

## Social capital and performance of public councils in Kazakhstan

*Makulbayeva Gulnur*

*The Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan*

*Davletbayeva Zhuldyz*

*The Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan*

*Yerlan Abil*

*Academy of Public Administration under the President of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan*

**Abstract:** Kazakhstan has embraced new governance institutions over the recent decades, one of them being state-sanctioned public councils (PC). They were established in 2016 under the Law on Public councils of Kazakhstan (No. 383-V.) with the aim of monitoring and consulting public organizations through the participation of citizens, civil society and state representatives. PCs monitor state bodies' service delivery in education, healthcare, communal service, and pension system; services which affect the quality of life and well-being of citizens. Council members have raised social problems in various policy domains and brought social changes in public transportation, ecology and agriculture (Shaukenova, 2017).

Academic literature raises concerns on PCs' performance due to the low transparency, autonomy, and duplication of local representative bodies' functions (Knox and Janenova, 2018). Previous studies, largely explain PC performance through endogenous factors such as resources and the role of local state bodies (Shaukenova, 2017; Knox and Janenova, 2018). This study adds cultural perspectives on our understanding of PCs' performance and applies social capital for that purpose. Specifically, I examined the relationship between social capital and the effectiveness of PCs. Social capital refers to "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam 1993, p.167). Putnam claims that higher stock of social capital (social trust, networks, and norms) has a positive impact on institutional performance.

There has been some research on origins of social capital in Central Asia (Radnitz et al., 2009), negative social capital based on clan networks (Kazantsev, 2015), the role of traditional forms of social capital for the community sustainability (Darmenova and Koo, 2021), and research that examines the relationship between social capital and subjective well-being (Kudebayeva et al., 2022). However, no one has looked at the relationship between social capital and institutional performance in the Central Asian context. This study fills the gap in the literature by examining the relationship between social capital and public council performance in the authoritarian context of Kazakhstan through addressing the question on "How does social capital impact PCs' performance in Kazakhstan?"

This qualitative inquiry draws on semi-structured interviews with council and civil society representatives (N=60), surveys the council members (N=60), archival work and non-participant observations of council working routines and meetings with state bodies in four regional councils. As public councils aim to express citizens' opinion on socially significant problems, this inquiry measures PC effectiveness through examining the councils' impact on social issues in various policy domains. On the other hand, the study measures the social capital according to Putnam and employs three components – cooperation norms, formal networking in intermediate organizations, social trust. Findings show that social trust and cooperation norms positively influence public council effectiveness, however, networking does not. This is explained by the state-led feature of formal networking in PCs, which include the state-led membership in horizontal associations (e.g. voluntary organizations) and affiliation of members with quasi-state organizations.