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ISSUES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of local self-government is essential for fostering citizen participation in addressing regional issues, enhancing civic engagement, deepening democracy within the political system, and increasing citizens' understanding of the decision-making process at the state level. In Kazakhstan, several significant decisions have been made in recent years, including the introduction of a fourth level of the budget and the direct election of aul akims (mayors of villages, towns, and cities that are subordinate to districts) by residents. These initiatives aim to strengthen local self-government. The reforms implemented have stimulated scientific research to assess the effectiveness of public policy in this area. This study evaluates recent publications on local self-government in Kazakhstan through literature reviews. Consequently, the authors present several conclusions and recommendations for broader discussion. These recommendations are beneficial not only for evaluating recent government reforms but also for outlining future directions for policymakers and potential research avenues for academics.

Key words: local self-government, local government, aul akim.

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Қазақстанда жергілікті өзін-өзі басқарудың өзекті мәселелері: әдеби шолу

Жергілікті өзін-өзі басқаруды дамыту азаматтардың жергілікті мәселелерді шешуге қатысуын қамтамасыз ету, азаматтық белсенділікті арттыру, саяси жүйедегі демократиялық басқаруды дамыту, азаматтардың мемлекеттік шешім қабылдау процесі туралы білімдерін кеңейту сияқты қажеттіліктермен дәйектеледі. Қазақстанда соңғы жылдары жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару жүйесін күшейтуге бағытталған төртінші деңгейлі бюджетті енгізу, ауыл әкімдерін тұрғындардың тікелей сайлауына мүмкіндік беру сияқты бірнеше маңызды шешімдер қабылданды. Қабылданған шешімдер өз кезегінде осы бағыттағы мемлекеттік саясаттың, жасалған өзгерістердің тиімділігін зерттеуге бағытталған академиялық жарияланымдар санын арттырды. Бұл зерттеу осы тақырып бойынша жарияланған ғылыми жарияланымдарды зерделеу мақсатында жүргізілді. Авторлар әдеби шолу әдісін қолдану жолымен соңғы жылдары осы тақырып бойынша жарияланған ғылыми жарияланымдарды топтастырып, оларда жазылған негізгі нәтижелер мен тұжырымдарды шығарды. Жиналған ақпараттардағы негізгі тұжырымдар мен қорытындыларды синтездеу нәтижесінде жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару жүйесін әрі қарай дамыту үшін қажетті компоненттер мен назар аударылуы керек кемшіліктер анықталды. Зерттеу нәтижесінде күшті жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару жүйесін қалыптастырудың өзекті мәселелері анықталып, осы саладағы мемлекеттік шешім қабылдаушылардың қарауына және зерттеушілер мен сарапшылардың талқылауына арналған тұжырымдар әзірленді.

Түйін сөздер: жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару, жергілікті басқару, ауыл әкімі.

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Проблемы местного самоуправления в Казахстане: обзор литературы

Необходимость развитие местного самоуправления аргументируется обеспечением участия граждан в решении местных вопросов, повышении гражданской активности, углубление демократии в политической системе, расширение знаний граждан о процессе принятия государственных решений. В Казахстане за последние годы было принято несколько важных решений, в частности введение четвертого уровня бюджета и прямые выборы акимов сел резидентами, направленного на усиление системы местного самоуправления. Реализованные реформы стимулировали научные исследования направленные на изучение эффективности государственной политики в данной области. Данное исследование проведено в целях анализа опубликованных научных публикаций. Авторы, с помощью метода обзора литературы собирали и проанализировали научные публикации, опубликованные в последние годы по данной теме. В результате синтеза основных выводов и предложений собранной информации выявлены необходимые компоненты, на которые необходимо обратить внимание для дальнейшего развития системы местного самоуправления. На основе которых были разработаны рекомендации по совершенствованию государственной политики в этой области для рассмотрения лицами, принимающими решения, и для обсуждения в научной среде.

Ключевые слова: местное самоуправление, местное управление, аким села.

Introduction

The significance of local government to society is highlighted by its focus on local problems and needs, its role in protecting citizens from oppression by central authorities, and its contribution to democratization and public participation in decision-making (Klugman, 1994; Stoker, 1996). These principles are rooted in the local government's proximity to communities compared to the central government. To align with normative theory, local governments must possess a degree of autonomy from higher administrative structures. Recently, Kazakhstan has initiated comprehensive reforms aimed at enhancing the autonomy of local governments and improving local self-governance. These reforms primarily target the smallest administrative-territorial units: village districts (auldyk okrug), towns (kent), cities subordinate to districts (audandyk mangyzy bar kala), and villages. Most of these units are situated in rural areas of the country. Similarly, heads of larger local governments, the mayors of the smallest administrative-territorial units are referred to as 'akim.' These positions typically oversee the smallest settlements, which are primarily found in rural areas. In public discourse, the akims of village districts, towns, and cities that fall under district jurisdiction are commonly known as 'aul akims'.

The significance of the smallest administrative-territorial units for political system grounded on

their number and proportion of dwelling people in the total population. As per the results of the national census conducted in 2021, there were 48 city local governments subordinate to districts, 2,177 village district local governments, 27 town local governments, and 93 local governments in villages not included in a village district (Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). Additionally, the census revealed that there are 6,932 villages, 29 towns, and 48 cities subordinate to districts. The population residing in these administrative units constitutes 38.8%, 1.2%, and 6.4% of the national population, respectively. In total, almost half of Kazakhstan's population (46.4%) lives in these smallest administrative-territorial units. This study focuses on the local governments of these small units in Kazakhstan.

The enhancement of local government for the smallest administrative-territorial units has been a pressing issue for decades. Previous studies have shown that the local governments in these units lack the real power necessary to effectively address local issues because they are under-resourced and heavily dependent on higher authorities (Makhmutova, 2006; Siegel, 2022). From 2018 to 2020, Kazakhstan introduced a fourth-level budget, which is a financial plan for the smallest administrative-territorial units. Starting in 2018, aul akims overseeing populations of over 2,000 residents were authorized to create their own budgets, raising revenues through specific local taxes and payments. Following 2020, this au-

thorization extended to all aul akims. Another significant reform was the direct election of aul akims by the local population, which began in 2021. Until 2013, all aul akims were appointed by higher-level akims; from 2013 until 2021, they were elected by deputies of the district or city maslikhat. According to the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the number of aul akims elected directly by local citizens was 864 in 2021, 516 in 2022, and 655 in 2023 (Қазақстан Республикасы Орталық сайлау комиссиясының ақпараттық бюллетені, 2024). Given the importance of these reforms in the local governance of the smallest administrative-territorial units since Kazakhstan's independence, recent changes have drawn significant interest from scholars. It is essential to synthesize the findings from existing literature to evaluate the effectiveness of recent government policies.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the available evidence regarding local self-government in Kazakhstan. This analysis aims to summarize key issues and develop recommendations for policymakers by objectively collating extensive information. With this purpose, this paper utilized systematic literature reviews, which is 'seek to collate evidence that fits pre-specified eligibility criteria in order to answer a specific research question' (Cochrane Collaboration, 2014). The guiding research question for this paper is: What are the main conclusions and major issues related to local self-government in Kazakhstan? Answering this question will help consolidate research findings, enhance current knowledge, and inform decision-makers. The research objectives include:

1. Identifying the main challenges of local self-government in Kazakhstan;
2. Evaluating the effectiveness of government policies in this area;
3. Developing recommendations for decision-makers.

This study has produced valuable insights into the functioning of local self-governments in Kazakhstan, some of which corroborate previous literature while others were revealed during this analysis.

Materials and Methods

To achieve the objectives of this study, a systematic literature review was utilized, as defined by Petticrew and Roberts (2008) as "a method of

making sense of large bodies of information, mapping out areas of uncertainty, and identifying where little or no relevant research has been conducted, but where new studies are needed." The steps proposed by Petticrew and Roberts for conducting systematic literature reviews guided this research. A protocol was developed in accordance with the goals of the study to direct the review process. Since this review is not related to the health sector, the protocol was not registered in any international database.

The literature selection process was carried out in four stages. In the first step, a search strategy was formulated to effectively conduct the search. The second stage involved removing duplicate and overlapping publications. The next step established criteria for including or excluding sources. Finally, a list of publications was compiled for critical evaluation. It should be noted that articles that were not accessible online were not included in the review.

Articles were searched using the Google Scholar search engine, as well as through the scientific and medical publication databases, Web of Science and ScienceDirect. Many local authors' publications can be found in the Russian Science Citation Index (Российский индекс научного цитирования – <https://www.elibrary.ru/>), which also was scanned. In addition, publications were searched in two libraries that have the largest items: the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan (<https://www.nlrk.kz/>) and the National Academic Library of Kazakhstan (<http://nabr.kz/>). Additionally, libraries of four universities that have a large collection of publications on this topic, including dissertations have been searched. They are L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (<https://library.enu.kz/>), Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (<https://elibrary.kaznu.kz/ru/>), Narxoz University (<https://kk.narxoz.kz/library>) and the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (<https://www.apa.kz/en/library/>), last of which have large collection of publications by local authors on public policy and administration. Moreover, catalogs of the Central Scientific Library (<http://library.kz/en/>) and the National Center of Science and Technology Evaluation (<https://nauka.kz/>) were also checked. Several keywords and terms in Kazakh, English, and Russian languages were used for the search and identification of necessary literature, a full list of which is given in Table 1.

Table 1 – Description of search terms

Search term	Clarification
Local government in Kazakhstan/post-soviet countries	-
Local governance in Kazakhstan/post-soviet countries	-
Local self-government in Kazakhstan/post-soviet countries	-
Decentralization in Kazakhstan/post-soviet countries	-
Local government election in Kazakhstan/post-soviet countries	-
Rural local government in Kazakhstan	-
Election of akims	This keyword is mainly used for searching publications in local libraries and search engines in Kazakh and Russian languages
Forth-level budget	These keywords are mainly used for searching publications in local libraries and search engines engines in Kazakh and Russian languages
Local self-government budget	These keywords are mainly used for searching publications in local libraries and search engines engines in Kazakh and Russian languages

*Table compiled by the authors

The selection of relevant publications for the literature review was conducted in three steps. First, abstracts, publication years, and citation counts of all listed publications were screened to assess their significance for the study. If an abstract was not sufficiently informative to determine eligibility, the author reviewed the introduction and conclusion of the article. Additionally, the credibility of the publisher, the affiliated institution, and the author's background were also taken into account at this stage. Some publications were ultimately rejected after reading nearly the entire text if any sections were unclear. The following criteria were then established for the inclusion of publications in the literature review:

1. The publication's content aligns with the purpose of this study.

2. It meets established academic standards.

3. It has been cited by other studies, recognizing that this criterion is somewhat arbitrary, as many publications may have few citations due to the underdevelopment of citation tracking systems in Russian and Kazakh languages.

4. The year of publication is considered, focusing on works published within the last five years, as significant reforms were implemented recently and this paper aims to evaluate those changes.

5. The credibility of the publisher and journal is assessed, especially if the journal is included in international or local scientific databases.

6. The author's research area of interest is also reviewed, particularly if the author has other publi-

cations on the subject, demonstrating their commitment to this topic.

In total, the authors identified approximately 300 publications on this subject, from which 29 were selected for further consideration (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Number of examined literature

Number of discovered publications	289	
Among them	Dissertations (Candidate, PhD)	21
	Books	20
	Conference/seminar proceedings	28
	Publications (grey literature)	36
	Scientific publications	184
<i>Number of publications included for examination</i>		29

*Table compiled by the authors

Results and Discussion

The introduction of fourth-level budget studies has focused on the financial aspects of local governments, particularly those in the smallest administrative-territorial units. These studies have concluded that implementing the fourth-level budget has been a positive innovation for the development of lo-

cal self-government (Ismailova, et al., 2023). Furthermore, the fourth-level budget, along with other government initiatives aimed at rural development, has improved the financial support available to aul akims (Zhumashov, 2023). It has also enhanced their managerial functions and budget planning capacities. However, recent studies indicate that aul akims remain financially subordinated to higher authorities when it comes to addressing local issues, as the revenue of many small administrative-territorial units heavily relies on transfers from higher budgets (Bitoleuova et al., 2020; Nurzhanova, 2020; Ошакбаев, 2020). In some cases, transfers from these higher budgets can account for as much as 88% of a unit's budget revenue (Исмаилова и Мусина, 2022). Additionally, the budgets of many administrative-territorial units are very small, often only sufficient to cover the operational costs of the aul akim's office, with minimal funds left for other projects, such as local area improvements (Дюсенбинов, 2021). Notably, even the budgets of higher local governments depend on transfers from above, particularly from republican budgets (Битолуова и Жусупов, 2020). This dependency is likely a result of the country's fiscal policy. As a solution, some scholars have proposed revising the inter-budget transfer system to allow local governments to retain more tax revenues (Патласов и Балпан, 2024). Consequently, despite being elected directly, aul akims continue to experience financial dependence on higher authorities.

Another issue that emerged after the introduction of the fourth-level budget is the inequality among local governments in budget formation. Administrative-territorial units with larger populations and significant enterprises have advantages over smaller local governments (Onalbaiuly, 2019; Zhumashov, 2023). For example, in the Pavlodar region, only two administrative-territorial units with large mining operations generate 67-80% of their revenue from local taxes, while other areas see this figure drop to no more than 9% (Қапанұлы, 2024). This disparity illustrates that, without higher budget transfers, many local units cannot generate sufficient revenue under the current fiscal system. Overall, while the fourth-level budget has enhanced financial support and improved the financial management of aul akims, it has simultaneously increased the revenue disparity between local governments and limited the decision-making autonomy of the aul akims.

In addition to the fourth-level budget, a novel approach was introduced that involves discussing budget expenditures with residents. Some studies indicate that this has led to increased civic engagement among the local population (Майшекина et

al., 2023). However, other studies report that residents in many local governments do not participate in budget discussions (Shiyan, 2020). Scholars suggest that citizens, who are expected to be direct participants in this process, often lack understanding of their roles and responsibilities, placing the onus on government officials instead (Pupysheva et al., 2023). It appears that both aul akims and residents were unprepared for these changes, as they require experience, practice, and basic legal literacy (Габдуалиев, 2022). Therefore, some scholars advocate for intensifying efforts to raise public awareness on these matters (Ydyrys et al., 2023; Солтангазинов et al., 2018). Overall, it is crucial to enhance the social accountability of aul akims and increase civic engagement among citizens.

The direct election of aul akims has also attracted significant scholarly attention. Many studies have found that direct elections positively impact local self-governance, increase public participation in decision-making, and improve communication between citizens and local authorities (Болысбек и Бюлегенова, 2023; Кошербаев and Мусатаева, 2023; Кумысбеков et al., 2022). Moreover, other scholars argue that elected aul akims tend to address local issues more effectively and are more inclined to develop projects that boost local government revenues (Есбергген and Асрепов, 2023). Nonetheless, some scholars express skepticism about these recent changes, arguing that past initiatives to enhance local government decision-making autonomy have been merely ceremonial. This viewpoint suggests that elected aul akims remain financially and politically dependent on higher authorities (Alzhanov, 2024), indicating that these elections may serve as an experiment in decentralization while maintaining political centralization (Busygina, et al., 2018). Consequently, many scholars recommend improving election regulations, such as requiring candidates to possess higher education diplomas, returning registration fees for self-nominated candidates, and establishing guidelines for the timing and funding of candidates' campaigns (Кумысбеков et al., 2022). It is crucial to address the issues within the election system and enhance the rights of aul akims.

Another significant, ongoing issue since the 1990s is the adoption of a law on local self-government. This law is vital not only for the development of local government institutions but also for protecting elected aul akims from interference by higher officials. Despite numerous attempts, a law on local self-government has still not been enacted. The existing legal framework does not regulate all aspects of local self-government, as it fails to clearly dif-

ferentiate between local state government and local self-government, the formation of local self-government bodies, and the financial support of local self-government (Кемелбеков, 2021; Утибаев and Утибаева, 2021; Питулько, 2023). Furthermore, it is not clearly stipulated whether elected akims are heads of local state executive governments or local self-government (Жанузакова, 2021). Studies have highlighted the necessity of adopting legislation that enhances local self-government in accordance with the characteristics defined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Bitoleuova and Lacrovskiy, 2022). Recently, a new draft law on local self-government was submitted to Parliament; however, previous unsuccessful attempts have fueled skepticism regarding the adoption of a robust law.

Unlike higher local governments, the smallest administrative-territorial units do not have representative bodies of local government (maslikhat). According to the law “On Local Government and Self-government in the Republic of Kazakhstan,” these units have a Meeting of the Local Community, which serves as a representative council consulting with the aul akim on issues related to the area’s development. However, the functioning, member formation, and powers of this council are not clearly defined. Additionally, studies have shown that the activity of the Meeting of the Local Community may be influenced by local governments and aul akims in the selection of its members (Zhumashov, 2023). Moreover, the Meeting of the Local Community is not as well-known among the population as maslikhats, which are established and familiar structures. For these reasons, the council is not as effective or reliable as the maslikhats. Some authors argue that the absence of a representative body at this level of local government is a significant problem (Шериязданов, 2021). Other studies emphasize that government policy on rural development focuses primarily on socio-economic, agricultural, and infrastructure aspects of rural settlements, which undermines the effectiveness of the local governance system (Утибаев and Утибаева, 2021). Overall, these studies illustrate the importance of enhancing the effectiveness of local government for the development of rural settlements, such as villages, small cities, and towns.

Recent changes have improved the functioning of the lowest levels of local governments. These developments have enhanced financial support for aul akims, increased their social accountability, and allocated additional resources. However, the current system has made aul akims dependent on higher authorities and local residents. Some aul akims may struggle to adapt to this dual pressure, as evidenced by various

experiments showing reluctance to continue their positions after encountering unfamiliar rules and intense discussions among the community (Абсеметова, 2017). In fact, the bulletins from the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan indicate that, for various reasons, over 500 aul akims vacated their positions in 2022 and 2023, prompting snap elections for the vacant roles (Қазақстан Республикасы Орталық сайлау комиссиясының ақпараттық бюллетені, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to bolster the social accountability of aul akims while reducing their vertical dependency. In this context, literature review reveals the importance of gathering aul akims’ perspectives on recent changes. Specifically, it would be valuable to explore how aul akims perceive these changes and whether they are willing to embrace greater social accountability or prefer to remain within a vertically accountable system. Additionally, it is important to assess whether the current reforms make aul akims accountable to both higher authorities and their communities simultaneously, and how they navigate this dual pressure. This area warrants further research.

In summary, this paper presents several findings for broader discussion. First, the authorization of aul akims to form budgets from local revenues has varied their capacity to provide services. Administrative-territorial units with larger ventures have an advantage in budget formation compared to other local governments. Second, while aul akims now have access to more adequate funding than before, the financing conditions make them reliant on higher authorities, with a significant portion of many aul akims’ budgets coming from higher-level allocations. Third, recent requirements for discussing local issues with the Meeting of the Local Community have made aul akims more socially accountable. However, establishing a maslikhat in the smallest administrative units would likely be more effective than relying on the Meeting of the Local Community. Lastly, the legislation governing aul akims’ functioning is complex and incomplete, which limits the development of local self-government. Moreover, the existing system has made aul akims dependent on higher authorities, which may be burdensome for elected officials; therefore, proceeding with reforms in this direction is important.

Conclusion

A review of the literature on local self-government in Kazakhstan leads to several key conclusions.

First, recent changes have positively impacted the strengthening of local self-government, positive-

ly influencing the budgets of aul akims and energizing political life in rural areas.

Second, the electoral system for aul akims needs improvement, as certain requirements hinder effective election campaigns and limit the nomination of potential candidates.

Third, despite the establishment of direct elections and a fourth-level budget, higher authorities continue to exert significant influence over the elected aul akims.

Fourth, the introduction of a fourth-level budget has resulted in inequalities between administrative-territorial units.

Fifth, a longstanding issue since the 1990s regarding the legislation on local self-government remains unresolved; this is particularly significant for the functioning of local governments in the smallest administrative-territorial units.

Overall, while recent reforms have had a positive effect on local governance in village districts, towns, and cities subordinate to districts, further efforts are needed to enhance the decision-making freedom of aul akims. Specifically, there should be an increase in their social accountability rather than maintaining strict vertical control.

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