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ASSESSMENT OF PROSPECTS AND MECHANISMS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE MODERNIZATION OF THE LOCAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the current state of local self-government institutions in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The relevance of this research is driven by the need for the development of local self-government in the country. The main objective of the study is to assess the effectiveness of local self-government institutions and identify factors influencing their functioning. The authors focus on two key institutions of local self-government – maslikhats and akims – and provide an overview of the changes that have occurred in these institutions over the past decades. The paper underscores the importance of active citizen participation in local self-government and examines the challenges facing Kazakhstan, such as passivity and distrust of the authorities among the population.

The research is conducted using a methodology based on the analysis of existing data, expert opinions, and a review of legislative acts. As a result of the study, the conclusion is drawn that the Republic of Kazakhstan faces a significant choice in the development of local self-government and democratic reforms. This work contributes to the field of knowledge about local self-government and offers practical recommendations for improving the local governance system in Kazakhstan. The research findings have practical value for the development of policies related to local self-government and citizen participation at the local level.

Keywords: local self-government, Kazakhstan, maslikhats, akims, democracy, civic participation, state governance institutions.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАН РЕСПУБЛИКАСЫНДАҒЫ ЖЕРГІЛІКТІ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК БАСҚАРУ ЖҮЙЕСІН ЖАҢҒЫРТУДЫ ЖҮЗЕГЕ АСЫРУДЫҢ КЕЛЕШЕГІ МЕН МЕХАНИЗМІН БАҒАЛАУ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада Қазақстан Республикасындағы жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару институттарының қазіргі жағдайда әрекет ету механизміне талдау жасалады. Зерттеудің өзектілігі еліміздегі жергілікті өзін-өзі басқаруды дамыту қажеттілігімен түсіндіріледі. Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару институттарының тиімділігін бағалау және олардың жұмыс істеуіне әсер ететін факторларды анықтау. Авторлар жергілікті өзін-өзі басқарудың екі негізгі институты – мәслихаттар мен әкім институты нешізінде анализ жасап, соңғы онжылдықтардағы құрылымдық өзгерістерді талдайды. Мақалада халықтың жергілікті өзін-

өзі басқаруға белсенді қатысуының маңыздылығы атап өтіліп, Қазақстанның алдында тұрған пассивтілік пен халықтың билікке сенімсіздігі сияқты мәселелер ғылыми тұрғыда зерттеледі.

Зерттеу қолданыстағы деректерді талдауға, сараптамалық қорытындыларға және заңнаманы шолуға негізделген әдістемені қолдану арқылы жүзеге асырылады.

Зерттеу нәтижесінде Қазақстан Республикасының алдында жергілікті өзін-өзі басқаруды дамыту және демократиялық өзгерістер бойынша маңызды таңдау түр деген қорытынды жасалды. Бұл жұмыс жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару туралы білім саласына ықпал етеді және Қазақстандағы жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару жүйесін жетілдіру бойынша практикалық бағдарлар анықталды. Зерттеу нәтижелері жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару саласындағы саясатты әзірлеуге және жергілікті деңгейде басқаруға азаматтардың қатысуына практикалық әсер етеді.

Түйін сөздер: жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару, Қазақстан, мәслихаттар, әкімдер, демократия, азаматтық қатысу, мемлекеттік басқару институттары.

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ОЦЕНКА ПЕРСПЕКТИВ И МЕХАНИЗМОВ РЕАЛИЗАЦИИ МОДЕРНИЗАЦИИ СИСТЕМЫ МЕСТНОГО УПРАВЛЕНИЯ В РЕСПУБЛИКЕ КАЗАХСТАН

Аннотация

Данная статья представляет анализ современного состояния институтов местного самоуправления в Республике Казахстан. Актуальность данного исследования обусловлена необходимостью развития местного самоуправления в стране. Основная цель исследования заключается в оценке эффективности институтов местного самоуправления и выявлении факторов, влияющих на их функционирование. Авторы обращают внимание на два основных института местного самоуправления - маслихаты и акимы, а также предоставляют обзор изменений, произошедших в этих институтах за последние десятилетия. В работе подчеркивается важность активного участия населения в местном самоуправлении и рассматриваются вызовы, стоящие перед Казахстаном, такие как пассивность и недоверие населения к власти.

Исследование проводится с использованием методологии, основанной на анализе существующих данных, мнений экспертов и обзоре законодательных актов.

В результате исследования делается вывод о том, что Республике Казахстан предстоит важный выбор в развитии местного самоуправления и демократических изменений. Данная работа вносит вклад в область знаний о местном самоуправлении и предоставляет практические рекомендации по улучшению системы местного управления в Казахстане. Результаты исследования имеют практическое значение для разработки политики в области местного самоуправления и участия граждан в управлении на местном уровне.

Ключевые слова: местное самоуправление, Казахстан, маслихаты, акимы, демократия, гражданское участие, институты государственного управления.

INTRODUCTION

For the successful social modernization of Kazakhstani society, a significant improvement of the public administration system is required. However, within this process, special attention must be given to the development of local self-government in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Local self-government is considered an integral part of a democratic state and a key factor in the further development of civil society.

As the level of government closest to the population, local self-government directly affects the interests of every citizen and addresses a range of everyday issues. Moreover, it promotes citizen self-organization, which is essential for the successful development of civil society. Local self-government enables citizens to actively participate in improving living conditions in their communities, fosters responsibility for solving local problems, and enhances their social and civic engagement.

This institution also contributes to conflict resolution and the socio-economic development of regions, which is crucial for the sustainable development of the country as a whole. Therefore, the development of local self-government in the Republic of Kazakhstan contributes to the formation of civil society and a socially oriented economy.

Global experience also demonstrates a variety of forms and methods of local self-government adapted to specific regions and traditions. Thus, it is important to adapt and incorporate international practices into the development of local self-government in Kazakhstan, taking into account national characteristics and culture. Local self-government should play a key role in the state-building strategy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as emphasized in the long-term national development strategy "Kazakhstan – 2050" and other development programs. In conclusion, local self-government plays a vital role in the development of civil society and the social modernization of Kazakhstan, and its advancement should be a priority in the country's development strategy [1].

The modernization of the local governance system is a complex and multifaceted process that reflects the evolving dynamics of administrative structures within states. This theoretical framework aims to establish conceptual foundations for understanding the prospects and mechanisms underlying the modernization of local governance in the Republic of Kazakhstan. It is based on key theoretical pillars that shape the discourse surrounding governance modernization. The concept of governance itself is undergoing an evolution, reflecting shifts in administrative systems. This paradigm shift has profound implications for the modernization of local governance in Kazakhstan.

The concept of public administration modernization emphasizes the need to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of government structures, including local governance systems. This perspective serves as a foundational basis for exploring the mechanisms of local governance modernization. Processes of decentralization and the strengthening of regional administration are key mechanisms that contribute to the modernization of local governance. They ensure more effective distribution of authority and responsibility between central and local levels of government.

The development of information technologies and the introduction of e-governance have become crucial tools in modernizing local governance. These mechanisms can enhance transparency, accessibility, and efficiency of local administration.

This theoretical framework provides a conceptual basis for understanding the perspectives and mechanisms of modernizing the local governance system in Kazakhstan. It draws upon key theoretical approaches that help clarify the changes in governance and state administration dynamics, as well as the transformations occurring in local governance. This theoretical foundation serves as a basis for further research and analysis of the modernization of local governance.

According to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, local self-government is defined as the legally guaranteed right and practical ability of local authorities to regulate and manage a significant portion of public affairs within their jurisdiction, in the interest of the local population [2]. This right is exercised through representative bodies elected by universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage, ensuring democratic legitimacy at the local level.

In Kazakhstan, the legal framework for local self-government is established by the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated January 23, 2001, "On Local Public Administration and Self-Government in the Republic of Kazakhstan," and the Presidential Decree No. 438 from November 28, 2012, which approved the Concept for the Development of Local Self-Government. These documents assign the state the responsibility to create the legal, organizational, and financial conditions necessary for the development of self-government, embedding decentralization within the broader state development strategy.

Local self-government is fundamentally rooted in the local community, which is its primary focus. Through local self-government institutions, citizens are empowered to address local issues independently and responsibly across social, economic, political, and environmental domains. However, as local communities navigate complex and evolving socio-economic systems, effective self-government requires ongoing institutional adaptation.

Consequently, the development of local self-government is a long-term and dynamic process closely tied to the maturity of civil society and the overall level of socio-economic development. At each stage of this process, specific governance objectives arise, necessitating periodic institutional adjustments and reform [3].

Currently, several priority areas can be identified: increasing citizen participation in decision-making at the levels of auls, settlements, and towns of district significance; expanding participatory mechanisms in urban areas; strengthening the role of maslikhats in the appointment or election of akims; and enhancing the financial and economic autonomy of local authorities through transparent oversight. Collectively, these measures highlight the strategic importance of local self-government in reinforcing Kazakhstani statehood and promoting sustainable, community-oriented governance. [4,6].

The restructuring of the public administration system is characterized by the need to introduce innovations, develop a new administrative ideology, initiate new managerial processes, and modify organizational structures. This process presents both theory and practice with the task of implementing a comprehensive and innovative reform of public administration, taking into account each country's national characteristics.

Local self-government is central to Kazakhstan's ongoing state modernization, yet we know little about which institutional levers—electoral selection of akims, the authority of maslikhats, and fiscal autonomy—actually improve local responsiveness and citizen participation. This article addresses this issue by evaluating how recent reforms have changed the effectiveness and accountability of local governance across Kazakhstan.

The purpose is to assess the prospects and mechanisms of local governance modernization by linking institutional design to observable outcomes in participation, trust, and service delivery. We ask: Do directly elected rural akims increase citizen participation and trust? Does greater fiscal and decision-making autonomy at the aul/town level improve satisfaction with local services? Do empowered maslikhats and Public Councils enhance transparency and oversight?

The direct election of rural akims is linked to higher voter turnout in local contests, more public hearings, and increased petitioning activity. A higher share of own-source revenues and participatory budgeting at the aul/town level correlates with greater resident satisfaction with roads, water, and communal services. Where maslikhats and Public Councils have stronger agenda-setting and review powers, perceived corruption is lower, and budget information is timelier. We examine Kazakhstan's local governance since 2001, focusing on auls, settlements, and towns of district significance (with illustrations from the North Kazakhstan Region where appropriate). Methodologically, we combine the analysis of legislation and secondary data with expert assessments to trace how design changes affect participation, trust, and service outputs.

The article specifies actionable mechanisms (elections, fiscal rules, deliberative bodies) that link reform to outcomes, offering empirically grounded recommendations for policymakers. Section 2 reviews the literature and reform context; Section 3 details data and methods; Section 4 presents findings; Section 5 discusses policy implications.

In other words, all of the above constitutes the natural sources of a new public governance paradigm, grounded in the adoption of innovative management approaches. This primarily entails improving the quality of public service delivery, operating in a competitive environment including cooperation with business entities, applying corporate management principles, and many other aspects.

The relevance of this issue in the activities of state bodies is also due to the fact that, in recent years, increasing the efficiency of public institutions, enhancing the implementation of state functions, and improving public service delivery have become priority tasks in the innovative reform

of local governance in Kazakhstan. As a result, significant changes have taken place in the principles of organization, functioning, and evaluation of public administration effectiveness [5].

Thus, local self-government in Kazakhstan plays a key role in addressing local issues and developing the territories where the population resides. Its deep roots in the country's history and traditions of self-organization make it an important tool for managing and developing local communities.

Literature Review

Local self-government (LSG) in Kazakhstan is rooted in the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Law on Local Public Administration and Self-Government (2001). The constitutional amendments of 2007 established that LSG should be exercised directly by the population and through elected maslikhats. This reform shifted the framework from administrative deconcentration to local autonomy. However, M.S. Nurtazin [1] notes that the legislation conflates local state administration with self-government, resulting in blurred accountability and diminished local responsiveness. V.N. Uvarov [8] similarly observes that the law primarily defines local administration as the implementation of central policies rather than decision-making based on local priorities. These insights highlight a fundamental contradiction in Kazakhstan's legal framework: while self-government is proclaimed, local authorities remain subordinate to higher state organs. This tension forms a critical foundation for the present study. The legal basis for local self-government in Kazakhstan is limited to the Constitution and the Law dated January 23, 2001, titled "On Local Public Administration and Self-Government in the Republic of Kazakhstan." In 2007, amendments were made to the Constitution, establishing that local self-government is exercised directly by the population and through maslikhats (local representative bodies) and other local self-government entities [6]. The legislation permits an akim (local governor) to perform both public administration and local self-government functions, and allows for the organization of assemblies of local communities to discuss matters of local importance [7].

Another major issue identified in the literature is fiscal dependence. Zh.K. Kaikenov [3] highlights that although rural akims are now elected, they control only minor budget lines, while most revenues are collected and redistributed at regional and national levels. L.S. Tarshilova [4] and A. Baimenov [5] argue that without financial autonomy, local officials lack incentives to respond to citizens' needs. Empirical analyses by R.T. Mukhaev [6] and V.V. Cherepanov [7] show that fiscal decentralization strongly correlates with improved service quality and public trust. However, Kazakhstan's local budgets remain largely controlled by district and regional akims and sectoral ministries, leaving village administrations as mere implementers. This structural barrier explains why political reforms have not yet produced tangible improvements in participation or accountability—a gap this article will explicitly address.

To enhance public participation, the state established Public Councils (PCs) through the Law on Public Councils. PCs aim to improve transparency, review budgets, and amplify citizens' voices. L.S. Tarshilova [4] observes early positive effects, such as more open discussions of yard maintenance, street repairs, and budget allocations. However, R.A. Muratova [8] warns that these councils possess only advisory powers and rely on executive goodwill. S.G. Kiselev [9] notes that participatory bodies lacking resource control risk becoming merely symbolic. These findings are critical for this study, as they indicate the existence of institutional forms of participation, though their functional impact remains uncertain. Our article directly assesses whether such bodies have led to measurable changes in decision-making and service delivery.

The literature frames LSG within broader theories. V.I. Zhiltsov [10] and A.M. Volodin [11] emphasize the dual role of local authorities as both state agents and community representatives, creating ongoing tension in post-Soviet systems. A.V. Babalov [12] argues that LSG gains legitimacy only when institutionalized feedback loops—such as participatory budgeting and public consultations—are present. D.Ts. Butitov [13] sees LSG as a mediator between state and society that requires both authority and resources to function effectively. Internationally, the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985) outlines four essential principles: legal competence, fiscal autonomy, clear

functional separation, and elected self-government [14]. Scholars like G.V. Atamanchuk [15] and A.A. Nemchinov [16] contend that Kazakhstan's model lacks these attributes, particularly fiscal autonomy and elected executives. This theoretical debate serves as a benchmark for assessing how far Kazakhstan has progressed toward genuine decentralization.

Existing research on local self-government is largely normative and descriptive, focusing on legal frameworks and institutional design rather than concrete outcomes. Few studies assess whether reforms such as electing rural akims, strengthening maslikhats, or establishing Public Councils have improved participation, accountability, or service delivery. This article addresses this gap by empirically linking institutional reforms to governance outcomes, thereby contributing evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of local self-government in Kazakhstan.

Other aspects of local self-government—particularly its role in the system of interaction between authorities and society in contemporary Russia, as well as regional experience—were studied in D.Ts. Butitov's dissertation [12]. The theoretical foundations of the constitutional and legal regulation of local self-government include widely recognized values of local democracy and governance, as articulated in the European Charter of Local Self-Government of October 15, 1985. It emphasizes the right and ability of local authorities to determine their own structures and manage public affairs in the interests of the local population, while adhering to existing legislation [13].

The existing scholarship conceptualizes local self-government in Kazakhstan as a formally institutionalized but substantively constrained system. Legal studies emphasize the persistent fusion of local state administration and self-government, which undermines accountability and limits autonomous decision-making. Fiscal analyses consistently identify financial dependence on higher-level authorities as a key obstacle to effective local governance, despite recent political reforms. Research on participatory mechanisms, including Public Councils, points to expanded consultative frameworks with limited practical influence. Comparative and theoretical literature, drawing on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, highlights the divergence between international standards and national practice. Overall, the literature remains predominantly normative, underscoring the need for outcome-oriented empirical assessment.

Many scholars argue that local self-government must be based on both the principles of freedom and feedback. This means that local self-government enables the population to make independent decisions on issues of local importance, taking into account the interests of both citizens and society as a whole.

The literature shows that local self-government in Kazakhstan remains constrained by central control, legal ambiguity, and fiscal dependence despite recent reforms. As existing studies are largely descriptive, this article empirically examines whether these reforms improve participation, accountability, and service delivery.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a mixed-methods design that integrated expert interviews, a population survey, legal analysis, and statistical procedures to evaluate the institutional, fiscal, and participatory aspects of local self-government reforms in Kazakhstan. The empirical component was based on a transparent sampling strategy, detailed data-collection protocols, and systematic analytical techniques.

The qualitative component consisted of twenty-five in-depth expert interviews conducted using a purposive (criterion-based) sampling strategy. The selection of participants was guided by predefined inclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and analytical value of the data. Eligible participants were required to (1) hold a formal position or active role within the local governance system or related civil society structures and (2) possess at least three years of professional experience in their respective fields. On this basis, the sample was constructed to reflect institutional diversity rather than numerical representativeness. It included rural and urban akims, maslikhat deputies, members of Public Councils, and representatives of local non-governmental organizations involved in community development and citizen participation.

Interviews were conducted offline in the Turkistan Region between March and June 2024. This period was selected to avoid overlap with major electoral or administrative cycles that could influence respondents' perceptions. Each interview lasted between forty-five and seventy minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide. The guide was developed on the basis of the study's research questions and existing literature on local governance and decentralization. It contained open-ended questions allowing respondents to elaborate on issues such as fiscal autonomy, delegated administrative powers, the functioning of participatory mechanisms, and constraints affecting municipal effectiveness. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis in accordance with the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [14]. Initial familiarization with the data was followed by open coding, theme identification, and thematic refinement. To enhance analytical rigor and reduce subjective bias, the coding process was conducted independently by two researchers. Inter-coder discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. The final thematic structure included categories such as fiscal sufficiency, legal authority, participatory instruments, administrative capacity, and institutional constraints.

To complement the expert-level findings, a quantitative survey was administered to 120 residents of the Turkistan Region. The selection of respondents was carried out using a quota sampling strategy aimed at ensuring variation across key sociodemographic characteristics, including gender, age group, and settlement type (urban or rural). This approach was chosen to capture diverse social experiences of municipal governance rather than to achieve full statistical representativeness.

Data collection took place between April and June 2024 and employed a mixed-mode approach in order to minimize access and digital literacy bias. Sixty-two respondents completed an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, while fifty-eight respondents completed an identical paper-based questionnaire administered in public service centers and district libraries. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended and Likert-scale items measuring respondents' satisfaction with municipal services, levels of trust in akimats and maslikhats, awareness of participatory institutions such as Public Councils, and patterns of civic engagement, including participation in public hearings, petitions, and neighborhood meetings. Prior to full deployment, the survey instrument was reviewed for clarity and internal consistency, and minor wording adjustments were made to ensure accessibility for respondents with different educational backgrounds. Quantitative data were subsequently coded and analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify general trends and to triangulate the qualitative findings.

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics such as means, percentages, and confidence intervals. To enhance analytical robustness, χ^2 tests examined associations between demographic characteristics and governance-related attitudes, while Cronbach's alpha assessed the internal reliability of composite indices measuring trust and service satisfaction. These statistical procedures addressed earlier limitations by providing proper significance testing and interpretive depth rather than relying solely on raw percentages.

The empirical analysis was supported by a legal and theoretical examination of key documents regulating local self-government in Kazakhstan, including the Constitution, the Law on Local Public Administration and Self-Government, the Law on Public Councils, the Budget Code, and relevant presidential decrees and government resolutions [15]. These materials were analyzed to clarify the distribution of competences across administrative levels, the nature of fiscal autonomy, and the legal design of participatory mechanisms. Special attention was given to discrepancies between normative provisions and their practical implementation in local governance.

Triangulation was used to integrate insights from legal texts, statistical indicators, expert interviews, and citizen survey data. This approach enabled a comprehensive assessment of whether reforms such as the election of rural akims and the strengthening of Public Councils have enhanced participation, accountability, and service delivery in the Turkistan Region. The combined methodological strategy strengthened the validity of the findings and provided a solid foundation for the study's conclusions.

RESULT

Our study hypothesized that strengthening institutional, fiscal, and participatory mechanisms would enhance the effectiveness of local self-government (LSG) in Kazakhstan. The findings provide partial confirmation: institutional reforms have advanced, yet fiscal autonomy and citizen engagement remain limited. To present these results more clearly, key indicators are summarized in the analytical tables “*Resident Engagement*” and “*Fiscal Autonomy*” that accompany the narrative interpretation.

Table 1. Resident Engagement in Local Self-Government (Survey, n = 120)

Indicator	Percentage (%)
Awareness of Public Councils (PCs)	61
Participation in PC meetings	14
Participation in public hearings	22
Trust in local authorities (high/medium)	48
Satisfaction with municipal services	41

Institutional reforms show the most significant progress. The 2007 constitutional amendments and the introduction of direct elections for rural akims—piloted in 2006 and significantly expanded after 2021—have strengthened formal representation mechanisms. According to data from the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan, voter turnout in rural akim elections consistently exceeded 75%, a trend reflected in Table 1. Maslikhats have also expanded their oversight of local budgets and development programs. However, as M.S. Nurtazin observes, the legal framework continues to conflate local administration with local self-government, maintaining the hierarchical subordination of elected bodies to higher executive authorities. This structural limitation weakens the practical autonomy of institutions despite their enhanced formal legitimacy.

Table 2. Fiscal Autonomy of Local Governments (2015-2023)

Fiscal Indicator	Value / Share (%)
Share of local revenues from interbudgetary transfers	80-82
Share of own-source revenues	18-20
Presence of independent budget lines for rural akimats	No
Ability to collect local taxes (property, land)	Limited / Restricted
Degree of expenditure autonomy	Low

Source: Based on Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan

The analysis of fiscal indicators reveals the greatest constraints. Table 2 (*Fiscal Autonomy*) summarizes the composition of local revenues for 2015-2023, based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan. More than 80% of municipal budgets rely on interbudgetary transfers, with rural akimats lacking independent revenue sources and separate budget lines. These findings support Zh.K. Kaikenov’s argument that elected leaders operate with minimal financial discretion. Comparative insights reinforce this conclusion: decentralization in Poland and Estonia gave municipalities control over property taxes, local fees, and assets, enabling more responsive governance. Conversely, Kazakhstan’s model resembles the pre-reform system in Russia described by V.I. Zhiltsov, where centralized fiscal authority impeded local initiative. The data indicate that electoral reforms alone are insufficient to improve service quality or accountability when fiscal capacity is structurally constrained [16].

Participatory mechanisms demonstrate mixed but informative patterns. The establishment of Public Councils (PCs) under the 2015 law has improved transparency in budget hearings and development planning. Interviews with maslikhat deputies suggest greater administrative responsiveness, echoing L.S. Tarshilova's observations. However, survey data, summarized in Table 1 (*Resident Engagement*), show a significant gap between awareness and participation: 61% of respondents reported knowing about PCs, yet only 14% had ever participated. This supports S.G. Kiselev's view that consultative bodies without formal authority risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Nonetheless, qualitative responses reveal relatively high trust in PCs where they operate actively, suggesting that modest institutional strengthening—such as delegated budgetary oversight—could transform them into meaningful participatory channels.

These findings align with major theoretical perspectives on local democracy. A.V. Babalov emphasizes that LSG acquires legitimacy only when institutionalized feedback mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting, allow citizens to influence decisions directly. D.Ts. Butitov conceptualizes LSG as an intermediary between state and society that must possess both authority and resources. Kazakhstan's system currently meets institutional criteria but lacks the substantive autonomy envisioned by these theorists. Consequently, it diverges from the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985), which stresses legal competence, fiscal independence, clarity of functions, and empowered elected bodies [17].

The evidence indicates that Kazakhstan's LSG reforms remain structurally incomplete. Institutional progress is hindered by fiscal dependence and weak participatory mechanisms. Without genuine financial autonomy and active citizen engagement, the current model cannot transition from formal decentralization to true local democracy or accountable governance.

Overall, the empirical findings demonstrate that the study's research objectives were largely achieved. The survey of residents and expert interviews were conducted to test the hypothesis that institutional, fiscal, and participatory reforms enhance the effectiveness of local self-government. The results partially confirm this hypothesis: while institutional reforms have strengthened formal representation, limited fiscal autonomy and low levels of citizen participation continue to constrain governance outcomes. Thus, the data explain not only whether reforms occurred, but why their impact remains uneven.

DISCUSSIONS

Unlike earlier studies that are largely descriptive, this article directly connects Kazakhstan's institutional reforms to measurable indicators such as voter turnout, citizen satisfaction, budget transparency, and service performance. The analysis clearly shows that while institutional progress is necessary, it is insufficient on its own: without fiscal and participatory empowerment, reforms cannot lead to effective or accountable local governance. Strengthening local self-government (LSG) therefore requires the gradual introduction of stable local revenue sources, a redistribution of decision-making authority to elected bodies, and sustained investment in civic education—especially in rural communities where engagement is low. International experience consistently demonstrates that a combined reform strategy, rather than isolated adjustments, is essential for building trust, responsiveness, and meaningful local democracy.

As Kazakhstan enters a new phase of political modernization, observers widely agree that the country is at a pivotal moment in the evolution of its local self-government system. The state's renewed commitment to decentralization, articulated in President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's political reform agenda, offers an unprecedented opportunity to reshape local institutions so they move beyond symbolic participation and become fully functioning democratic bodies.

A core pillar of this transformation is fiscal decentralization. Policy experts note that allowing municipalities to retain a greater share of property taxes, business taxes, and local fees would give akims the financial capacity to address pressing issues—ranging from infrastructure to social services—without awaiting ministerial approval. Comparative evidence from Central and Eastern Europe shows that fiscal autonomy not only improves service delivery but also enhances public trust by making local authorities visibly accountable for their decisions.

Institutional empowerment must be matched with stronger participatory mechanisms. Maslikhats and Public Councils should be granted co-decision authority over budget allocations and local development priorities to ensure that community needs shape policy outcomes. Expanding public hearings, digital participation platforms, and participatory budgeting would help institutionalize citizen oversight, bridging the gap between residents and decision-makers.

Civil society organizations also play a strategic role in this process. Through civic education campaigns, youth programs, and grassroots initiatives, they can strengthen political culture, improve awareness of citizen rights, and activate broader public involvement beyond periodic elections. Increasing youth engagement is particularly important for establishing long-term norms of accountability and transparency in local institutions.

Digitalization represents another critical frontier for reform. Smart-governance tools can streamline bureaucratic procedures, enhance data transparency, and create direct feedback loops between residents and officials. Pilot initiatives in several Kazakhstani cities show that digital monitoring and reporting systems can reduce delays, improve service quality, and allow citizens to track local projects in real time.

Ultimately, the success of decentralization depends on the political will to transfer substantive—not merely administrative—authority to the local level. Scholars warn that decentralization risks becoming performative if it is not accompanied by real power, resources, and accountability mechanisms. A balanced, phased approach can mitigate potential political risks while laying a durable foundation for resilient and responsive local democracy.

Kazakhstan's path toward effective LSG remains complex, yet momentum is clearly building. If institutional, fiscal, and participatory reforms advance together, the country can develop a governance model that strengthens state capacity while empowering citizens. Achieving this balance would mark a significant milestone in Kazakhstan's democratic development and contribute to greater public trust in governance at all levels [18, p. 112; 19, p. 47; 20, p. 89].

Studies of decentralization in Latin America and Southeast Asia show that fiscal and participatory reforms introduced without sufficient administrative capacity and accountability mechanisms may result in elite capture and uneven service delivery [21, pp. 112-118; 22, pp. 64-70]. Research on post-socialist decentralization in the Balkan states likewise demonstrates that rapid fiscal devolution without effective oversight can exacerbate territorial inequalities and weaken state coordination [23, pp. 89-95]. These findings suggest that although integrated institutional, fiscal, and participatory reforms are generally associated with improved local governance, their success depends on sequencing, capacity-building, and sustained strategic coordination at the central level. For Kazakhstan, this implies that decentralization should proceed gradually and context-sensitively rather than through rapid and uniform transfers of authority.

Furthermore, international practice confirms that local self-government performs best in administrative-territorial units with compact populations—such as auls, villages, districts, and towns—where direct interaction between authorities and residents is feasible. A step-by-step introduction of LSG powers is therefore essential for successful implementation, especially in rural regions where social structures and political habits differ from urban centers. Over time, as local bodies demonstrate concrete, measurable results, public trust will deepen, creating a cycle in which citizen engagement and institutional performance reinforce each other. This dynamic is central to the long-term legitimacy and sustainability of Kazakhstan's decentralization agenda.

These insights underscore that Kazakhstan has a historic opportunity to redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens at the local level. Successful decentralization will depend on aligning institutional structures with genuine fiscal authority, empowered participation channels, and a politically informed population capable of exercising oversight. If these conditions are met, local self-government (LSG) can evolve from a mere administrative layer into a meaningful arena of democratic governance. The next decade will be crucial; Kazakhstan can either establish a model of resilient, community-oriented local democracy or risk perpetuating centralized practices that hinder long-term development.

CONCLUSION

Over the past two decades since the adoption of the 2001 Law on Local Government and Self-Government, Kazakhstan has made gradual yet significant progress in institutionalizing local self-governance. The introduction of directly elected rural akims, the strengthening of maslikhats, and the creation of Public Councils demonstrate a commitment to decentralization. While these reforms have expanded opportunities for participation, this study reveals that the substantive autonomy of local bodies remains constrained by fiscal dependence, limited decision-making authority, and weak citizen engagement. Although institutional reforms have laid the groundwork, they have not yet realized the full benefits of responsive and accountable local governance.

The persistence of centralized budgetary control, the unclear legal status of local self-government bodies, and the consultative nature of participatory institutions hinder local authorities from genuinely representing their communities. This structural imbalance reflects the ongoing tension between Kazakhstan's formal commitments to decentralization and its practical adherence to hierarchical state administration. International experience—from Poland and Estonia to South Korea—shows that fiscal autonomy, clear legal competencies, and empowered representative councils are essential for building effective local democracy. Without these elements, reforms risk remaining symbolic, resulting in participation without power and accountability without enforcement.

This article empirically links institutional design to measurable outcomes—voter turnout, citizen satisfaction, trust, budget transparency, and service quality—and demonstrates that institutional innovations alone are insufficient without fiscal and participatory empowerment. To advance beyond the current transitional phase, Kazakhstan must pursue three parallel strategies: first, granting stable own-source revenues and tax authority to local bodies; second, legally strengthening the decision-making powers of maslikhats and Public Councils; and third, investing in civic education and participatory platforms to cultivate an active and informed citizenry. These steps will transform local self-government from a formal administrative layer into a genuine arena of democratic governance.

Moreover, building sustainable local democracy requires a shift in political culture. Currently, the legacy of paternalism, low trust, and civic passivity limits participation and weakens accountability. Civic education initiatives, especially among youth, can foster the norms of responsibility and collective problem-solving that underpin effective self-government. Digital tools—such as e-participation platforms, open budgeting portals, and real-time feedback systems—can bridge the gap between citizens and officials, reduce corruption risks, and build confidence in local institutions. Evidence shows that when citizens observe tangible improvements in services delivered by the local authorities they elected, their trust in government increases, creating a virtuous cycle of engagement and accountability.

Kazakhstan is at a crucial point in the evolution of its governance system. The country's strong traditions of communal self-organization, combined with a modern political agenda, provide a unique foundation for developing a model of local self-government that reflects its history and socio-political context. Realizing this potential will require not only policy adjustments but also the political will to transfer meaningful authority, financial power, and oversight rights to the local level. Such reforms would not weaken the state; rather, they would strengthen it by distributing responsibility, enhancing policy responsiveness, and deepening public legitimacy.

If Kazakhstan can align institutional reforms with fiscal autonomy and participatory governance, it can transform local self-government from its current nascent form into a robust institution. This change would improve the everyday lives of citizens across auls, towns, and districts and reinforce the long-term stability and democratic resilience of the Kazakhstani state. For a nation at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, achieving a balance between state capacity and local empowerment would mark a significant milestone in its political development and contribute meaningfully to the creation of a modern, accountable, and citizen-centered governance system.

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