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FROM ELECTORAL DECENTRALISATION TO ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY: A FUNCTIONAL ALIGNMENT FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IN TURKISTAN REGION, KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the reasons why institutional reforms of local government in Kazakhstan have not consistently resulted in improvements in administrative performance. The analysis is based on a functional alignment approach that considers the relationship between legally assigned responsibilities, financial resources, staff competencies, digital administrative processes, public accountability and measurable results. The research combines institutional and legal analysis with data on budgetary equalisation for 2021–2025, nine semi-structured interviews with local government representatives, ten expert pairwise-comparison matrices and an electronic survey of 1,062 respondents conducted between 17 March and 1 April 2025. Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in Turkistan Region, while national fiscal data were used to situate the findings within the broader institutional context. Because the electronic survey did not collect information on respondents' regions of residence, its results are interpreted as sample-specific associations rather than representative estimates for Turkistan Region or Kazakhstan as a whole. The findings show that equalisation subventions rose from KZT 2,279.7 billion in 2021 to KZT 5,774.3 billion in 2025. However, changes in the territorial composition of Kazakhstan after 2022 need to be considered when interpreting this increase. According to the survey results, 70.5% of respondents regarded akims as accountable to the population, while 76.6% reported being fully or partially satisfied with their performance. Satisfaction was strongly associated with perceived transparency, accountability and observable improvements in local conditions, although these relationships do not establish causal effects. Drawing on the empirical findings, the article proposes a diagnostic model comprising five interrelated dimensions: institutional arrangements, fiscal capacity, human resources, digital administration and citizen engagement. The model provides a basis for identifying administrative constraints, assessing professional competencies and developing measurable performance indicators. The findings suggest that improving local government effectiveness requires closer alignment between assigned responsibilities and the resources and administrative capacities available to fulfil them. Elections and the introduction of independent local budgets are important elements of

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decentralisation, but their implementation alone does not ensure improvements in administrative performance.

Keywords: *local government; civil service reform; decentralisation; administrative capacity; public accountability; Kazakhstan*

INTRODUCTION

Local government reforms are commonly assessed in terms of institutional changes, including the introduction of elected local executives, the establishment of additional budgetary tiers and the expansion of digital public services. Although these developments represent important steps towards decentralisation, they do not necessarily demonstrate that local authorities possess sufficient resources and administrative capacity to fulfil their statutory responsibilities. In Kazakhstan, the establishment of fourth-tier budgets, the introduction of direct elections of rural-level akims in 2021 and the experimental implementation of elections at higher levels of local administration have broadened the institutional framework of decentralisation. Previous research has examined the institutional development and implementation mechanisms of local government reform in Kazakhstan (Abdullaev et al., 2024). However, the practical significance of these reforms depends on whether the redistribution of responsibilities has been accompanied by corresponding changes in financial autonomy, staffing levels, professional competencies and mechanisms of public oversight. In this regard, particular attention should be given to the extent to which institutional changes have strengthened the ability of local authorities to exercise their powers and respond to the needs of local communities (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2019).

This article adopts the administrative function as the primary unit of analysis in assessing local government reforms, rather than examining electoral arrangements or fiscal institutions separately. Direct accountability to local residents does not necessarily imply that local authorities have sufficient control over financial and organisational resources or access to personnel with the specialised competencies required to perform their duties. Similarly, the formal allocation of budgetary resources may not lead to improvements in administrative performance when responsibilities are insufficiently defined and service delivery problems are not systematically recorded, monitored and addressed through established procedures. These discrepancies between assigned responsibilities and the resources, competencies and procedures necessary for their implementation are referred to in this study as functional gaps.

The study addresses the following research question: how can functional discrepancies between assigned responsibilities, financial resources, professional competencies and accountability mechanisms be identified and addressed in local government administration, drawing on field evidence from Turkistan Region and national institutional and fiscal data? To examine this question, the article begins with a review of the literature on public governance and civil service administration, followed by a description of the mixed-method research design and the empirical data used in the analysis. The subsequent sections examine budgetary indicators and survey findings to identify factors affecting the performance of local authorities. Based on the results, the study develops a practical framework for addressing the identified institutional and administrative gaps and proposes a phased approach to implementing the recommended reforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Classical decentralisation theory identifies the ability of local authorities to respond to territorial needs and preferences as an important advantage of decentralised public expenditure, while recognising the institutional and fiscal conditions that may limit its effectiveness (Oates, 1972). The concept of polycentric governance extends this perspective by examining the interaction of multiple decision-making centres and the role of collective action in addressing problems at the local level (Ostrom, 1990). Within the literature on public accountability, particular attention is given to the responsibility of public officials to explain and justify their decisions, as well as to the institutional mechanisms through which their actions and consequences can be assessed (Bovens, 2007). Considered together, these theoretical approaches indicate that the effectiveness of decentralisation depends not only on the formal transfer of powers but also on the relationship between the authority granted to local institutions, their capacity to exercise that authority and the mechanisms through which their activities are subject to public oversight.

In the context of civil service reform, the professional competencies of public officials and established administrative procedures are important factors influencing the performance of local government institutions. Local administrative staff are responsible for a broad range of functions, including public procurement, infrastructure planning and maintenance, compliance with legal requirements, budget reporting and communication with residents. These responsibilities are frequently performed by relatively small administrative teams with limited access to specialised expertise. Expanding the functions assigned to local authorities without corresponding professional and organisational support may increase staff workloads and reduce the quality of administrative performance. However, the effectiveness of local administration depends not only on the number of employees but also on the extent to which their qualifications correspond to the complexity and requirements of assigned tasks. Particular importance is therefore attached to competencies in public finance management, legal regulation, project planning and implementation, digital administration and citizen engagement (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2025).

In Kazakhstan, the Law on Local State Administration and Self-Government (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2001) sets out which local government institutions are responsible for what. It is against this legal background that the study asks whether the functions assigned on paper come with the authority and administrative resources needed to carry them out.

In this study, functional alignment is understood as the consistency between seven interrelated elements of local governance: statutory mandates, institutional responsibility, financial resources, professional competencies, digital administrative support, public accountability and measurable performance outcomes. These elements form a sequence in which the effective implementation of an assigned function depends on the availability and coordination of the resources, capacities and procedures required at each stage. A functional gap occurs when inconsistencies arise between adjacent elements, potentially limiting the ability of local authorities to fulfil their responsibilities. The proposed approach is primarily diagnostic and is intended to identify specific institutional or administrative constraints that can be addressed through appropriate policy and management measures. At the same time, functional alignment does not require uniform levels of local autonomy or identical organisational arrangements across territories. Rather, it provides a basis for assessing whether existing institutional arrangements correspond to the responsibilities and administrative conditions of each locality.

The analytical framework has five linked dimensions: (1) institutional and legal arrangements; (2) financial and economic resources; (3) professional and managerial capacity; (4) digital administration and procedural traceability; and (5) citizen participation and public communication. Each covers a separate condition that local governments need in order to carry out their functions. The institutional and legal dimension is about who holds which responsibilities and who has the authority to decide. The financial dimension is about whether money is available and whether it arrives predictably. Professional capacity covers the skills and organisational support staff need to do their assigned work. Digital administration concerns how administrative procedures are recorded, monitored and checked, and citizen participation concerns public oversight and feedback.

We do not have the same depth of evidence for every dimension. For this reason, legal and fiscal records, interviews, expert assessments and survey responses are each used for the purpose they suit. Where no direct data on administrative performance exist, we treat the dimension as something to be assessed diagnostically, not as an empirically confirmed result. The Findings section shows how the dimensions, evidence sources and findings line up.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical analysis draws on sources that address distinct research questions and are therefore examined separately, without being combined into a single representative dataset. The legal and institutional analysis examines the development of direct local elections and fourth-tier budgets. The fiscal analysis describes the legislatively approved amounts of general-purpose interbudgetary subventions and withdrawals for 2021–2025, expressed in billions of KZT at current prices. The interpretation acknowledges the break in territorial comparability in 2023 associated with the establishment of new regions. Accordingly, these figures are not treated as a measure of decentralisation based on a constant set of territorial units.

The qualitative part of the study draws on nine semi-structured interviews with officials from district, city and rural administrations in Turkistan Region. We used them to find out what constrains these administrations, how well their assigned responsibilities match the resources they actually have, and what goes wrong in practice when they carry out local government functions. Participants were not chosen by probability sampling, and the interviews do not cover the full range of administrative practice in the region. Their value is in pointing to possible functional gaps and in shaping the diagnostic framework we propose. We therefore read the findings as evidence about a particular context, not as estimates of how common these problems are.

Separately, experts assessed the framework using the analytic hierarchy process (AHP). This stage relied on ten anonymised pairwise-comparison matrices, each with a consistency ratio of 0.10 or lower. The interviews and the AHP assessment were distinct stages of the research, and we did not assume the same people took part in both.

The survey analysis uses 1,062 coded questionnaires collected online between 17 March and 1 April 2025. Respondents were asked how they view local leadership, the transparency of elections, accountability, what has changed since the elections, and how satisfied they are with the work of akims. Because participants were recruited through non-probability sampling, the data cannot be taken as a statistically representative picture of the population of Turkistan Region or of Kazakhstan. The questionnaire recorded whether respondents lived in rural or urban areas, but not their district or region, so we cannot say how the sample is distributed

geographically. The sample is also unbalanced: 72.7% of respondents were women and 82.4% lived in rural areas.

Even so, the data allow us to look at response patterns and statistical associations within the group surveyed. Descriptive percentages describe the respondents only. Spearman correlations and binary logistic regression show associations within the analytical samples; we do not use them to estimate prevalence in the wider population or to claim that the electoral reform caused any effect. Seven respondents under 18 were left out of the inferential models, which were restricted to adults.

The two logistic regression models use different samples because of differences in outcome definitions and response availability: n = 932 for perceived post-election change and n = 943 for satisfaction. Analysis of questions allowing multiple responses was limited to descriptive statistics, as the supplied coded dataset retained only one response category per respondent. The scenario values for the prospective effectiveness index presented below are illustrative calculations and should not be interpreted as measured improvements or validated forecasts.

The study therefore combines several kinds of evidence, each with its own job, rather than using a representative mixed-methods design. Legal and fiscal documents set out the institutional context. Interviews show the practical constraints administrations face. Expert assessments indicate how much weight is given to different reform criteria, and survey data show how respondents' views of local governance relate to one another. Because each source answers a different question, we do not use them to cross-validate estimates of conditions in the region or the country. Taken together, they help us identify and interpret functional gaps and frame propositions for later empirical testing. The findings apply only to the populations and administrative settings we actually observed.

FINDINGS

The findings are grouped by the empirical sources used in the study and read through the five dimensions of the functional alignment framework. We keep four kinds of evidence apart: institutional and fiscal conditions recorded in legal and budget documents, administrative constraints raised in the interviews, priorities set by the experts, and perceptions reported by survey respondents. Keeping them separate matters because the evidence does not measure all five dimensions equally well. The sections below present the empirical results first and then consider what they mean for each dimension. Table 4 summarises how the sources map onto the dimensions and shows where more administrative data are needed.

Institutional and financial dimensions of local government reform

Between 2021 and 2025, general-purpose subventions increased in nominal terms, while budget withdrawals changed relatively little. The ratio of subventions to withdrawals more than doubled after 2022. These figures reflect the scale of fiscal equalisation but do not, in themselves, demonstrate that financial autonomy declined in every rural district. Administrative and territorial restructuring also increased the number of recipient territories, altering the coverage of the national series. The aggregate trend therefore cannot be interpreted as evidence of a causal relationship based on an unchanged set of territories.

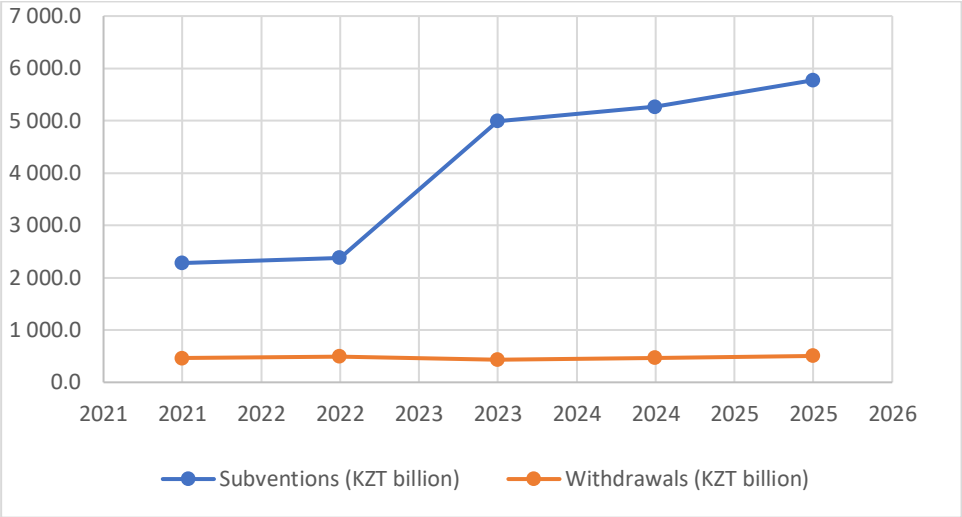
Table 1 uses the general-purpose interbudgetary transfer amounts set by law for 2020–2022 and 2023–2025 (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019; Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). The two periods are shown separately because the territorial restructuring of 2023 means the national figures before and after that year cannot be directly compared.

Table 1. General-purpose interbudgetary transfers, Kazakhstan, 2021–2025

Year	Subventions (KZT bn)	Withdrawals (KZT bn)	Recipients / donors	Ratio
2021	2 279,7	462,9	13 / 4	4,93
2022	2 380,9	494,4	13 / 4	4,82
2023	4 995,1	431,9	17 / 3	11,57
2024	5 265,0	469,5	17 / 3	11,21
2025	5 774,3	504,2	17 / 3	11,45

Source: authors' calculations based on the laws governing general-purpose interbudgetary transfers for 2020–2022 and 2023–2025 (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019; Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). Territorial coverage changed in 2023.

Figure 1. Statutory general-purpose transfers, 2021–2025



Source: authors' calculations based on enacted transfer legislation; nominal KZT billion, with a territorial-composition break in 2023.

Available data on fourth-tier budgets show that own-source revenues increased from KZT 31.7 billion in 2021 to KZT 42.0 billion in 2022, with the corresponding revenue shares rising from 17.0% to 18.9%. These data should be analysed separately from the national equalisation series, as the fiscal denominators differ. Intergovernmental transfers may be essential to ensuring equitable service provision across territories with unequal resources. Operational difficulties arise when funding is unpredictable, local discretion over expenditure is insufficient to address local priorities, or the financing of a specific mandate cannot be clearly identified.

Citizen participation, accountability and perceived governance outcomes

Table 2 summarises the main response distributions from the authors' survey. Most respondents regarded akims as accountable, and more than three-quarters expressed at least partial satisfaction. Assessments of transparency were more varied. These findings reflect the perceptions of respondents recruited through convenience sampling. They should therefore not be treated as validated measures of service quality or used to draw conclusions about voter behaviour at the national level.

Table 2. Selected survey results (n = 1,062)

Indicator	Positive / high	Intermediate / uncertain	Negative / low
Perceived akim accountability	Yes: 749 (70.5%)	Uncertain: 196 (18.5%)	No: 117 (11.0%)
Election transparency	High: 425 (40.0%)	Medium: 402 (37.9%); uncertain: 156 (14.7%)	Low: 79 (7.4%)
Post-election change	Substantial: 529 (49.8%); minor: 222 (20.9%)	Uncertain: 123 (11.6%)	No change: 167 (15.7%); deterioration: 21 (2.0%)
Satisfaction with akim	Fully: 536 (50.5%); rather: 277 (26.1%)	Uncertain: 112 (10.5%)	Rather not: 76 (7.2%); not at all: 61 (5.7%)
Readiness for oversight	Ready: 535 (50.4%)	Conditional: 266 (25.0%); uncertain: 8 (0.8%)	Not ready: 253 (23.8%)

Source: authors' survey conducted from 17 March to 1 April 2025; percentages are of all 1,062 coded responses.

The rank correlation analysis suggests that assessments of local elections should consider citizens' perceptions of governance alongside turnout and awareness of electoral reform. Perceived transparency was positively associated with reported post-election change (Spearman's $\varrho = 0.504$; $n = 845$) and satisfaction ($\varrho = 0.498$; $n = 841$). A positive association was also observed between reported post-election change and satisfaction ($\varrho = 0.584$; $n = 869$). All three correlations were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The strongest pairwise associations were therefore found among respondents' assessments of governance, rather than between these assessments and demographic characteristics.

Table 3. Selected associations from binary logistic regression

Dependent outcome	Predictor / category	Odds ratio	95% CI	p
Positive perceived change (n=932)	Accountability: yes	7.14	4.20–12.15	<0.001
Positive perceived change (n=932)	Transparency: medium	5.72	3.06–10.71	<0.001
Positive perceived change (n=932)	Transparency: high	13.85	6.78–28.30	<0.001
Satisfaction (n=943)	Accountability: yes	2.06	1.12–3.82	0.021
Satisfaction (n=943)	Transparency: high	6.93	3.01–15.97	<0.001
Satisfaction (n=943)	Substantial improvement	10.34	5.28–20.25	<0.001

Source: authors' statistical analysis of the 2025 survey. Odds ratios reflect model-specific coding and reference categories; no causal interpretation is warranted.

The findings are consistent with an accountability mechanism in which public assessments of local leadership reflect observable actions and the transparency of decision-making. However, they do not establish that electoral reform produced favourable evaluations. The observed associations may partly reflect respondent self-selection, common-method bias and unobserved contextual factors.

Professional capacity, institutional autonomy and expert priorities

Interview evidence points to the combination of responsibilities imposed on comparatively small local offices. Interviewees identified specialist legal, budgetary and digital skills, the ability to alter staffing profiles, and ongoing methodological support as practical constraints. Since the interview sample is small and purposive, the observations identify functional risks rather than national prevalence rates.

The AHP results similarly emphasised substantive local autonomy and relations with residents. Across the ten expert matrices, the mean weight assigned to the actual autonomy of local government bodies was 0.225, compared with 0.054 for the formal division of powers. Criteria concerning civic evaluation and engagement also received relatively high weights in the overall expert profile. These weights reflect the preferences elicited in the ten expert assessments and should not be interpreted as objective measures of local government performance.

Taken together, the findings suggest that professionalisation should be guided by functional audits and extend beyond one-off training. Where a local executive body is responsible for a communal service, its competency profile should specify the legal, procurement, project management and reporting skills required for service delivery, alongside the staffing and budgetary resources available to fulfil that responsibility.

Synthesis of findings across the five dimensions

The results show that each of the five dimensions rests on a different kind of evidence, so they cannot all be assessed with the same precision. Table 4 matches each dimension to the relevant findings, lists the administrative issues that bear on it, and separates what is documented from what still needs to be checked. This summary connects the analytical framework to the reform model we propose.

Table 4. Mapping of the analytical dimensions to the empirical evidence

Analytical dimension	Evidence used	Main findings and implications
1. Institutional and legal arrangements	Legal analysis; nine interviews; AHP assessments	Formal allocation of powers does not necessarily ensure operational autonomy. Expert assessments assigned greater weight to actual autonomy (0.225) than to formal division of powers (0.054).
2. Financial and economic resources	National fiscal series, 2021–2025; fourth-tier budget data, 2021–2022	Rising nominal subventions coexist with limited own-revenue shares at the fourth budgetary tier. The adequacy of funding for individual mandates requires separate assessment.
3. Professional and managerial capacity	Nine interviews in Turkistan Region; AHP assessments	Interviewees identified constraints relating to legal, budgetary and digital competencies, staffing flexibility and methodological support. The frequency of these constraints was not measured.
4. Digital	Interviews;	Digital competencies emerged as an administrative

administration and procedural traceability	institutional analysis	concern, but no systematic evidence on request-processing times, case tracking or service completion was collected. Digital traceability therefore remains a proposed diagnostic criterion.
5. Citizen participation and public communication	Survey of 1,062 respondents; expert assessments	Perceived transparency, accountability and post-election improvements were positively associated with satisfaction. These relationships describe the surveyed group and do not establish regional prevalence or causality.

Source: developed by the authors from the legal and fiscal analysis, nine interviews, ten AHP matrices and the 2025 survey. The table distinguishes empirical observations from proposed diagnostic indicators.

A functional alignment model for civil service reform

The proposed functional alignment model builds on the findings across the five dimensions. It turns the institutional, fiscal, professional and participatory problems we identified into a series of administrative checks. Digital traceability is included too, but as a part of the model that still needs empirical testing. The diagnostic cycle starts with three questions: what the law requires, which body is responsible, and where the money comes from. It then looks at staff skills, organisational support, how administrative procedures are recorded and monitored, public reporting and service outcomes. When a mismatch turns up, the model points to a matching reform instrument. Table 5 sets out the main types of functional gap, possible remedies and the criteria for checking whether they have been put in place. The model is meant as a framework for future administrative assessment; its effectiveness has not yet been shown empirically.

Table 5. Proposed diagnostic and reform matrix

Observed functional gap	Reform instrument	Operational verification
Responsibility without assured funding	Mandate and resource audit; transparent transfer allocation	Budget source and discretionary spending identified for each function
Elected leadership without task-specific competence	Competency assessment; modular training; mentoring	Demonstrated legal, fiscal and project-management proficiency
Digital channel without follow-through	Case tracking integrated into execution and public reporting	Responsible officer, deadline, status and result visible
Citizen willingness without effective participation	Public hearings, response registers and suitably funded participatory projects	Decisions and implementation feedback publicly documented
Fragmented performance assessment	Shared KPI definitions and periodic functional review	Outcome indicators checked, corrective actions recorded

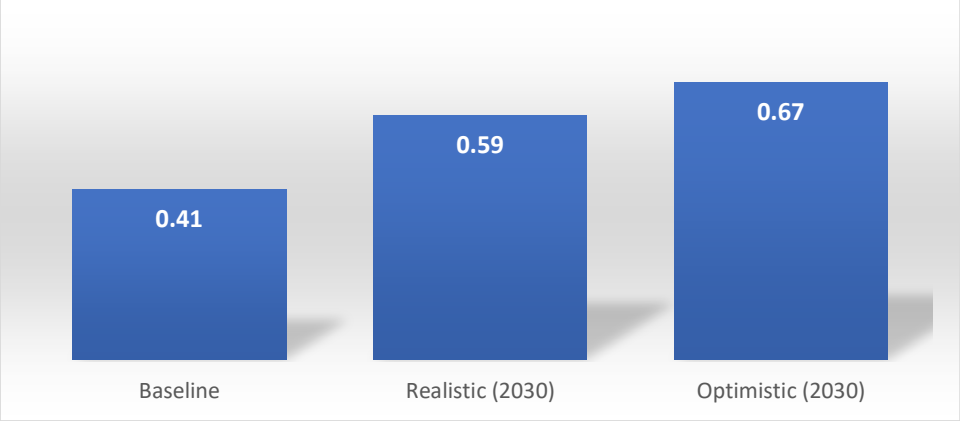
Source: proposed by the authors on the basis of the study findings. Indicators are proposals, not established nationwide requirements.

Each of the five dimensions requires a distinct evidence base. Institutional assessment draws on maps of responsibilities, approved procedures and council records. Financial assessment considers own-source revenues, transfer predictability, expenditure estimates by function and the share of funds available for discretionary use. Human resource capacity is assessed through competency profiles and task-based evaluations. Digital assessment relies on auditable records of the receipt, assignment, deadlines and resolution of public requests. Public communication is evaluated through measures of citizen satisfaction and involvement, supported by records documenting participation and the responses provided.

A composite effectiveness index can summarise the five dimensions once territorial data have been collected and normalised. The proposed approach uses weighted aggregation of expert-assessed criteria, but the resulting score does not replace an examination of individual functional gaps. A high score for digital capacity, for example, cannot compensate for an unfunded statutory mandate. The composite index should therefore serve as an initial screening tool, followed by a detailed review of its constituent dimensions.

Figure 2 presents the authors' illustrative baseline value for the overall index and two scenarios for 2030. The baseline value of 0.41 compares with 0.59 under the realistic scenario and 0.67 under the optimistic scenario. These values were constructed for illustration and should not be interpreted as observed effects of reform or as estimates of future effect sizes.

Figure 2. Illustrative overall effectiveness index: baseline and 2030 scenarios



Source: authors' scenario calculations. Values are hypothetical and have not been field-validated.

Implementation implications

For practitioners, functional alignment provides a practical means of assessing whether the conditions necessary to deliver a particular service are in place. A rural local authority seeking to improve street lighting, for example, should document legal responsibility for the service, budget authorisation, procurement competence, the delivery timetable and procedures for publishing results. This gives residents a concrete basis for evaluating the implementation of decentralisation commitments through completed services. The assessment also identifies gaps that may justify requests for support from central or regional authorities.

The proposed roadmap for 2027–2030 comprises four successive stages. In 2027, voluntary diagnostic pilots would establish verified baselines. In 2028, participating local administrations could formalise competency profiles, regular public reporting procedures and specifications for key performance indicators. The 2029 stage would involve integrating resource audits, digital monitoring of requests and participatory budgeting procedures within

the limits of legally established budgetary powers. In 2030, a follow-up assessment would compare documented outcomes with baseline values, identify unresolved gaps and inform decisions on wider implementation. This timetable forms part of the proposed roadmap and does not represent an adopted government programme.

The proposed reforms have several implications for public sector personnel policy. Recruitment and staff development plans should reflect service delivery obligations. Performance appraisal should distinguish between responsibilities within an officer's control and functions that depend on approval from higher administrative levels. Continuing professional development should cover budgeting, regulatory procedures, project implementation, digital case management and public communication. Small administrations may benefit from shared technical teams and specialist support where maintaining equivalent expertise in each authority is impractical. Administrative capacity should therefore be treated as an organisational resource to be considered in the design of local governance arrangements, rather than solely as an individual attribute of the elected akim.

Any institutional or fiscal steps to implement the proposed measures would have to fit within the Budget Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025), the law that governs budget arrangements and fiscal relations between levels of government. Fiscal measures and civil service reforms should be coordinated. General-purpose transfers can reduce disparities between territories, but their design should be assessed in conjunction with the clarity of assigned responsibilities, local discretion over expenditure and publicly verifiable results. Open-data initiatives should extend beyond dashboard publication, allowing residents to trace how requests are assigned and resolved and how the outcomes inform subsequent planning. Accountability thus connects adherence to internal administrative procedures with external public scrutiny.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations that affect how its findings should be read. The online survey used a non-probability sample and did not record where individual respondents lived. Its demographic make-up was also lopsided, with women and rural residents making up a large share of participants. For these reasons, neither the descriptive results nor the statistical associations can be generalised to the population of Turkistan Region or Kazakhstan. And because the survey was cross-sectional, it cannot tell us whether local elections caused any change in administrative performance.

The nine semi-structured interviews and ten AHP assessments were carried out as separate parts of the study. They shed light on administrative constraints and expert priorities in context, but they cannot show how widespread these conditions are across local government bodies. The national fiscal series shows transfer volumes as set by law, and it is affected by the territorial changes made in 2023. Nor does the available evidence measure all five dimensions of the framework directly; digital procedural traceability and independently verified service outcomes are the clearest gaps. The integrated effectiveness index and its 2030 scenarios are illustrative only and have not been checked against territorial administrative data. Future research should test the model in comparable local administrations, using verified indicators of functions, finances, staffing and service performance.

CONCLUSION

The study looked at how local governments can identify and fix mismatches between the responsibilities the law gives them, the money they have, the skills of their staff and the ways they are held accountable, drawing mainly on evidence from Turkistan Region. The findings

suggest that decentralising institutions does not in itself show that local administrations have the capacity to carry out their functions well. The analysis of budget transfers and fourth-tier revenues shows why formal budget arrangements need to be kept apart from the question of whether money is actually available for particular responsibilities. Local officials who were interviewed pointed to shortages of specialist skills, too little flexibility in staffing and weak methodological support. The experts, for their part, gave more weight to real institutional autonomy than to the formal division of powers.

Survey respondents judged local governance largely on three things: whether officials seemed accountable, whether elections seemed transparent, and whether they could see local conditions getting better. Respondents who rated elections as more transparent were also more likely to report change after the election ($\varrho = 0.504$) and to say they were satisfied ($\varrho = 0.498$). The link between reported change and satisfaction was stronger still ($\varrho = 0.584$). These correlations describe this sample only and cannot show that electoral reform caused any of the effects. Read together with the qualitative and fiscal evidence, though, they point to a gap in how decentralisation is usually assessed. Adopting new institutions is only part of the picture; what also matters is how administrative responsibilities are carried out in practice and how they are explained to residents.

The study's main contribution is a functional alignment framework covering five dimensions of local governance: institutional and legal arrangements, financial resources, professional capacity, digital procedural traceability, and citizen participation. The framework is a way to spot where a mandate assigned to local government outruns the organisational conditions needed to carry it out. In practice, each function is checked against five questions: who is responsible for it, what funding is available, what skills it requires, which administrative procedures govern it, and what outcomes can be verified. The framework also separates the dimensions that the current findings support from those that still need further administrative evidence.

The findings point to three priorities for local government reform. Any transfer of responsibilities should come with a check on where the money will come from and how much freedom local bodies have to spend it. Staff training and organisational support should be tied to the skills that particular administrative functions actually demand. And digital case tracking and public reporting should be built up, so that anyone can verify whether local decisions were carried out and how citizens' requests were handled. The implementation stages proposed for 2027–2030 offer a way to test these measures in territorial pilots and evaluate them afterwards.

So the research question can be answered by diagnosing local government function by function. For each mandate, the diagnosis asks which institution is responsible, what resources it has, what professional and digital capacity it can draw on, what accountability procedures apply, and what results can be measured. This gives a workable way to keep institutional decentralisation and civil service reform moving in step. Whether it actually works is still an open question, which forward-looking tests with comparable administrative and service-delivery data will need to settle.

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