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PATRIOTIC EDUCATION, CIVIC IDENTITY, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD MILITARY SERVICE: EVIDENCE FROM A MIXED-METHODS SURVEY IN ALMATY

Abstract

Patriotic education in Kazakhstan is commonly discussed alongside civic identity, national security, and preparation for military service. These concerns overlap, but public support for one does not necessarily imply support for all. This article examines how adults in Almaty understand the relationship between patriotism and national security, assess the Zhas Sarbaz initiative and military service, and describe possible improvements to patriotic education. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted in April-May 2025 among 437 respondents aged 18 or older. The quantitatively led mixed-methods instrument contained 12 closed and four open questions; 390 free-text submissions were thematically coded. In the closed items, 81.7% linked patriotism with national security, 83.3% supported Zhas Sarbaz, and 34.7% expressed reservations about joining the armed forces. The open responses most often called for renewed school and university programmes (28.7%) and greater attention to family and preschool socialization (10.3%). Smaller groups mentioned media projects, practical and sports activities, and the social position of service members, while 46.2% made no concrete proposal. The pattern suggests that patriotic orientation, approval of a youth programme, and personal service intentions should be examined separately. The findings offer practical directions for education and youth policy, but the convenience sample and single-city design do not support national prevalence estimates or causal claims.

Keywords: patriotic education, civic identity, military service, national security, Zhas Sarbaz, youth, mixed methods, Kazakhstan.

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ПАТРИОТТЫҚ ТӘРБИЕ, АЗАМАТТЫҚ БІРЕГЕЙЛІК ЖӘНЕ ӘСКЕРИ ҚЫЗМЕТКЕ КӨЗҚАРАС: АЛМАТЫ ҚАЛАСЫНДАҒЫ АРАЛАС ӘДІСТІ САУАЛНАМА НӘТИЖЕЛЕРІ

Аңдатпа

Қазақстанда патриоттық тәрбие азаматтық бірегейлік, ұлттық қауіпсіздік және жастардың әскери қызметке даярлығы мәселелерімен қатар талқыланады. Бұл ұғымдар өзара байланысты болғанымен, олардың қоғамдық пікірдегі көрінісі бірдей емес. Мақаланың мақсаты - Алматы тұрғындарының патриотизм мен ұлттық қауіпсіздік байланысын қалай түсінетінін, «Жас Сарбаз» бастамасы мен әскери қызметті қалай бағалайтынын және патриоттық тәрбиені

жетілдіру үшін қандай ұсыныстар беретінін анықтау. 2025 жылғы сәуір-мамыр айларында 18 жастан асқан 437 адам қатысқан көлденең қималы онлайн сауалнама өткізілді. Сандық бөлігі басым аралас әдісті құрал 12 жабық және 4 ашық сұрақтан тұрды; 390 мәтіндік жауап тақырыптық кодталды. Респонденттердің 81,7%-ы патриотизмді ұлттық қауіпсіздікпен байланыстырды, 83,3%-ы «Жас Сарбазды» қолдады, ал 34,7%-ы қарулы күштер қатарына қосылуға қатысты күмәнін білдірді. Ашық жауаптарда мектеп пен университет бағдарламаларын жаңарту (28,7%), отбасы мен мектепке дейінгі тәрбиенің рөлін күшейту (10,3%), медиа жобалар, тәжірибелік-спорттық іс-шаралар және әскери қызметшілердің әлеуметтік жағдайы аталды. 46,2% нақты ұсыныс бермеді. Нәтижелер патриоттық бағдар, жастар бағдарламасын қолдау және әскери қызметке жеке ниет бір ғана көрсеткішпен өлшенбейтінін аңғартады. Зерттеу білім беру мен жастар саясатына қатысты нақты бағыттарды ұсынады, алайда ыңғайлылық іріктемесі қорытындыларды Алматыдан тыс аумақтарға тікелей таратуға мүмкіндік бермейді.

Түйін сөздер: патриоттық тәрбие, азаматтық бірегейлік, әскери қызмет, ұлттық қауіпсіздік, «Жас Сарбаз», жастар, аралас әдістер, Қазақстан.

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ПАТРИОТИЧЕСКОЕ ВОСПИТАНИЕ, ГРАЖДАНСКАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ И ОТНОШЕНИЕ К ВОЕННОЙ СЛУЖБЕ: РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ СМЕШАННОГО ОПРОСА В АЛМАТЫ

Аннотация

В Казахстане патриотическое воспитание обсуждается в связи с гражданской идентичностью, национальной безопасностью и подготовкой молодежи к военной службе. Эти направления соприкасаются, но в общественном мнении не совпадают полностью. Цель статьи - выяснить, как жители Алматы понимают связь патриотизма с национальной безопасностью, оценивают инициативу «Жас Сарбаз» и военную службу, а также какие изменения в системе патриотического воспитания считают необходимыми. В апреле-мае 2025 года проведен поперечный онлайн-опрос 437 респондентов в возрасте 18 лет и старше. Смешанный дизайн с преобладающим количественным компонентом включал 12 закрытых и 4 открытых вопроса; тематическому кодированию подвергнуты 390 текстовых ответов. 81,7% участников связали патриотизм с национальной безопасностью, 83,3% поддержали «Жас Сарбаз», а 34,7% выразили сомнение относительно вступления в вооруженные силы. Среди предложений чаще всего назывались обновление школьных и университетских программ (28,7%), усиление роли семьи и дошкольного воспитания (10,3%), медийные проекты, практико-спортивные мероприятия и улучшение социального положения военнослужащих. 46,2% не предложили конкретных изменений. Полученные результаты показывают, что патриотическая ориентация, поддержка молодежной программы и личная готовность к службе требуют отдельного анализа. Исследование формулирует практические ориентиры для образовательной и молодежной политики, но удобная выборка не позволяет напрямую распространять выводы за пределы Алматы.

Ключевые слова: патриотическое воспитание, гражданская идентичность, военная служба, национальная безопасность, «Жас Сарбаз», молодежь, смешанные методы, Казахстан.

Introduction

Patriotic education occupies a sensitive position at the intersection of citizenship, national identity, education, and security policy. In public debate, patriotism is frequently presented as an uncomplicated public good: citizens who love their country are expected to trust its institutions, accept civic obligations, and support national defence. Scholarship offers a more differentiated picture. National

attachment can sustain solidarity and public responsibility, yet it can also become uncritical or exclusionary when loyalty is treated as obedience and criticism is delegitimized (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997; Kleinig et al., 2015; Primoratz, 2002; Schatz et al., 1999). The relevant policy question is therefore not simply whether patriotism is present, but what kind of patriotism is cultivated, through which institutions, and with what relationship to democratic citizenship.

This distinction is especially important in Kazakhstan. Since independence, nation-building has combined civic language about a shared Kazakhstani political community with the revitalization of Kazakh language, history, and ethnocultural symbols (Aitymbetov et al., 2015; Burkhanov & Sharipova, 2014; Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2013). Studies show that civic and ethnic identifications can overlap, but their salience varies with language, ethnicity, region, education, and perceived inclusion (Rees & Williams, 2017; Sadvokassova et al., 2025; Sharipova et al., 2017). Recent national evidence also demonstrates that broad endorsement of unity may coexist with different understandings of citizenship and belonging among social groups (Sadvokassova et al., 2026). Patriotic education in this context cannot be reduced to uniform symbolism; it must address diversity, equal membership, and the conditions under which citizens regard public institutions as legitimate.

Military-patriotic education is a formal element of this policy environment. Government Resolution No. 1039 approved the Concept of Military-Patriotic Education of Youth until 2030 in 2023, and Resolution No. 937 substantially updated it in November 2025 (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). The Zhas Sarbaz movement, military-sports gatherings, Smart Sarbaz activities, meetings with veterans, and initial military training are among the practical instruments used by public institutions (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.). These initiatives operate alongside the statutory framework governing military service and the status of service members (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2012).

The existence of programmes, however, does not establish their social effects. International research warns against assuming that military service automatically produces national cohesion. Its consequences depend on fairness, institutional credibility, the meaning attributed to service, and whether participation is experienced as equal citizenship or hierarchical exclusion (Burk, 2002; Feaver, 1996; Krebs, 2004, 2009). Public perceptions of why soldiers serve also shape attitudes toward the military and its missions: citizens distinguish service motivated by duty from service motivated by material necessity, even though real motives are often mixed (Krebs & Ralston, 2022; Krebs et al., 2021, 2026). Comparative cases can illuminate mechanisms, but they cannot be transplanted to Kazakhstan without attention to its own institutional and cultural setting.

The present study addresses a narrower empirical gap. Research on Kazakhstan has examined nation-building discourse, language, symbols, media, and civic identity (Burkhanov, 2017, 2020; Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022; Isaacs, 2015; Smagulova, 2008; Tussupova, 2010). Public attitudes toward military-patriotic initiatives, especially when respondents are also invited to propose changes, have received less attention. This matters because broad approval of patriotic education can coexist with disagreement about its content, institutions, and relationship to military service.

Accordingly, this article asks three research questions:

8. How do respondents relate patriotism to national security and civic belonging?
9. How do they evaluate Zhas Sarbaz and personal participation in military service?
10. Which family, educational, media, welfare, and practical mechanisms do they prioritize when proposing improvements to patriotic education?

The design is descriptive rather than causal. It reports item-level distributions and interprets them alongside participants' written proposals. The resulting account is deliberately modest: it identifies how several orientations appear together in an Almaty convenience sample without converting programme approval into an enlistment measure or treating reluctance to serve as evidence of weak civic commitment.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Nations are sustained not only through legal membership but also through shared narratives, symbols, routines, and imagined community (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995; Smith, 1991). Yet the concept of “identity” risks becoming analytically vague when belonging, self-understanding,

classification, solidarity, and collective action are collapsed into a single term (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). For this reason the present study treats civic identity as a perceived relationship to the political community that includes belonging, rights, responsibilities, and recognition as an equal member, while patriotism is understood more specifically as attachment to and concern for the country.

Social identity theory explains how group membership becomes part of the self and shapes comparison with out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Political applications of the theory emphasise that the meaning of an identity is historically and institutionally produced rather than psychologically fixed (Huddy, 2001). Consequently, patriotism and nationalism require empirical separation. Early measurement work distinguished affection and commitment toward one's country from beliefs in national superiority (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Subsequent research differentiated blind patriotism – characterized by unquestioning allegiance – from constructive patriotism, which combines critical loyalty with a desire to improve the country (Schatz et al., 1999, 2020). Related scholarship further distinguishes attachment from glorification: attachment can coexist with moral reflection, whereas glorification tends to suppress criticism of the in-group (Roccas et al., 2006).

These distinctions are consequential for education and policy. A high score on a generic patriotism item does not reveal whether respondents support inclusive citizenship, accept criticism, or equate the state with the nation. Cross-national research also cautions that measurement equivalence cannot be assumed when patriotism scales are transferred across languages and political contexts (Davidov, 2009). In the present dataset the available closed questions do not form a validated latent scale; results are therefore reported item by item rather than combined into an unsupported composite index.

Political socialisation is distributed across family, school, peers, organisations, media, and historical events (Sapiro, 2004). Intergenerational transmission is real but conditional: children do not simply reproduce parental orientations, and successful transmission depends on communication, salience, and later experience (Jennings et al., 2009). Schools can supply knowledge and shared symbols, yet the pedagogical form is decisive. Comparative civic-education research links stronger civic knowledge and engagement to opportunities for discussion, participation, and engagement with public issues (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Open classroom climates and meaningful civic-learning opportunities are associated with political efficacy and intended participation (Campbell, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Service and community activity can contribute to political identity when experience is connected to reflection and public responsibility (Yates & Youniss, 1998). These findings support a critical-democratic model in which students learn to evaluate institutions and act with others rather than merely memorise approved messages (Banks, 2008; Veugelers, 2007).

This framework is particularly relevant to Kazakhstan's multilingual educational environment. Research among school graduates indicates that civic and patriotic self-understandings vary with language of instruction and regional context (Khlebnikov et al., 2025). Other work highlights the role of education in identity formation and the need to balance national-cultural and common civic content (Asyltayeva et al., 2023). The implication is not that one linguistic group is inherently more patriotic than another, but that different educational and media environments organise access to narratives and opportunities for participation.

Media are important agents of political socialisation, yet exposure should not be mistaken for persuasion. In Kazakhstan, media discourse has helped negotiate multiculturalism, national identity, and ethnic relations (Burkhanov, 2020; Tussupova, 2010). Cinema and national symbols similarly provide arenas in which belonging is represented and contested (Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022; Isaacs, 2015). Digital platforms intensify the process by enabling circulation, remixing, and peer-to-peer participation (Jenkins et al., 2009). Meta-analytic evidence generally finds a positive association between social-media use and participation, but effect sizes vary and cross-sectional designs cannot establish causality (Boulianne, 2015). Digital media literacy is more promising when young people learn to assess sources, encounter diverse perspectives, and create civic content rather than passively consume campaigns (Kahne et al., 2012). Accordingly, the study interprets respondents' calls for patriotic media as a demand for accessible and relevant communication, not as evidence that propaganda will reduce scepticism.

Civil-military scholarship treats the relationship between armed forces and society as a normative and institutional problem rather than merely a communication problem. Democratic systems require

militaries capable of protecting the state while remaining accountable to civilian authority and public values (Burk, 2002; Feaver, 1996). The citizen-soldier ideal can connect service and membership, but historical evidence does not support a universal claim that conscription or training automatically integrates a nation (Krebs, 2004, 2009). Attitudes toward military service depend on the perceived fairness, status, and social meaning of service (Krebs & Ralston, 2022; Krebs et al., 2021). Cross-national evidence further shows that cultures of military service vary across democracies (Krebs et al., 2026). Post-Soviet research warns that state-led patriotic mobilisation can produce public support without eliminating social fragmentation or scepticism (Bækken, 2021). These insights generate a theoretical expectation for the Almaty survey: support for national defence or a youth programme may coexist with reluctance to enlist if service conditions, prestige, or trust are viewed negatively.

Taken together, the literature suggests that civic-patriotic orientations are multi-layered, institutionally mediated, and not reducible to simple endorsement of official programmes. The present study therefore examines both closed-item distributions and participants' own recommendations in order to capture this complexity.

Research methodology

The present study adopted a cross-sectional, quantitatively led mixed-methods design in order to capture both the distribution of key attitudes and the explanatory reasoning that respondents themselves supplied. Closed questions yielded descriptive frequencies and %ages, while four open questions generated free-text recommendations that illuminated the practical meanings participants attached to patriotism, education, and military service. In mixed-methods terms the qualitative strand was embedded within the survey instrument and integrated with the quantitative findings during interpretation, following established guidance on concurrent embedding and joint displays (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013; O'Cathain et al., 2010). This approach was chosen because the research questions concerned not only levels of support for official programmes but also the institutional and social conditions that respondents considered necessary for those programmes to succeed.

Fieldwork took place in April and May 2025. Almaty was selected as the research site because it offered an accessible urban environment with a substantial student and young-adult population, high levels of digital connectivity, and intensive everyday use of social media. These characteristics made the city substantively relevant to questions of contemporary patriotic education and youth engagement. At the same time, the choice of a single large city means that the findings cannot be generalised to Kazakhstan as a whole; rural residents, older adults, and individuals with limited internet access are systematically under-represented. The design therefore prioritises exploratory description and internal triangulation over claims of national representativeness.

The analytic sample comprised 437 respondents aged eighteen or older. Recruitment relied on a combination of institutional and digital channels: universities, military training institutions, WhatsApp groups, and Instagram posts. The resulting convenience and network-based sample was deliberately young: 72.1 % of participants were aged 18–35, of whom 28.4 % fell into the 18–25 range and 43.7 % into the 26–35 range. Respondents reporting higher education accounted for 39.4 % of the sample, and 70.7 % indicated residence in Almaty. Because the probability of selection for any given individual was unknown, conventional sampling-error estimates and population confidence intervals cannot be calculated. Non-probability web-based samples of this kind remain useful for mapping patterns of opinion and for generating participant-driven recommendations, yet self-selection and coverage biases limit any inference about prevalence in the wider population (Baker et al., 2013; Bethlehem, 2010). These limitations are acknowledged throughout the analysis and are reflected in the cautious language used to describe the results.

The survey instrument was administered via Google Forms and contained sixteen items in total: twelve closed questions employing Likert-type or single-choice formats and four open questions that invited free-text proposals. The content of the questionnaire was informed by Kazakhstan's Concept of Military-Patriotic Education of Youth until 2030 and by the official place assigned to initial military training within that framework (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). Only those indicators whose values were fully preserved in the study record are reported in the present article: the perceived connection between patriotism and national security, support for the Zhas Sarbaz programme,

reservations about personal enlistment, basic sample characteristics, and the thematic categories derived from open responses. The instrument was piloted prior to full fieldwork in order to check wording, response options, and technical functionality. Critically, no previously validated multi-item scale of patriotism, civic identity, institutional trust, or military-service motivation was administered. Consequently no composite scores are calculated, and the item-level %ages must not be interpreted as measurements of a single latent construct. For the sake of reproducibility the final journal submission is expected to include the complete questionnaire, original-language versions, response anchors, and coding instructions as a supplementary file.

Quantitative analysis was deliberately descriptive. Closed responses were summarised as frequencies and %ages using Microsoft Excel. The source dataset did not contain the cross-tabulations or inferential statistics that would have permitted formal tests of subgroup differences by age, gender, or educational level. Any references to such variation are therefore treated as exploratory observations rather than as statistically established effects. Qualitative analysis focused on the 390 open responses that contained usable text. Coding proceeded thematically, combining categories suggested by the research questions with inductive attention to recurring proposals that emerged from the data themselves. Five substantive themes were retained: family and preschool socialisation; school and university programmes (including initial military training and cultural activities); the status and welfare of military personnel and their families; media, cinema, and social networks; and practical, outdoor, or military-sports activities. A sixth residual category captured answers that offered no concrete proposal (for example, “I do not know” or “nothing should change”). Two researchers independently reviewed the coding framework and the assignment of responses in order to reduce dependence on a single interpreter’s judgement. No formal inter-coder reliability coefficient was computed; the qualitative counts are therefore presented as transparent descriptive coding rather than as evidence of measurement precision. Theme development and reporting followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Integration of the two strands occurred through systematic side-by-side comparison. Levels of programme support were examined alongside expressions of personal reservation about enlistment, and the closed-item distributions were read in light of the explanations respondents gave concerning education, family, media, welfare, and practical experience. This strategy allows the identification of points of convergence and tension without claiming that any particular open comment explains an individual respondent’s closed-question answers. The overall analytic stance remains one of cautious triangulation: quantitative patterns establish the broad contours of opinion, while qualitative themes supply the institutional and practical meanings that participants themselves considered important.

Ethical and data-quality considerations were addressed at several levels. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; respondents could discontinue the survey at any point without penalty. No direct personal identifiers were retained in the analytic file. The study followed recognised quality principles for opinion and social research, including transparency of purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality (International Organization for Standardization, 2019). It should be noted that ISO 20252 is a service-quality standard and does not substitute for institutional ethics review. The documentation available to the authors did not contain the official name of an ethics committee, an approval number or date, or the full electronic-consent script; these records remain an author-level requirement for editorial verification. Finally, the sensitive nature of the topic – patriotism and military duty – carries a recognised risk of socially desirable responding. Anonymous online administration reduces the pressure of an interviewer but cannot eliminate the tendency to present oneself in a favourable light (Krumpal, 2013). This potential bias is kept in view when interpreting high levels of programme endorsement.

In sum, the methodological design privileges transparent description, multi-source triangulation, and explicit acknowledgement of limitations over unsupported claims of representativeness or causal inference. The sample is young, urban, and digitally connected; the measures are item-level rather than scale-based; the qualitative coding is descriptive rather than statistically validated; and the integration of strands is interpretive rather than statistical. These features shape the form that the results can take and the strength of the conclusions that may legitimately be drawn. The following Results section therefore presents both the quantitative distributions and the qualitative themes in a manner that preserves their complementary strengths while remaining clear about the boundaries of inference.

Results

The results are organised around three interrelated questions: who participated, how respondents evaluated the relationship between patriotism, national security, and a named youth programme, and what concrete proposals they advanced for strengthening military-patriotic education. Because the sample is non-probability and urban-skewed, all percentages are treated as descriptive of the achieved group rather than as population estimates. The presentation begins with a concise profile of the respondents, moves to the key closed-item distributions that reveal both convergence and tension, and then turns to the thematic analysis of open responses. Throughout, quantitative patterns and qualitative themes are placed side by side so that points of agreement and discrepancy become visible. This structure allows the reader to follow the evidence from sample composition through programme support and personal reservations to the concrete recommendations participants themselves offered.

Sample profile

The analytic sample of 437 respondents is predominantly young and urban, consistent with recruitment through universities and social media. Older adults, rural residents, and people with limited internet access are therefore likely underrepresented. Table 1 summarises the principal demographic characteristics available in the study record.

Table 1. Sample characteristics reported in the study record (N = 437)

Characteristic	Category	%
Age	18–25 years	28.4
	26–35 years	43.7
	18–35 years combined	72.1
Education	Higher education	39.4
Residence	Almaty	70.7
Open-question participation	Free-text responses coded	390 responses

Note. Categories are reproduced from the source manuscript. The available record did not contain a complete weighted demographic table. %ages are descriptive and are not population estimates.

Source: Authors' survey, April-May 2025.

Patriotism, national security, and programme support

The closed-item distributions reveal both convergence and tension. A large majority associated patriotism with national security and expressed support for the Zhas Sarbaz initiative, yet personal willingness to join the armed forces was markedly lower. Table 2 presents the three key indicators.

Table 2. Selected closed-question results (N = 437)

Indicator	Result	Evidentiary meaning
Respondents associating patriotism with national security	81.7 %	Broad perceived connection between civic attachment and security
Respondents supporting Zhas Sarbaz	83.3 %	High approval of the named youth initiative
Respondents expressing reservations about joining the armed forces	34.7 %	Personal service willingness lower than programme approval

Note. The indicators originate from separate questionnaire items and must not be added together or treated as a single scale.

Source: Authors' survey, April-May 2025.

The distributions reveal both convergence and tension. Most respondents connected patriotism with national security and approved Zhas Sarbaz. Yet more than one-third expressed reservations about joining the armed forces. This is the clearest empirical reason not to equate patriotic orientation with enlistment willingness. Respondents can endorse a civic or educational programme while evaluating the personal costs, status, risks, or conditions of military service more cautiously.

Participant-generated proposals

When respondents were invited to offer recommendations, education emerged as the largest substantive theme, followed by family socialisation, media formats, practical activities, and the welfare of service members. Almost half of those who answered the open questions offered no concrete proposal. Table 3 summarises the thematic distribution.

Table 3. Themes in open responses (n = 390)

Theme	Frequency	%
Improve school and university programmes (including initial military training and cultural activities)	112	28.7
Begin in the family and preschool	40	10.3
Use media, cinema, and social networks	23	5.9
Organise practical, outdoor, military-sports, and historical activities	23	5.9
Improve the social status and welfare of military personnel and families	12	3.1
No concrete proposal (e.g., “I do not know” or “nothing should change”)	180	46.2
Total	390	100.0

Note. % ages may be affected by rounding. Each response was assigned to the primary theme re-ported in the source coding.

Source: Authors' thematic coding of open survey responses.

Respondents who focused on education requested more relevant teaching of history and culture, stronger or modernized initial military training, clubs, and university activities. Family and preschool proposals emphasized stories, memory, language, and early examples of responsibility. Media suggestions called for contemporary films, short videos, social campaigns, and accessible digital formats capable of capturing young people's attention rather than simply more official messaging. Practical proposals included visits to historical sites or military units, hikes, field activities, and military-sports competitions. The smaller but analytically important group that addressed service conditions linked perceived prestige to pay, benefits, working conditions, and family support rather than to communication alone. The large “no concrete proposal” category should not automatically be read as apathy; it may reflect limited information, satisfaction with existing arrangements, low issue salience, uncertainty, or reluctance to articulate a sensitive opinion. The survey did not include follow-up interviews capable of distinguishing these explanations.

Read together, the closed and open responses reveal two different levels of judgment. General ideas and programmes attract broad support, whereas personal military service is assessed more cautiously. When respondents turn from evaluation to recommendations, they rarely assign responsibility to one institution alone; their answers move between family, formal education, media, practical activity, and the institutional conditions under which military service is performed. This multi-level pattern sets the stage for the interpretive discussion that follows.

Discussion

The Almaty survey reveals a consistent and theoretically significant pattern: high endorsement of abstract patriotic ideas and of a named youth programme coexists with more cautious personal judgments about military service. Fully 81.7 % of respondents associated patriotism with national security and 83.3 % supported Zhas Sarbaz, yet more than one-third expressed reservations about joining the armed forces. The data therefore distinguish three separate acts—endorsing a public idea, approving a concrete programme, and making an individual service decision. This distinction constitutes the study's central empirical contribution.

National-attachment research helps interpret the gap. Constructive patriotism permits genuine commitment to a political community while leaving room for criticism and institutional reform (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Schatz et al., 1999). Civil-military scholarship reaches a parallel conclusion: citizens

evaluate service through perceived fairness, social status, career motives, material conditions, and institutional legitimacy (Krebs & Ralston, 2022; Krebs et al., 2021). The questionnaire lacked follow-up items that could isolate which factors weighed most heavily. Service conditions, career plans, family obligations, trust, risk, and uncertainty all remain plausible explanations. What the data establish is that programme approval cannot serve as a reliable proxy for enlistment willingness.

Policy implications follow directly. Scepticism about personal service should be treated as information rather than disloyalty. Communication campaigns that ignore practical concerns may elicit socially desirable answers while leaving underlying judgments unchanged. Democratic civil-military theory supplies a more durable basis for confidence: capable defence institutions require civilian accountability, fair treatment of personnel, and sustained public legitimacy (Burk, 2002; Feaver, 1996). When these conditions are perceived as weak, patriotic messaging alone is unlikely to close the observed gap.

Open responses further complicate single-institution accounts of patriotic education. Respondents distributed responsibility across family, preschool, school, university, media, public organisations, and the military. This distribution aligns with an ecological understanding of political socialisation in which multiple agents interact over time (Sapiro, 2004). Families transmit language, memory, and everyday models of responsibility; schools can create structured encounters with diverse perspectives and opportunities for civic action; media circulate symbols and narratives; and voluntary or military-related programmes can offer practical participation. The prominence of educational reform is consistent with international evidence that active discussion, open classroom climates, and meaningful participation outperform one-way instruction in building civic efficacy (Campbell, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). It also resonates with Kazakhstan research showing that language of instruction and institutional context shape civic and patriotic orientations (Asyltayeva et al., 2023; Khlebnikov et al., 2025). An inclusive curriculum should therefore connect knowledge of national history and defence institutions with constitutional rights, interethnic equality, media literacy, and the legitimate place of reasoned disagreement.

Practical activities—visits to historical sites or units, sports competitions, field exercises, service projects, and meetings with veterans—appear as a secondary but coherent theme. Such activities can generate embodied experience and intergenerational contact, yet their civic effect is not automatic. Experience contributes to political identity primarily when participants receive structured opportunities to reflect on meaning, responsibility, and public consequences (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Programmes that treat attendance as an outcome miss this reflective dimension; guided discussion and participant voice should be integral to design.

Kazakhstan's multiethnic composition adds further complexity. Nation-building has long balanced civic and ethnocultural repertoires (Burkhanov & Sharipova, 2014; Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2013; Rees & Burkhanov, 2018). Citizens frequently combine a Kazakhstani civic identity with ethnic and linguistic identities, though the balance varies across groups and contexts (Rees & Williams, 2017; Sadvokassova et al., 2025; Sharipova, 2020; Sharipova et al., 2017). National symbols often succeed because their meanings remain broad enough to accommodate different audiences, yet the same ambiguity can mask disagreement (Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022). Military-patriotic education must therefore avoid presenting any single language, region, gender, or mode of participation as the sole authentic expression of loyalty. Accessibility, multilingual communication where appropriate, visible representation of diverse citizens, and equal treatment shape whether national membership is experienced as inclusive. Recent nationwide research on ethnic minorities confirms that positive views of nation-building coexist with continuing variation in civic and ethnic identification (Sadvokassova et al., 2026).

Media proposals are unsurprising in a young, digitally connected sample. Media and cinema have long served as arenas for representing and contesting national identity in Kazakhstan (Burkhanov, 2020; Isaacs, 2015; Tussupova, 2010). Demand for contemporary films, short videos, and social-media content signals preference for accessible formats rather than a simple request for more official messaging. The data do not, however, show that additional exposure would reduce personal reservations about service; such a claim would require longitudinal or experimental evidence. A stronger educational response would link communication to media literacy and participatory production—researching local

histories, conducting consent-based interviews, comparing sources, or producing multilingual documentaries. Participatory culture can expand civic voice, although unequal access and weak source evaluation remain risks (Jenkins et al., 2009). Digital media literacy is associated with online participation and exposure to diverse perspectives (Kahne et al., 2012), while broader social-media evidence remains largely associational (Boulianne, 2015). Evaluation should therefore move beyond views and reach to knowledge, source judgment, dialogue, and meaningful participation.

Although only a small number of responses focused primarily on the status and welfare of military personnel, the theme speaks directly to institutional credibility. Prestige is difficult to sustain when working conditions, safety, fair treatment, professional development, pay, benefits, complaint mechanisms, or family support are perceived as inadequate. Legislation defines formal status, yet public confidence also depends on everyday practice (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2012). Comparative research shows that citizens distinguish among patriotic duty, career choice, and material necessity when judging why people serve (Krebs & Ralston, 2022; Krebs et al., 2021, 2026). Educational work is more credible when accompanied by transparent information about service pathways, rights, welfare, transferable skills, and post-service opportunities.

High support for Zhas Sarbaz is a favourable starting condition, not an impact evaluation. The movement should be assessed against an explicit theory of change linking inputs (instructor training, curriculum, equipment, equitable access) to activities, immediate learning outcomes, and longer-term civic outcomes. Measurement must distinguish knowledge, belonging, critical-democratic orientation, institutional trust, service interest, and actual participation. Future designs would benefit from pre- and post-programme measures, comparison groups where feasible, and validated scales separating constructive from blind patriotism, attachment from glorification, and efficacy from trust (Davidov, 2009; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Roccas et al., 2006; Schatz et al., 1999). Measurement equivalence across regional, linguistic, gender, socioeconomic, and urban-rural subgroups should be tested before group comparisons are made.

Several limitations define the study's evidentiary scope. Convenience recruitment produces unknown selection probabilities; the sample cannot support national or city-wide prevalence estimates. Concentration in Almaty (70.7 %) and the 18–35 age range (72.1 %) restricts comparison with rural, older, and regionally diverse populations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal claims. Absence of validated multi-item scales and incomplete item wording prevent assessment of construct validity and cross-language equivalence. Subgroup patterns cannot be treated as statistically significant. Social-desirability bias remains possible even under anonymous conditions (Krumpal, 2013). Qualitative data consisted of short comments rather than interviews; the large “no-proposal” category is ambiguous, and single primary coding simplifies overlapping ideas. Independent coding review occurred, but no reliability coefficient was reported.

These limitations do not invalidate the study. They reposition it as an exploratory urban survey that identifies a theoretically meaningful tension between programme approval and personal service willingness, surfaces participant-generated themes of direct policy relevance, and clarifies measurement priorities for subsequent national research. The central observation—that citizens can simultaneously endorse patriotic programmes and hesitate before personal enlistment – remains robust within the achieved sample and consistent with both national-attachment theory and civil-military research. Future work combining probability sampling, validated instruments, longitudinal or experimental designs, and deeper qualitative inquiry will be better placed to test the mechanisms producing this pattern and to evaluate whether specific educational or institutional interventions can narrow the observed gap.

Conclusion

The study offers two main conclusions. Empirically, respondents expressed broad support for the connection between patriotism and national security and for Zhas Sarbaz, but they were more divided when the question concerned their own military service. Substantively, the written proposals show that patriotic education is not confined to a single lesson or organization.

Families and preschools introduce memory and belonging. Schools and universities can add historical knowledge, discussion, and civic practice. Media can widen access, provided that communication is joined to source evaluation and participation. Practical activities connect learning with experience, while everyday service conditions influence whether military institutions are regarded

as credible. These elements work best when critical reflection, inclusion, and equal citizenship are treated as part of patriotism rather than as exceptions to it.

The next stage for Zhas Sarbaz and related programmes should be evaluation as well as expansion. A national follow-up would benefit from stratification by region, settlement type, language, age, gender, and education; publication of the full questionnaire and data-management protocol; and validated measures that separate constructive patriotism, institutional trust, civic efficacy, and service intentions. Such evidence would allow programme designers to identify what participants learn, which groups are reached, and where institutional practice requires improvement.

Mandatory Declarations

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Author contributions (CRediT). Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing - review and editing. Author 2: Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing - original draft. Both authors: Validation and approval of the final manuscript.

Ethics and consent. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and electronic informed consent was obtained before completion of the survey. The study documentation supplied for manuscript preparation did not include an ethics committee name, approval number, or approval date. The authors will provide the editorial office with the applicable institutional record or a documented determination that formal review was not required.

Data availability. De-identified data and the questionnaire are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical, legal, and confidentiality restrictions.

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