

THE ROLE OF MASLIKHATS IN THE SYSTEM OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT: THE CASE OF ALMATY

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Abstract. In Kazakhstan, maslikhats serve as a key element of the local self-governance system, functioning as representative bodies involved in decision-making processes that impact the lives of local communities. The purpose of this article is to examine the role of maslikhats within the local government, using the city of Almaty, the country's largest metropolis, as a case study. The study employs a comprehensive methodological approach that includes a retrospective analysis of the formation and development of maslikhats, an analysis of the legal framework regulating their activities, and an examination of empirical data through semi-structured expert interviews. The findings of the study highlight both the achievements and challenges associated with the functioning of maslikhats in the context of Kazakhstan's modern local governance system, with a particular emphasis on the insufficient autonomy of these representative bodies. Based on the results, recommendations are proposed to enhance their effectiveness, citizen engagement, and interaction with authorities.

Keywords: *maslikhat, local government, public administration, Almaty, representative bodies.*

АЛМАТЫ ҚАЛАСЫНЫҢ МЫСАЛЫНДА ЖЕРГІЛІКТІ ӨЗІН-ӨЗІ БАСҚАРУ ЖҮЙЕСІНДЕГІ МӘСЛИХАТТАРДЫҢ РӨЛІ

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Аңдатпа. Қазақстанда мәслихаттар жергілікті қоғамдастықтардың өміріне әсер ететін шешімдер қабылдауға қатысатын өкілді органдардың функцияларын орындай отырып, жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару жүйесінің негізгі элементі болып табылады. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты-еліміздің ірі мегаполисі Алматы қаласының мысалында жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару жүйесіндегі мәслихаттардың рөлін зерттеу. Зерттеу мәслихаттардың қалыптасуы мен дамуын ретроспективті талдауды, олардың қызметін реттейтін нормативтік-құқықтық базаны талдауды, сондай-ақ жартылай құрылымдалған сараптамалық сұхбаттардың көмегімен эмпирикалық деректерді зерттеуді қамтитын кешенді әдіснамалық тәсілді қолданады. Зерттеу нәтижелері Қазақстан Республикасының қазіргі заманғы жергілікті басқару жүйесі жағдайында мәслихаттардың жұмыс істеуіне байланысты жетістіктер мен проблемаларды анықтауға мүмкіндік берді. Өкілді орган қызметінің дербестігі жеткіліксіз. Зерттеу қорытындысы бойынша олардың тиімділігін арттыру, азаматтардың қатысуы және атқарушы билік органдарымен өзара іс-қимыл бойынша ұсыныстар ұсынылды.

Түйін сөздер: *мәслихат, жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару, мемлекеттік басқару, Алматы, өкілді органдар.*

РОЛЬ МАСЛИХАТОВ В СИСТЕМЕ МЕСТНОГО САМОУПРАВЛЕНИЯ НА ПРИМЕРЕ ГОРОДА АЛМАТЫ

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Аннотация. В Казахстане маслихаты выступают ключевым элементом системы местного самоуправления, выполняя функции представительных органов, участвующих в принятии решений, затрагивающих жизнь местных сообществ. Цель данной статьи – изучение роли маслихатов в системе местного самоуправления на примере города Алматы, крупнейшего мегаполиса страны. В исследовании применяется комплексный методологический подход, включающий ретроспективный анализ формирования и развития маслихатов, анализ нормативно-правовой базы, регулирующей их деятельность, а также изучение эмпирических данных с помощью полуструктурированных экспертных интервью. Результаты исследования позволили выявить достижения и проблемы, связанные с функционированием маслихатов в условиях современной системы местного управления Республики Казахстан. Недостаточная автономия деятельности представительного органа. По итогам исследования предложены рекомендации по повышению их эффективности, вовлеченности граждан и взаимодействия с органами исполнительной власти.

Ключевые слова: *маслихат, местное самоуправление, государственное управление, Алматы, представительные органы*

Introduction

Local self-governance plays a vital role in various aspects of a state's and society's life. Local authorities ensure the protection of citizens' rights within their jurisdiction. Although the primary responsibility lies with the state, local self-governance makes a significant contribution to this endeavor [1]. By enhancing democratic participation, it enables citizens to engage in decision-making processes either directly or through their elected representatives. This, in turn, facilitates the resolution of local issues more effectively and fosters a sense of involvement and belonging among citizens [2]. Furthermore, local authorities possess a deeper understanding of, and respond more promptly to, the specific needs of their communities. This encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions that are critical for the sustainable development of territories [3]. Despite their importance, local authorities face several challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiency, financial dependence on national governments, and the need for reforms to improve governance and service delivery. Reforms could empower local authorities to focus more effectively on local issues and reduce state interference [4]. In addition to addressing governance challenges, local self-governance fosters social partnerships and community development by encouraging dialogue and collaboration among residents. Such an approach helps address local socio-economic issues and improves overall quality of life.

In Kazakhstan, maslikhats (local representative bodies) are a critical element of the local self-governance system. They represent the interests of citizens and participate in decision-making processes that affect the lives of local communities. This article aims to analyze the role of maslikhats within the local self-governance system, using the city of Almaty as a case study. The focus of the analysis is to identify key achievements, existing challenges, and provide recommendations to improve their effectiveness.

By examining the effectiveness of maslikhats in the context of local self-governance, this analysis seeks to deepen the understanding of the role of representative bodies at the local level. It also aims to contribute to the further development of the local self-governance system in Kazakhstan as a whole.

Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive methodological approach to analyze the role of maslikhats in Kazakhstan's local governance system. The methodology integrates several analytical tools to provide a thorough examination of their role, achievements, challenges, and prospects for development.

Analysis of the Legal Framework:

The normative and legal framework was carefully examined, including the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, laws, and subordinate acts regulating the activities of maslikhats. This legal analysis clarified the institutional role of maslikhats within the local governance system, revealing their formal responsibilities and limitations. The study also focused on identifying gaps and inconsistencies in legislation that may affect their effectiveness.

Retrospective Analysis:

The retrospective analysis focused on examining the qualitative and quantitative composition of the maslikhat of Almaty. This approach aimed to understand the structural and functional evolution of this representative body over time.

Empirical Data Collection through Expert Interviews:

To gather empirical data, the study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with specialists in local self-governance, current and former deputies of maslikhats, and independent experts. The interviews covered topics such as the practical functioning of maslikhats, their interactions with executive bodies, barriers to effective decision-making, and ways to enhance citizen engagement.

Qualitative Data Analysis:

The collected data were subjected to qualitative content analysis to structure information and identify key trends, challenges, and opportunities. This method helped in synthesizing diverse perspectives into a coherent understanding of the current state and potential of maslikhats.

By integrating these methodological components, the study provides a multidimensional perspective on the functioning of maslikhats. This approach not only deepened the understanding of their strengths and weaknesses but also offered practical recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness, citizen involvement, and collaboration with executive authorities.

Results and discussion

Analysis of the Legal Framework

Legislation provides a structured framework for public participation, ensuring transparency, openness, and accountability in administrative decision-making processes [5]. This legal structure is essential for defining the scope, methods, and rights associated with public involvement in governance. Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan has been developing its own model of local self-government. The first legal act to initiate the development of local self-governance was the Law “On Local State Administration and Local Councils of People’s Deputies of the Kazakh SSR.” Later, in independent Kazakhstan, the right of citizens to local self-government was enshrined in the Constitution adopted in 1995. However, at that time, there was no institutional framework to ensure the actual implementation of this right. The current Constitution includes a provision on the exercise of local state administration through local representative bodies (Article 85). At the same time, another provision (Article 89) identifies maslikhats as one of the structures through which local self-government can be implemented [6].

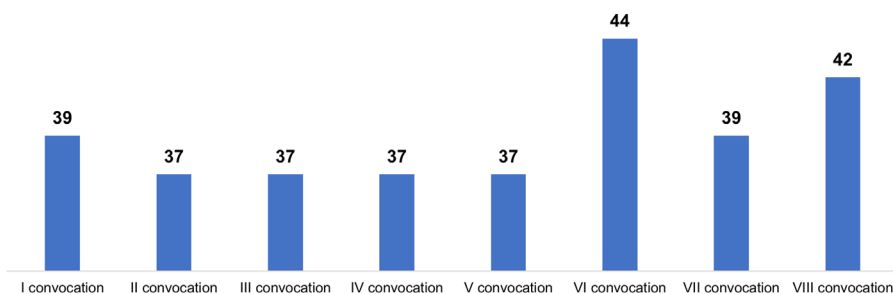
In addition to the Constitution, an analysis of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Local State Administration and Self-Government” reveals the hybrid nature of these bodies. For instance, according to Article 1 of the aforementioned law, a maslikhat is an elected body chosen by the population. However, the same Article 1 states that maslikhats have an administrative apparatus funded from the state budget. Furthermore, Article 4 establishes requirements and restrictions, including for maslikhats. The provisions of this article prohibit decisions that contradict the directions of the country’s internal and foreign policies. It also imposes an obligation to adhere to national standards. This contradicts the classical principles of local self-governance, at least in terms of autonomy [7].

As Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) note, sustainable development of local self-government is only possible when mechanisms for citizen engagement are in place, enabling them to effectively express their interests [8]. To date, as an analysis of the legislative framework has shown, maslikhats within Kazakhstan's local self-government system do not fully represent the power of citizens but instead function as a hybrid form of state administration. Transforming this system into a more effective and citizen-oriented one will require reforms aimed at strengthening the autonomy of maslikhats, increasing the level of civic participation, and improving collaboration with the executive branch.

Retrospective Analysis

An analysis of official data from the website of the Almaty City Maslikhat revealed that over the past 30 years, the number of deputies has not undergone significant changes, fluctuating between 37 and 44 members, with the maximum recorded during the VI convocation. The average number of deputies was 39 (Figure 1) [9].

Figure 1. Dynamics of the Number of Deputies in the Almaty City Maslikhat, 1993–2023



Source: Official website of the Almaty City Maslikhat

However, the study faced limitations due to the inability to assess certain quantitative indicators, such as the number of submitted requests or the number and quality of issues resolved for the city. Therefore, despite the positive trends observed, it remains challenging to evaluate the impact of the number of deputies on the effectiveness of the maslikhat within a historical context. Additionally, analyzing the influence of the gender composition on the effectiveness of the Almaty City Maslikhat was difficult due to the loss of documentation during the events of January 2022.

An analysis of the party composition of the last three convocations of the city maslikhat demonstrated positive dynamics. According to publicly available data, the VI convocation was represented by three political parties (Nur Otan, Ak Zhol, and Aul). Subsequently, following the elections to the VII convocation, the composition was renewed by 75%, with deputy mandates distributed among representatives of four parties. By the VIII convocation, the number of represented parties increased to five [9].

Furthermore, several innovations have been introduced, including holding

maslikhat sessions and citizen receptions in an online format. A press office for the maslikhat was established, and a practice of evaluating deputies' effectiveness based on a developed KPI methodology was implemented. This resulted in the rotation of 11 deputies after the first year. During the VII convocation, an Expert Council and a Youth Council were also established under the maslikhat.

An analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the current composition of the city maslikhat (VII convocation) showed its balanced representation (Table 1).

Table №1. Socio-Demographic Composition of the Almaty City Maslikhat

Nationality	Age Group
Kazakhs – 78.6% Russians – 4.8% Others – 14.3%	18-35 years – 21.9% 36-44 years – 36.5% 45-59 years – 39.2% 60 years and older – 2.4%
Sector (Category)	Social Groups
Business and Quasi-Sector – 58.6% NGOs and Media – 19.5% Education – 4.9% Culture and Sports – 9.7% Healthcare – 4.9% Others – 2.4%	Mothers of multiple children – 4.8% Fellow countrymen – 4.8% People with disabilities – 2.4%

Official website of the Almaty City Maslikhat

As seen in Table 1, the maslikhat's structure is balanced in terms of the diversity of social strata represented. It can be observed that the maslikhat, as a representative body, has become more inclusive, increasingly reflecting the interests of the civil sector.

Local bodies can enhance this engagement by creating inclusive and participatory governance structures, such as youth councils and community health initiatives. According to Segura et al. (2018), Maphosa and Moyo (2024), these structures provide platforms for community members to participate in decision-making processes and ensure that their voices are heard [10, 11].

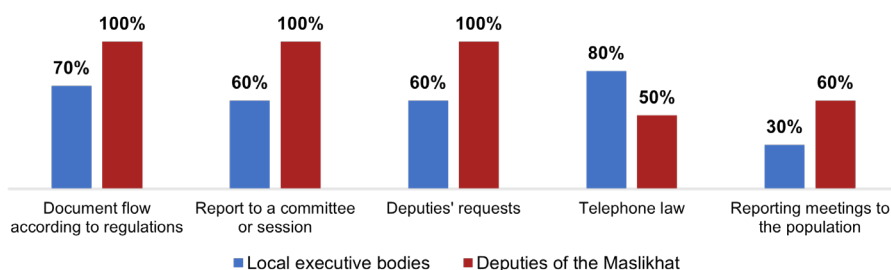
The analysis highlights the evolving dynamics and structural changes within the Almaty City Maslikhat over the past three decades. While the number of deputies has remained relatively stable, recent innovations, such as the introduction of online sessions, KPI-based performance evaluations, and the establishment of youth and expert councils, reflect efforts to modernize and improve its effectiveness. Positive developments in party representation and balanced socio-demographic composition indicate increased inclusivity and alignment with civil society interests. However, significant challenges remain, including limited data availability and the difficulty of assessing the impact of gender composition and quantitative indicators on the maslikhat's overall performance. To further enhance its effectiveness and citizen-oriented governance, continued reforms are essential, particularly those fostering greater transparency, accountability, and participatory mechanisms.

Expert Interviews

As part of an anonymous interview, 20 experts participated, evenly split

between civil servants (50%) and deputies of the Almaty City Maslikhat from various convocations and political affiliations. One of the key research questions, as outlined in the approved program, focused on examining the practices of interaction between maslikhats and local executive bodies. According to the results, the main mechanisms of interaction include document flow, various forms of meetings, correspondence within the framework of deputy inquiries, telephone communication, and reporting meetings with the public (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Key Mechanisms of Interaction Between Local Executive and Representative Authorities (Maslikhats), According to Respondents



All maslikhat deputies noted the importance of official channels of interaction. Additionally, informal contacts (referred to as "telephone governance") play a significant role, as mentioned by 80% of maslikhat deputies and half of the representatives of akimats. One issue with the procedure of deputy inquiries, according to one expert, lies in the changing approach of deputies themselves. As noted by a respondent, some deputies are reluctant to prepare well-structured inquiries, instead waiting for a related story to appear on social media. This practice allows deputies to avoid responsibility, positioning themselves as passive observers in addressing various issues.

The insufficient effectiveness of maslikhats, according to most surveyed experts, is linked to a low level of engagement in the work of the representative body (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Assessment of Deputies' Engagement in Maslikhat Activities (on a 5-point scale)



Experts identified several factors contributing to low engagement, including burnout following election campaigns, underestimated expectations regarding the time required for public duties, criticism from the public and government bodies, and the lack of funding for activities.

For example, Respondent No. 1, a representative of the Public Council and a deputy for two convocations, highlighted that a deputy's activity is a crucial factor for the maslikhat's effectiveness. According to the respondent, deputies elected in single-mandate districts are more active in working with the public. Similarly, Expert No. 7 noted that single-mandate deputies are more proactive, and every resident in their district knows their deputies personally. On the other hand, many newly elected deputies fail to understand that deputy work is a public service requiring significant time and commitment.

One of the factors contributing to low engagement among deputies may be the legal framework, which stipulates that professional deputy activities are limited to the Chair of the Almaty City Maslikhat and two released Chairs of specialized commissions. However, in Almaty, there is only one released Chair, while the remaining 40 deputies perform their duties on a voluntary basis. The lack of paid assistants, allocated transportation, and reliance on primary employment are factors that likely underlie the low engagement levels among maslikhat deputies. Furthermore, as one expert pointed out, the maslikhat operates as a collegial body where decisions are made collectively, which diminishes individual accountability. This collective decision-making process may further discourage initiative and active involvement in maslikhat activities. Consequently, low engagement among deputies, driven by the absence of remuneration and the collective nature of decision-making, could also hinder effective interaction with the local akimat.

Most experts also identified high turnover rates in local executive bodies as a significant barrier to effective collaboration between maslikhat deputies and local executive authorities. One expert highlighted that substantial time is spent understanding issues, holding meetings, and discussing problems, only for personnel changes to occur, leading to the process being restarted from the beginning due to a lack of institutional memory. This substantially reduces the efficiency of interaction. Additionally, as noted by 60% of respondents from Pool No. 1, government agencies tend to prioritize directives from central government bodies. This top-down decision-making system ("up-to-bottom") further affects the efficiency and responsiveness of interactions between local executive bodies and Almaty City Maslikhat deputies.

Zhanuzakova L.T. (2021) discusses the need to enhance the role of maslikhats in overseeing the activities of akimats in Kazakhstan. She suggests granting maslikhats the authority to issue votes of no confidence not only against akims but also individual members of akimats [8]. This approach would increase the accountability of local executive bodies to their representative institutions. By introducing such measures, the proposal aims to establish stronger checks and balances at the local government level, fostering democratic governance in the regions.

By studying international practices of interaction between local executive and representative bodies, the following comparative insights can be formed (Table 2):

Table №2. Socio-Demographic Composition of the Almaty City Maslikhat

Aspect	Maslikhats (Local Councils)	Akimats (Local Administrations)
Role	Representative body	Executive body
Primary Function	Articulate local interests	Implement policies
Communication	Essential for effective governance	Structured channels needed
Collaboration	Voluntary agreements beneficial	Regional cooperation
Challenges	Ambiguous authority, political tensions	Conflict prevention mechanisms

Source: compiled by authors based on [12], [13], and [14]

The principles and issues of local structures and the importance of communication, collaboration, and clear delineation of roles are universally applicable. Effective interaction between these bodies can lead to improved governance and better outcomes for local communities.

The current situation in Kazakhstan highlights several challenges to achieving effective interaction. In the context of Kazakhstan, effective interaction between local executive and representative bodies can significantly enhance governance, leading to better outcomes for local communities. This collaborative approach fosters more transparent decision-making, strengthens accountability, and promotes the efficient delivery of services, contributing to the overall development and stability of local governance in the country.

Conclusion

The analysis of the legislative framework reveals that, to date, maslikhats within Kazakhstan's local self-government system do not fully embody the power of citizens but rather operate as a hybrid form of state administration. To transform this system into one that is more effective and citizen-oriented, significant reforms are necessary. These reforms should focus on strengthening the autonomy of maslikhats, increasing civic participation, and improving collaboration with the executive branch.

The evolving dynamics of the Almaty City Maslikhat over the past three decades reflect attempts to modernize and enhance its effectiveness, with recent innovations such as online sessions, KPI-based performance evaluations, and the establishment of youth and expert councils. These changes indicate progress toward greater inclusivity and alignment with civil society interests. However, challenges persist, including the limited availability of data and difficulties in assessing the impact of gender composition and quantitative indicators on maslikhat performance. To achieve a more citizen-oriented governance model, it is crucial to continue implementing reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and participatory mechanisms.

The importance of official channels of interaction between maslikhats and executive bodies has been acknowledged by all maslikhat deputies, but informal contacts, particularly "telephone governance," also play a significant role. This informal system, while facilitating communication, also leads to passive behaviors among some deputies, who tend to wait for social media stories rather than actively address issues. This avoidance of responsibility weakens the effectiveness of deputy inquiries. Additionally, experts pointed to several factors contributing to low

engagement, such as burnout, unrealistic expectations about the time commitment required for public duties, public and government criticism, and inadequate funding. High turnover rates in local executive bodies pose a significant challenge to effective collaboration, as frequent personnel changes disrupt institutional memory, reducing the efficiency of interactions. Furthermore, the centralization of decision-making within government bodies limits the responsiveness and efficiency of local executive authority and maslikhat collaboration. This top-down system undermines the potential for dynamic and effective local governance.

Recommendations:

- Strengthening the Autonomy of Maslikhats: Reforms should empower maslikhats with more decision-making authority and autonomy to ensure they function as true representatives of the citizens. This could include granting maslikhats the authority to issue votes of no confidence against akims and individual members of akimats, as suggested by Zhanuzakova L.T. (2021), to enhance accountability.

- Enhancing Civic Participation: To bridge the gap between maslikhats and citizens, efforts should focus on fostering greater civic participation through more accessible and inclusive engagement mechanisms. Online platforms and public consultations could be expanded to encourage active involvement from diverse demographic groups.

- Improving Deputy Engagement: To address the low engagement levels among deputies, particularly those serving on a voluntary basis, it is recommended to introduce mechanisms that provide financial support, such as paid positions or assistant roles. This would help reduce the reliance on deputies' primary employment and increase their commitment to public service.

- Addressing High Turnover and Institutional Memory: Efforts should be made to stabilize personnel in local executive bodies and maintain institutional memory. Creating platforms for knowledge sharing and ensuring continuity in leadership could reduce the inefficiency caused by turnover.

By addressing these challenges and implementing these recommendations, Kazakhstan can strengthen its local governance structures, creating a more effective, citizen-oriented system of governance.

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