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REPORTED BRIBE REQUESTS AMONG FIRMS IN KAZAKHSTAN, 2019-2024: DIRECT AND INDIRECT QUESTIONS IN THE WORLD BANK ENTERPRISE SURVEYS

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Abstract: In the World Bank Enterprise Surveys, the share of Kazakhstani firms asked for a bribe rose from 11.6% in 2019 to 16.4% in 2024. This can mean more bribery or more candid managers. Following the author's rule, the paper compares a direct question about the firm's own experience (J.5) with an indirect one about "establishments like this one" (J.7) in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. In Kazakhstan both rose (by 5.3 and 4.5 points), but the difference (+0.8, 95% interval -21.4 to +23.0) favours neither reading, also at the lower design effects seen in the neighbours' surveys. Changes by transaction cannot be confirmed with the published standard errors. The author's forecast for the neighbours held in the point estimates.

Keywords: corruption; bribery; respondent reticence; World Bank Enterprise Surveys; Kazakhstan; Central Asia.

1. Introduction

The World Bank Enterprise Surveys ask managers whether a gift or informal payment was expected from their firm when it dealt with the state. In Kazakhstan the share of firms that met at least one such request in six common transactions (bribery incidence) rose from 11.6% in 2019 to 16.4% in 2024 [1]. This looks like more bribery, but the figure would also rise if managers became more willing to admit requests that were already being made. This reluctance to answer truthfully is called respondent reticence [2].

The author set out both readings in her hypothesis: firms still face procedures where "opportunities for informal payments may still exist", but "businesses are now more willing to report bribery requests than before". Her rule for telling them apart: "If only the question about whether a firm was asked for a bribe increases, while other indicators of corruption and firms' interactions with government remain stable", this "could suggest" more candour. If several indicators rise together, "this would be more consistent with a real increase in bribery".

The surveys make this rule testable. Question J.5 asks about the firm's own experience: "In any of these inspections or meetings was a gift or informal payment expected or requested?" Question J.7 asks what "establishments like this one" pay, which does not accuse the respondent's own firm [3; 4]. If managers had only become more candid, J.5 should rise while J.7 stays flat. If bribery had become more common, both should rise.

Research question. Did the 2019-2024 rise in reported bribe requests in Kazakhstan reflect more bribery or more candid answers, and in which interactions with the state did it occur?

This paper argues that the published data cannot yet answer the first part: the two answers rose together, but too uncertainly to favour either reading.

2. Literature Review

The test rests on one finding: reluctant respondents distort answers about their own firm much more than answers about similar firms. Clausen, Kraay and Murrell, building on a Romanian study, identified 13.1% of respondents in the Enterprise Survey for Nigeria as highly likely to be reticent [2]. They admitted sensitive acts at 61% of the others' rate when asked about their own firm, but answered virtually like everyone else on the question corresponding to J.7. This study and [5] predate the data; they are used only for the method, and a non-exhaustive search found no later study with this test.

Reticence can also hide in a question's structure. J.5 is asked only of firms that report contact with tax officials, and denying the contact avoids the bribe question [5]. Tax contact must therefore be read with J.5.

A recent study of Kazakhstan shows where firms meet corruption, but not how it changes. In a 2023 survey of 702 entrepreneurs, Kudasheva and Rakhmatullayeva found construction, energy, extractive industries and logistics most exposed through licensing, taxation and customs [6]. As the author noted, such surveys differ from the Enterprise Surveys, which use the same method in every country and so allow comparison with neighbours.

3. Data and Method

The paper analyses published country-level indicators; no data were collected and no ethical approval was needed. Indicators, standard errors and numbers of firms were downloaded from the Enterprise Surveys portal on 13 October 2026 [1]. The surveys represent formal private firms with five or more employees and are stratified and weighted [7; 8]. The latest waves cover 1,446 and 1,013 firms in Kazakhstan (2019, 2024), 1,239 and 1,008 in Uzbekistan (2019, 2024) and 360 and 354 in the Kyrgyz Republic (2019, 2023) [1]. After 2019, Kazakh firms were surveyed only in two COVID-19 follow-ups (2021 and 2022), which did not ask about bribes, so 2019 is the only recent starting point.

Measures. Bribery incidence and J.5 are direct; J.7, the share saying similar firms pay "to get things done", is indirect; the share naming corruption a major obstacle measures perception [7]. The wording of J.5 and J.7 is essentially the same in both waves [3; 4].

The test. The main comparison is the change in J.5 against the change in J.7. J.5 is answered by the firms that met tax officials, a subset of those answering J.7, so the two estimates are correlated by an unpublished amount; intervals are shown for correlations of 0 and of 1, the second only as the narrowest possible width.

Precision. The standard error of a change combines the two published ones, treating the waves as independent. Kazakhstan's standard errors imply design effects of 3.5 to 17.8 (neighbours: 1.7 to 4.0), and their method is undocumented. They are used as published, except in four transaction cells where they are 0 or implausibly small. The main changes are also recomputed at assumed design effects of 1 to 3. No correction is made for multiple comparisons.

4. Results

4.1 The direct and indirect answers rose together

Between 2019 and 2024 every main corruption measure in Table 1 rose: J.5 by 5.3 points and J.7 by 4.5. This is the pattern the rule links to more bribery, not candour. But the change in J.5 minus the change in J.7 is +0.8 points, with a 95% interval of -21.4 to +23.0 (or -13.7 to +15.3 at the narrowest bound). Both intervals contain a J.5-only rise as large as the one observed (+5.3), so the test cannot choose. With these standard errors it could only detect a gap of about 21 to 32 points, so this is no evidence that the gap is zero.

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Table 1. Kazakhstan: share of firms, % (published standard error), and the 2019-2024 change in percentage points (95% interval).

Measure	2019	2024	Change	p
Bribery incidence (direct)	11.6 (5.4)	16.4 (6.4)	+4.8 (-11.6; +21.2)	0.57
J.5 tax meetings (direct)	11.9 (6.3)	17.2 (8.8)	+5.3 (-15.9; +26.5)	0.62
J.7 similar firms pay (indirect)	7.9 (2.1)	12.4 (2.7)	+4.5 (-2.2; +11.2)	0.19
Corruption a major obstacle	12.0 (2.8)	16.1 (2.2)	+4.1 (-2.9; +11.1)	0.25
Met or visited by tax officials	30.9 (4.2)	27.7 (3.1)	-3.2 (-13.4; +7.0)	0.54
J.5 change minus J.7 change			+0.8 (-21.4; +23.0)	0.94
By transaction (firms in 2024):				
Operating licence (97)	8.0 (1.6)	11.0 (9.0)	+3.0 (-14.9; +20.9)	0.74
Import licence (24)	24.3 (*)	0.9 (*)	-23.4	
Construction permit (49)	14.6 (8.0)	0.1 (*)	-14.5	
Electrical connection (22)	4.4 (3.6)	22.1 (*)	+17.7	

Note: source [1]; own calculations. Firms answering in 2019 and 2024: incidence 615, 422; J.5 358, 327; J.7 1,356, 923. Test row: no correlation assumed. Tax meetings are J.5; water connections: no 2024 value. * Standard error 0 or implausibly small.

With the published standard errors, no single rise exceeds sampling error (Table 1). This rests on Kazakhstan's undocumented standard errors: at any design effect up to 3.1, which covers most of the neighbours' range, the J.7 rise would be significant (p = 0.047 at 3). The main test would not (+0.8, -9.4 to +11.0). J.5 rests on a quarter to a third of J.7's firms, which caps the correlation of the two estimates near 0.5-0.6. At the neighbours' design effects (1.7 and above) a correlation of at least 0.84 would be needed to exclude a J.5-only rise, so the test contains both readings there. Only at a design effect near 1, far below the 3.5 to 17.8 implied by Kazakhstan's published standard errors, would a correlation of 0.53, within that cap, exclude it. With the published standard errors and at the neighbours' design effects, the test is inconclusive.

4.2 Where the change sits

The point estimates rose for tax meetings, operating licences and electrical connections and fell for import licences and construction permits (Table 1). With the published standard errors none of these changes can be confirmed. At the neighbours' design effects the fall for construction permits (49 firms in 2024, with a published 2024 standard error of 0) would exceed sampling error. The 2024 questionnaire has no question on bribes at customs.

4.3 The neighbours and the author's forecast

In Uzbekistan J.5 rose from 6.7% to 8.3% while J.7 fell from 7.3% to 6.7%, the pattern of candour, but within sampling error (difference +2.2, -7.2 to +11.6). In the Kyrgyz Republic the bribery answers barely changed.

Before this paper's figures were computed, the author forecast: "I would predict that the Kyrgyz Republic may have the highest share of firms answering 'Yes' to the direct J.5 question, while Uzbekistan may have a lower share." It held in the point estimates: J.5 is 27.9% in the Kyrgyz Republic, 17.2% in Kazakhstan and 8.3% in Uzbekistan. The Kyrgyz lead over Uzbekistan is clear (19.6 points, 9.8 to 29.4); over Kazakhstan (10.7, -8.0 to +29.4) it is within sampling error.

5. Discussion

Beyond sampling error, four features of the surveys weaken the test. First, as the author anticipated, the questions differ: J.5 covers tax meetings among the 28-31% of firms that had them, J.7 any payment by similar firms. Second, denying a tax visit avoids the bribe question [5], so the slight fall in tax contact may be real or reticent. Third, refusals count as "yes" in bribery incidence and J.7 (for J.5 this is not stated) [7], so more refusals would raise both, the very pattern observed. Fourth, the 2024 questionnaire was revised and dropped J.6 and the customs question, which could also shift answers. By transaction, the point estimates rose for tax meetings and operating licences, procedures Kudasheva and Rakhmatullayeva name [6], and fell for construction permits, although construction is one of the sectors they name.

6. Conclusion

The 2019-2024 rise in reported bribery in Kazakhstan cannot yet be read as either more bribery or more candour. Firm-level files could show whether refusals changed, and a randomized response question in the next wave [2] would measure reticence directly.

Author contributions and use of AI tools

The author chose the topic and question from her mentor's options (14 and 16 September 2026). She wrote the hypothesis, rule and forecast, found studies [2; 6] and nine others left out here, and approved the analysis plan, which named three waves (two are used here). She had seen the Kazakh headline figures and the direction of change in some neighbours before writing the hypothesis. She used ChatGPT to check statistics and, in places, to phrase her thoughts. Her mentor turned the rule into the test and, with a generative AI tool (Claude, Anthropic), downloaded the data, wrote the analysis code and drafted the English text around her quoted words. No number, quotation or reference was produced by a language model without being checked.

Data availability

All data are public [1; 3; 4; 7]. The analysis scripts (Python) are available on request.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest. No funding was received.

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