

MODERNISING LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE BODIES CASE STUDY: IMPLEMENTING 2022 CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS IN THE PAVLODAR REGIONAL MASLIKHAT

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ABSTRACT

The foundation of national statehood rests upon robust local self-government. At this level, solutions to many socio-economic development challenges can be effectively implemented, fostering sustainable growth and citizen well-being. As a social state, the Republic of Kazakhstan possesses unique experience in establishing and developing a local government system heavily influenced by representation of the people. However, like any system, it requires periodic changes and modernisation to effectively address contemporary challenges. This article presents pilot proposals for modernising local representative bodies ('maslikhats') – drawing upon the experience of the Pavlodar regional maslikhat. These proposals incorporate new scientific knowledge with the potential for practical application in improving local governance.

Key words: power, modernisation, maslikhat, deputy, local government, local representative body, elections

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing the quality of public administration across all levels, including service delivery to citizens, is a crucial priority in our nation's current development stage. This necessitates a marked increase in engaged citizen participation in deliberating on critical societal issues and formulating solutions. Within the current framework of local self-government, the close partnership between government and society should be particularly manifested at the level of sub-national entities. In today's society, local self-government stands as one of the most effective mechanisms to ensure the active participation of residents in regional, urban, and rural settlements. This allows them to directly manage affairs and address critical local issues.

As enshrined in Article 89, Paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "*local self-government is exercised by the population directly, as well as through maslikhats and other local government bodies in local communities where population groups reside compactly.*" Following the January 2022 events, in his impactful address delivered on March 16, 2022, titled "New Kazakhstan: The Path of Renewal and Modernisation", the President of the country emphasised that "*to bolster citizen trust in representative government, particular attention must be paid to maslikhats. Strong maslikhats play a vital role in addressing pressing problems and enhancing the quality of life in the regions.*"

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Local representative bodies, known as maslikhats, play a crucial role in Kazakhstan's public administration system. However, enhancing their efficiency and strategic planning capabilities is essential. Consistent and responsible implementation of election promises and programmes is paramount, as it not only fosters citizen trust in government institutions and belief in real change, but also contributes directly to national well-being and progressive development in Kazakhstan.

The urgency of this topic stems from the need for maslikhats to effectively address the evolving needs of Kazakh society. Empowering communities to solve vital to their daily life local issues independently and responsibly is paramount. This can only be achieved through modernisation, incorporating new methods and technologies into their operations. The current period of state development emphasises reforms within the local government system, making it a key driver of targeted and consistent influence on public relations. Therefore, a thorough understanding of

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the challenges surrounding the modernisation of maslikhats, the representative bodies of local government, is of paramount importance. This need is further amplified by the urgent push to enhance the overall efficiency of the entire deputy corps.

This study aims to provide a well-founded rationale for modernising maslikhats and develop the main directions of this process. Specifically, the author seeks to provide scientific and methodological recommendations for improving the organisation of this institution of power, using the Pavlodar regional maslikhat as a case study. Through the research, the author aims to formulate specific proposals and recommendations for enhancing the operational effectiveness of maslikhats, again using the Pavlodar regional maslikhat as an example.

Numerous Kazakh lawyers and political scientists have previously addressed the organisational, legal, and political issues surrounding the formation and development of local self-government institutions.² For instance, academician Baimakhanov M. T. has explored various topics in his extensive body of work, including the functions and operations of the state, state bodies, the representative system, national legal system development, positive responsibility, the essence of law, legal consciousness, the relationship between law and morality, and the nuances of legal science; and Professor Dzhunusova Zh. Kh., in her work has examined the ongoing political modernisation in Kazakhstan and compared it to similar processes in other countries.³

Furthermore, several domestic researchers have examined the modern theoretical and historical foundations of public administration and local self-government, primarily focusing on the latter.⁴ Similarly, other scholars have addressed the economic and financial issues related to establishing local self-government institutions in Kazakhstan.⁵ Among foreign studies, contributions from Russian scientists also deserve acknowledgment.⁶ However, despite the substantial amount of scientific and theoretical material on this topic, there are noticeably fewer practical developments, particularly examples of successful practices integrated into actual regional political processes.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study utilises a case study approach, focusing on the Pavlodar regional maslikhat, to assess the quality of local implementation of the principles outlined in the "Concept for the Development of Local Self-Government until 2025". The study sheds light on the regular operations of the maslikhat, analyses existing mechanisms for improving the work of the local representative body and deputy corps, and ultimately aims to identify potential improvements.

The case study approach is anchored on a formal logical method in order to provide valuable insights and achieve a profound scientific understanding. This approach enabled the study to delve into the origins, defining factors, and evolving nature of key elements within Kazakhstan's local self-government structures. The study methodology also ensured the representativeness of the gathered information and the trustworthiness of the derived results. Finally, the study leveraged the method of synthesising general theoretical and specialised literature to formulate the final provisions and conclusions. This ensured a well-grounded and insightful interpretation of the research findings.

² These prominent scholars include, but are not limited to, Z. K. Ayupova, M. T. Baimakhanova, K. B. Berentaeva, L. N. Burlakova, Zh. Kh. Dzhunusova, L. T. Zhanuzakova, A. B. Zhumadilova, B. G. Zhusupova, B. A. Isaeva, R. K. Kadyrzhanova, M. M. Makhmutova, M. S. Mashana, A. N. Sagindykova, R. S. Sakieva, G. S. Sapargaliev, S. S. Sarteva, A. A. Taranova, O. V. Chernyshova and others.

³ "Third World Theory" and the "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy: The Political Aspect of Modernization", "Substantial Features of the Concept of "Modernization" and Its Practice: The Diversity of Democratic Experience", "Involvement of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Political Processes: Political Science Analysis".

⁴ These researchers include Nurtazin M. S., Uvarov V. N., Tarshilova L. S., Kaykenova Zh. K., and Baimenov A. M.

⁵ K. B. Berentaeva, M. T. Yesenbaeva, Z. Kh. Kakimzhanova, K. N. Kelimbetova, M. B. Kenzheguzina, K. E. Kubaeva, B. K. Mukina, K. S. Mukhtarova, and A. S. Serikbaeva

⁶ Zhiltsov V. I., Babun R. V., Volodin A. M., Nemchinov A. A., Kisselev S. G., Mukhaev R. T., Muratova R. A., Cherepanov V. V., and Atamanchuk G. V.

DISCUSSION

The concept of 'modernisation' encapsulates the act of enhancing, updating, and bringing an object into alignment with contemporary demands, legal regulations, and quality standards. This transformative process extends beyond technologies, machines, and equipment, encompassing social relationships and public administration systems alike. As astutely observed by Russian expert E. Yu. Ruden, modernising the interactions between state authorities constitutes "a shift in their evolution based on present-day needs: imbuing them with a novel, genuinely democratic character that resonates with modern values and civil society's aspirations".

Kazakhstan has embarked on a reform of local self-government, since 2018, aligning its policies with the country's modernisation strategy outlined in the "Government Development Plan to 2050". The urgency and importance of this reform are further underscored by the "Concept for the Development of Local Self-Government until 2025," adopted in August 2021. In his address to the nation on March 16, 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev also emphasised the need for a dedicated law to strengthen the local self-government system.

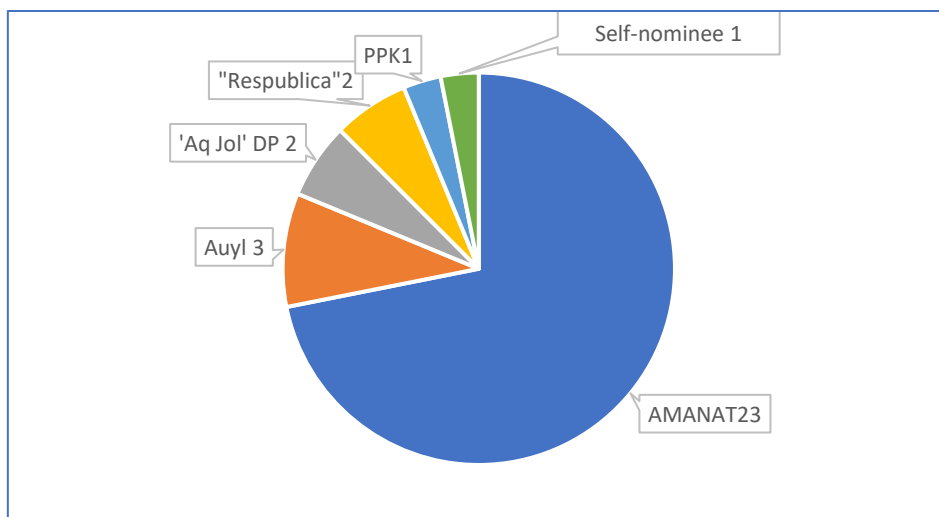
Acting as a bridge between society and the state, local self-government connects them at the local level where local communities reside. Local self-governments possess distinct features in comparison to public administration as a whole (Chebotarev, 2023).

1. The possibility of extensive participation of the entire population in various organisational forms for developing, adopting, and implementing decisions on major local community issues.
2. Presence and function of local representative bodies or officials authorised to represent local communities' interests and make decisions on their behalf.
3. Direct election of these bodies by the local population, ensuring accountability and responsibility to the voters.
4. Autonomy of local self-government bodies in managing local affairs, including their own executive body, budget with revenue sources, and material base through municipal property.
5. Clear legal distinction between government and local self-government competences, balancing national and local interests within the territory.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in his address on political modernisation, emphasised the critical role of maslikhats in strengthening local self-government. He highlighted their current "hybrid nature," where they function as both an institution of local government and local self-government. This necessitates a clear definition of their powers to ensure effective governance at the local level.

In alignment with this directive, the Pavlodar regional maslikhat, chaired by Ilya Terenchenko, convened its first session of the 8th convocation on April 30, 2023. The newly elected regional maslikhat comprises 32 deputies, representing a diverse political landscape: 23 from the *AMANAT* party, 3 each from the People's Democratic Patriotic Party "*Auy!*" and the *Aq Jol* Democratic Party, 2 each from the *Respublica* and People's Party of Kazakhstan, and 1 self-nominated individual. (see Figure 1). This composition solidifies the maslikhat's role as a multi-party body for local self-government.

Figure 1: Party composition of the Pavlodar regional maslikhat



Within a year of dedicated efforts, the Pavlodar regional maslikhat has undergone a remarkable transformation. Significant structural changes and innovative approaches to citizen interaction have been implemented. This evolution is captured in 14 key steps outlining the Maslikhat's transformation.

1. Leadership positions in two standing key committees became vacant in the Pavlodar regional maslikhat.⁷ This presented an opportunity to formulate a critical agenda prioritising issues such as allocating greater attention to closely monitoring and controlling the regional budget formation and development; or addressing a growing public concern and bringing the land issue under increased public scrutiny, especially in light of the recent policy to return unused agricultural land. This is also congruent with President Tokayev's views, which consistently emphasise that agro-industrial development plays a key role in ensuring food security.
2. Young people, by virtue of their receptiveness to societal changes and willingness to actively participate in their implementation, play a vital role in shaping our society. Comprising almost 30% of Kazakhstan's population (5.7 million out of 19.8 million in 2023) and exceeding 25% of the Pavlodar region's population (195,000 out of 755,000), their needs hold significant importance.⁸ Acknowledging this, the regional maslikhat has established the seventh standing commission on youth, sports, and tourism, dedicated to addressing the evolving social needs of younger generations.
3. It is widely recognised that legislatures are the "nerve endings" of the polity (Polsby, 1983). This resonates deeply, as they stand closest to the people. A deputy, more than any other government official, must know the needs of the constituents and is expected to respond to those needs, and citizens tend to feel a closer connection with their elected representatives compared to other government officials. Recognising these vital links, the Pavlodar Regional Maslikhat has taken several steps. A dedicated sector for working with citizens was created in the Regional Maslikhat, to ensure accessibility and transparency. Every Friday is a reception day by deputies for direct communication with voters. Furthermore, a WhatsApp messenger hotline was launched for responding promptly to citizens' requests. These initiatives aim at ensuring accessibility and transparency through direct communication, obtaining information about problems faced by voters and for monitoring the effectiveness of measures taken. The expected result is strengthened trust of citizens through the

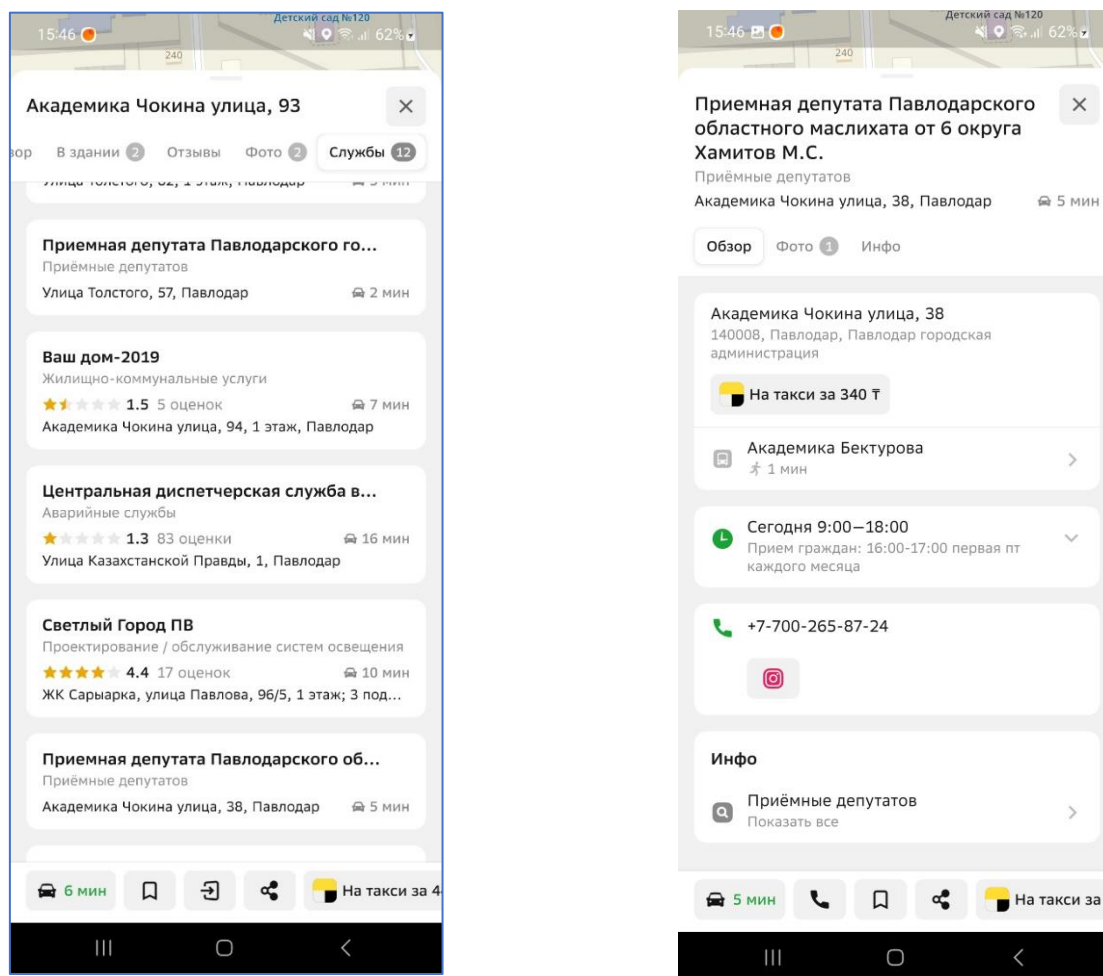
⁷ Both S. K. Kalizhanova (AMANAT Party) and B. A. Amanzholov ("Auyl") have stepped down as chairs of the Commission on Economics and Budget Issues and Commission on Agrarian Issues, respectively.

⁸ Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan

direct communication and thus addressing significant regional problems through analysing citizens' appeals. Such detailed and efficient analysis facilitates higher responsiveness of standing commissions' agendas to the most urgent issues in the region.

4. Kazakhstan's evolving electoral landscape has impacted the regional Maslikhat's deputy corps composition. In 2018, the proportional representation system for maslikhat elections was introduced, through which deputies were elected solely through party lists. While President Tokayev acknowledged this "boosted party development," negative consequences emerged. Notably, non-party individuals lost the ability to be elected, either into the Mazhilis or local legislatures, leading to decreased citizen engagement and political apathy. Many felt their voices were not heard, and voter recognition of deputies declined. Consequently, a mixed system was adopted in the 2023 elections, ensuring comprehensive representation of citizens achieving a better reflection of voter interests at national and regional levels. Furthermore, to strengthen citizen representation, the regional maslikhat has implemented a new principle: the interchangeability of deputies. This assigns both single-mandate and party-list deputies to specific districts. This change allows party-list elected deputies to allocate more attention to designated regions within the broader district, working collaboratively with single-mandate deputies to tackle local citizen concerns more effectively.
5. The Pavlodar regional maslikhat has fostered stronger collaboration with local executive bodies to address critical social issues promptly. "Plans of Coordinated Actions" serve as blueprints, outlining specific activities, implementation timelines, responsible parties, and measurable outcomes. This collaborative approach has strengthened interaction between the maslikhat and institutions like the Pavlodar Regional Prosecutor's Office, the Anti-Corruption Agency's regional department, and the Regional Police Department.
6. The maslikhat has adopted a new, inclusive format for sessions and meetings. Now, all deputies, without exception and regardless of their belonging to standing committees, actively participate in extended meetings of standing committees. This ensures everyone stays informed about events occurring in other areas of the work of the representative body, as well as provide their suggestions and recommendations.
7. Investing in the deputy corps, the maslikhat partnered with the Pavlodar branch of the Academy of Public Administration to offer the first-ever advanced training programme. The advanced training's duration was significantly increased to 80 academic hours (more than double), addressing topics suggested by the deputies themselves. Leading experts and lecturers, including those from the AMANAT party's Academy of Political Management and the "Union of Deputies of Maslikhats of Kazakhstan," delivered the training based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government.
8. To connect citizens with their representatives and increase accessibility, the maslikhat, in collaboration with the Pavlodar city maslikhat, implemented the "Know your deputy!" project. This project integrates personal profiles of city and regional deputies with contact information and appointment booking details into the popular 2 GIS mobile app (Figure 2). Now, any city resident can easily see which deputies represent their specific area, fostering closer and simpler communication.

Figure 2: GIS applications, with contact details of deputies



9. In line with Article 21-2 of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On local government and self-government in the Republic of Kazakhstan," the Pavlodar regional maslikhat has, for the first time in its history, established two deputy groups to comprehensively address critical issues facing the region. Recent events, not only in our region but throughout the country, have tragically highlighted the immense importance and relevance of tackling these issues effectively.
 - a group to consider issues related to the prevention of violence and abuse against women and children; and
 - a group to ensure labour protection, industrial safety, and compliance with labour legislation.
10. Recognising the value of established effective mechanisms, the Pavlodar regional maslikhat has created a Council of Elder Mentors. This voluntary body comprises current and former city and district maslikhat chairs and deputies from all convocations. By sharing their experience and collaborative support, they ensure the continuity of beneficial practices.
11. Understanding the importance of fostering continuity and developing future leaders, the maslikhat has established the Young Politicians Club. This initiative targets young individuals, aiming to equip them with practical parliamentary skills, prepare them for social and political engagement, and thus contribute to the development of a modern, active political culture in the region.

12. To fulfil its responsibility under Article 25 of the "Law on Local Government and Self-Government", the regional maslikhat has implemented a branded minibus service. This enables deputies to easily travel to remote areas and directly meet with citizens, making themselves accessible wherever they are needed.
13. As Alikhan Baimenov, Chairman of the Astana Civil Service Hub has emphasised in his article "Some factors of the effectiveness of public administration" (2020) in the context of public administration, transparency and clear communication are paramount when managing public funds. This goes beyond governance; it strengthens accountability and ensures citizens understand which government entity tackles specific issues and delivers services. This relevance is heightened by rising citizen expectations, fuelled by access to information from other countries and localities through technology. Recognising the power of communication in the digital age, all deputies were tasked with amplifying their engagement with the population through social media and messaging platforms. This strategic move has yielded a remarkable 500% increase in reach across social networks, attracting both dedicated followers and expanding coverage among non-subscribed audiences. In addition, some information projects and additional sections in regional media are being launched. where deputies provide updates on their accomplishments, share upcoming initiatives, and engage in direct dialogue with the public on a range of issues.⁹
14. The Pavlodar regional maslikhat is actively implementing elements of project management into its business processes. One key initiative is the adoption of the innovative "Easy Project" platform, allowing deputies to effectively monitor the implementation of project-related indicators across the region. Furthermore, a unique educational program specifically designed for maslikhats of cities and districts has been developed and officially registered with the authorised state bodies on November 13, 2023, under Certificate of Entry of Information into the State Register of Copyrighted Objects No. 40425.

The above 14 steps represent the significant progress made by the Pavlodar regional maslikhat in modernising its activities within a single year since the March 2023 elections. While we retain and value those effective practices established earlier that continue to hold relevance, we also recognise the dynamic nature of the world and Kazakhstan's ongoing development. It is therefore crucial to continuously adopt new mechanisms and work methods to address evolving challenges and meet the aspirations of both the President and Kazakh society.

Naturally, challenges remain. As it turned out, not all deputies readily embraced change, increased responsibility, and more open engagement with voters. Yet, we draw confidence from the positive outcomes of modernisation efforts. We believe these elected officials will ultimately recognise the societal benefits and inherent value of the transformations underway within the representative bodies.

More importantly, work on enhancing the regional Maslikhat's activities continues. Our 2024 plans include developing and implementing a deputy performance rating system based on both work results and voter feedback. This will encourage and elevate the work of the deputy corps, while providing citizens with greater transparency into the Maslikhat's activities.

CONCLUSION

Kazakhstan's local self-government modernisation prioritises decentralisation and increased citizen participation in forming representative bodies. This will ensure that local authorities include trusted individuals and promote budget allocation aligned with community needs. By

⁹ For example, the regional radio "Halyk Radiosy" launched sections "Deputat Minberi", "Deputatskaya Tribuna", "Basty Mindetter", "O Glavnom". "Deputatskiy Control" TV show is released on the Irbis TV channel, and the "Texerildi" show is broadcast on the Yertis TV channel. In print media of the Yertis Mediaholding columns such as "Minber", "Sailashy Muddesi", "Est problema", "Aktualno", and "Vopros Rebrrom" appear regularly.

2025, a nationwide decentralised model, featuring a system of checks and balances and direct elections for both representative and, to an extent, executive bodies, aims to empower local communities and improve communication. Global trends emphasise proximity between citizens and local governance, leading to better quality of life, safety, and open communication. To mark 30 years of maslikhats' activities, the Pavlodar regional maslikhat will host a conference gathering public figures, deputies, and academics to share experiences and develop new mechanisms for the maslikhats' functioning.

At the 2023 AMANAT Party Maslikhat Forum, Chairman Yerlan Koshanov stressed: "*Maslikhats share responsibility with akimats for quality of life in respective regions. Formal reports and approvals must be replaced by local discussions where deputies can advocate for their constituents, without populism, while remaining critical to achieve strategic goals.*" Reflecting this, the Pavlodar maslikhat has witnessed a return to spirited debate and constructive dissent, leading to deputies becoming more open, responsible, and professional. Consequently, citizens' perceptions are shifting, viewing deputies and maslikhats as true defenders and representatives of their interests.

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