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Instagram as Infrastructure of Kazakhstani National Identity and the Potemkin Nation Brand Paradox

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Abstract. Instagram in Kazakhstan has moved beyond the status of a lifestyle platform and has become a dense public infrastructure where national identity is photographed, negotiated, contested and bureaucratically processed. The article examines this transformation through a three-level model: citizen – local executive head – state. At the citizen level, Instagram turns everyday experience into public evidence: a broken pavement, a procurement scandal, a language meme, an ecological habit or a post about gendered shame. At the local executive head level, the platform becomes a visible test of local executive bedel, since administrative authority is judged not only by position but also by response, speed and credibility. At the state level, Instagram functions as an instrument of nation branding and soft power, yet this visual strategy produces a paradox when the polished national image is compared with domestic experience. The article introduces the concept of the Potemkin nation brand paradox: a condition in which a country's image is attractive for external audiences but provokes irony among citizens who recognize the gap between promotional aesthetics and everyday governance. The analysis draws on verified platform statistics, legal sources, academic literature on digital nationalism and nation branding, and documented Kazakhstan cases such as «ProTenge», «Protest Körpe», eco-activism and municipal Instagram communication. The findings show that Instagram has become an infrastructure of Kazakhstani national identity because it connects visibility, bedel, post-Soviet memory, civic evidence and state image-making in one platform field.

Keywords: *Instagram, Kazakhstan, national identity, digital nationalism, nation branding, soft power, post-Soviet communication, civic evidence.*

Introduction

Kazakhstan's national identity is now produced not only in school textbooks, state ceremonies, television speeches or diplomatic events. It is also produced in Instagram stories, comment threads, reels, municipal complaint posts, activist screenshots, influencer captions and patriotic visual campaigns. A young user posts a video in Kazakh and receives encouragement from strangers. A resident tags an «akimat»

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account under a photograph of an open manhole. An eco-blogger explains why waste sorting is not a fashionable hobby but a civic obligation. A ministry publishes polished images of modern Kazakhstan for foreign audiences. In the same feed, a citizen posts a sarcastic comment asking why the beautiful image does not match the street, hospital, school, bus stop or public office nearby.

This simultaneity is the starting point of the article. Instagram does not simply reflect Kazakhstan's identity. It rearranges the conditions under which identity becomes visible. Before platform communication, the citizen needed access to formal media, public hearings, letters to state bodies or personal networks to make a claim visible. Instagram lowers this threshold. It gives the citizen a camera, a caption, a tag, a comment and an audience. The act may be small. Yet when repeated by millions of users, it forms a new infrastructure of public recognition.

The scale is already national. DataReportal's Digital 2026: Kazakhstan report states that Instagram had 13.1 million users in Kazakhstan in late 2025 [1]. This figure matters because Instagram's audience is not a narrow elite public. It crosses age, language, class, region and profession, although access and influence remain uneven. The platform is where a part of Kazakhstan sees itself being seen. A wedding aesthetic, a mountain trip, a complaint against an «akimat», a discussion of language shame, a public procurement post, a charity campaign or a tourism reel may all become fragments of the national image.

The legal environment confirms that digital platforms are no longer outside the state's institutional attention. The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Online Platforms and Online Advertising" dated July 10, 2023 No. 18-VIII regulates relations connected with online platforms operating in Kazakhstan and online advertising [2]. The law is important not only as a regulatory document. It shows that online platforms have become part of the state's information architecture. The state recognizes their power, requires legal representation for large platforms, regulates illegal content and expects interaction between platforms and authorized bodies. Instagram therefore operates at the intersection of social life, law, public administration and symbolic politics.

The analytical problem becomes sharper when Instagram is viewed through the cultural concepts of «бедел» and «абырой».

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In Kazakh public culture, *bedel* means socially recognized authority, weight and credibility. *Abiroy* refers to honour, dignity and reputation. These concepts are not ornamental. They shape how citizens judge public figures, elders, officials, influencers, activists and institutions. In a platform environment, *bedel* is no longer attached only to formal status. It must be performed and tested. A local executive head may hold office, but his or her digital *bedel* depends on visible responsiveness. An activist may lack office, but gain *bedel* through evidence and consistency. A state may promote an attractive national brand, but lose *abiroy* if citizens read that image as staged.

The post-Soviet context gives this problem a historical depth. Public communication in post-Soviet societies has long been marked by the tension between official display and lived reality. The Russian term «*показуха*» captures the logic of staged performance for superiors: a model school prepared before inspection, a freshly painted façade before a delegation, a carefully arranged meeting where the audience already knows what may be said. The Potemkin village metaphor belongs to the same symbolic field. In contemporary platform society, Instagram becomes the place where such façade-making can be both reproduced and exposed. The state can publish an impressive image, but the citizen can publish the surrounding context.

This article introduces the concept of the «Potemkin nation brand paradox». The concept denotes a situation in which the country's image is aesthetically strong, internationally legible and visually persuasive, yet domestic audiences respond with irony because they compare the promotional image with everyday governance. The paradox does not mean that the image is entirely false. Kazakhstan genuinely has spectacular landscapes, modern urban spaces, dynamic youth, multilingual culture, strong digital habits and visible international ambitions. The paradox begins when these real strengths are presented as a seamless national brand while citizens experience unresolved contradictions: corruption, inequality, bureaucratic distance, environmental problems, gendered policing, media restrictions or poor service quality.

The aim of the article is to explain why Instagram has become infrastructure of Kazakhstani national identity and how this infrastructure operates through the three levels of citizen, local executive head and state. The working

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hypothesis is that Instagram strengthens national identity when citizen evidence, local executive head responsiveness and state branding reinforce each other. When these levels diverge, Instagram does not merely support the nation brand. It reveals the gap inside it.

Literature Review

Instagram and nationalism in Kazakhstan have already attracted serious scholarly attention. Diana T. Kudaibergenova's article "The body global and the body traditional: a digital ethnography of Instagram and nationalism in Kazakhstan and Russia" is especially important because it shows that Instagram is not a neutral gallery of personal images. It is a place where acceptable behaviour, bodily expression, gendered respectability and fear of losing national culture are negotiated in authoritarian and post-Soviet contexts [3]. Kudaibergenova's argument is valuable because national identity appears not only through state symbols, but through the body, dress, beauty, comment, accusation and shame. Instagram produces visible bodies, and visible bodies become sites of national judgement.

This argument is directly relevant to Kazakhstan's platform culture. A woman's public self-presentation may be read as modernity, Westernization, religious modesty, national pride, excessive visibility or moral violation. A man's public performance may be interpreted through success, consumption, patriotism or bureaucratic proximity. In this environment, Instagram becomes a visual court of national authenticity. The platform does not invent this moral economy. It intensifies it by making judgement fast, public and archived.

The religious dimension further complicates the picture. Laura Toktarbekova, Sholpan Zhandossova and Madina Bektenova examine Kazakh Muslim women's visual religious identity and Islamic agency on Instagram, showing how piety, aesthetics, entrepreneurship and gendered visibility are brought together in digital space [4]. Their work matters because it demonstrates that national identity in Kazakhstan cannot be analysed only through secular state narratives. Religion, especially in its visual and gendered forms, becomes part of the public negotiation of who may represent Kazakhstani modernity. Instagram allows Muslim women to build authority outside older institutional channels. This authority is not only religious. It is social, educational, aesthetic and

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entrepreneurial.

Nation branding scholarship brings the state back into the analysis. Sabina Insebayeva's "Imagining the Nation: Identity, Nation Building and Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan" argues that nation branding became a permanent feature of Kazakhstan's state discourse and that image-building projects, media exposure and spectacular urbanization were used to cultivate a positive international image [5]. This point is crucial because Instagram did not create Kazakhstan's concern with image. It inherited and accelerated a pre-existing state strategy. The difference is that earlier image-making was more controllable: international media campaigns, mega-events, diplomatic forums and capital-city architecture could be planned from above. Instagram is less stable. It lets the state speak, but it also lets citizen's answer.

Adrien Fauve's article "Global Astana: nation branding as a legitimization tool for authoritarian regimes" adds a sharper political dimension [6]. In Fauve's reading, Astana is not only a city; it is a legitimizing image of state capacity, modernization and futurity. The city's architecture is designed to be seen. Instagram converts this architectural symbolism into endlessly reproducible content: skylines, ministries, boulevards, forums, night lights, monumental perspectives. Yet the photogenic quality of state modernity is double-edged. A skyline can impress foreign audiences and still produce domestic irony if citizens compare it with regional inequality, infrastructural weakness or public distrust.

Erica Marat's "Nation Branding in Central Asia: A New Campaign to Present Ideas about the State and the Nation" situates Kazakhstan within a broader regional struggle for international recognition [7]. Central Asian states had to overcome external invisibility, stereotypes and the reductive label of "the stans." Kazakhstan's branding efforts therefore emerged from a real geopolitical need: to be recognized as sovereign, modern and strategically important. Instagram expands this recognition struggle into everyday culture. Food videos, travel reels, language memes, wedding aesthetics and local business accounts all contribute to the international image, even when they are not coordinated by the state.

Simon Anholt's concept of competitive identity is useful because it separates national reputation from simple advertising. Anholt argues that a country's image is shaped by policy, culture, people, tourism, exports, governance and

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investment behaviour, not merely by logos or slogans [8]. This principle is central for the Potemkin nation brand paradox. A state can design a beautiful campaign, but if policy and lived experience contradict the image, the brand weakens. Instagram makes this contradiction visible faster than traditional media. A polished video can be reframed by one citizen post that shows what the campaign leaves outside the frame.

Joseph S. Nye Jr.'s soft power theory also remains relevant. Nye defines soft power as the ability to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment [9]. In the Instagram age, attraction becomes decentralized. The state is not the only source of Kazakhstan's soft power. A Kazakh-language creator, a musician, a designer, an eco-activist, a chef, an urban photographer, a religious educator or an investigative journalist may create more credible attraction than an official campaign. This is not because state communication is always false. It is because platform audiences often trust lived fragments more than institutional polish.

The literature therefore converges on a central insight: national identity is not transmitted whole from the state to society. It is assembled through visual practices, moral expectations, institutional performances and public interpretation. The main gap in the existing scholarship is that the citizen, local executive head and state levels are rarely analysed together. Studies of digital nationalism often focus on bodies, gender and online conflict. Studies of nation branding often focus on the state and external audiences. Studies of governance focus on institutions and regulation. Instagram in Kazakhstan connects all three. That connection is the article's main analytical field.

Materials and Methods

The article uses a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach. The empirical logic is not built on private scraping of Instagram accounts. The quantitative layer uses published platform-reach data, including DataReportal's estimate of 13.1 million Instagram users in Kazakhstan in late 2025 [1]. Platform-reach data are treated carefully. They are not equivalent to the exact number of unique active citizens because advertising tools may include methodological limitations, age restrictions, duplicate identities or platform-defined reach. Yet they are valid for estimating

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communicative scale and comparing platform infrastructures.

The legal-institutional layer uses the 2023 Law “On Online Platforms and Online Advertising” [2]. This source establishes that online platforms are part of the regulatory field of Kazakhstan’s information policy. It also helps explain why Instagram is not only cultural space, but also a governed environment where content, complaints, representation and moderation become legally significant.

The scholarly layer includes academic literature on digital nationalism, religious agency, nation branding, competitive identity and soft power [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]. The case-based layer includes ProTenge as a citizen-level anti-corruption account [10], Almaty «akimat»’s Instagram communication as an akim-level responsiveness case [11], Protest Körpe as a cultural protest case [12], eco-activism as an everyday civic identity case [13], internet shutdown and platform regulation as state-level trust problems [14], [15], Kazakh-language platform practice as an identity case [16], and Threads referendum discussion as a comparative platform case [17].

The analytical unit is the communicative episode. Each episode is examined according to four indicators:

Table 1

Indicator	Meaning	Analytical question
Visibility	The degree to which a claim becomes publicly observable	What becomes visible on Instagram?
Bedel transfer	The movement of authority from office to performance or evidence	Who gains credibility and why?
Responsiveness	The reaction of institution or audience to a visible claim	Does visibility produce action?
Potemkin gap	The distance between official image and domestic experience	Does the image generate pride or irony?

Three formulas are used to make the analysis technically clearer.

$$PRR_i = \frac{U_i}{P} \times 100$$

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Here, PRR_i is the platform reach ratio for platform i , U_i is the reported number of users or reachable identities, and P is the population base used for interpretation. If Instagram reached 13.1 million users and the implied population base is approximately 20.8 million, then:

$$PRR_{Instagram} = \frac{13.1}{20.8} \times 100 = 62.98\% \approx 63\%$$

This calculation supports the classification of Instagram as a mass national platform rather than a niche communication channel.

$$ARC = \frac{R_s}{R_t} \times 100$$

Here, ARC is the akim responsiveness coefficient, R_s is the number of solved or answered appeals, and R_t is the total number of appeals. If a municipal account reports that 85 out of 100 Instagram appeals are solved, then:

$$ARC = \frac{85}{100} \times 100 = 85\%$$

This formula is used conceptually because the public case reports a high rate of problem-solving through Instagram, but not a full raw administrative dataset.

$$PNBG = B_e - E_d$$

Here, $PNBG$ is the Potemkin nation brand gap, B_e is the intensity of external brand expectation, and E_d is the credibility of domestic experience. The formula is conceptual and intended for future empirical testing. A high $PNBG$ means that the country's outward-facing image is much stronger than the citizen's perception of everyday institutional reality. A low $PNBG$ means that the brand is supported by lived experience and therefore produces less irony.

Results

The first empirical result is scale. Instagram's 13.1 million user reach in Kazakhstan in late 2025 means that the platform operates at the level of national infrastructure

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[1]. It is not infrastructure in the same way as roads, electricity or mobile broadband. It is infrastructure in the communicative sense: people organize visibility, recognition, complaint, prestige and participation through it. A citizen does not need to describe every detail of a local problem in bureaucratic language. A photo, a geotag and an «akimat» tag may be enough to create public pressure.

Table 2

Digital indicators of Instagram’s infrastructural role

Indicator	Verified value	Analytical meaning
Instagram users in Kazakhstan	13.1 million	Mass visual public sphere
Estimated population ratio	about 63%	National-level reach
Legal regulation of online platforms	Law No. 18-VIII, 2023	Platforms are part of state information policy
Main communicative affordance	image, story, reel, tag, comment	Everyday evidence becomes public
Main political tension	visibility versus control	The platform supports both branding and critique

The table shows that Instagram’s infrastructural role is produced by a combination of scale, affordance and institutional recognition. A platform with millions of users but no civic use would remain entertainment infrastructure. A platform with civic use but no mass reach would remain activist niche media. Instagram in Kazakhstan has both: mass reach and civic-institutional penetration.

The diagram shows that Instagram is not alone in Kazakhstan’s platform ecology. TikTok has a larger reported adult reach, and Threads has become important as a space for more text-based and critical expression. Yet Instagram remains distinctive because it combines visual identity, influencer culture, business pages, municipal accounts, activist documentation and state branding. It is less ephemeral than TikTok and more image-oriented than Threads. For national identity, this combination is decisive. Kazakhstan is not only argued on Instagram. It is shown.

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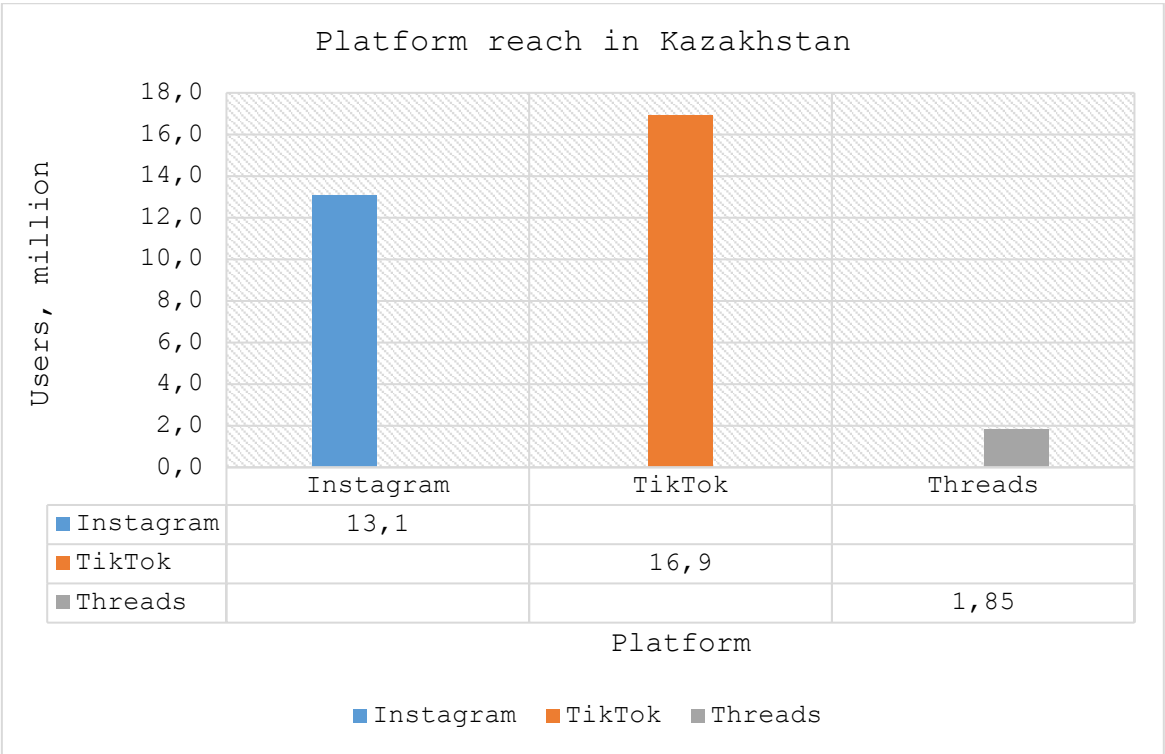


Figure 1. Platform reach in Kazakhstan

At the citizen level, Instagram converts ordinary experience into public evidence. This is visible in anti-corruption activism. Open Contracting Partnership documented the ProTenge case, where journalist Jamilya Maricheva used Instagram to make public procurement understandable to ordinary audiences; the account had about 80,000 followers and helped stop suspicious public purchases worth US\$500,000 [10]. This case is important because procurement is usually hidden behind technical language. ProTenge translated it into a visible civic drama: public money, inflated prices, absurd purchases, screenshots, comments, anger and collective verification.

The civic meaning is larger than one account. ProTenge changes the citizen's role from passive taxpayer to platform auditor. A follower learns that public procurement is not a distant administrative procedure. It is a field where public money can be wasted, defended or questioned. Instagram becomes a school of fiscal citizenship. Its stories and posts create a practical lesson: national identity includes responsibility for public resources.

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Table 2.

**Citizen-Level Instagram Practices and Their
Contribution to National Identity Formation**

Practice	Instagram form	National identity function
Public procurement monitoring	Screenshots, contract fragments, short explainers, polls	Citizen as taxpayer, auditor and controller of public spending
Urban problem reporting	Tagged photos, geolocation, comments, direct appeals	Citizen as local co-owner of urban space
Environmental activism	Stories, eco-guides, swap events, recycling campaigns	Citizen as ethical caretaker of shared environment
Protest symbolism	Hashtags, visual campaigns, symbolic objects, avatar frames	Citizen as rights-bearing participant in public life
Kazakh-language content	Memes, captions, reels, grammar posts, everyday jokes	Citizen as linguistic agent and cultural transmitter
Religious self-presentation	Visual piety, modest fashion, educational posts, family ethics	Citizen as moral actor in a plural public sphere
Gender and dignity discourse	Testimonies, awareness posts, campaign visuals, comments	Citizen as defender of dignity, safety and social justice
Civic fact-checking	Screenshots, comparisons, source links, correction posts	Citizen as verifier of public claims and official narratives
Local memory and heritage	Archival images, family stories, craft symbols, place-based posts	Citizen as carrier of cultural continuity
Everyday soft power	Travel posts, food images, city aesthetics, hospitality scenes	Citizen as informal producer of Kazakhstan's external image

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This table matters because it expands the meaning of national identity. National identity is often treated as a matter of symbols: flag, anthem, history, territory, ethnic memory. Instagram does not remove those symbols, but it adds a civic layer. A citizen who monitors procurement, sorts waste, speaks Kazakh online, supports a protest symbol or tags an «akimat» is also producing national identity. The country becomes not only something to be celebrated, but something to be repaired.

Eco-activism demonstrates the same logic through daily habits. The Astana Times interview with Kamila Akimbekova shows how Instagram helped turn conscious consumption, waste sorting and the Darmarka exchange initiative into visible public practices [13]. This kind of activism does not look as dramatic as mass protest. It is quieter. But it touches the moral fabric of citizenship. Throwing away usable clothes, ignoring waste sorting or treating mountains as picnic background without responsibility becomes a question of civic abıroy. Instagram helps transform private habits into public norms.

Protest Körpe adds a cultural dimension. Colleen Wood's account of the Protest Körpe campaign shows how supporters of Asya Tulesova used Instagram to create a "newsfeed quilt" through images of quilt squares connected to the traditional Kazakh körpe [12]. The campaign is analytically strong because it breaks the assumption that tradition belongs mainly to official ceremonies. Here tradition became a civic technology. The quilt did not merely decorate protest. It gave protest a local form, one that was domestic, recognizable, soft in material but firm in political meaning.

The citizen level therefore contests the Potemkin brand in two ways. First, it produces counter-evidence: documents, videos, screenshots, complaints. Second, it produces counter-symbols: körpe, Kazakh-language memes, eco-habits, feminist posts, religious aesthetics. Citizens do not simply reject the nation brand. They compete to define what the nation should mean.

The local executive head level is the hinge between everyday citizenship and state power. In Kazakhstan's administrative structure, the local executive head represents local executive authority. In cultural terms, the local executive head also carries bedel. Citizens expect competence, visibility, problem-solving and symbolic

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closeness. Instagram changes the way this expectation is tested.

The Almaty case is useful because it shows the early institutional recognition of Instagram as a feedback channel. Baribar Media reported in 2016 that then Almaty local executive head Bauyrzhan Baybek described Instagram as one of the cheapest ways to establish communication with the population; the «akimat» account had nearly 90,000 followers, and Baybek stated that about 85% of appeals had been solved [11]. The detail is important. The platform was not framed only as publicity. It was framed as administrative contact.

The logic can be expressed through the akim responsiveness coefficient:

$$ARC = \frac{R_s}{R_t} \times 100$$

If $R_s=85$ solved appeals and $R_t=100$ total appeals, then:
 $ARC = 85\%$

This does not prove the full effectiveness of akim PR across Kazakhstan. It shows the political meaning of visible responsiveness. A high response rate, if verified and sustained, can increase local bedel. A low response rate, especially under public comments, can damage bedel. In the Instagram environment, silence is visible. Delay is visible. A generic answer is visible. A solved problem is visible too.

Table 3.

Local executive head PR as digital bedel

Dimension	Traditional bureaucracy	Instagram bureaucracy
Complaint entry	Written appeal, office visit	Photo, tag, direct message, comment
Evidence	Inspection act	Citizen image or video
Time pressure	Procedural deadline	Public expectation of quick response
Authority	Position and hierarchy	Visible problem-solving
Reputation	Internal report	Public comment memory
Failure mode	File remains unanswered	Silence becomes screenshot

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The local executive head level also reveals a risk. Instagram responsiveness can become selective and theatrical. A highly visible complaint in Almaty may receive immediate attention, while a similar problem in a rural district remains unseen. A viral post may be solved faster than a formal petition. An local executive head may publish repairs as content, turning governance into a sequence of visual “before-after” stories. Some of this is useful. Citizens want repairs. Yet if the underlying administrative system remains weak, Instagram becomes a stage for episodic response rather than structural service quality.

This is the municipal version of the Potemkin paradox. The image of responsiveness may be real in individual cases, but still decorative if it does not change planning, budgeting, procurement, maintenance and accountability. A repaired manhole is good. A city where residents must publicly shame the bureaucracy to repair manholes is a different matter.

At the state level, Instagram becomes part of Kazakhstan’s soft-power and nation-branding architecture. The state must communicate the country to multiple audiences: citizens, investors, tourists, students, diplomats, diaspora communities and foreign media. Instagram is attractive because it compresses complex messages into immediate visual forms. A mountain landscape says “nature.” A skyline says “modernity.” A national costume says “heritage.” A business forum says “investment.” A clean airport says “order.” A young bilingual speaker says “future.”

Nation branding literature shows that this strategy has deep roots in Kazakhstan. Insebayeva describes how image-building projects became a permanent part of state discourse [5]. Fauve connects Astana’s global image to regime legitimation [6]. Marat places Kazakhstan inside a broader Central Asian campaign to present new ideas about the state and nation [7]. The state’s Instagram practices therefore should not be treated as random posting. They are part of a longer historical effort to secure recognition.

The problem begins when recognition is pursued through visual coherence more than institutional credibility. Anholt’s competitive identity theory suggests that reputation depends on the alignment between image and behaviour [8]. Nye’s soft power theory also implies that attraction cannot be built only by message control [9]. If political values and policies are not attractive, culture alone cannot compensate

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indefinitely. Instagram intensifies this test because citizens can answer the state’s image with lived evidence.

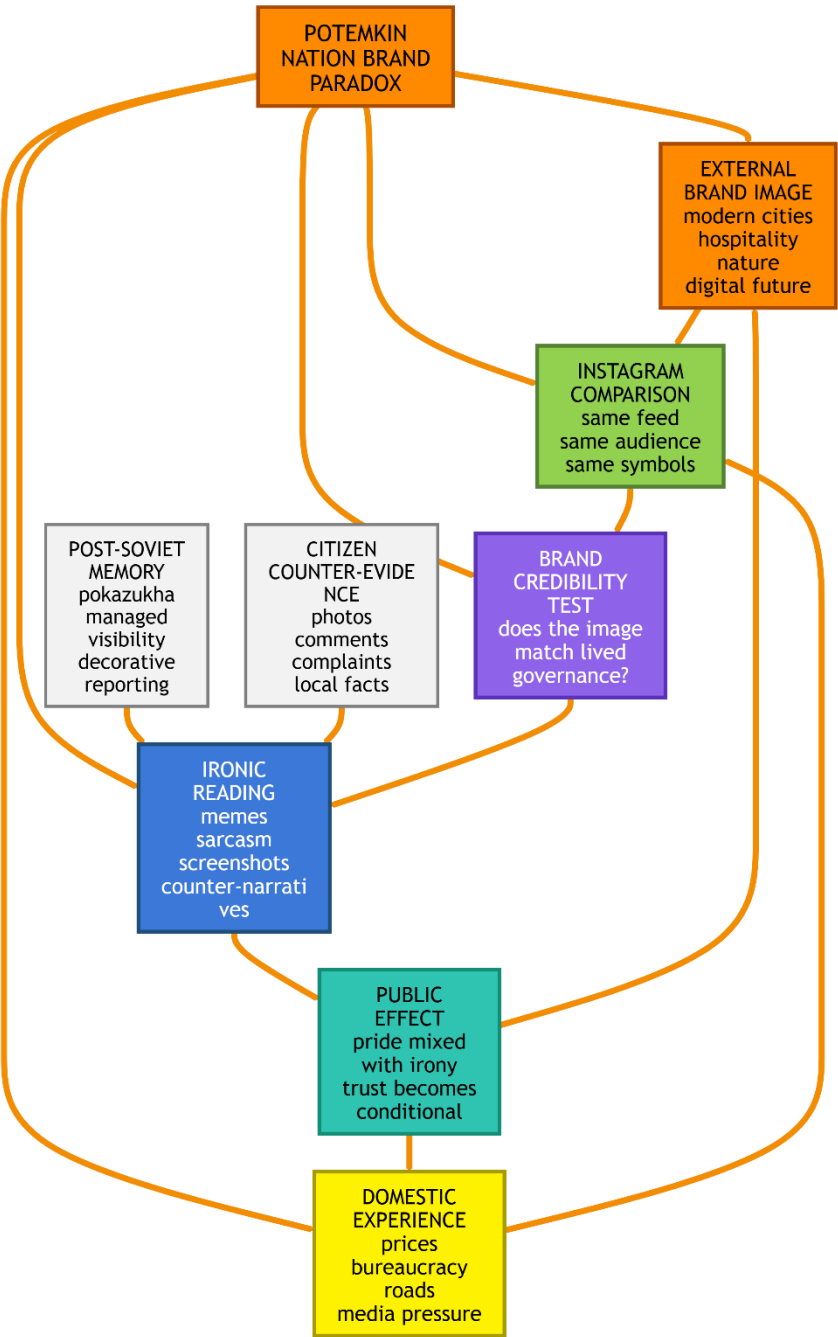


Figure 2. **Visual Gap Between National Branding and Domestic Experience**

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The diagram shows why Instagram is so dangerous for decorative branding. The external image and domestic experience no longer circulate in separate media systems. They meet in the same feed. A user may see a tourism reel and immediately below it a complaint about infrastructure. A state campaign may say “digital future,” while a citizen remembers the January 2022 shutdown. A city account may post a repaired park, while comments ask about another district. The national brand becomes a public test rather than a finished product.

The Potemkin nation brand paradox is intensified by information control. Pavlina Pavlova’s OpenGlobalRights analysis of Kazakhstan’s January 2022 events describes internet throttling and shutdown as a politically costly information-control practice that disrupted services, reporting, banking and everyday digital life [14]. This episode matters for Instagram because it showed that digital infrastructure could be suspended under crisis conditions. For citizens, the shutdown weakened the credibility of “digital Kazakhstan” narratives. A digital state that can disconnect citizens during unrest creates a deep trust contradiction.

Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net 2024 report classifies Kazakhstan as “Not Free” in internet freedom and describes legal and practical restrictions affecting online expression [15]. This does not mean Instagram is empty of civic life. It means civic life develops under caution. Users learn to code criticism, use humour, repost through private channels, screenshot disappearing content and choose topics carefully. The platform becomes a semi-open public sphere: visible enough for mobilisation, constrained enough to encourage self-censorship.

This structure produces a particular post-Soviet platform culture. Citizens do not always confront the state directly. They often use irony. Irony is not only humour. It is a survival form of public interpretation. A sarcastic comment under a polished campaign says: “We see the image, but we also see what it hides.” The Potemkin brand paradox depends precisely on this double vision.

Language, gender and the social texture of national identity

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Kazakh-language content is one of the most important signs that Instagram has become identity infrastructure. Tamila Olzhbaekova's 2026 Times of Central Asia article argues that TikTok, Instagram and Threads are turning Kazakh into a language of memes, stories, self-irony, flirting, debates, local humour and personal expression, rather than only a school subject or official norm [16]. This shift is crucial. A language becomes socially strong not only when people know it, but when they can joke, complain, desire, argue and think publicly in it.

Instagram supports this shift because it tolerates imperfection. A user can post mixed Kazakh-Russian speech, informal grammar, urban slang or regional expression. This may irritate purists, but it also reduces fear. A language that appears only in official speeches can feel heavy. A language that appears in memes becomes breathable. National identity gains everyday warmth.

Gender complicates the picture. Women constitute a major part of Instagram's adult audience in Kazakhstan, and the platform is central for women's entrepreneurship, religious self-presentation, activism, beauty culture, motherhood discourse and public education. Yet the same visibility exposes women to moral policing. Kudaibergenova's work on gendered nationalism [3] and Toktarbekova, Zhandossova and Bektenova's work on Muslim women's Instagram agency [4] show that the female body and female voice remain key sites where "tradition" and "modernity" are debated.

This model captures the core result of the article: Instagram in Kazakhstan does not belong to a single communicative actor and cannot be explained as a simple channel of state messaging, civic activism or municipal public relations. It is used simultaneously by citizens, local executive heads and the state, but each actor enters the platform with a different expectation of visibility. Citizens use Instagram to transform everyday experience into public evidence: a damaged road, an unanswered complaint, a procurement scandal, a language meme, a personal story of injustice or a small act of civic care. For them, the platform is valuable because it gives ordinary observation a public form and allows private dissatisfaction to become socially recognizable.

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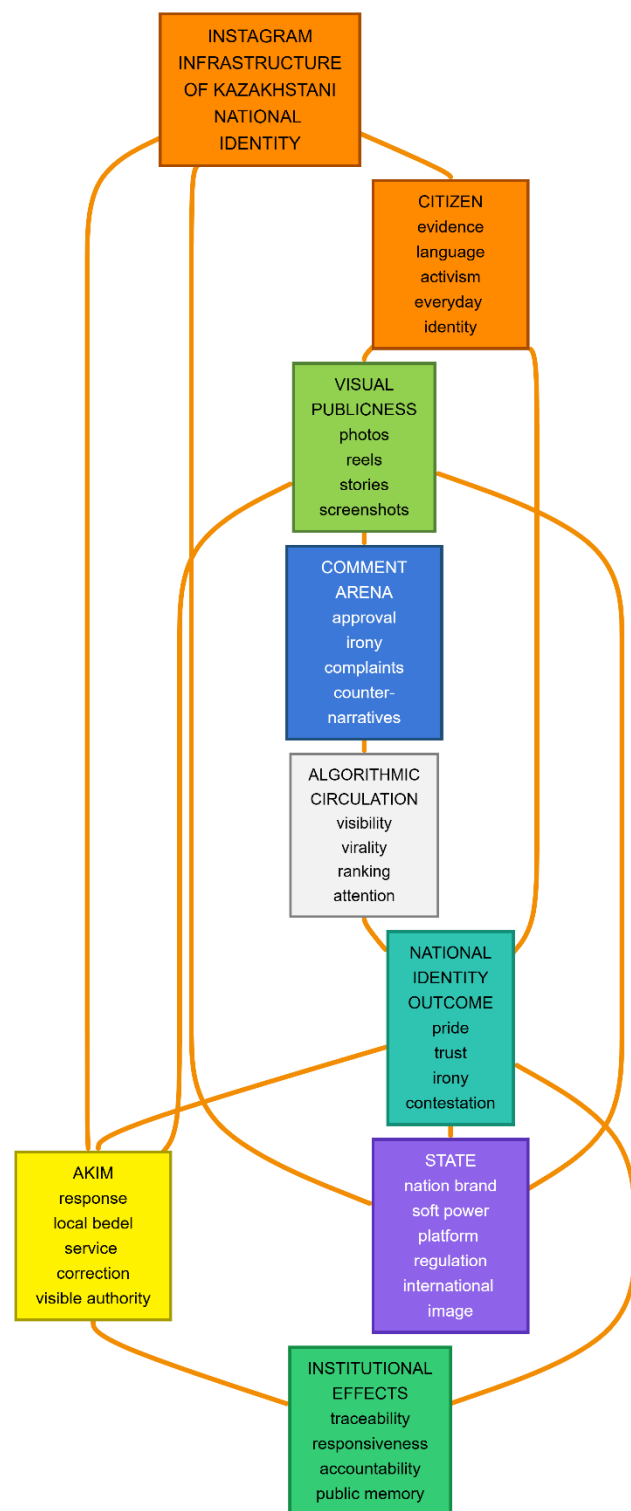


Figure 3. **Three-level Instagram infrastructure of national identity**

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Local executive heads use Instagram in a different way. Their main task is not only to publish information, but to protect and reproduce local administrative bedel through visible responsiveness. A local executive head is judged by citizens not simply as a formal office-holder, but as a public actor whose authority must be confirmed through reaction, explanation and problem-solving. When a complaint receives a clear answer, when a repair is shown with evidence, or when a local problem is acknowledged without bureaucratic evasion, Instagram can strengthen trust in local executive leadership. When the response is delayed, vague, decorative or absent, the same platform weakens authority because silence also becomes visible.

The state uses Instagram at a broader symbolic level. Its interest lies in national coherence, external attractiveness and soft-power legitimacy. Through official accounts, tourism imagery, cultural campaigns and digital development narratives, the state presents Kazakhstan as modern, hospitable, stable, culturally rich and future-oriented. Yet this symbolic work becomes vulnerable when citizens compare the polished national image with domestic experience. Instagram places these layers in one feed: the beautiful country, the complaining citizen, the responding or silent local executive head, and the state narrative. National identity therefore emerges not from one message, but from the friction between evidence, authority and image. This is precisely where the Potemkin nation brand paradox appears: the national brand may look persuasive from outside, while citizens read it through everyday governance, memory, irony and lived comparison.

Discussion

The findings show that Instagram has become infrastructure of Kazakhstani national identity because it combines visibility, credibility and comparison. The citizen can make evidence visible. The local executive head can convert response into bedel. The state can convert images into soft power. But the same infrastructure also allows citizens to compare these levels and identify contradictions.

This comparison is the central mechanism of the Potemkin nation brand paradox. A polished national image is not automatically rejected. Many citizens may feel pride when Kazakhstan appears modern, beautiful and globally visible. The problem emerges when pride is mixed with disbelief.

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Citizens may admire the mountains, city lights and cultural symbols, while asking why the same state cannot solve mundane problems. This mixed reaction is the emotional structure of the paradox: pride plus irony, attachment plus distrust, recognition plus distance.

The concept of *bedel* explains why the paradox is culturally powerful. In a society where public authority depends on reputation, a gap between word and action damages more than technical efficiency. It damages honour. A state, an local executive head or an influencer may have formal visibility, but visibility without credibility becomes risky. Instagram multiplies that risk because the audience remembers. Screenshots preserve contradictions. Comments accumulate collective judgement. A deleted post may circulate again. Digital memory weakens the old bureaucratic habit of waiting until a scandal disappears.

The post-Soviet background explains the sensitivity to staging. Citizens have historical reasons to suspect decorative performance. A freshly painted façade before a visit, an arranged audience, an overproduced report, a beautiful but empty slogan – these are not abstract metaphors. They are familiar communicative forms. Instagram does not remove them. Sometimes it reproduces them through over-curated official pages. But Instagram also equips citizens to expose them. The platform is both a factory of façades and a camera pointed behind the façade.

At the local executive head level, the findings show that local executive communication can work only if it produces institutional consequences. A responsive Instagram account may increase trust, but only if response is consistent, trackable and not limited to viral cases. Otherwise, local executive head PR becomes another form of performance. The citizen sees the post, but not the system. The repair happens, but the cause remains.

At the state level, nation branding must become less aesthetic and more evidentiary. The strongest future brand for Kazakhstan will not be the most polished one. It will be the one that citizens can recognize without sarcasm. This does not mean the state should stop promoting tourism, investment, culture or digital development. It means promotional claims should be anchored in visible policy delivery. A campaign about green Kazakhstan should be supported by waste infrastructure. A campaign about digital Kazakhstan should be supported by stable access and digital

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rights. A campaign about modern citizenship should be supported by gender safety, language confidence and responsive governance.

Practical recommendations

First, «akimat» Instagram accounts should move from reactive communication to accountable service dashboards. Each public complaint should receive a visible category, deadline, responsible department and completion status. This would reduce dependence on virality and protect citizens without large audiences.

Second, state branding campaigns should include citizen evidence rather than only official aesthetics. A repaired road, a transparent procurement case, a successful waste sorting initiative or an open-data project can produce stronger credibility than a generic promotional reel.

Third, Kazakh-language digital creativity should be supported without excessive formal correction. Language revival on Instagram depends on everyday use, humour and experimentation. Over-policing linguistic purity may reproduce shame and reduce participation.

Fourth, women creators and activists require stronger protection from online harassment. If women are central to Instagram’s public culture, national identity cannot be credible while women’s visibility is punished through shame, threats or moral policing.

Fifth, the Potemkin nation brand gap should be measured. Ministries, «akimat»s and researchers can compare official campaign sentiment with citizen comment sentiment, complaint frequency, repair rates and trust indicators.

Table 4.

Policy recommendations by level

Level	Main risk	Corrective action	Expected effect
Citizen	Evidence ignored	Public tracking of complaints	Stronger civic trust
«Akim» - local executive head	Performative responsiveness	Response dashboard and deadlines	Higher local bedel
State	Over-polished branding	Claims linked to policy indicators	Lower Potemkin gap
Language	Official stiffness	Support informal Kazakh content	More natural language use

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Gender	Moral policing	Protection of women creators	More inclusive identity
Tourism	Decorative image	Infrastructure-backed promotion	More credible soft power

Future research directions

Future research should develop a systematic dataset of Instagram posts from citizen accounts, «akimat» accounts and state-branding accounts. The dataset should code topic, language, visual style, engagement, sentiment, institutional response and comment tone. A comparative design can test whether citizen posts receive more trust than official posts, whether Kazakh-language content produces different engagement patterns from Russian-language or English-language content, and whether visual patriotism generates pride, irony or silence.

Algorithmic visibility needs separate investigation. Instagram does not show posts neutrally. It ranks, recommends and suppresses content according to opaque platform logic. If activist evidence circulates less widely than lifestyle branding, the national identity field becomes uneven. If emotional or sarcastic posts travel faster than institutional explanations, public trust may be shaped by outrage dynamics. These questions require mixed methods: digital ethnography, platform analytics, interviews and controlled content observation.

A second direction concerns regional inequality. Almaty and Astana dominate digital visibility, but Kazakhstan’s national identity cannot be reduced to metropolitan Instagram. Future research should examine how residents of smaller cities, mono-towns and rural districts use Instagram to negotiate local belonging and state distance. The Potemkin paradox may be stronger outside major cities, where polished national images are compared with weaker infrastructure.

A third direction concerns cross-platform identity. TikTok, Instagram and Threads now perform different cultural functions. TikTok accelerates emotion and performance. Instagram stabilizes visual identity and reputation. Threads enables more direct textual criticism. A serious study of Kazakhstani digital nationalism should compare these platforms rather than treating social media as one homogeneous sphere.

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A fourth direction concerns the measurement of bedel. Surveys and interviews could test whether citizens assign more credibility to official position, professional expertise, civic evidence, moral reputation or platform popularity. Such research would clarify whether digital bedel is replacing, supplementing or merely imitating older forms of authority.

Conclusion

Instagram has become infrastructure of Kazakhstani national identity because it connects the citizen, the local executive head and the state in one visual-public field. At the citizen level, it turns everyday experience into evidence and gives ordinary users tools to participate in defining the country. At the local executive head level, it tests local authority through responsiveness and visible problem-solving. At the state level, it supports nation branding and soft power, but also exposes the distance between promotional image and lived governance.

The «Potemkin nation brand» paradox captures this contradiction. Kazakhstan can look beautiful on Instagram and still provoke domestic irony if citizens feel that the image is stronger than the institution behind it. The paradox is not anti-national. It is a demand for a more credible national image. Citizens do not necessarily reject pride. They reject being asked to admire a façade without seeing repair behind it.

The strongest digital nation brand for Kazakhstan will not be built by perfecting visual surfaces alone. It will be built when citizen evidence is treated as a governance resource, local executive head responsiveness becomes systematic, Kazakh-language creativity becomes ordinary, women's visibility becomes safer, and state branding is linked to measurable public delivery. Instagram has made national identity more fragile, but also more honest. In that honesty lies its political and scholarly value.

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