

# MIGRATION TRENDS IN KAZAKHSTAN: EXPLORING MIGRATION CAUSES AND FACTORS

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.21.2.13>

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## ABSTRACT

**T**he article examines the issues of emigration of the population of Kazakhstan, the reasons and factors influencing the decision of citizens to leave the country.

The analysis was based on the fall 2018 sociological poll results, which comprised responses from 3,215 Kazakhstani citizens and in-depth interviews with 143 experts in different civil service, science, education, and economics branches.

The results thus obtained showed that labor migration predominated: people were driven by the desire to earn more, to realize their professional potential, to receive better education and professional training. We have also discovered that the low quality of education and lack of favorable conditions for the development of the younger generation are the two other causes of the outflow of Kazakhstanis from their homeland. The state is not doing enough to persuade young

specialists and scientists to remain in the country, which explains the gradual increase of intellectual migration and brain-drain.

The results brought us to a conclusion that certain political factors, including poorly protected legitimate rights, corruption and

certain related reasons, are fairly important for those determined to leave.

Many of those who are ready to leave, the older generation in particular, are kept back by family and friendly ties and the habitual life style.

**KEYWORDS:** migration, factors, causes of migration, migration policy, Kazakhstan.

## Introduction

International migration is an inalienable component of globalization caused by economic, political and other processes unfolding in the changing world. Migration is present in practically every region of our planet. It is especially obvious in the developing countries: these potential sources of cheap labor force make the studies of the causes and factors of migration an important component of our understanding of the changing population strength in the world and prevention of the most probable social and economic problems in the long-term perspective.

According to the International Migration Organization, in the last two decades the number of international migrants remained fairly stable: 281 million were living outside their homelands in 2020 against 173 million in 2000 and 221 million in 2010. Today, international migrants comprise about 3.6% of the world's total population.<sup>1</sup>

According to the latest studies, people become international migrants under the pressure of economic, political and social factors.<sup>2</sup> International migration is driven by the desire to find better jobs and higher wages.<sup>3</sup> The political factors—discrimination, violations of basic human rights and clumsiness of the authorities—are also not ignored as key factors of the decision to emigrate.<sup>4</sup> Sociologists point to family ties and network connections in the target country, which obviously make it easier to find a job, accommodation and acquire information indispensable for smooth resettlement.<sup>5</sup>

Migration processes in Central Asia and their factors stir up a lot of plausible interest in the academic community. There is an opinion that migration is gradually becoming an important part of the economies of Central Asian and other post-Soviet states.<sup>6</sup> Experts believe that people leave the

<sup>1</sup> See: *International Migration 2020 Highlights*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2020 (ST/ESA/SER.A/452).

<sup>2</sup> See: F. Docquier, G. Peri, I. Ruysen, "The Cross-Country Determinants of Potential and Actual Migration," *International Migration Review*, No. 48, 2014, pp. 37-39.

<sup>3</sup> See: B. Krasniqi, N. Williams, "Migration and Intention to Return Entrepreneurial Intentions of the Diaspora in Post-Conflict Economies," *Post-Communist Economies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2018, pp. 464-483; I. Arif, "The Determinants of International Migration: Unbundling the Role of Political, Economic, and Social Institutions," *The World Economy*, Vol. 43, Issue 6, 2020, pp. 1699-1729.

<sup>4</sup> See: M. Nejad, A. Young, "Want Freedom, Will Travel: Emigrant Self-Selection According to Institutional Quality," *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 45, 2016, pp. 71-84.

<sup>5</sup> See: S. Jain, "For Love and Money: Second-Generation Indian-Americans 'Return' to India," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 5, 2013, pp. 896-914.

<sup>6</sup> See: E. Taukebayeva, M. Zhumabekov, B. Saparov, R. Khaymetov, "Understanding State Failures in the Central Asian Region," *Academic Research in Educational Sciences*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, ISSN 2181-1385.

region because their countries of choice offer a wide choice of jobs, efficient use of professional skills and social lifts.<sup>7</sup>

In their joint article, Eric Fong and Kumiko Shibuya have written that labor migration predominates in the majority of regions.<sup>8</sup> As could be expected, the expert communities and the governments throughout the world are worried by unfolding migrations. Population outflows negatively affect the competitiveness of states, their economic and social sustainability and their development as a whole. In recent years, Kazakhstan has been demonstrating a negative migration balance: the number of emigrants was bigger than the number of immigrants. This causes a lot of scholarly and, what is even more important, practical interest: the results of relevant studies may help improve migration policies and, to a great extent, prevent migration.

We have posed ourselves the task to *identify the factors responsible for the desire to leave Kazakhstan for other countries*.

Our results have demonstrated that migrants are driven by economic and political problems in their country and personal contacts with Kazakhstanis who have already settled abroad.

## Gathering Information and Methods of Studies

The academic community is convinced that mixed research methods are the best instrument of comprehensive and varied analysis of the object of studies and impartial scholarly assessments.<sup>9</sup> We relied on quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Our analysis is based on the results of the sociological poll carried out between 21 September and 19 October, 2018 in all regions of Kazakhstan, including its capital Nur-Sultan and the cities with a republican status with the total sample of 3,215 respondents of 18 and older. Women comprised 60.1% of the total (1,932), men, 39.9% (1,283).

Young people aged 18 to 29 (1,014 people in all) comprised the main age group—31.6% of the polled; people aged 30 to 39 (921 in all)—28.7%; those aged 40 to 49 (678 people)—21.1%; there were 514 respondents aged 50 to 59 (15.9%); 88 people (2.7%) among the polled were over 60.

People with higher education formed the biggest respondent group (70.3% or 2,261 people); specialists with secondary special and professional education constituted the second biggest group, with 16.2% (519 people), followed by the group with post-graduate education (masters, PhDs, and doctors of science (9%, 289 people); 4.5% of the respondents (146 people) had secondary education.

~~The majority of the polled were civil servants (66%, or 2,123 people); employees of the law and order structures and the military comprised 0.5% of the polled, or 15 people); employees of budget organizations, 12.6% or 406 people; the share of students was 15.9% (512 people); the business community was represented by 3% of the polled, or 97 people; jobless and self-employed—1% (62 people).~~

The poll was conducted in Kazakh and Russian using the Google Forms online poll instrument; the results were analyzed in the SPSS program.

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<sup>7</sup> See: M. Gubaidullina, Zh. Idrysheva, *et al.*, “The Contribution of Migration to Sustainable Development: Western Vector of Migration from Central Asia (the US Case),” E3S Web of Conferences, Vol. 159, 2020, available at [https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202015902003].

<sup>8</sup> See: E. Fong, K. Shibuya, “Migration Patterns in East and Southeast Asia: Causes and Consequences,” *The Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 46, 2020, pp. 511-531.

<sup>9</sup> See: C. Moorley, X. Cathala, “How to Appraise Mixed Methods Research”, *Evidence-Based Nursing*, Vol. 22, 2019, pp. 38-41.

The expert interviews within this project were carried out in Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Aktau, Karaganda, Petropavlovsk, Ust-Kamenogorsk, and Shymkent. We interviewed 143 experts in education, science, civil service and the private sector.

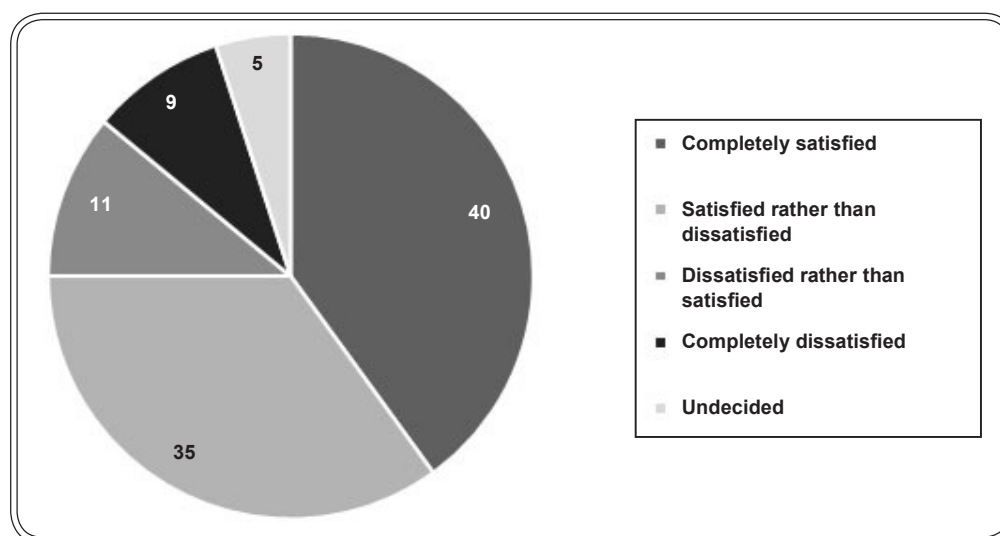
At the same time, our statistical portrait of the migration trends relied on official information of the Committee for Statistics, Ministry of National Economics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and programmed and strategic migration-related documents.

## Results

It is repeatedly pointed out that people emigrate in search of better jobs, more efficient realization of their professional potential and higher living standards.<sup>10</sup> Our results showed that the majority of citizens of Kazakhstan are satisfied with their quality of life: 40% of the polled expressed their satisfaction with the quality of life; 35% said that they were satisfied rather than dissatisfied (see Fig. 1). The level of satisfaction with the quality of life depends on many factors: professional, social and economic status and confidence in the future. Despite the high level of satisfaction, however, our deeper studies revealed the fact that over 46% of the respondents were ready to emigrate.

Figure 1

To Which Extent Are You Satisfied with the Quality of Life in Kazakhstan? %



Natasha C. Parkins is convinced that migration is, on the whole, accelerated by the lack of economic and social opportunities in the home country.<sup>11</sup> This is partly confirmed by the results of our poll, according to which 23% of Kazakhstanis are attracted by high living standards and high salaries (20%) in other countries. The problems related to corruption drive away 10% of the respondents, while

<sup>10</sup> See: M. Gubaidullina, Zh. Idrysheva, *et al.*, *op. cit.*; F. Docquier, G. Peri, I. Ruysen, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> See: N.C. Parkins, "Push and Pull Factors of Migration," *American Review of Political Economy*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2010, pp. 6-24, available at [<https://libezproxy.syr.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/push-pull-factors-migration/docview/912208903/se-2?accountid=14214>].

9% are dissatisfied with the low technological level of the economy's production sector. The third group of potential migrants consists of those attracted by the social package offered in Western countries (7%); stability (6%) and people dissatisfied with the low level of medicine in Kazakhstan (6%). There are problems associated with the realization of the legitimate rights of citizens, the economic crisis, price volatility and the high level of crime (less than 5% of the respondents) (see Fig. 2).

Expert interviews provided similar answers: higher wages, better social support and high standards of living in other countries:

*"First of all, it's the quality of life, labor conditions and social insurance. I am leaving the country because in Europe and America it is much easier to find jobs upon graduation. In Kazakhstan it is not that easy for educated people to find jobs according to their wishes and professional skills. It is next to impossible to reveal your potential"* (male, 30, civil servant, Astana).

*"Skilled people move abroad because their abilities are not appreciated here. I speak about well-educated engineers and experts in nuclear physics and chemistry. Their abilities are appreciated in the form of academic degrees, while in foreign companies they are appreciated in the form of high wages. In Kazakhstan recent graduates can only count on courier or cleaning jobs"* (male, 25, civil servant, East Kazakhstan Region).

Monthly incomes are the common indicator of the social and material status, which makes the question "To which extent are you satisfied with the level of your wage?" highly relevant. The majority of the polled (50%) were dissatisfied with their low monthly incomes; 43% of the polled were more or less satisfied (see Fig. 3).

The polled experts pointed to the problems of **self-development, self-realization and the desire to receive a good-quality education** as the reasons for emigration and brain drain:

*"Our people emigrate because here they cannot move higher and get well-paid jobs. A young university graduate has no adequate skills, no experience in the chosen profession and, therefore, no prospects. Emigration and foreign language courses are his only options. Even those who graduated from a college in Almaty would not be appreciated in Kazakhstan"* (female, 38, civil servant in Almaty).

*"There are several main reasons: living conditions in our country differ a lot from America, where life is comfortable. Economic conditions are very different—they are worse in our country and are much better in the other countries that attract our people. There it is much easier to realize yourself as a professional and probably as an individual"* (male, 24, civil servant, Astana).

*"First and foremost, young people emigrate to receive a good education. A strongly motivated, developed and talented young person (not all of them can be described in these terms) has all the reasons to move abroad to study"* (male, 53, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).

Despite the negative trend, certain experts pointed to the temporary nature of the outflow from Kazakhstan explained by positive shifts in reforms:

*"First and foremost, I think that the living conditions offered there are probably affordable. I have never been abroad, so I do not know for sure. Secondly, wages and salaries are probably higher, yet we should take into account that the living standards are also higher. This is a temporary phenomenon"* (male, 27, civil servant, Mangystau Region).

*"Our youth is highly ambitious, we are open to the world, we are not closed. They can see where, how and who live abroad. They probably cannot get this here and now and cannot and do not want to wait. They need everything now. I hope that this is a short-lived phenomenon. If we realize our programs and strategic plans, we will become a flourishing state and our young people will no longer look abroad and plan emigration, which is something that we see today"* (male, 46, civil servant, Astana).

The respondents from the North Kazakhstan Region were very concerned by the pace of educational migration to the Russian Federation, where tuition is lower and the prestige of universities higher:

Figure 2

Main Reasons for Migration, %

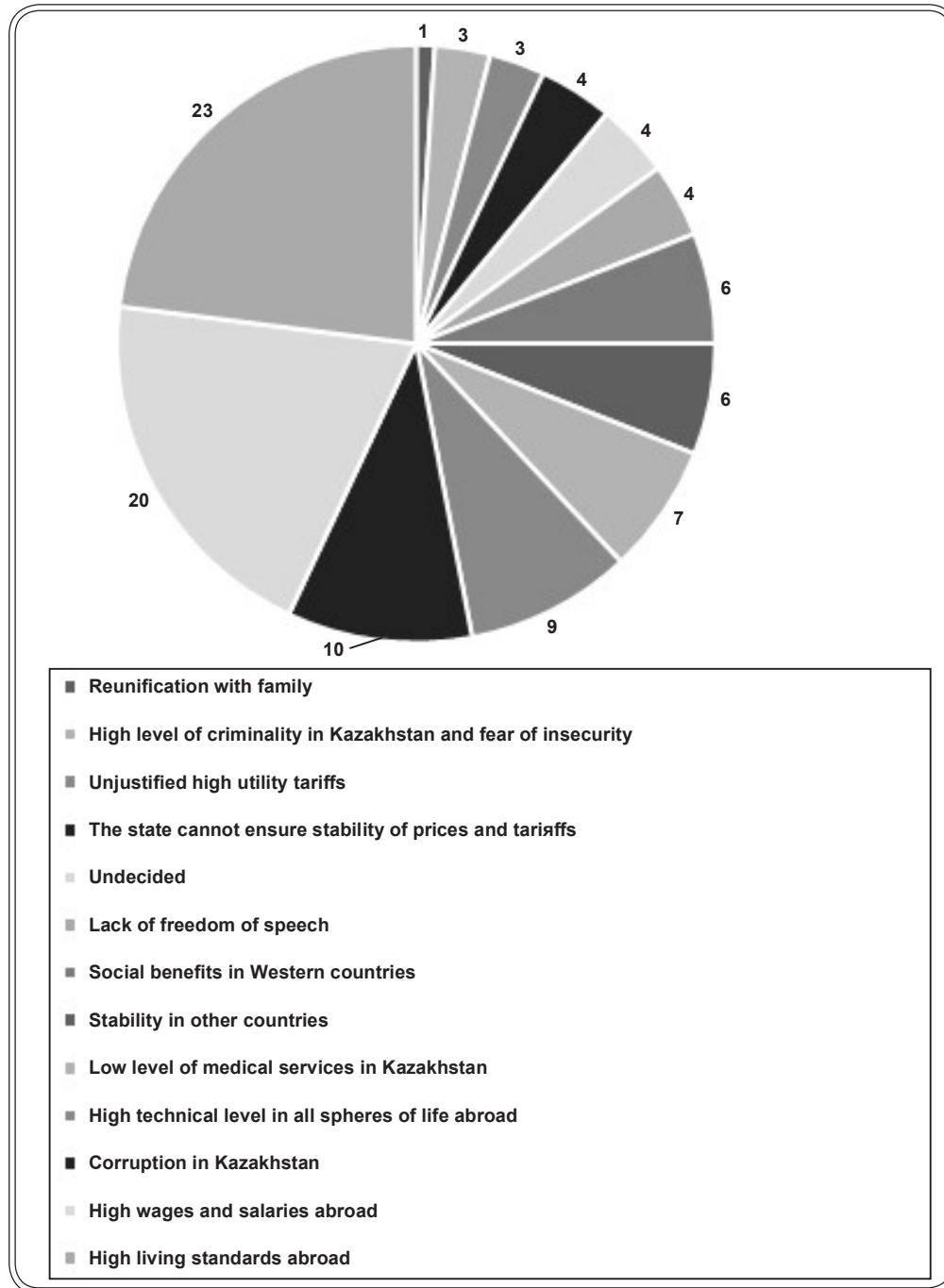
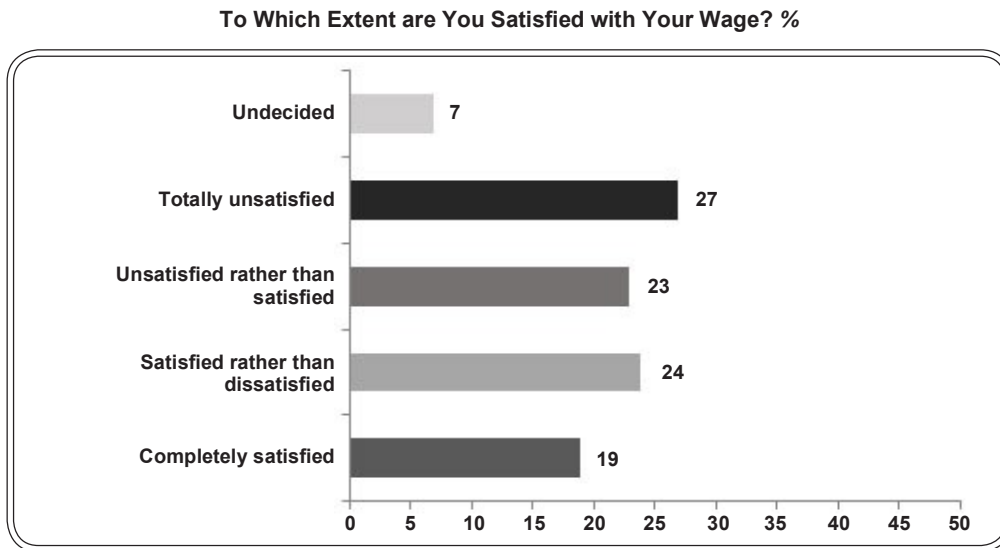


Figure 3



*“I wonder why school graduates move there. Because it is much easier to be educated through grants in neighboring countries. They go to other states, attracted by the living conditions and the education” (male, 58, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).*

*“The image is very important. Omsk with its million-strong population is the capital of Western Siberia; there are several well-known universities with long histories and respected teaching cadres. This is about the image, yet money is no less important. In Russia higher education is much cheaper than here. For example, annual tuition at our Asfendiyarov Medical Academy is 800,000 tenge. In Omsk it is 600,000-500,000 tenge. Education is much cheaper in Russia. Education at the North Kazakhstan State University is more expensive than in Omsk. The Agrarian Academy is cheaper than in Kazakhstan” (male, 40, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).*

**The majority of the Kazakhstani citizens plan short labor migration.** They do not contemplate permanent resettlement: they want to work and live with their families in Kazakhstan:

*“I was invited, and I wanted to work, but never thought of leaving Kazakhstan forever to settle in another country. I was satisfied with the conditions in which I could develop and carry out certain research programs. Everything was OK there. My children and my roots are here, and I want to live and die here” (female, 56, lecturer, Almaty).*

*“I think I would have gone abroad to learn Western skills to apply them in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is our country, our Motherland” (male of 24, civil servant, Karaganda Region).*

Some of the respondents explained their intention by **patriotic feelings and the desire to be useful in their country.** Older respondents were dead set against changing the way of life:

*“No, I will not go anywhere, I like it here, we could and can go abroad. We have relatives abroad, but even my children are not considering emigration. Our roots are here, everything we have is here” (female, 44, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).*

*“No, I’d rather stay here, in my settlement and will develop it so that people could get better incomes. I’d rather go forward to become the leader and patriot of my home country” (male, 26, civil servant, East Kazakhstan Region).*

*“Today I have no such plans; if as a young man I had the opportunities available to the young generation today, I would have done the same” (male, 46, civil servant, Astana).*

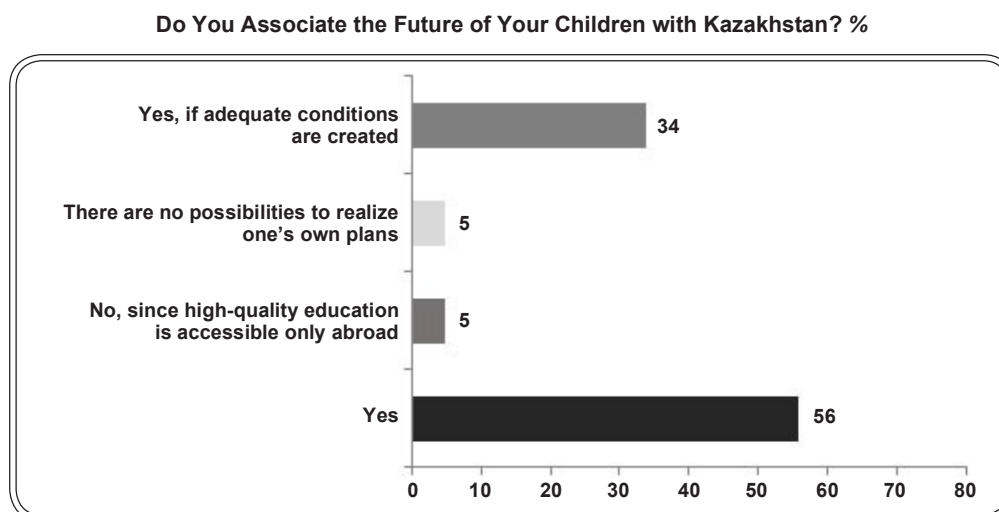
A small part of the respondents, however, said that they were ready to move abroad if offered good jobs and good conditions.

*“Well, certainly. Had I been offered a good job there and adequate housing, if my family accepted this I would have moved”* (female, 38, civil servant, Almaty).

*“If we are talking about foreign countries, I would look attentively at any foreign country. Judging by our neighbors, we are not the worst. Also, conditions should be good and I would be interested in this country. If not, I would still have said: well, let’s try”* (male of 29, civil servant, East Kazakhstan Region).

The respondents were asked to assess the **state of the social sphere in Kazakhstan**, including the system of education and additional education for children. The question “Do you associate the future of your children with Kazakhstan?” received 56% of positive responses. On the other hand, 10% of the respondents firmly refused to associate the future of their children with Kazakhstan, which offered no high-quality education and limited self-realization potential. According to 34% of the polled, the outflow from the country could be stemmed only by better conditions for development and education (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4



Meanwhile, there is an important fact: a relatively big share of the respondents (62%) are not satisfied with the conditions in which they raise their children. The inadequate level of education in Kazakhstan forces parents to educate their children in developed countries; not infrequently, children educated abroad do not return, but find jobs and homes there (see Fig. 5). There are many reasons to believe that the outflow from Kazakhstan is caused by the parents’ desire to find better conditions and brighter prospects for their children.

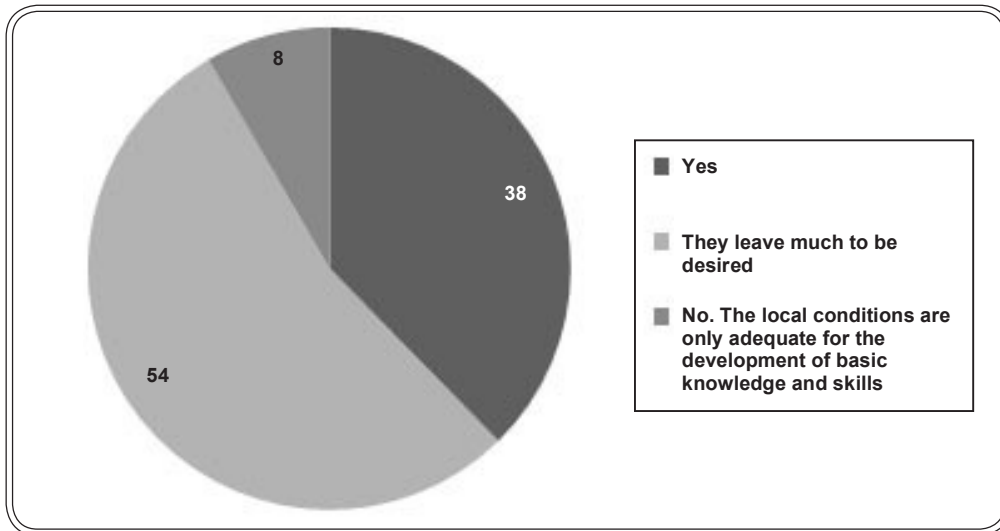
Meanwhile, the following arguments are offered as an explanation for the **low quality of training at Kazakhstan’s universities**:

- **The inadequate level of professional competence of the teaching staff at universities** is explained by the shrinking number of university lecturers of “Soviet times” as a model of teaching skills. The younger generation of the respondents, however, is convinced that the Soviet teaching methods were outdated, which makes the services of “Soviet lecturers” unnecessary:



Figure 5

Are You Satisfied with the Conditions  
in Which Your Children Grow and Develop? %



*“Professionalism of the teaching staff is below standards”* (female, 39, teacher, Almaty).

*“For example, there are people who studied in the Soviet Union, but there are new technologies that are appearing today and these people should be taught to use them”* (male, 25, civil servant, Mangystau Region).

*“Regrettably, this generation of experienced people is gradually disappearing, while the young specialists do not fit all requirements”* (male, 37, civil servant, Astana);

- **The profession of a university lecturer is not popular** among highly skilled specialists because of **low wages and inadequate social support**:

*“There are not many lecturers who are interested in what they are doing; others, to tell the truth, are barely surviving. They need money for sustenance and remain in this profession, but do not develop their skills. They spend a lot of time, up to 90% of their working hours, dealing with papers and documents instead of developing and teaching students”* (male, 30, teacher, Astana).

*“Today, people stay away from universities: the wage is sixty thousand tenge, while the workload forces them to spend a lot of time at work. Not many people want to work for sixty thousand”* (female, 56, lecturer, Almaty);

- **Corruption at universities and inefficient management** are the two factors that explain the low development level of the higher education system:

*“I should say that, unfortunately, corruption has reduced to naught the entire system of higher education in this country. On the whole, repercussions might be very negative both for the country and society”* (male, 37, civil servant, Astana).

*“I am convinced that ours is the most corrupt educational system; it is much more corrupted than the customs service, police and civil service”* (male, 40, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).

*“In big universities the quality of education is probably worse; they are too big and too inflexible, which is bad and costs a lot. They do not teach students adequate competences”* (female, 42, lecturer, Almaty);

- **Paid education** is one of the major stumbling blocks on the road to higher quality of education at our universities: accessible to all who can pay, it kills competitiveness among students:

*“I do not understand paid medical education: indeed, an indifferent student who paid for his education will hardly become a good doctor. I do not understand paid education at either medical or pedagogical universities. Human lives and development of our children cannot and should not depend on money paid for education”* (female, 47, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).

*“Education is paid, and the number of graduates is much greater than before. The quality casts doubt: a lot of graduates cannot find adequate jobs”* (female, 58, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).

*“Today, when anybody with money can enroll at a university, the quality of higher education in our country leaves much to be desired”* (female, 43, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region);

- Many respondents spoke of a **lack of motivation in the student milieu**: many of them are not concerned with the quality of their education:

*“Those who enroll to study will study. In this case, the quality of the pedagogical staff is not that important; it is much more important what the student wants”* (female, 37, civil servant, North Kazakhstan Region).

*“Many students enroll at universities to get a diploma; they are not interested in their future profession. The teaching staff, therefore, see no reason to try too hard”* (male, 47, civil servant, Astana).

*“Much depends on the students themselves. I have often heard from professors that only 5 or 7 students out of 100 work hard. Others spend time at seminars and lectures with telephones in their hands”* (male, 64, Almaty).

At the same time, 60% of the respondents positively assessed the possibilities of professional development in Kazakhstan; while 40% were more or less satisfied or even displeased.

According to the results of our opinion poll, *political factors* are also present among migration factors. We have already written that, according to the academic community, observance of the basic human rights is one of the fairly important determinants of migration.<sup>12</sup> About 20% of the respondents pointed to the deficiencies of the national human rights legal system; 12% pointed to repeated violations of rights in all spheres of life; 6% pointed out that those wishing to protect their legal rights and interests need money or good contacts at the very top (see Fig. 6). About half of the respondents, 49% to be more exact, are convinced that the laws of Kazakhstan efficiently protect the rights and interests of its citizens.

In the course of our poll the respondents were invited to assess the **efficiency of the instruments of state support of citizens in different spheres (business, science, etc.)**. According to the respondents, the state supports businesses and those who received the Bolashak presidential stipend. The vulnerable population groups are only partially and inefficiently supported. The society is convinced that state support of young specialists, scientists and talented people is inadequate and not efficient enough (see Fig. 7).

<sup>12</sup> See: C. Werner, C. Emmelhainz, H. Barcus, “Privileged Exclusion in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Ethnic Return Migration, Citizenship, and the Politics of (Not) Belonging”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 69, No. 10, 2017, pp. 1557-1583.

Figure 6

**Do You Believe That the Rights of Citizens Are Protected by the Laws of the RK?**

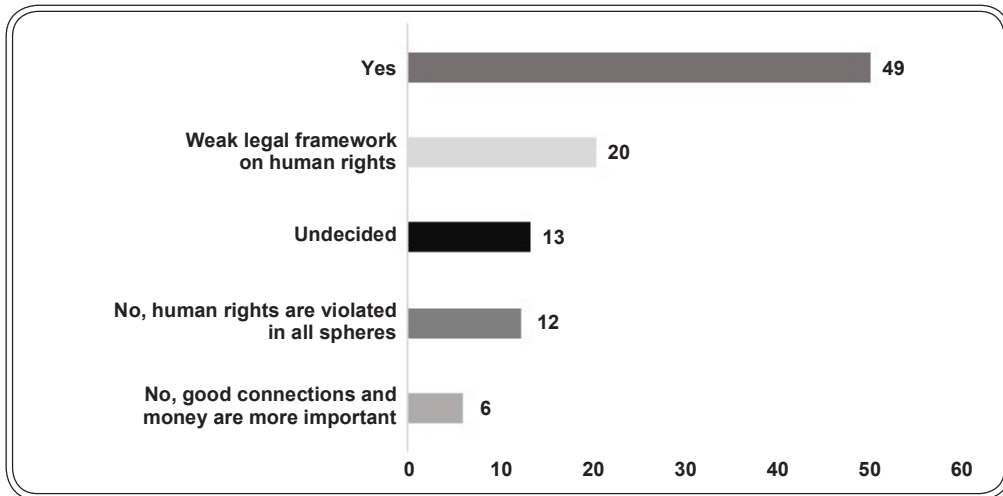
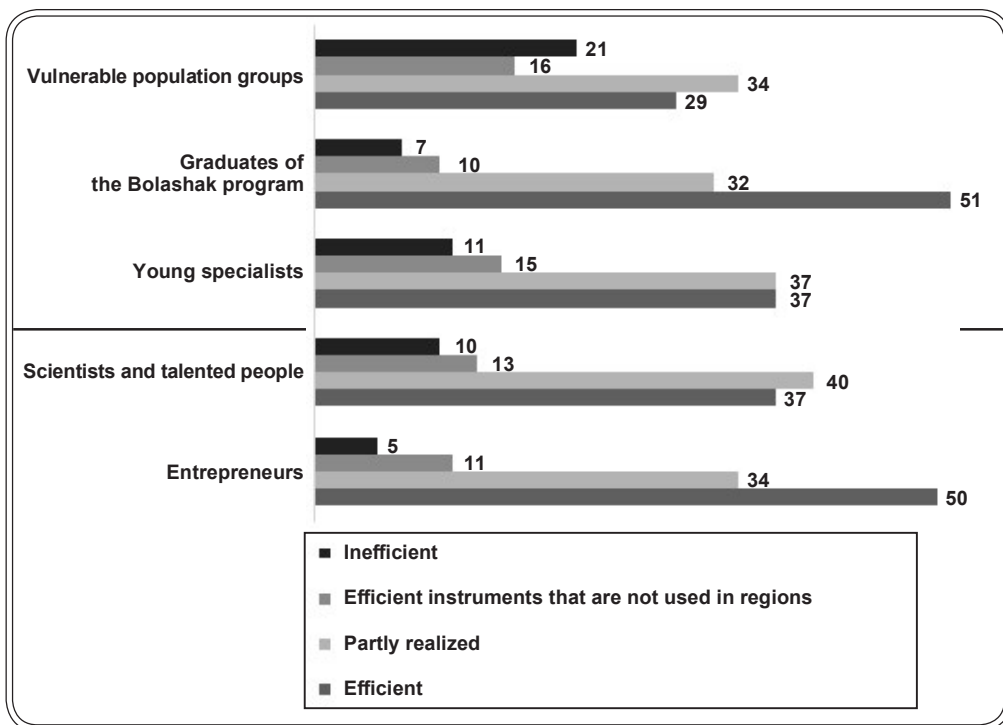


Figure 7

**Assessment of the Efficiency of State Support, %**



## *Conclusion*

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The results of our studies have demonstrated that migration in Kazakhstan is caused, to different degrees, by social, economic and political factors. The academic community has already pointed out that they are common to all, predominantly developing, countries.<sup>13</sup>

Employment and wages are the two most important and relatively common problems. The majority (50% of the polled) of Kazakhstanis are dissatisfied with their monthly incomes, hence labor migration in the context of international migration.<sup>14</sup> They are attracted by the high living standards and high incomes in foreign countries, good chances to realize their professional skills and make a career. This coincides with the results of other studies carried out in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.<sup>15</sup> Some of our project participants have stated that the negative migration trends were only temporary phenomena, and referred to the measures intended to improve the social and economic conditions in Kazakhstan.

Our results confirmed that the education system was very important for the development of the younger generation. Our poll has shown that society is deeply concerned about the low quality of available education. This explains why people do not associate the future of their children with Kazakhstan and prefer to educate them in countries with higher living and educational standards. Those who assessed the level of higher education in Kazakhstan pointed to corruption and the low level of competence and inadequate training of the teaching staff. The respondents were dissatisfied with the state measures designed to support young specialists and scientists. Some experts explained this by the low status of teachers and scientists and the level of wages and salaries in educational establishments. The academic community agreed that migration of promising and educated Kazakhstanis to the West deprives the country of its labor force and, what is even more important, its intellectual elite.<sup>16</sup>

Political situation, high level of corruption and low level of protection of human rights were mentioned as migration drivers. The citizens are not quite satisfied with the current human rights legislation (20% of the respondents); 18% of the respondents are convinced that their rights are limited in many spheres, and that money and connections are the best instrument of dealing with all sorts of problems. There were scholars who deemed it necessary to point out that the rights of national minorities are infringed upon, especially of those with a “temporary status.”<sup>17</sup>

To sum up: the results mean that the social, economic and political institutions of Kazakhstan should demonstrate more efficiency. They should pay more attention to the level of wages and salaries and encourage professional and personal development. This also applies to the problem of the development of children and support of young specialists and scholars, otherwise an outflow of young and educated may create not only an intellectual but also a demographic gap in the future.

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<sup>13</sup> See: F. Docquier, G. Peri, I. Ruysen, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> See: E. Fong, K. Shibuya, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> See: B. Bokayev, R. Ismailova, Z. Torebekova, “Affecting International Migration Trends through a Multi-Faceted Policy: Kazakhstan within Central Asia and the EAEU,” *Romanian Political Science Review*, Vol. XX, No. 2, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> See: M. Gubaidullina, Zh. Idrysheva, *et al.*, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> C. Werner, C. Emmelhainz, H. Barcus, op. cit.