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ENHANCING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC COUNCILS AS AN ANTI-CORRUPTION MECHANISM: THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract

A current trend in public administration is combating corruption through mechanisms of transparency and accountability. In Kazakhstan, one such mechanism is public councils. The aim of this article is to examine the effectiveness of public councils in Kazakhstan in countering corruption. To achieve this goal, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were applied. The study analyzed Kazakhstan's legislation on public councils for its compliance with five anti-corruption social accountability mechanisms: participatory budgeting, public monitoring, access to information, organized civil society and engagement, and media involvement. The study also reviewed the results of a focus group with members of public councils from Kazakhstan's central government bodies (12 participants). The findings revealed that the anti-corruption role of public councils in Kazakhstan remains limited. In particular, their involvement in budget formation and legislative development is minimal. The influence of public councils on government decision-making is low. Furthermore, public council members are often subjected to pressure from government bodies. Legislative changes are needed to grant councils binding powers, along with measures to protect council members from undue pressure. Increasing citizen awareness and ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes are also critically important for strengthening the role of civil society in combating corruption.

Keywords: public councils, anti-corruption, civil society, government bodies, participation

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СЫБАЙЛАС ЖЕМҚОРЛЫҚҚА ҚАРСЫ ТЕТІК РЕТІНДЕ ҚОҒАМДЫҚ КЕҢЕСТЕРДІҢ ҚЫЗМЕТІН ЖЕТІЛДІРУ: ҚАЗАҚСТАН МЫСАЛЫ

Аңдатпа

Мемлекеттік басқарудағы қазіргі тенденция ашықтық пен есеп беру тетіктері арқылы сыбайлас жемқорлықпен күресу болып табылады. Қазақстанда осындай тетіктердің бірі – қоғамдық кеңестер. Мақаланың мақсаты – сыбайлас жемқорлыққа қарсы күресте Қазақстанның қоғамдық кеңестері қызметінің тиімділігін зерттеу. Бұл мақсатқа жету үшін деректерді жинау мен талдаудың сапалы әдістері қолданылды. Қазақстан Республикасының қоғамдық кеңестер туралы заңнамасына әлеуметтік жауапкершіліктің сыбайлас жемқорлыққа қарсы бес тетігінің: бірлескен бюджеттеу, қоғамдық мониторинг, ақпаратқа қолжетімділік, ұйымдасқан азаматтық қоғам мен қатысу және бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының сақталуына талдау жүргізілді. Қазақстанның орталық мемлекеттік органдарының қоғамдық кеңестерінің мүшелерімен (қатысушылар саны – 12) фокус-топтың нәтижелері зерделенді. Зерттеу нәтижелері Қазақстандағы қоғамдық кеңестердің сыбайлас жемқорлыққа қарсы рөлі шектеулі екенін көрсетті. Атап айтқанда, олардың бюджетті қалыптастыруға және заңнаманы әзірлеуге қатысуы аз. Қоғамдық кеңестердің мемлекеттік органдардың шешімдер қабылдауына ықпалы төмен деп сипатталады. Сонымен қатар, қоғамдық кеңес мүшелері мемлекеттік органдар тарапынан қысымға ұшырайды. Заңнамалық өзгерістер кеңестерге міндетті өкілеттіктер беру, сондай-ақ кеңес мүшелерін қысымнан қорғау шаралары қажет. Азаматтардың хабардарлығын арттыру және олардың шешім қабылдауға белсенді қатысуын қамтамасыз ету сыбайлас жемқорлыққа қарсы күрес пен мемлекетті басқарудағы азаматтық қоғамның рөлін арттыру үшін де маңызды.

Түйін сөздер: қоғамдық кеңестер, сыбайлас жемқорлыққа қарсы күрес, азаматтық қоғам, билік органдары, қатысу

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СОВЕРШЕНСТВОВАНИЕ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ ОБЩЕСТВЕННЫХ СОВЕТОВ КАК АНТИКОРРУПЦИОННОГО МЕХАНИЗМА: КЕЙС КАЗАХСТАНА

Аннотация

Актуальным трендом государственного управления является противодействие коррупции через механизмы прозрачности и подотчетности. В Казахстане одним из таких механизмов являются общественные советы. Цель статьи – изучение эффективности деятельности общественных советов Казахстана в противодействии коррупции. Для достижения данной цели применены качественные методы сбора и анализа данных. Проведен анализ законодательства Казахстана об общественных советах на соответствие пяти антикоррупционным механизмам социальной подотчетности: партисипативное бюджетирование, общественный мониторинг, доступ к информации, организованное

гражданское общество и вовлеченность, медиа. Изучены результаты фокус-группы с членами общественных советов Центральных государственных органов Казахстана (количество участников – 12). Результаты исследования показали, что антикоррупционная роль общественных советов в Казахстане остаётся ограниченной. В частности – их участие минимально в формировании бюджета и разработке законодательства. Влияние общественных советов на принятие решений государственных органов характеризуется как низкое. Кроме этого, члены общественных советов подвержены давлению со стороны государственных органов. Требуются изменения в законодательстве, наделяющие советы обязательными для исполнения полномочиями, а также меры по защите членов советов от давления. Увеличение информированности граждан и обеспечение их активного вовлечения в процесс принятия решений также является критически важным для повышения роли гражданского общества в противодействии коррупции и управлении государством.

Ключевые слова: общественные советы, противодействие коррупции, гражданское общество, органы власти, участие

MAIN PART

One of the effective methods to combat corruption is social accountability, implemented through various mechanisms of citizen participation in government decision-making. One such mechanism is public councils. In the Republic of Kazakhstan, the institution of public councils has a history of almost a decade, following the adoption of the relevant law in 2015. However, to date, despite the established legal framework and considerable accumulated experience, the effectiveness of public councils remains questionable. In particular, they have limited effectiveness in preventing corruption within governmental decision-making processes.

This study explores the legal framework governing public councils and assesses the perspectives of their representatives operating under Central Government bodies in Kazakhstan. The findings indicate that these councils do not serve as a robust anti-corruption mechanism, primarily due to restricted authority and an absence of substantial influence over government decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption poses a significant threat to the sustainable development of nations, undermining citizens' trust in government institutions and hindering the effective functioning of the economy [1, 2]. In the global fight against corruption, mechanisms that promote transparency and accountability of public authorities to society play a crucial role. Principles of good governance emphasize citizen participation in public administration, both directly and through legitimate intermediary organizations. Key factors for the successful implementation of good governance include minimal corruption and maximum consideration of public needs and opinions in government decision-making [3].

In Kazakhstan, where combating corruption is a top state priority, Public Councils have emerged as an important tool for involving citizens in overseeing government activities and decision-making. Despite some progress in Kazakhstan's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), as reported by Transparency International (TI) in 2023, the country remains categorized among the highly corrupt states and territories [4]. According to TI experts, recent improvements are largely attributed to the activation of civil society engagement mechanisms, particularly following the events of January 2022 [5]. One such mechanism is the Public Councils, which function as an institution for public oversight and participation in governance. In recent years, the role of Public Councils has become increasingly significant, as they serve as a crucial platform for dialogue between the state and society while also contributing to the development of a sustainable anti-corruption culture. The Public Councils in Kazakhstan have seen notable development, especially following the adoption of the Law "On Public Councils" in 2015, which established the legal framework for their creation and operation [6]. The main goal of these councils is to enhance the

role of civil society in public governance, ensure transparency in government actions, and enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption means.

Public Councils bring together diverse civil society actors, including members of non-governmental organizations, public associations, independent experts, and socially active citizens. Their main functions include reviewing and discussing draft legal acts, participating in the monitoring and evaluation of government agencies, and making recommendations on public policy issues. A critical task of the Public Councils is to instill confidence in citizens that their opinions are considered in state-level decision-making.

Public Councils contribute to anti-corruption efforts by detecting and mitigating corruption risks at an early stage, enhancing transparency in governmental activities, and fostering public oversight. Since the success of anti-corruption initiatives largely relies on active civil society participation, these councils serve as vital instruments for strengthening government accountability and openness.

The aim of this article is to examine how effectively Public Councils function as an anti-corruption tool in Kazakhstan. To this end, the work of public councils was analyzed through the lens of five anti-corruption components: participatory budgeting, public monitoring, access to information, organized civil society and engagement, and media involvement.

Research hypothesis: The existing structure and operations of Public Councils in Kazakhstan impose significant limitations on their ability to combat corruption.

From a societal standpoint, this study highlights the need to strengthen the role of Public Councils in combating corruption and fostering greater citizen engagement in governance. Academically, it addresses a gap in the existing literature by evaluating the structural challenges and potential of Public Councils through the lens of five key anti-corruption factors. The insights and recommendations provided aim to support policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors in advancing reforms that enhance the effectiveness of Public Councils as an anti-corruption instrument in Kazakhstan and beyond.

The significance of examining Public Councils as an anti-corruption mechanism lies in the necessity of understanding their potential to reinforce transparency and accountability in governance. In Kazakhstan, their impact remains limited due to several constraints, including restricted authority over budget oversight, conflicts of interest, weak collaboration with anti-corruption institutions, and other systemic barriers [7]. Given these challenges, a thorough analysis of Public Councils' role in anti-corruption efforts is both timely and essential for strengthening civil society institutions and improving state policies aimed at combating corruption. This article explores the legal framework and practical functioning of Kazakhstan's Public Councils as an anti-corruption tool, offering strategic recommendations to enhance their effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was used in this study, combining a cross-sectional analysis of two sources of qualitative data:

- Legal acts of Kazakhstan regulating the activities of Public Councils.
- Focus group data collected from members of Public Councils of Central government bodies of Kazakhstan.

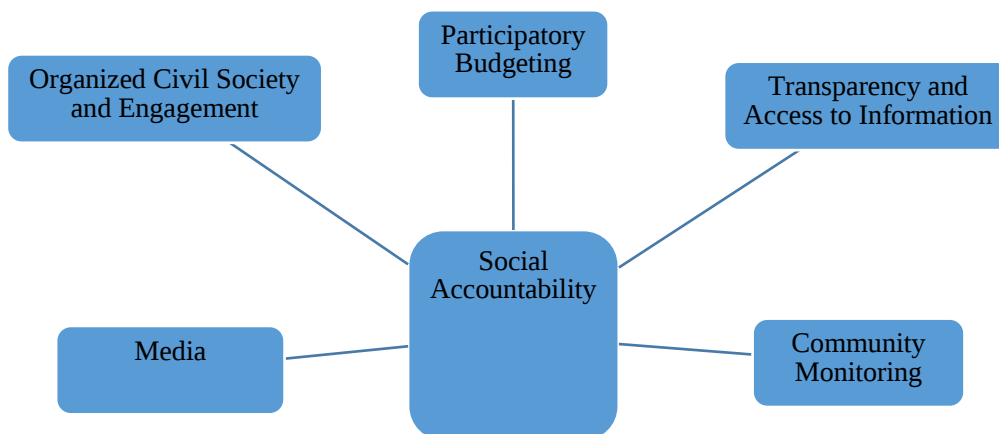


Figure 1 – Mechanisms of public participation in combating corruption

Note: Created by the authors based on [8].

The research was conducted across five areas (Figure 1), each of which aligns with the mechanisms (measures/initiatives) proposed by the Department for International Development (DFID) for involving civil society in the fight against corruption.

Analyzing legal acts provides insight into the formal framework governing Public Councils, including their powers, responsibilities, and mechanisms for interaction with government bodies. This data source is critical for understanding how Public Councils are expected to function as anti-corruption tools within the legal and institutional context of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, this analysis helps identify potential gaps, ambiguities, or weaknesses in the regulatory framework that may hinder their effectiveness.

Focus groups were conducted because they allow for an in-depth exploration of the practical realities and operational constraints faced by Public Councils, directly aligning with the research hypothesis. By facilitating discussions among participants, focus groups help uncover specific structural and procedural limitations that hinder the councils' ability to combat corruption. This method enables the identification of recurring challenges, power dynamics, and institutional barriers that restrict their effectiveness. Additionally, it provides a deeper understanding of how Public Councils navigate their roles within the existing governance framework, offering insights that support the hypothesis regarding their constrained anti-corruption capacity.

By combining these two data sources, the study bridges the gap between the theoretical design of Public Councils (as outlined in legal acts) and their practical implementation (as experienced by council members). This mixed-methods approach ensures that the analysis is both grounded in the formal regulatory framework and enriched by the lived experiences of key stakeholders. Such an approach enhances the validity of the findings and provides a robust foundation for policy recommendations aimed at improving the anti-corruption role of Public Councils in Kazakhstan.

The focus group took place in September, 2024, in Astana, Kazakhstan, with the members of the Public Councils of the central government agencies. The selection of focus group participants was justified by the need to ensure representation from the widest possible range of public administration sectors, with a particular focus on agencies overseeing industries with the high corruption risks. This approach allowed for a more targeted analysis of the structural and operational challenges that hinder the effectiveness of Public Councils in combating corruption.

The primary goal of the focus group was to gather insights on how members of Public Councils perceive the effectiveness of their interactions with government bodies. A structured script and questions were used to explore themes related to the relationship between Public Councils and government bodies.

Participants were asked to discuss several key topics, including:

- The impact of unresolved issues by government bodies;
- Key achievements of Public Councils;
- Challenges they face in their work.

The focus group consisted of 12 participants. This method allowed for the identification of diverse perspectives and practical expertise regarding the anti-corruption function of Public Councils. An analysis was conducted to reveal the extent to which members of Public Councils are engaged in anti-corruption work and what recommendations they may offer to improve their work.

The data obtained from the analysis of Kazakhstan's legal acts regulating Public Councils were systematically coded and categorized to identify key provisions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the regulatory framework. This analysis focused on evaluating the alignment of the legislative framework with the 5 anti-corruption framework elements (public monitoring, access to information, participatory budgeting, organized civil society and engagement, and media).

The data from the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes and patterns were identified to capture participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of Public Councils, their challenges, and the opportunities for improving their anti-corruption role. Thematic coding was performed manually to ensure a nuanced understanding of the participants' insights, with particular attention paid to areas of convergence and divergence in their experiences.

The authors admit certain limitations of the study, particularly that the focus groups involved members of Public Councils of Central government bodies. Future research could expand by including data from surveys of members of Public Councils at local executive bodies and quasi-governmental entities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of Public Councils can be analyzed through various theoretical and conceptual frameworks, including their contribution to public engagement in anti-corruption efforts. Democratic accountability reforms promoted by developed countries emphasize the active participation of citizens in combating corruption. Over the past decades, this topic has garnered increasing attention, as highlighted in numerous theoretical and empirical studies. A. Persson, B. Rothstein and J. Teorell, examining the failures of anti-corruption reforms based on the principal-agent model, argue that in some countries, corruption should be conceptualized through the lens of collective action theory [10]. This theory highlights the importance of group attitudes, trust, and individual behavioral tendencies in society. In other words, if corruption is perceived as a social norm, people are less likely to engage in meaningful anti-corruption activities, and vice versa. Building on this, M. Bauhr notes that societal mobilization in anti-corruption campaigns does not guarantee success if greed, rather than necessity, drives corruption [11, p.561]. Necessity-based corruption often involves extortion by officials, making citizens more likely to engage in anti-corruption efforts when institutional mechanisms and organizations are available. This aligns with the earlier model by M. Van Zomeren, T. Postmes, R. Spears, which identifies three factors that drive collective action: perceived injustice, perceived efficacy, and social identity [12, p.504]. By conceptualizing these findings, the anti-corruption role of Public Councils can be understood as shaping society's collective perception of corruption as an undesirable phenomenon. Public Councils contribute to anti-corruption efforts by employing practical mechanisms, such as involving citizens in strategic, economic, and legislative decision-making processes. Their role has been extensively studied in international literature, particularly regarding public monitoring, which, according to G. Mugellini, S. Della Bella, M. Colagrossi, G.L. Isenring, M. Killias, is more effective in reducing public sector corruption than cultural or organizational reforms [13, p.9]. Similar findings by E. Molina, L. Carella, A. Pacheco, G. Cruces, and L. Gasparini demonstrate that community monitoring interventions are effective in low- and middle-income countries, particularly where state institutions are weak [14, p.88]. Public monitoring can take various forms, such as

social audits, which assess organizational performance based on societal impact. However, as B.Santoso and B.Aprillianto note, legal support from the state is critical for social auditors to function effectively [15, p.44], highlighting the need for institutional backing to ensure transparency and accountability.

In post-Soviet countries, the anti-corruption role of Public Councils has been analyzed from different perspectives. For instance, C.Knox and S.Janenova studied their activities in Kazakhstan, identifying systemic issues such as dependence on government bodies, limited opportunities for public oversight, and weak NGO infrastructure, all of which undermine their effectiveness [16, p.318]. In Russia, E.Dyakova and A.Trakhtenberg outlined the varied roles of Public Councils, including experts, watchdogs, lobbyists, and intermediaries between the public and the state [17, p.195]. L.A. McCarthy, K.Stolerman, A.V. Tikhomirov emphasized their role in promoting a positive image of the state, which can limit their independence and anti-corruption effectiveness [18]. In Ukraine, I.Kovbas and P.Krainii identified key barriers, including legal, technical, and substantive shortcomings, which prevent Public Councils from fully realizing their anti-corruption potential [19, p.93]. The lack of standardized approaches to membership and functions was also emphasized by I.Orlova and T.Sokolova [20, p.124]. In Uzbekistan, as noted by M.Alimova, legal uncertainty remains a major obstacle to the effective functioning of civil society institutions, including Public Councils, limiting their ability to act as independent anti-corruption mechanisms [21, p.254].

A comparative analysis reveals common challenges faced by Public Councils in post-Soviet countries, such as formalism, weak legal frameworks, and limited independence. In Kazakhstan, as C.Knox and S.Janenova highlighted, these challenges are exacerbated by dependence on state bodies, weak NGOs, and restricted opportunities for public oversight. At the same time, Kazakhstan is undergoing governance reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability. While previous studies have largely focused on identifying the structural weaknesses of Public Councils and their dependence on the state, our research specifically examines their potential as anti-corruption mechanisms. Unlike existing literature, which primarily assesses Public Councils in terms of their formal roles and operational limitations, our study aims to evaluate their practical effectiveness in reducing corruption through public engagement and oversight. By focusing on Public Councils within the broader anti-corruption framework, this research provides new empirical insights into their role in Kazakhstan's evolving governance landscape. In this context, assessing the effectiveness of Public Councils becomes particularly relevant, as it can provide insights into the progress of these reforms and the extent to which Public Councils fulfill their anti-corruption functions. Such research is essential, as it addresses an underexplored area in the academic literature.

RESULTS

The mechanisms of public participation in anti-corruption efforts are embedded in four legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Tables 1-5).

Participatory Budgeting

Table 1 – Participatory Budgeting Mechanism in Kazakhstan's Legislation on Public Councils

Anticorruption mechanism	Regulatory legal documents	Provisions/Norms
Participatory Budgeting	Law on Local Government and Self-Governance [22]	Discussion of the budget draft (Article 27) and the annual report (Article 31) on the execution of the local budget at a Public Council meeting
	Law on Public Control [23]	Conducting public control in companies within the National Wealth Fund group over projects funded by budgetary resources (Article 3)
	Law on Public Councils	Discussion of budget program projects and their implementation at the central and local levels (Article 5)
Note: Compiled by the authors based on the legislation of Kazakhstan		

Table 1 illustrates that Kazakhstan's legal framework grants Public Councils the authority to engage in the planning and implementation of both national and local budgets, including initiatives funded by the National Welfare Fund and quasi-state organizations. Budget-related discussions are conducted during council meetings in accordance with standardized procedural regulations (Order, 2021). Public Councils are entitled to provide recommendations, which government agencies and quasi-state entities are required to review and justify their responses to, ensuring a level of accountability (Law "On Public Councils," Article 1).

During the focus group discussion, several participants expressed concerns about the lack of real influence of Public Councils, particularly regarding budget discussions. One participant emphasized the councils' limited authority in budget formation:

"Public Councils need real power. Every government agency has its own quasi-state company, and national companies don't answer to anyone – they just do as they please. When we discuss budgets, we're given a final decision and told to approve it. You can speak up, but no one really listens." (Participant 1)

Another participant highlighted administrative pressure on council members who raise critical issues related to the budget:

"Before Public Council recommendations are even drafted, members who bring up sensitive issues face significant pressure, often through their workplaces. If someone raises a tough question about the budget, their director might receive calls urging them to silence the employee. This practice continues today. Many council members may seem to represent the public, but in reality, they have their own vested interests." (Participant 2)

Community Monitoring

Public Councils in Kazakhstan carry out community monitoring as one form of public oversight (Table 2).

Table 2 – Community Monitoring Mechanism in Kazakhstan's Legislation on Public Councils

Anticorruption mechanism	Regulatory legal documents	Provisions/Norms
Community Monitoring	Law on Public Control	Principles of conducting public monitoring as a form of public control (Article 12)
	Law on Public Councils	Procedure for organizing and conducting public monitoring by members of the Public Council (Article 20)
Note: Compiled by the authors based on the legislation of Kazakhstan		

One focus group participant noted the prevalence of contradictory legal acts:

"We in the Public Council are focused on solving our own issues, but if you look from a broader perspective, many state orders and legal acts contradict the law. No one takes our opposition into account, and such contradictions often slip through, with councils serving as a 'release valve' to show international organizations that we have democracy. But in practice, we face these issues on the ground." (Participant 3)

Another participant criticized the development of strategic documents, pointing out the lack of justification for budget spending in terms of sectoral development:

"Recently, we were brought in to approve a sectoral development concept. There were six of us, different experts, and we were presented with a finished product, a vision of a bright future. But in reality, there's nothing there—no indicators, just superficial 'before and after' scenarios. Budgets for construction projects are justified, but not as part of any development or transformation of the sector. We need a system where Public Councils are listened to, with the vice minister accountable to the council." (Participant 4)

Transparency and Access to Information

Table 3 – Transparency and Access to Information Mechanism in Kazakhstan's Legislation on Public Councils

Anticorruption mechanism	Regulatory legal documents	Provisions/Norms
Access to Information	Law on Public Councils	The right of Public Council members to request from government agencies and quasi-governmental sector entities the necessary information related to the subject of public monitoring (Article 20)
	Law on Access to Information [24]	The obligation of information holders (including government agencies, budgetary organizations, and quasi-governmental sector entities) to publish the results of public monitoring of the quality of state services on online platforms (Article 16)
<i>Note: Compiled by the authors based on the legislation of Kazakhstan</i>		

As shown in Table 3, information holders are only required to publish information about public monitoring results on the quality of government services. However, the scope of public monitoring is much broader and includes, for example, monitoring the implementation of development plans and the application of legislative norms.

In terms of Public Councils as a channel of communication between society and the government, weak informational activity was noted.

"The existing online platforms for Public Councils are ineffective. Here, during our discussion, we're getting much more information. We don't know what's happening in other ministries. We need a platform with live, informal conferences where there's actual content because currently, there's no information." (Participant 5)

Organized Civil Society and Engagement

The maximum number of civil society representatives in national-level Public Councils and quasi-state organizations is limited, with one-third of the participants being government representatives (Table 4).

Table 4 – Organized Civil Society and Engagement mechanism in Kazakhstan's legislation on Public Councils

Anticorruption mechanism	Regulatory legal documents	Provisions/Norms
Organized Civil Society and Engagement	Law on Public Councils	Minimum proportion of civil society representatives in Public Councils, equal to two-thirds (Article 1)
		The task of Public Councils to represent the interests of civil society and to consider public opinion in decision-making and discussions at the local and national levels (Article 3)
		Number of Public Council members ranging from 10 to 30, depending on the level (Article 9)
Note: Compiled by the authors based on the legislation of Kazakhstan		

Council members from civil society are elected through a competitive process (Law "On Public Councils", Article 10). For local councils, the maximum number of members is set by the relevant government body (Law "On Public Councils", Article 2-1). In practice, each elected member of a Public Council represents the interests of a specific group of individuals or legal entities, often business associations. Additionally, the involvement of ordinary citizens is minimal, as evidenced by the opinions of council members.

"Public Councils are a bridge between civil society and government bodies. One of my suggestions is to make our work more visible so that citizens know they can raise their issues. For example, I haven't seen a single request from civil society. The Public Council institution isn't well promoted, and that, in my opinion, is the most important mission we've failed to accomplish." (Participant 6)

This conclusion suggests that civil society participation in Kazakhstan remains in its early stages, with minimal engagement from citizens. Moreover, the prospect of greater involvement raises concerns:

"The question is whether Public Council members are ready for the workload if there is more promotion and a flood of complaints. No one is prepared because this is voluntary work. If someone brings you a complaint, you'll say, 'I'm not a government body; I can't resolve this,' and the person will think, 'I went to a Public Council member, and it's the same bureaucracy as the government.'" (Participant 7)

Media

The role of media in the activities of Public Councils in Kazakhstan is defined by legal provisions, as shown in Table 5. In this context, media serves as one option for publishing reports on planned and implemented actions of Public Councils within the framework of public oversight. Alternatives to media include online resources, such as government websites. However, in practice, these online platforms are not widely visited or popular, resulting in reduced public awareness.

Table 5 – Media Mechanism in Kazakhstan's Legislation on Public Councils

Anti-corruption mechanism	Regulatory documents	Norms/Provisions
Media	Law on Public Councils	The obligation of the Public Council to inform the public about its activities at least twice a year and to publish an annual report in the media or on an online platform (Article 7) Submission of Public Council recommendations to the media following public hearings (Article 21)
	Law on Public Control	Publication of information about planned public discussions in the media (Article 10)
<i>Note: Compiled by the authors based on the legislation of Kazakhstan</i>		

Media is also used to disseminate recommendations resulting from public hearings and planned discussions. However, the role of the media in the functioning of Public Councils is neither defined nor regulated by special laws such as the "On Mass Media" [25] and "On Access to Information". Some Public Councils view media interaction as a means to enhance their influence over government bodies:

"This is done through public resonance, raising issues via media interaction. Media engagement is the only effective lever; until there is significant public outcry, neither the government nor deputies will take action." (Participant 8)

"This remains the only tool – to create more noise through media and public opinion, if, of course, we are right. If not, how do we achieve things we are unsure about?" (Participant 9)

Participant 9's response indicates uncertainty about the effectiveness of creating media noise without absolute confidence in their position. This reflects concerns about potential legal repercussions for spreading inaccurate information under Kazakhstan's administrative and criminal laws.

DISCUSSION

In Kazakhstan, the institution of Public Councils is a result of state policy aimed at increasing government transparency and accountability to citizens. The history of Public Councils dates back to the adoption of the 2015 Law "On Public Councils", which provided the legal framework for their formation at the national and local levels. The primary goal of these councils is to facilitate dialogue between the authority and society, contribute to the development and realizing of public policies, and oversee the operating of government bodies.

Participatory budgeting is a principle that allows citizens to take part in the planning and allocation of public finances [26, p.1] and can significantly influence the exposure of corruption [8]. Despite the councils' monitoring powers, the implementation of their recommendations is not mandatory for government bodies. The analysis indicates that the corruption risks in budget planning processes in Kazakhstan's central government bodies are highly likely when large amounts of money are allocated to inefficient projects with low transparency in distribution and spending. The influence of Public Councils on these decisions is minimal, as confirmed by both the lack of legal authority and the practical experiences of council members.

Community monitoring refers to the process by which community members oversee the implementation of government projects and development programs [9]. The range of objects for such monitoring is extensive, covering government services, programs, strategic plans, budgets, and the application of existing legislation. The goal of this monitoring is to identify negative consequences for citizens and any violations of public interests, with corruption being one significant potential consequence. During monitoring, Public Councils are authorized to request necessary information from government bodies, and their conclusions result in council recommendations (Law "On Public Councils," Article 20). However, these recommendations are not mandatory for implementation. Public monitoring of legal acts and sectoral programs faces clear pressure on Public Council members, and significant remarks are not taken into account. The formalism of the process can be partly explained by the nature of Public Councils in Kazakhstan. According to G. Mansuri and V. Rao, their activities can be classified as "induced participation", meaning that they are government-initiated and encouraged [27, p.32]. In contrast, "organic participation" arises independently and is driven by motivated and charismatic leaders. When the government induces participation, its agents are less likely to act in opposition.

It is crucial to assess the level of awareness among Public Council members regarding government activities and the willingness of state bodies to *disclose publicly relevant information*. Under Kazakhstan's legislation, Public Council members have the right to request information from governmental and quasi-governmental organizations for public oversight purposes (Law "On Public Councils," Article 20). However, there is no legislative obligation for information holders to provide such information, and the term "necessary information" is vague, leaving it unclear what types of information are required. As noted by I. Luna-Pla and J.R. Nicolás-Carlock, improving legal practices is a key component of effective anti-corruption efforts [28, p.15]. On the other hand, ambiguous legal norms are often exploited by those in power to maintain a corrupt *status quo* [29, p.1]. The results of this study aligns with I. Bajrami and T. Bajrami's conclusion that governments are reluctant to inform citizens about their opportunities to participate in decision-making [30, p.139].

Public Councils in Kazakhstan, while not the only instrument of *civil society participation*, are a key tool for *citizen involvement* in public policy implementation. The current format of Public Council operations does not allow for full and comprehensive citizen participation in governance. As noted by M. Bauhr, mobilizing society for anti-corruption work is possible under certain conditions, including the presence of appropriate engagement infrastructure [11, p.561]. This study demonstrates the need to improve the working mechanism of Public Councils in Kazakhstan.

The results strongly support the hypothesis that the current structure and activities of Public Councils in Kazakhstan significantly limit their effectiveness as an anti-corruption mechanism. Across key dimensions, their ability to serve as robust anti-corruption bodies is hindered by systemic and operational challenges. Public Councils have minimal influence over budgetary

processes due to the absence of legal authority and inadequate involvement in decision-making. This undermines their capacity to address corruption risks in budget allocation and spending. They face significant formalism and pressure in monitoring activities, with their remarks often disregarded. As government-initiated entities ("induced participation"), they lack the independence and grassroots legitimacy necessary for effective anti-corruption oversight. Weak informational activity and limited public awareness hinder the Councils' role as intermediaries between the government and society. Government reluctance to inform citizens of participatory opportunities exacerbates this limitation, reducing transparency and accountability. Civil society participation in Public Councils remains underdeveloped. Members often represent narrow interest groups rather than the broader public, while ordinary citizens have limited involvement. This reflects the early stages of civil society development in Kazakhstan and limits the Councils' collective anti-corruption capacity. Finally, media engagement remains an underutilized mechanism for enhancing transparency and public oversight.

These findings confirm that the structural, procedural, and legal limitations of Public Councils prevent them from fulfilling their potential as effective anti-corruption mechanisms. To achieve substantial progress, reforms should grant councils greater independence, improve transparency initiatives, enhance media collaboration, and increase public involvement. The results of this research are practically important because they highlight clear weaknesses in the anti-corruption function of Public Councils in Kazakhstan. They can serve as a guide for policymakers on the steps to improve the councils' effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Civil society struggles to combat corruption effectively when transparent legislation, consistent law enforcement, and strong governance are lacking [31, p.558]. Research suggests that, although public councils formally exist in Kazakhstan and have a legislative framework, their impact on anti-corruption efforts remains constrained. These councils encounter challenges such as limited authority, the non-binding nature of their recommendations, and the significant influence of administrative bodies on decision-making.

Mechanisms such as public monitoring, participation in budgeting, and access to information are theoretically designed to enhance transparency and reduce corruption risks. However, in practice, the influence of public councils on key processes like budget formation and legislative development is minimal. This is due both to legal constraints and the lack of real tools to alter governmental decisions.

Furthermore, focus group results reveal that members of public councils are often subjected to administrative pressure, and their involvement in discussing sensitive issues related to funding poses a risk of negative consequences for their professional activities. Moreover, the activities of public councils are perceived as a formal measure used to create the appearance of civic participation and democratic processes, without having a substantial impact on outcomes.

Thus, the existing system requires significant reforms to enhance the effectiveness of public councils. Key recommendations include the following:

Grant Binding Powers to Public Councils: Legislative reforms should grant councils the power to implement their recommendations, ensuring their influence in governmental decision-making.

Protect Council Members from Administrative Pressure: Introduce legal safeguards to shield public council members from retaliation or pressure when addressing sensitive or controversial topics.

Enhance Public Monitoring and Budget Participation: Establish clearer mechanisms for public councils to influence budget formation and oversight, alongside transparent reporting standards.

Foster Citizen Engagement: Launch awareness campaigns to educate citizens about the role and importance of public councils, and create more accessible channels for active participation.

Strengthen Capacity Building: Provide training programs for public council members to improve their understanding of governance processes, anti-corruption strategies, and effective communication techniques.

By implementing these reforms, Kazakhstan can transform its public councils into a robust mechanism for combating corruption and strengthening civil society's role in governance.

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