

PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC COUNCILS IN KYRGYZSTAN

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Article History:

Received: 23 January 2026

Revised: 15 March 2026

Accepted: 17 March 2026



ABSTRACT. *Public councils are advisory-consultative bodies embedded in the public administration system of Central Asian countries. The existing scholarly literature criticizes the operation of public councils as exhibiting limited effectiveness and tends to view them as symbolic. This study focuses on Kyrgyzstan's public councils, which functioned from 2014 to 2024, and examines the factors that influenced their performance. This research uses a qualitative case study research design, which includes data collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data.*

This inquiry applies the framework developed by Abelson et al. (2003), including four criteria: representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes. These criteria are designed for the evaluation of public participation processes. During data collection, participants were asked questions related to these four criteria and factors that influence them. Findings show that to fulfill requirements on representation, fair procedural rules, access to information, and influence of public council members' voices on outcomes, three conditions should be met. First, the political will of the government and openness to public council inputs are the key factors. Selected line ministries of Kyrgyzstan were open to inputs of public councils and did not impose constraints on their operation. Second, the strength of civil society played an essential role. Independent media and active civil society representatives joined the public councils to bring changes to reforms. Third, social capital and horizontal relationships at the society level also contribute to public councils' performance. These findings demonstrate that, given plausible conditions and resources, public councils in Central Asia can demonstrate effective performance.

KEYWORDS: *public councils, participatory governance, civil society, Central Asia, social capital.*

INTRODUCTION

Post-Soviet countries have introduced different participatory mechanisms and institutions such as public chambers (Evans, 2010; Owen & Bindman, 2019), public councils (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Yuldoshev, 2021), open budget and open

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legislation (Knox & Janenova, 2018), as well as participatory budgeting (Kasymova, 2013). These consultative and participatory mechanisms aim to engage citizens and civil society in collaborative governance, enhance public administration, boost transparency of state decisions, strengthen policy legitimacy, and citizen trust in state authorities.

Although some studies put criticism on their operation in the Central Asian context (Kurmanov & Knox, 2024), other studies are more optimistic on their performance (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024), viewing them as an avenue for state-society dialogue and interaction. These academic debates indicate that participatory mechanisms in post-Soviet societies should not be treated as homogenous and constant, rather it should be noted that they are changing and demonstrating incremental progress. It is important to study their effectiveness as more participatory institutions are in place in Central Asian countries. For example, Kazakhstan introduced a law on public councils in 2016, which was further revised in 2022 by expanding it to quasi-state bodies. Uzbekistan introduced them in 2018 with further revision (Yuldoshev, 2021). Noteworthy, public administration of Central Asia is shifting toward citizen-centric governance, including various stakeholders such as civil society, citizens, academia, and experts. By studying their progress and enabling factors for their performance, our study provides practical implications for policymakers.

This study focuses on one participatory consultative body, i.e., public councils (PC) in Kyrgyzstan. In this country, public councils operated in 2014-2024 under line ministries, state committees, and administrative organizations (Law on public councils, 2014). The public council operation in Kyrgyzstan was officially seized in 2024 and replaced by an online legislation portal (Economis.kg, 2024). According to the Law, public councils are consultative-supervisory bodies under line ministries, state committees, and administrative organizations aimed to fulfill public oversight over state bodies' performance (Law on public councils, 2014). They fulfill their functions independent from state bodies and on behalf of wider society. Their responsibilities include the revision of draft legal acts, initiating discussions of socially significant issues, analysis of state programs and other means of interaction with civil society, provision of recommendations for their improvement, collection and aggregation of the public's proposals on social issues, and presentation to state bodies (Law on public councils, 2014).

This inquiry sets the following research question: Which factors contributed to the effectiveness of public councils in Kyrgyzstan? Kyrgyzstan is an interesting case because it was once defined as an "island of democracy" in Central Asia with an independent civil society (Jargalsaikhan, 2019) and rapidly growing grassroots organizations. It provides rich data and experience for peer-to-peer learning for other Central Asian countries. This study avoids claiming that all public councils under line ministries, state committees, and other administrative organizations of Kyrgyzstan were effective, but rather it explores factors that can have an impact on their effectiveness. This research draws on an online focus group (the number of participants: 15) conducted in 2024. Participants of the focusgroup are ex-public council members, civil society members who were aware of public council performance, and civil activists. In addition, follow-up interviews with selected ex-public council members (N=6) allowed gathering

overarching data. Findings of the focus group and interviews have been triangulated with secondary data drawn on Varieties of democracies, World Bank, legal documents, and other reports.

Findings suggest that the effectiveness of public councils is determined by factors such as a favorable political context and state support, strong and independent civil society, as well as social capital. Findings also suggest that public councils encountered challenges such as limited resources (e.g., human, financial), non-binding decisions, bureaucratization, and the existence of loyal members to the state. The study first presents a literature review, followed by methodology and findings. Finally, it reflects on the discussion and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Engaging various stakeholders in policy-making enhances transparency, leads to better decision-making, improves social stability and regime legitimacy, and incorporates various opinions and expertise in the policy process (Pateman, 1970). In this regard, advisory bodies offer policy-relevant knowledge and advice. By referring to those recommendations, policy-makers improve the legitimacy of decision-making (Bressers et al., 2018; OECD, 2017).

In Western settings, advisory bodies are diverse in structure and operation, but they all share a similar aim to study problems and then offer recommendations to policymakers. In most cases, their decisions are non-binding, and policymakers have the discretion to either accept or reject councils' recommendations. The government institutionalizes the advisory bodies as councils, public research institutes, think tanks, and ad hoc commissions (Bressers et al., 2018). They are neither fully inside nor outside the government (Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; Halligan, 1995). Many policy advisory bodies are financed and staffed by the government; this is why there is a trade-off between advisory bodies' autonomy and state control (Bressers et al., 2018). The distinguishing feature of Western advisory bodies is that apart from civil servants and the general public, they predominantly include experts and representatives of academia. Advisory bodies may act as "legitimizers" that enable policymakers to adopt the pre-determined decisions under the guise of scientific justification; or they act as "knowledge brokers" providing policy alternatives to policymakers; or they may act as "policy entrepreneurs" by providing new policy solutions to challenging issues (Averchenkova et al., 2021).

Developing countries adopt participatory mechanisms and advisory councils for various reasons. Due to accelerated technological change and globalization, countries of the Global South are introducing different participatory institutions (Morgenbesser, 2020; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Another reason is New Public Management (NMP)-style reforms; this is particularly true in China and Russia, where democratic institutions are legitimized by referring to global economic competitiveness. Developing countries introduced participatory mechanisms to increase the effectiveness of governance (Owen & Bindman, 2019; Owen, 2017; Owen, 2020), which serves to downsize the ineffective Soviet-era bureaucracy in Russia (Owen & Bindman, 2019).

Non-democratic regimes introduced consultative-advisory bodies to consult professionals, experts, and citizens in policy advice. However, such bodies' operations

and membership are controlled by the government and may exclude critical advice in some instances (Li & Dunlop, 2019). In China, advisory committees are presumably comprised of experts and professionals rather than general citizens. Thus, in the literature, they are called Expert Advisory committees of China (Li, 2021; Zheng et al., 2010). The Chinese government prefers “scientific-based decision-making” rather than “democratic decision-making” (Li, 2021; Zheng et al., 2010). In Malaysia and Singapore, they are named deliberation councils, which include private sector representatives apart from civil society and citizens. The key to the deliberation process in Southeast Asian advisory councils is the unanimity principle and the principle of non-attribution¹ (Campos & Gonzales, 1999; Lim, 1998).

Similarly, Russia also introduced a consultative-advisory body in 2005, namely, the public chambers. Soon after that, other post-Soviet states, such as Kazakhstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, introduced similar consultative bodies. Russian public chambers aim to monitor the operations of executive agencies and engage in consultation regarding the legislative processes (Evans, 2010). As an extension of public chambers in regions, public councils were established in the Russian Federation from 2005 to 2014 (Orlova & Sokolova, 2017).

Russian consultative bodies intervene on behalf of citizens in particular issues, some of which are off-limits for open discussion, and some others encourage the public chamber to be more outspoken, so the effectiveness of this institution depends on the nature of social issues (Evans, 2010). Genuine debate is only permitted on issues that do not challenge Putin’s “power vertical” in Russia (Owen & Bindman, 2019). Moreover, its performance depends on the commission chairman’s resources, interests, energy, and organizational skills (Richter, 2009a). Additionally, consultative bodies’ performance depends on informal authority and on how chamber members interact with each other, local officials, and social organizations (Richter, 2009b).

Several consultative advisory bodies in Russia have demonstrated progress in fulfilling their functions. The Public Monitoring Commission (Russia) for prisons, which acts as a consultative body, oversees the conditions in places of detention and makes recommendations to the state authorities for improving those conditions. Despite the less committed colleagues loyal to the state, the social activist members of public monitoring commissions could contribute to small social changes (Owen, 2015). Similarly, the Public Chamber in the Novgorod region enhanced public participation, and local authorities “took their inputs very seriously” (Petro, 2001, p.234). It is hard to show considerable success, but the Murmansk regional Public Chamber resolved many minor social problems (Stuvøy, 2014). In a similar vein, Owen and Bindman (2019) suggest that despite the controlling nature of the state, the participatory mechanisms offered an opportunity for civic groups to influence policy outcomes (e.g., improvement of prison conditions, conservation of city architecture, liberalization of NGO law in 2009, etc.). In some circumstances, their inputs can shape the direction of reforms (Owen & Bindman, 2019). However, small in scope, PCs in Russia provide opportunities for critical voices to be heard and bring some changes (McCarthy et al., 2020). Tatarstan’s PCs investigated the deaths of detainees as a result of police

¹ It ensures that policy recommendations are not attributed to any group

torture, after that, it published a critical report on police practices, a success story by Tatarstan's PCs (McCarthy et al., 2020).

Other scholars point to the limited effectiveness of PCs in Russia. In the case of Saint-Petersburg's (Russia) PCs, Sungurov et al. (2020) conclude that they have a weak impact on policy-making processes due to a lack of feedback from authorities, a deficiency in resources, lack of openness of PCs, and incapability to influence the current agenda. Other limitations relate to ineffective and non-transparent selection processes (Richter, 2009a), biased accountability, and a lack of obligation either to the general citizenry or to the selected body. The most powerful and experienced civil society representatives are not included in the public chamber (Belokurova, 2010). In addition, the public chamber aims to recruit members who are peaceful and loyal to the state (Owen, 2015).

In the Central Asian context, public councils were introduced in Kazakhstan in 2016, Tajikistan in 1998, and Uzbekistan in 2018 (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Yuldoshev, 2021). These consultative-advisory institutions operate under executive bodies, their decision is non-binding, and mainly consist of civil society representatives and civil servants, while PC members' participation is voluntary (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Yuldoshev, 2021; Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Knox & Janenova, 2018). Some studies found limited effectiveness of PCs in Kazakhstan (Knox & Janenova, 2018), while other research reveals positive outcomes produced by public councils (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Makulbayeva et al., 2024). Furthermore, some studies examine public councils of Central Asian countries from comparative perspectives (Davletbayeva & Zagrebin, 2024). However, there is a dearth of research exploring the performance of Kyrgyz public councils. Given the plausible political conditions created in Kyrgyzstan before it turned to authoritarian rule in 2022, it is interesting to examine the Kyrgyz public councils and identify the key factors that contribute to their effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study research design because case studies are crucial in examining phenomena that are socially embedded in the political and social environment (Yin, 2018; George & Bennett, 2005). Moreover, a case study is helpful in revealing causal mechanisms and approaching the research question through various data sources such as primary data, secondary data, and observations (Yin, 2017). The case study method is appropriate for this study, because public councils operate under executive bodies of Kyrgyzstan while incorporating different actors from a wide variety of sectors such as civil society, think tanks, quasi-government bodies, and civil service. Kyrgyzstan was selected as a unique country case because it was defined as a "highly defective democracy" by Bertelsmann Transformation Index (Knox & Janenova, 2018), before turning to the authoritarian trajectory in 2022. This indicates that the country provided supportive conditions for the operation of democratic institutions and participatory mechanisms before 2022.

This inquiry applies the framework developed by Abelson et al. (2003), that includes the following four criteria: representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes. These criteria are designed for the evaluation of public participation processes,

including those at PCs. During interviews and focus groups, the participants were asked questions related to those four criteria. Focus group and interview questions included: 1. Legitimacy and fairness of the selection process. What factors influence it? 2. The degree of inputs into agenda-setting by public council members. What are the determining factors for that? 3. Access to information. 4. How did PCs make an impact on social problem resolution, and did their inputs influence final outcomes? What factors impact it? While applying Abelson et al.'s (2003) framework (representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes), this study puts a primary focus on the factors that allow for meeting these four criteria, which in turn contribute to public council effectiveness.

The data collection was conducted by using primary data such as focus groups and interviews with (ex)public council members of Kyrgyzstan. The focus group is effective as it allows the researchers to observe norms and patterns through group dynamics during the focus group discussion (Morgan, 1997; Krueger, 2014). An online focus group with 15 participants was conducted in October 2024. Participants were ex-public council members and active civil society representatives who interacted frequently with public councils. The selection criteria included purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2002). Focus group respondents (N=15) were asked four questions related to PC effectiveness and factors that determine its performance. In addition to focus groups, the authors also conducted a follow-up interview (N=6) with selected PC members. Interview and focus group questions, as well as the data collection program, have been discussed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of Kazakhstan. All ethical requirements, such as the informed consent form and anonymity of respondents, have been assured during the data collection. Interviews and focus groups were carried out in Russian. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour, whereas the focus group lasted for about one hour. Although data saturation was reached during the focus group, the authors conducted an additional 6 interviews with the aim to clarify questions related to civil society capacity and horizontal networks.

In addition to focus group and interview data, this study also uses secondary data such as academic literature, policy documents, reports, legal documents, and datasets from the World Bank and Varieties of Democracy. Data triangulation helps to improve the quality of findings and improve academic rigor. Triangulation increases the credibility of research findings (Denzin, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The collected data have been transcribed and analyzed manually. The data have been coded, and three thematic topics (three factors that impact public council effectiveness) have emerged as an outcome. These are further discussed in the findings part of this article. To improve the analysis, the inter-coder technique has been employed. Finally, this study may have the following limitations. As it relies on qualitative data, its findings have analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2017). Also, due to the timeframe of public council operation in Kyrgyzstan (2014-2024), some respondents may not have accurate data, their judgments and perceptions on public council effectiveness might be biased.

FINDINGS

The criteria for representation and procedural rules. The Presidential Decree on the creation of Public Supervisory Councils in 2010 established the basis for public councils, which came into place by the law on Public councils of state bodies in 2014 (Law on public councils, 2014). Interestingly, members of the public supervisory councils designed the first draft of the law on public councils. Public councils carry out their activities on a voluntary basis, and their decision are non-binding.

PCs were formed by the commission consisting of 15 members, which in turn was formed by five representatives from state bodies and ten representatives from civil society. The most appealing part is that the election of ten representatives from civil society was conducted based on democratic principles. Voting to elect civil society members of the Commission proceeded through an anonymous ballot where each applicant admitted to the competition from civil society, with the voting rights, wrote 20 names for election to the Commission. Consequently, the most listed applicants entered the commission (Law on public councils, 2014). According to the Law on public councils of Kyrgyzstan, PCs were mainly from civil society, and only the commission that forms the public councils was represented 1/3 from state bodies.

Another distinguishing feature of public councils is collaboration with international agencies, including UNDP, horizontal partnership with media and other civil society organizations (Respondent #8, focus group). For example, UNDP had a close partnership with public councils with an aim to enhance their capacity (UNDP, 2014). The partnership with international agencies was permitted by the law. Article 5, point 4 states: public councils can involve in their work representatives of domestic and international expert and scientific organizations, as well as individual specialists (Law on public councils, 2014). Yet another distinguishing feature of representation at PCs was related to the inclusion of the youth. PCs allowed young people to enter their commissions and gain experience. The PC members encouraged the youth to join the public councils later on. In the beginning, many council members were of near retirement age, and they focused on attracting more local youth. Recently, young people have increasingly joined, and a lot of interesting work has been done (Respondent 4, focus group). Finally, to ensure a better gender representation, PCs are formed with no more than 70 percent of their members of one gender (Law on public councils, 2014). Diverse representation and inclusion of the youth, as well as engagements with international donors, contributed to PC effectiveness.

Criteria for information. According to focus group and semi-structured interview findings, public councils were transparent. Indeed, PCs had a common website separate from state bodies, www.osgo.kg, which is still active to date. It encompasses public councils' data related to annual reports, events, public discussions, meeting minutes, and other resources (Respondent #2, focus group). The website was free from state interference and was funded by civil society organizations. Public councils were open to the general public. PC meetings (*zasedaniya*) were open to the public and could be freely attended by citizens, representatives of civil society organizations, and the media (Law on public councils, 2014). Although state bodies were obliged to share information with PCs (except for secret data), focus group participants criticized the state bodies for their unwillingness to share the requested data on certain occasions (respondent #13, focus group).

Criteria for outcomes. According to focus group and interview findings, some public councils in Kyrgyzstan demonstrated good effectiveness, for example, the public council under the Healthcare Ministry of Kyrgyzstan. Their inputs contributed to reforms, determined the agenda, and resolved socially significant issues. For example, PC members initiated the introduction of the state social order in the agency of youth affairs. Public council members' recommendations related to openness and transparency of public procurement in state bodies have been approved. Also, the transparency of the state budget at the national level has been improved, and international indices confirm this progress. By the involvement of public council members under the Ministry of Healthcare of Kyrgyzstan, a corruption case related to the anti-tuberculosis drug Cycloserin (budget accounted for USD 300 000) has been disclosed, a criminal case was initiated against the employees of the National Center for Physiology of Kyrgyzstan (Respondent #5, focus group).

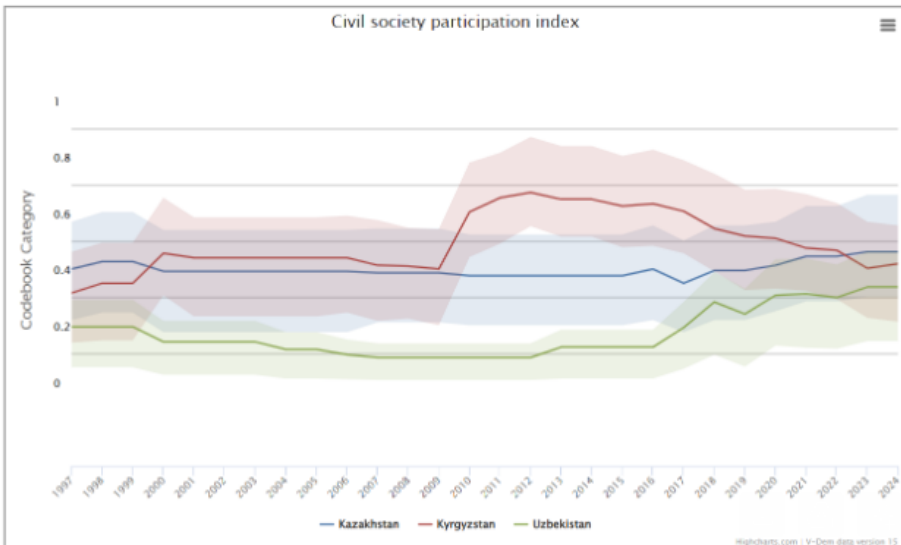
There were more results achieved by PCs. The proposal of the public council under the Minister of Finance was supported by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, and as a result, Kyrgyzstan joined the Open Government Partnership in 2017. (Respondent #11, focus group). This allowed the local civil society to have access to state information and promote other consultative channels in the country. Moreover, another outcome achieved was related to the budget of state bodies. During the pandemic, after reviewing the 2020 budget of the Kyrgyz Republic and substantiating their proposals, the public councils were able to reduce the expenditures of the Jogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyz Parliament), the Office of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Office of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, and ministries and departments by 6,266.3 million soms (Respondent #11, focus group).

To ensure that these four criteria were upheld, public council effectiveness has been driven by a complex of factors such as political will and support on the part of the national government, availability of social capital (i.e., mutual trust and networking), and a comparatively strong civil society in this country. Not a single factor, but a combination of these factors, along with internal group dynamics and resources provided by international agencies, as well as the state, had a huge impact on PC effectiveness.

The first factor worth noting is the political support or will of the executive branch. Before 2022, the country had often been depicted as an “island of democracy in Central Asia” (Jargalsaikhan, 2019), in which various democratic reforms and institutions had been experimented. Some PCs enjoyed a conducive political environment (e.g., the Ministry of Healthcare, Ministry of Finance), senior state officials did not constrain the PC activities, and demonstrated openness and willingness to collaborate (Interview, respondent #3). The focus group participants noted that the state treated them as equal partners and granted certain discretion before the change of political course in 2022. This finding is well aligned with OECD's statement that participatory governance is most effective when there is support from political leaders (OECD, 2017; Bressers et al., 2018). For instance, Prime Minister Sooronboi Dzhheenbekov attended the annual meeting on “Evaluation of interaction between state bodies and public councils in 2016” and called state bodies for openness and collaboration with these consultative bodies (Cabarasia, 2016).

The second mostly-mentioned factor is related to the strength of civil society in Kyrgyzstan. The presence of a comparatively independent civil society with alternative sources of funding and international donors made a huge difference. Given the rapid improvements of information-communication technologies and increased access to the internet, public councils can easily challenge corruption cases and mismanagement of state resources (Respondent #10, focus group). There were independent media actors in the country. Traditionally, Kyrgyzstan allowed more space for civil society and its participation in political issues (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2014) (Figure 1). As we can see on Figure 1, the civil society participation index is much higher in Kyrgyzstan compared to other Central Asian countries, particularly before 2022.

Figure 1. Civil society participation index for Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries

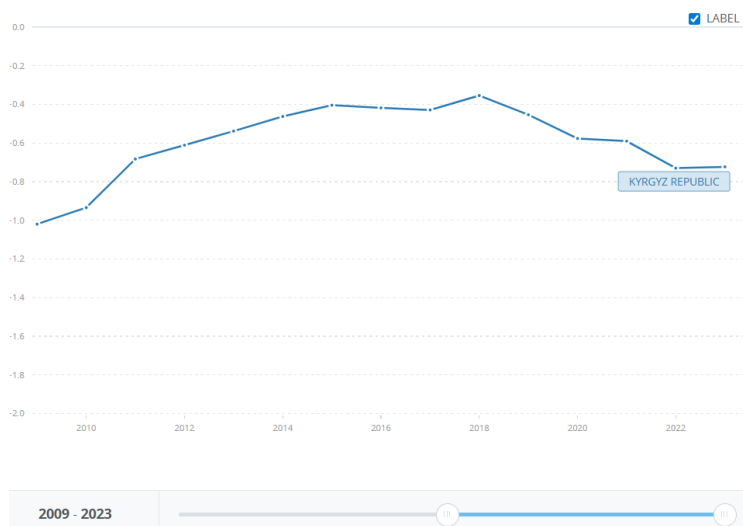


Source: *Varieties of democracies, 2024*

According to interviews and focus group findings, some public council members were very experienced with strong civic skills like monitoring state bodies, effective communication of popular needs, and strong horizontal networks. This finding is aligned with the data drawn from the World Bank, 2022 (Figure 2). Voice and accountability measures to what extent citizens and civil society can participate in state affairs and select their government, freedom of the press, media, and freedom of association. This index ranges from -2.5 (poor) to 2.5 (effective). Kyrgyzstan reached -0.4 in 2018 (Figure 2), declining afterwards. This is the most impressive achievement on voice and accountability in Central Asia. For example, Uzbekistan saw merely -1.8 in 2018, which was the highest result demonstrated by this country. This data is consistent with our argument that civil society in Kyrgyzstan enjoyed freedom of the press and media, freedom of association to a certain extent, and allowed a space to participate in

state affairs before 2022, meaning that public council members enjoyed this pleasant political context during the operation of public councils from 2014 to 2024.

Figure 2. Voice and accountability, Kyrgyzstan



Source: World Bank, 2022

The following factor that contributes to the effectiveness of the Kyrgyz public councils relates to social capital. Traditions of mutual assistance, interpersonal trust, and networking in horizontal associations are the core dimensions of social capital (Putnam et al., 1993). According to Putnam et al. (1993), horizontal networks, reciprocity, and interpersonal trust are important for civic skills and engagement with state officials. Interview findings suggest that public council members from the most effective public councils (like the public council of the Ministry of Healthcare in the Kyrgyz Republic) used their horizontal networks. It is insufficient to offer recommendations to state bodies, but rather it is required to pursue its resolution through approaching various institutions like the prosecutor's office, national government, courts, and social media (Interview, respondent #5). Members of effective public councils utilized their networks in the media and other horizontal associations in order to resolve social problems. That said, working within public councils was insufficient, but rather active engagement with various actors like courts, the prosecutor's office, and civil society organizations was crucial. According to the report by Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2024), although in general social capital is not high in Kyrgyzstan, civil society members have "social problem related" social capital, meaning that civil society can self-mobilize spontaneously around a common interest. In line with this, interview respondents argue that civil society representatives and public council members were in close connection and peer-to-peer partnership on the resolution of certain issues were the cornerstone of public council performance (Respondent # 7, focus group).

In sum, public council effectiveness depends on many factors, three major ones discussed in this research. Political support and openness of state bodies make the

public council inputs useful and impactful. The strength of civil society and social capital are the key drivers of public council performance.

DISCUSSIONS

Literature on open government institutions and participatory bodies in Central Asia (Kurmanov & Knox, 2024; Janenova & Kurmanov, 2025) views consultative bodies as symbolic or ineffective, criticizing them for regime legitimization purposes. That body of literature sees consultative bodies as homogeneous, implying that all types of participatory bodies exhibit limited effectiveness. This literature does not differentiate across types, levels, and intensities of interaction with state bodies. In our study, we attempted to focus on a single case, the Kyrgyz public councils, and explored what factors might impact its effectiveness. Findings demonstrate that not all public councils are apathetic and ineffective, but rather selected public councils (e.g., public councils under the Healthcare Ministry) showed progress and had an impact on reforms. This finding is consistent with research on Russian public councils and public chambers (Owen & Bindman, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2020; Owen, 2015). Owen and Bindman (2019) claim that the consultative bodies in Russia offered an opportunity for civic groups to influence policy outcomes like the improvement of prison conditions. Although small in scope, public councils of Russia offer opportunities for critical voices to be heard and bring some changes (McCarthy et al., 2020). Tatarstan's PCs investigated the deaths of detainees as a result of police torture, after that, it published a critical report on police practices, a success story by Tatarstan's public councils (McCarthy et al., 2020). Likewise, Makulbayeva et al. (2024) present several cases related to public councils of Kazakhstan, which brought positive changes in cemetery maintenance in the Western part of Kazakhstan and water pipeline construction in Northern Kazakhstan. Similarly, Janenova and Knox (2018) provide a case related to public transportation in Astana city of Kazakhstan, that has been improved by the inputs of public council recommendations and public discussions.

Earlier studies that examine public council effectiveness in Central Asian countries identified several key factors, such as a deficiency of resources and the role of the state (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Knox & Janenova, 2018). In addition, this study examines the role of civil society capacity, social capital, and political will of the national government. This finding contributes to knowledge generation in a broader sense. It is a false assumption to treat such participatory bodies as ineffective without subjecting them to examination. States in developing countries also face challenges of ineffective government and limited budgets. By introducing such consultative bodies, they gather information, the state monitors social moods, and resolves socially significant problems. Additionally, such type of collaboration with citizens and civil society is not new for post-Soviet countries, because these countries practiced different types of councils and the Leninist notion of workers' control over the state and post-Stalinist *narodniy kontrol'* established foundations for state-society interaction (Owen, 2016). This implies that public councils see some continuation of citizen and civil society participation in state affairs from Soviet practices. By exploring their performance in-depth and identifying the driving factors, this study furthered the scholarly debate on participatory bodies in the Central Asian context and offered novel insights.

Similar to public councils in other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyz public councils' decisions were non-binding, advisory, and council members' participation was based on a voluntary basis. However, Kyrgyz PCs were distinguished by diverse representation. The democratic election procedure whereby applicants from civil society vote for Commission members is a novel approach that offered an opportunity to the most active civil society representatives to enter. Another feature worth noting is the gender parity and inclusion of the youth in public councils. Finally, the Kyrgyz government legally allowed the public councils to cooperate with foreign donors and experts, which also contributed to diverse stakeholder contributions to its effectiveness. These practices can be partially adopted by other Central Asian countries with an aim to enhance their effectiveness in their societies.

This study also provides practical implications for policymakers, particularly for those countries where public councils are functioning and undergoing reforms. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan can learn from the successful public councils of Kyrgyzstan. By offering more space and training in civic skills, public council members can serve as partners of national governments, especially at sub-national levels. There is a high transaction cost for national governments to monitor the implementation of strategic programs and agendas on the ground.

CONCLUSION

This study examines Kyrgyzstan's public councils, which functioned from 2014 to 2024, and reveals the factors that influenced their performance. This inquiry applies the framework developed by Abelson et al. (2003), including four criteria: representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes. These criteria are designed for the evaluation of public participation processes. Findings show that to fulfill requirements on representation, fair procedural rules, access to information, and influence of public council members' voices on outcomes, three conditions should be met. The political will of the government and openness to public council inputs are the key factors. Selected line ministries of Kyrgyzstan were open to inputs of public councils and did not impose constraints on their operation, which in turn increased public council effectiveness. Also, the strength of civil society played an essential role. Independent media and active civil society representatives joined the public councils in Kyrgyzstan to bring changes to reforms. Finally, social capital and horizontal relationships at the society level also contribute to public councils' performance. These findings demonstrate that, given plausible conditions and resources, public councils in Central Asia can demonstrate effective performance. Public councils of Kyrgyzstan were distinguished by its inclusive representation of the youth and ensuring gender parity as well as by its close collaboration with international experts.

FUNDING

This research was funded by the grant offered by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Kazakhstan, AP 23490980, Modernization of the activities of public councils in Central Asia as a mechanism for increasing transparency and accountability of government bodies.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

GM: investigation and writing; ZD: theoretical framework and methodology; MD: writing, reviewing, and editing; LR: data collection and resources.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the editors of the *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Dr. Kosherbayeva and Dr. Aldiyarova, for their constructive comments and support. The authors also appreciate the valuable feedback provided by two anonymous reviewers.

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