

# MERITOCRACY AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AS KEY FACTORS FOR CIVIL SERVICE EFFECTIVENESS<sup>1</sup>

A. M. Baimenov<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

*The article reviews the importance and the need for active knowledge and experience exchange, both within and outside the region, for qualitative and efficient modernization of civil service. The Regional Hub of Civil Service in Astana plays an important role in this process serving as a dialogue platform for sharing knowledge and practices for improving efficiency in civil service by supporting the efforts of the region's governments in building human and institutional capacity in civil service.*

**Key words:** *civil service, knowledge and experience exchange, Regional Hub, reforms, GCPSE, principles of meritocracy, risk of patronage, prevention of corruption.*

Each government identifies itself the priorities for modernizing civil service based on the social and economic model chosen, level of democracy in the society, availability of political will as well as development challenges. The best government decisions are, of course, based on the review of modern trends, regional specifics and country context. This requires active exchange of knowledge and practices both between the countries of the region and developed economies.

Therefore, the institutionalization of such exchange through the Regional Hub of Civil Service in Astana (ACSH) was supported by governments of the region and has proven itself.

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on the speech made at the Global Conference on 'Meritocracy and Professional Ethics as Key Factors for Civil Service Efficiency' in the framework of the VIII Astana Economic Forum. Astana, 21 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Alikhan Baimenov, Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Regional Hub of Civil Service in Astana. A practitioner and scientist, author of a number of books and publications on public administration, civil service and management. Lead the civil service reform in the Republic of Kazakhstan, development of the Concept Note of a new model of civil service in the Republic of Kazakhstan.  
Contact details: [alikh.baimenov@undp.org](mailto:alikh.baimenov@undp.org).

ACSH is an international initiative launched by 25 countries and 5 international organizations. Its mission is to improve efficiency of civil service by supporting the efforts of governments of the region in building institutional and human capacity in civil service. I should also note that Hub's agenda is driven by the demand of participating countries in research, joint projects and ways for developing expert networks.

At the same time, we decided that in addition to the practices of developed economies we should also look at the practices of the neighbouring countries which are implementing reforms in similar social, cultural and historical context. And the countries of the region are interested in learning about each other's experience through benchmarking, both at the regional and global levels.

While looking for responses to challenges the countries of the region are pro-actively reforming civil service and there are certain success stories which are studied and disseminated through the ACSH. For instance, the ACSH is already implementing joint projects with the Georgian Civil Service Bureau on anticorruption issues, with Azerbaijan's Civil Service Affairs Commission on public service delivery issues, with Kyrgyzstan's HR Office on performance evaluation of civil servants, etc. I'm glad to note that for promoting such exchange the ACSH received a UN Award for strengthening South-South regional and interregional cooperation.

As Helen Clark, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, noted in her letter to the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Establishment of the Hub and its success have been made possible because Kazakhstan is ready to share its successful reform practices, including the introduction of meritocracy into professional civil service'.

International experts note that Kazakhstan has implemented two stages of comprehensive reforms of civil service in the region and the establishment of the Hub in Astana helps it to become a global centre of knowledge in civil service domain.

Importantly, modernization of civil service in Kazakhstan which is based on political will of President Nazarbayev is a strong example of consistent and progressive reforms when each next phase of reforms builds on and expands achievements of the previous

phase. For instance, establishment of Corps A and 8-fold reduction of political government officials definitely appeared to be an important step towards professionalization and reduction of impact of political processes on human resources management in government authorities; this was noted in the report of the Anti-Corruption Network of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in November 2014 as an anti-corruption measure.

Thus, continuity, progressiveness and consistency of reforms were reflected in the fact that earlier phases prepared the basis for shifting towards career model. The objectives set by President Nazarbayev with respect to institutional reform for building modern, professional and independent bureaucracy and the transition to a career model should become a new phase in the development of civil service in Kazakhstan.

The President said that achievement of the above objectives requires strengthening of meritocracy principles through the improvement of selection and promotion processes, including testing system.

Speaking about tests, I'd like to emphasize that tests as a screening mechanism are critical in the countries where risks of patronage are quite high. This is proven by the results of some international studies, including the study by Professor Sandel from Gothenburg University, Sweden. Eventually, when the risks of patronage decrease, it can be decentralized and have a more flexible approach to the selection of staff.

This is also proven by the results of our survey of the ACSH's participating countries on patronage issues. Most respondents believe that patronage still exists in civil service and that it should be limited to political appointments. Most respondents also believe that patronage and administrative government officials are incompatible. Inefficient activities of government authorities, poor psychological climate among staff and outflow of qualified staff from civil service were indicated as the major implications of patronage in the region. Respondents believe that the principles of meritocracy are critical for minimizing patronage.

We all also know that the correlation between patronage and corruption is high.

According to the results of a comparative analysis made by the UNDP on the institutional aspects of anti-corruption

efforts, for some countries to succeed it was critical to take measures to eliminate possibilities for corruption by optimizing and simplifying administrative procedures, as well as public procurement and public investment procedures. Our studies have demonstrated that these areas are of high interest for the ACSH's participating countries.

It is important to note that the countries with efficient bureaucracy have separate authorised institutions to promote civil service development. The UNDP review on institutional aspects of anti-corruption demonstrated that an anti-corruption agency and a dedicated agency dealing with civil service are separate entities.

I should also note that the key to success is that government authorities themselves bear primary responsibility for prevention of corruption. The analysis demonstrated that proper institutional framework including courts, police, audit, ombudsman, etc. need to be established. The links between investigation and prosecution authorities and courts are especially important.

The issues of professional ethics and conflict of interest are substantial. The practice of the U.S. and other developed countries demonstrate that it is useful to have ethical counsels in each agency; such counsels provide appropriate advice and guidance to the staff on the issues of conflict of interest and standards of behaviour.

In general, prevention of corruption should be based on an integral and comprehensive approach with efficient interactions between relevant government authorities as well as active engagement of civil society in improving public knowledge and developing a zero tolerance to corruption.

Most respondents of the ACSH's second baseline study indicated research on corruption and patronage as a priority for the ACSH's activities.

Preliminary data indicate that the absolute majority of respondents find ACSH's work useful from its establishment to date, which encourages optimism for its future pro-active work. The ACSH discusses and identifies its future activities at the meetings of the Steering Committee. We address all issues with the representatives of each participating country, and engage pro-actively with the Agency for Civil Service Affairs and Corruption Prevention under the Joint Work Plan. I am glad that the geographic

representation of the ACSH is expanding, and today it comprises 30 participating countries.

It is important to note that the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and UN Development Programme in Kazakhstan signed in 2014 as instructed by President Nazarbayev created new opportunities for the ACSH.

As you all know, the ACSH has three areas for supporting the efforts of the governments in building institutional and human capacity: research-related initiatives, capacity building and partnerships and expert networks. Baseline studies regularly conducted by the ACSH serve as the basis for the ACSH's future activities. We cooperate with the OECD, EU, UN family, including the Singapore Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, as well as large academic and research institutions worldwide.

I believe that the implementation of civil service reforms will help to improve efficiency and increase public confidence in the bureaucracy.