

Constructing Digital Citizen Empowerment in Central Asia? Investigating cases of Participatory Budgeting in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Digitalization of government and the introduction of Open Government has emerged as omnipresent reform across developed and developing countries. While these reforms are introduced to enhance government effectiveness and business-like efficiency among public service providers, more attention needs to be given to its empowerment promise through increased participation of citizens. Participatory budgeting (PB), as a democratic innovation reform, is supposed to bolster citizen participation in decision-making regarding budget priorities directly. This article, which draws on an extensive review of the empirical data and secondary sources, investigates the cases of PB initiatives introduced recently in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This work finds that PB strengthens administrative efficiency while serving the political logic of transforming participation in a non-threatening way for authoritarian regimes. Autocracies design PB as the limited "deliberative" participatory practice aiming to promote cooperation between citizens and the regime while constructing controlled citizen empowerment.