

Citizen-State Communication through Kazakhstani Public Councils: Balancing Traditional and Innovative Channels

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ABSTRACT

Interaction between the state and citizens is a key component of any system of public administration and is carried out through various communication channels. In a rapidly changing contemporary environment, traditional forms of communication are increasingly complemented and replaced by innovative ones. The aim of this article is to examine the local experience of citizen–state communication in Kazakhstan through the case of Public Councils under state bodies, functioning as advisory structures created through a top-down approach and are intended to enhance citizen participation in decision-making processes. The study employs a qualitative research design based on the analysis of empirical data obtained through interviews and a focus group with representatives of civil society and current members of Public Councils operating under state bodies in Kazakhstan. The case of Public Councils demonstrates the hybrid nature of communication methods used in their activities. At the same time, the potential of these methods is unevenly realized and largely depends on the initiative of individual council members as well as the institutional conditions under which the councils operate.

Key words: public councils, digital tools, participation, communication channels, innovative approach

Introduction

Communication between citizens and the state is one of the key elements of the functioning of modern democratic systems and effective public administration. Through various channels of interaction, state institutions obtain information about the needs and expectations of society, while citizens have the opportunity to express their interests, participate in the discussion of political decisions, and monitor the activities of public authorities. In the public administration literature, such forms of interaction are considered an important mechanism for increasing transparency, accountability, and the legitimacy of governance (Fung, 2006; Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015; Michels and De Graaf, 2017). Well-established communication channels enable the state to identify social problems in a timely manner, adjust policies, and improve the quality of decision-making.

In recent decades, the forms of communication between citizens and the state have undergone significant transformation. Alongside traditional formats of interaction, such as public hearings, face-to-face meetings, and public consultations, digital channels of participation have been rapidly developing, including social media, online platforms for citizen appeals, and

electronic consultation tools. The development of digital technologies has expanded opportunities for citizen participation in discussions of public policy by enabling the involvement of broader segments of the population and creating new forms of feedback between state institutions and society (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013; Naranjo-Zolotov et al, 2019). As a result, the contemporary system of state–citizen interaction is characterized by a combination of traditional and digital communication channels, the effectiveness of which largely depends on the institutional context, the availability of technologies, and the level of citizen engagement.

The institution of Public Councils in Kazakhstan is legally established as a mechanism for public participation and public oversight within central and local government bodies and operates within the legal framework of the relevant law (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015). In practical terms, public councils represent a boundary institution between civil society and the state. They simultaneously receive civic signals (problems, complaints, and proposals) and produce governance outputs (recommendations, opinions, public expertise, and monitoring). Researchers studying the functioning of public councils in Kazakhstan generally point to the formal nature of these structures and their limited real influence. Although their effectiveness is constrained by both legal and institutional factors (Knox and Janenova, 2018; Makulbayeva and Sharipova, 2025; Makulbayeva and Sharipova, 2026), they nevertheless represent an important attempt by the state to expand citizen participation.

Kazakhstan has been developing digital channels of citizen–state interaction. These include the eOtinish service for submitting official appeals and tracking the status of their consideration (including the evaluation of response quality and complaints about implementation), the Open NPAs portal for the public discussion of draft legal acts with the publication of government responses and statistics on public comments (Kosherbayeva and Kylbayev, 2025), as well as the unified portal Kazkenes.kz, which serves as a platform providing information on the activities of public councils and as a point of contact for citizens wishing to address them (Absimetov et al, 2025). At the same time, a number of studies point to the weakness of communicative competencies among civil servants in Kazakhstan and the existence of persistent challenges in this area (Iskindirova et al, 2024).

At the international level, digital participation and the “digital contact” between citizens and the state are increasingly viewed as key components of the digital state and public trust (UN, 2024), as well as part of broader open government policies (OECD, 2025). However, research emphasizes that technologies alone do not guarantee meaningful citizen influence on decision-making; their effects depend on the design of participatory processes, the existence of “closed feedback loops,” and institutional accountability (for example, typologies of co-production and “we-government,” as well as mechanisms of influence in eParticipation) (Linders, 2012).

Within this context, it becomes necessary to examine how innovative communication channels between citizens and government are used in practice. To address this, the study explores the case of public councils operating within central and local government bodies in Kazakhstan.

Research question: How does the use of traditional and innovative communication channels by public councils in Kazakhstan affect the effectiveness of citizen–state interaction, and what factors shape their patterns of use in practice?

In this context, communication is understood as the set of institutional and digital channels that enable information exchange, feedback, and dialogue between citizens and government bodies. The article examines how public councils in Kazakhstan facilitate contact between citizens and government bodies through both traditional and digital communication channels, and which innovations (online platforms, social media, messenger applications, streaming, and feedback portals) are actually used in practice or remain largely at the level of ideas. In doing so, the study contributes to the understanding of innovative practices of interaction between government and civil society, their effectiveness, the barriers they face, and potential directions for their further development.

Literature Review

In scholarly literature on citizen–state interaction, it is emphasized that citizen participation in public governance is implemented through a variety of communication channels. These channels include both traditional forms of interaction—such as public meetings, consultations, and participation through mass media—and more recent digital participation tools, including social media, online feedback platforms, and electronic petitions or appeals systems. Such a multi-channel approach reflects a shift from one-way information dissemination toward more complex models of dialogue and joint discussion of public policy (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015).

A traditional channel of communication is face-to-face meetings and public hearings. In public administration, they are considered a fundamental mode of communication that ensures the visible inclusiveness of decision-making processes (Williamson, 2014). Such meetings typically involve direct physical participation, substantive engagement (exchange of opinions, discussion of specific cases), and the collection of feedback (surveys, written comments).

Face-to-face interaction between citizens and public officials is viewed by Bartels (2015) as a key form of engagement within participatory democracy, the effectiveness of which depends on communicative capacity and the flexibility to understand the specific context of ongoing discussions. For public institutions (administrations, parliaments), organizing in-person meetings and public hearings can serve to legitimize decisions and “maintain a bridge of trust” between the state and society (Fung, 2006). For citizens, such interactions provide opportunities for direct voice, enabling them to articulate their concerns, receive immediate feedback from decision-makers, and influence agenda-setting processes.

At the same time, several limitations of face-to-face communication are widely noted, including limited and unrepresentative participation, procedural formalism, and low engagement from so-called “quiet” groups of the population (Williamson, 2014). Participants in face-to-face meetings are often individuals with higher levels of education, those who have previously

participated in similar activities, or those already demonstrating political or civic engagement, which tends to reduce the diversity of participants (Michels and De Graaf, 2017).

In recent years, traditional face-to-face forms of interaction between the state and citizens have increasingly been complemented by hybrid and fully online formats of public meetings, consultations, and hearings. The development of digital technologies and electronic participation platforms has expanded opportunities for citizens to engage in discussions of public policy regardless of physical presence. In the academic literature, such practices are viewed as part of the broader concept of e-participation, which involves the use of internet platforms and digital tools to involve citizens in processes of discussion and decision-making (Benlahcene et al., 2024).

Studies show that electronic forms of participation can significantly broaden communication channels between the state and society by enabling the collection of proposals, discussion of draft decisions, and the formation of feedback in an online environment (Naranjo-Zolotov et al, 2019). At the same time, these formats are not without their weaknesses, including formal or superficial participation, reduced depth of discussion, and various technical challenges (Lu et al, 2026).

One of the infrastructures enabling remote participation is e-government. In many countries, official portals have been created for submitting citizen appeals and conducting public consultations. An example is the electronic appeals system e-Otinish, which allows citizens to submit complaints or requests to government bodies on various issues (Kurmanov et al., 2024). This initiative has been implemented in Kazakhstan as part of a broader e-government and citizen-centric approach in public administration (Bokayev et al, 2021). Despite the widespread adoption of such communication channels worldwide, public institutions continue to face a number of challenges related to obtaining feedback on the quality and effectiveness of public services (Benlahcene et al, 2024).

Another important digital trend in state–citizen communication is the growing role of social media, which in recent years has become one of the most actively used channels of public interaction between government institutions and society. Unlike traditional media, social networks enable more rapid and interactive communication, allowing government bodies to disseminate information, respond to citizens’ requests, and receive feedback almost in real time.

Research shows that public institutions increasingly use social media platforms as a tool of public communication aimed at improving transparency, informing the population, and involving citizens in discussions of public policy (Graham et al., 2015). Social media are also viewed as a mechanism for expanding citizen participation, as they allow individuals to express their opinions directly, comment on decisions, and engage in public debates without traditional institutional intermediaries (Bonsón et al, 2017).

At the same time, some scholars note that the use of social media by government bodies often remains primarily informational in nature, while the potential of these platforms for two-way dialogue and deeper citizen engagement is utilized to a lesser extent (Contri, Fissi and Gori, 2025). Thus, social media constitute an important digital communication channel between the

state and citizens, expanding opportunities for information dissemination and feedback; however, their effectiveness largely depends on whether they are used for genuine interaction or remain predominantly a tool for one-way communication.

A common channel of communication between citizens and the state is the submission of mass citizen appeals, including petitions, complaints, and collective statements. In political science, such mechanisms are considered one of the most accessible forms of political participation, enabling citizens to articulate their demands and signal existing problems to the state (Durso et al, 2018).

Research shows that petition systems create an institutionalized mechanism of feedback between society and the state, as civic engagement in this area largely depends on expectations regarding the response of public authorities (Magesan and Migrow, 2022). In the context of digitalization, these forms of participation have gained new momentum through online petition platforms, which allow citizens to mobilize public support and draw the attention of the state to social issues (Kim and Suh, 2024).

More broadly, complaint and petition systems are viewed as tools that enable governments to gather information about societal problems and serve as feedback channels that may contribute to adjustments in public policy (Chen, 2016).

Another communication channel frequently mentioned in the literature on citizen–state interaction is the mass media. Government institutions traditionally rely on media technologies primarily as a means of informing the public and shaping the public agenda. However, Esser and Strömbäck (2014) highlight the emergence of so-called “new media,” which allow citizens not only to consume information passively but also to respond to official sources and express alternative viewpoints across various digital media environments, thereby participating in the creation and dissemination of content. In this context, the authors define new media as a set of contemporary communication tools that differ from traditional media—such as print, radio, and television—by their digital nature and interactive capabilities.

The existing literature also describes alternative directions for the development of citizen–state communication, including deliberative formats of participation such as citizens’ assemblies, mini-publics, and citizens’ juries, as well as ICT-enabled legislative processes (Smith, 2009). These innovations are aimed at directly involving citizens in political decision-making and improving the quality of decisions through more in-depth public deliberation (OECD, 2020).

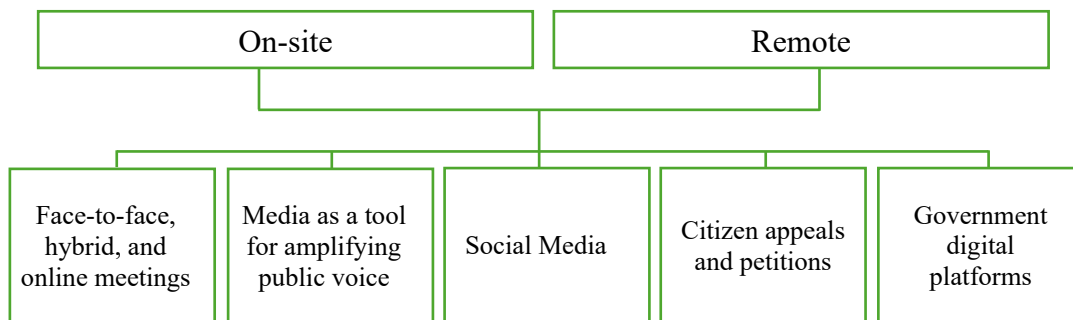
Overall, the channels discussed above form the infrastructure of state–citizen communication, providing multiple entry points for interaction between citizens and government institutions. However, the extent of their practical use and institutional effectiveness varies significantly depending on political and administrative contexts. This makes it important to empirically examine how different communication channels operate within specific institutional mechanisms of interaction between the state and society. In this article, one such mechanism is examined public councils.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design aimed at examining how public councils in Kazakhstan use different communication channels to facilitate interaction between citizens and government bodies. The analytical framework of the study is based on communication channels identified in the academic literature on citizen–state interaction, participatory governance, and e-participation (Figure 1). Drawing on these studies, the article identifies a set of key traditional and innovative communication channels and analyzes their presence, absence, and specific features within the activities of public councils in Kazakhstan.

The empirical basis of the qualitative analysis consists of field research conducted in 2024–2025. The data include in-depth interviews with representatives of the broader public and focus groups with members of public councils operating at both central and local levels in the Republic of Kazakhstan. In total, 20 participants took part in the in-depth interviews and 12 participants were involved in focus group discussions.

Figure 1: Key State-Citizens Communication Channels



Source: Authors

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach, facilitated through established civil society organizations engaged in civic participation in each country. These organizations included national-level NGOs with extensive experience in public oversight and participatory governance. Initial contact with respondents was made through these organizations, followed by recruitment on a voluntary basis and further expanded using snowball sampling, whereby participants suggested additional individuals with relevant expertise. The main inclusion criterion was practical experience with public councils, either as current or former members. A significant number of respondents were also recognized experts in their respective fields, reflecting the widespread involvement of experts in public councils’ activities. Particular emphasis was placed on selecting participants with substantial experience in public councils, as individuals without direct involvement were considered less able to provide informed assessments of internal processes, decision-making practices, and institutional constraints.

Purposive and snowball sampling are widely used in qualitative research to access information-rich participants with relevant experience, thereby enhancing the depth and contextual validity of findings (Noy, 2008). However, these approaches may introduce selection bias and limit the diversity of perspectives, as participants are often drawn from interconnected

networks and more engaged groups (Etikan et al, 2016). In this study, the sample largely consists of experienced participants, which can be characterized as a form of expert or elite-oriented sampling. Although this approach may underrepresent the views of less engaged participants, it allows for a more in-depth analysis of institutional practices.

The interviews and focus groups were designed to explore how public councils organize communication with citizens, which channels are used in practice, how frequently they are employed, and what barriers limit their effectiveness. Particular attention was paid to the use of digital and innovative channels, including social media platforms, online portals, messenger applications, and live-streaming formats.

To ensure analytical rigor, the empirical findings were interpreted in conjunction with a desk-based analysis of Kazakhstan's regulatory framework governing the activities of public councils and mechanisms of citizen participation. Relevant legislative and policy documents were reviewed to identify the formal institutional design of communication between public councils and citizens.

The combination of empirical data and desk research made it possible to classify the findings into several thematic groups corresponding to different types of communication channels and their practical implementation. The analysis focuses on identifying gaps between formally established mechanisms of citizen participation and the actual communication practices observed in the work of public councils.

This approach allows the study to assess not only the availability of communication channels but also their practical functionality, the barriers affecting their effectiveness, and the potential directions for improving citizen–state interaction within the institutional framework of public councils in Kazakhstan.

Results

Kazakhstani Public Councils' legal and institutional background

Public councils in Kazakhstan represent a case of a citizen participation initiative that is not unique in nature. Similar structures exist in many countries of Central Asia and across the post-Soviet space, for example, in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia (Pierobon, 2018; McCarthy, Stolerman and Tikhomirov, 2020), functioning as consultative and advisory bodies established to ensure the participation of civil society in governmental decision-making processes and to strengthen public oversight of state institutions.

The establishment of public councils became part of broader institutional reforms initiated under the Nation Plan “100 Concrete Steps,” in which one of the priorities was the development of mechanisms of public oversight and the expansion of citizen participation in public governance (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015). In furtherance of these initiatives, a special law was adopted in 2015 that defined the legal status, functions, procedures for formation, and main areas of activity of these bodies. The law established the key objective of public councils as ensuring the openness of government activities and incorporating the views of

civil society in the development and implementation of public policy (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015). This institution was further developed within the broader policy of modernization of the public administration system and the implementation of the concept of the “Listening State,” which aims to promote dialogue between the state and society and to enhance the transparency and accountability of public authorities (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019).

Institutionally, public councils are established under central government bodies as well as under local executive authorities (akimats) and quasi-governmental organizations. A distinctive feature of these bodies is their mixed composition, which includes both representatives of civil society and government officials; however, the majority of council members must represent the non-governmental sector. The main functions of public councils include discussing draft legal acts and government programs, conducting public hearings, reviewing reports of government bodies, and formulating recommendations on issues related to socio-economic development and the improvement of public services (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015).

According to the Law, members of public councils in Kazakhstan are selected on a competitive basis from among citizens by a specially established selection commission, which itself consists of members appointed through a competitive process. At the same time, public councils must comply with a parity requirement: at least two-thirds of their members are representatives of civil society, while one-third consists of representatives of the relevant government body or organization.

Thus, public councils serve as one of the key institutional mechanisms for involving civil society in public governance processes in Kazakhstan. Their establishment reflects the state’s efforts to institutionalize forms of public participation and to strengthen elements of open and accountable governance.

Empirical findings

The results of the research identified the following key directions in the development of communication practices within the activities of public councils in Kazakhstan.

Traditional communication channels vs. online meetings and streaming

According to the law, the primary form of activity of public councils is meetings, which are considered valid if at least two-thirds of the total number of members are present (Article 13, Law “On Public Councils”). At the same time, the law requires advance notification of participants about the time and place of public hearings (Article 21, Law “On Public Councils”). Thus, the format of participation is not formally regulated, and there is no prohibition on holding meetings in an online format.

According to empirical findings, face-to-face meetings and internal committee work are perceived as the key traditional communication channel, primarily serving as a space for “live” discussion and exerting pressure on government agencies. Focus group participants explicitly noted that offline interaction allows for a more dynamic exchange and increases the likelihood of achieving tangible results: *“This should definitely take place; it is no longer the pandemic, nothing can replace live communication and live discussions”* (Focus group participant No. 4). At the same time, traditional formats often encounter organizational shortcomings—such as

irregular meetings and the absence of gatherings for several months—which reduces the ability of councils to function as a stable communication channel: “*There was an attempt to gather everyone, but it didn’t work out*” (Focus group participant No. 11).

The online format of meetings, although considered a promising innovation in terms of expanding opportunities for participation regardless of distance and time constraints, was described by focus group participants as disappointing. One participant noted: “*Meetings must take place offline, with the possibility of joining online. What does online mean? No one sees anyone, and you can simply be disconnected*” (Focus group participant No. 4). Another case was mentioned where a government agency could use this format to its advantage: “*Unfortunately, the ministry takes advantage of this, and when sensitive questions are raised, connection problems tend to occur, since the meeting is streamed through Facebook...*” (Focus group participant No. 11).

Media as a tool for amplifying the public voice

Under Kazakhstan’s legislation, mass media are defined as periodical print publications, television and radio channels, and online media outlets (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). Formally, this law guarantees freedom of speech and creativity, as well as the right of everyone to freely receive and disseminate information by any means not prohibited by law. In addition, Article 4 of the Law establishes informing society as one of the main purposes of mass media. In practice, public councils use the institution of mass media both as a channel for informing the public and as a means of increasing pressure on government bodies.

For example, one interview participant emphasized that information about the activities of public councils is regularly covered through radio and television broadcasts (Respondent No. 5). However, the media channel remains unstable: in the case of the city of Almaty, it was noted that media representatives are “*regularly invited but do not attend regularly,*” which effectively shifts the responsibility for ensuring publicity onto the council members themselves (Respondent No. 16).

On the other hand, mass media are often mentioned in the logic of “*raising public attention if there is no feedback*” (Focus group participant No. 6). This idea was supported by another participant: “*This is done through public resonance, by raising issues through interaction with the media. Interaction with the media is the most effective lever*” (Focus group participant No. 10). Thus, the media function as a conduit for public resonance, exerting a significant influence within Kazakhstani society.

Social media

Since there is no specific law exclusively regulating social media, their regulation is carried out through legal provisions related to information, internet resources, personal data, and online platforms.

Interview and focus group participants noted the role of social media in covering the activities, agendas, and outcomes of public councils, as well as serving as a channel for self-organized communication between council members and their audiences. “*Members of the public councils share information about their activities on their social media accounts; all of this*

is available there” (Focus group participant No. 16). At the same time, the work in this area was described as lacking systematic organization: *“Everything happens individually and somewhat chaotically; some members may post information through their personal social media pages”* (Respondent No. 14). This suggests a relatively low level of digital literacy among some representatives of civil society involved in the activities of public councils.

Another interview participant emphasized that it is preferable not to engage in self-promotion on social media, but rather to address issues *“calmly and quietly, focusing on achieving results”* (Respondent No. 18). This highlights another aspect of social media activity—the potential to create the appearance of active work rather than producing substantive outcomes.

Nevertheless, some respondents expressed positive views regarding the opportunities provided by social media and internet-based resources. One interviewee noted that *“when a ministry needs comments, they contact a council member directly... through WhatsApp... to quickly provide an assessment,”* adding that *“despite the absence of a formal protocol, such communication allows current issues to be resolved more quickly”* (Respondent No. 1). Another strong local example was mentioned in the case of Almaty: *“In the city of Almaty, the selection process for public council members is transparent... everything is recorded and uploaded to YouTube... the interviews and then the voting process”* (Respondent No. 20). In another fragment, *“online broadcasting and live recording”* were also highlighted as elements contributing to procedural transparency (Respondent No. 4).

Thus, a gradual expansion in the use of digital tools and social media can be observed in the activities of public councils. These platforms are increasingly functioning not only as channels of information dissemination but also as instruments for enhancing procedural transparency and enabling more efficient communication among council members, government bodies, and citizens.

Mass citizen appeals and the state’s digital infrastructure

The implementation of the function of mass citizen appeals in Kazakhstan is carried out through a dedicated digital infrastructure of the state. This infrastructure can serve as an external interface for communication between citizens and the government.

The eOtinish (e-Appeal) portal for electronic appeals was launched in Kazakhstan in 2022 and has significantly simplified and automated the process of submitting citizen requests and complaints. Its functionality allows users to track the status of an appeal, the history of interactions, and the evaluation of responses (eOtinish Unified Platform for Citizen Appeals, n.d.). The platform integrates all government bodies and the procedures for handling appeals from individuals and legal entities into a single system, ensuring transparency, convenience, and monitoring of response deadlines.

The electronic petition mechanism was introduced as one of the instruments for expanding citizen participation in governmental decision-making and represents one of Kazakhstan’s achievements in advancing the principles of open government and the “Listening State.” Its legal basis is established in the relevant legislative act, which provides citizens with the opportunity to

submit collective appeals in the form of electronic petitions through the specialized digital platform ePetition (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020). The main principles underlying this instrument include transparency of procedures, equal access for citizens to participate, and the obligation of government bodies to consider a petition once it reaches the required support threshold.

Letters and petitions function as “external” traditional channels of civic pressure that can strengthen the position of public councils. One interview provides an example of high mobilization within the civil sector: *“The civil sector actively participated in the discussion of the law by sending more than 600,000 letters [to government bodies through public councils] regarding the draft law on the protection of the rights of women and children”* (Respondent No. 1). Another interview participant confirmed that *“a large number of letters, complaints, appeals, wishes, recommendations, and proposals are submitted to public councils”* (Respondent No. 13). Among other alternative channels of mass appeals, petitions were also mentioned: *“When issues are raised directly by citizens through petitions [through eOtinish, ePetition or handwritten] and questions that generate public resonance, recommendations tend to have the greatest influence on the councils”* (Respondent No. 14).

Another alternative channel for mass citizen appeals relevant to public councils is the Open NPAs portal (Legal Acts Information System, n.d.). Officially, this portal was created for publishing draft legal acts and facilitating their public discussion through a comment-based interface. Users can submit comments, remarks, and proposals, provided that they complete mandatory electronic authorization as individuals, and each comment undergoes moderation before publication.

For public councils, the Open NPAs portal represents a potential mechanism for expanding contact with citizens: councils could transform discussions of draft legal acts into structured consultations (collecting proposals, synthesizing feedback, and publishing public reports indicating whether comments were “accepted” or “not accepted”). However, empirical data show that this integration remains limited, appearing more as a general practice of participation rather than as an institutionalized function of public councils.

Another channel mentioned in the empirical data is the website of the public councils of Kazakhstan, Kazkenes.kz. This portal is presented as a resource where users can find information about the activities of public councils, contact them, and download relevant materials. Interviews indicate that “there is a unified information portal, but its operation requires further activation” (Respondents No. 6, No. 7). This represents an important marker: the infrastructure exists, but the demand from public councils to maintain and regularly update the information has not yet been institutionalized.

Table 1: Survey results: participation channels mentioned in interviews and focus groups

Channel / Instrument	Number of Mentions		Interpretation
	by Focus Groups Participants	by Interviewees	
Offline meetings	5	1	Important as a “more lively” format, but constrained by logistics and schedules
Online meetings	3	1	Risks of control/disconnection and connection problems are discussed
Zoom	0	1	A burden of “sitting in these Zoom meetings” and a decline in effectiveness are noted
WhatsApp	0	1	Used for operational requests and communications “without a formal protocol”
Social media (general)	2	10	Most frequently mentioned channel
Facebook	1	2	In the focus group: mentioned in the context of conducting meetings via Facebook and “connection problems”
Instagram	0	1	Occasional mention
YouTube	0	2	In interviews: the Almaty case – recording of procedures/interviews
Mass media (radio/TV)	3	8	A traditional channel of pressure, legitimization, and publicity
Kazkenes.kz portal	0	2	Viewed as an existing infrastructure with limited use, requiring greater activation by participants
eOtinish platform	0	1	Occasional mention
“Open Normative Legal Acts” portal / digital signature (EDS)	0	1	Occasional mention

Source: Authors

The overall structure of indicative references to participation channels is presented in Table 1.

The findings indicate that the communication practices of public councils in Kazakhstan are shaped at the intersection of traditional and innovative channels of interaction. While offline meetings and traditional mass media continue to play a significant role, there is a gradual expansion in the use of digital platforms, social media, and messenger applications, which enable more timely communication and increase the public visibility of council activities. At the same time, the results of the survey and focus groups show that the potential of these tools is used unevenly and largely depends on the initiative of individual council members and the institutional conditions under which the councils operate.

Discussion

The case of public councils in Kazakhstan shows that their communication architecture is formed as a hybrid system that combines traditional forms of participation and innovative channels of interaction to varying degrees.

Empirical data indicate that offline meetings are still perceived by participants as the most effective form of interaction. They provide more intensive discussion and the opportunity to exert direct pressure on government bodies. This finding is consistent with studies on deliberative participation – understood as forms of interaction that emphasize reasoned discussion, exchange of arguments, and collective opinion formation (Fishkin, 2009) – which suggest that face-to-face interaction creates more favorable conditions for discussion and consensus-building compared to exclusively digital formats (e.g., Halpern and Gibbs, 2013). At the same time, as the case of public councils demonstrates, the irregularity of meetings and organizational constraints such as limited resources, administrative barriers, and scheduling difficulties, reduce the stability of this communication channel.

In turn, the use of online meeting formats and streaming reflects a broader global trend toward the digitalization of participatory processes. However, the results of the interviews and focus groups are consistent with the conclusions of Linders (2012), showing that the effectiveness of such formats is not guaranteed and depends on the institutional design and the procedures of publicity. Otherwise, as illustrated by the case of an online broadcast of a public council meeting via Facebook, such formats may be used by authorities for their own purposes and turn into merely formal instruments.

Empirically, this points to a critical barrier: a digital channel without established standards of transparency may reinforce asymmetries of power in communication rather than expand participation. Another barrier may be the reluctance of some public council members to “be visible” or appear publicly, which may stem both from personal motivations and from concerns about being “exposed” by authorities and associated with “undesirable” participants. This also refers to the classic dilemma of “visibility vs. access”: while publicity increases accountability, it may reduce informal access to decision-making.

Best practice requires an institutional design in which transparency is embedded in procedures rather than dependent on individual strategies (OECD, 2025). According to Willis et al. (2023), the influence of the above-mentioned barriers can be reduced through careful process planning, high-quality technical support, and experienced facilitation of the online environment. In addition, in hybrid meeting formats it is important to create a supportive psychological environment and ensure an adequate level of attention to all participants (Constantinides and Quercia, 2022).

Thus, the format of meetings, which constitute the main form of activity of public councils in Kazakhstan, currently varies and offers flexible conditions for both government representatives and members of civil society. The skepticism expressed by some civic activists toward online participation, although understandable, appears to be partly subjective. At the same time, the concerns raised about the possibility of manipulating technical tools during the

organization of streaming meetings indicate the need to establish more transparent procedures and technically reliable platforms.

According to the empirical findings, mass media are playing an increasingly important role in the communication strategy of public councils in Kazakhstan. Interviews indicate that the media are used not only as a channel for informing the public but also as a tool for generating public resonance. This corresponds with classical approaches to the role of media in accountability processes, where publicity functions as an important mechanism of pressure on government institutions (McQuail, 2010). Under conditions where the recommendations of public councils have limited binding force, media exposure can strengthen their influence on decision-making.

Media exposure is increasingly becoming a prominent means through which the public in Kazakhstan seeks to influence governmental decisions. This trend reflects the broader development of a more innovative, information-driven, and expressive society. In this context, social networks and messenger applications have gained particular importance in recent years. They significantly lower barriers to public expression and enable citizens to rapidly disseminate information about problems, discussions, and initiatives related to the activities of government institutions. For public councils, such platforms function not only as channels for informing the public about their activities but also as tools for mobilizing public attention, shaping the public agenda, and exerting additional pressure on authorities through the expansion of public debate. Research in political communication shows that social media can reinforce agenda-setting processes by expanding the range of actors capable of introducing issues into public discourse and sustaining them within the public agenda (Gilardi et al., 2022).

As the results of the study show, social media platforms are used both to publicize the activities of public councils and to facilitate informal communication between their members and government bodies. At the same time, the use of social networks in the activities of public councils remains largely individualized and is not always institutionalized within the operational practices of these bodies in Kazakhstan. This finding supports conclusions from studies on digital participation, which suggest that social media can reduce the transaction costs of communication and expand opportunities for mobilization; however, their impact depends on the organizational readiness of institutions to engage in two-way interaction within a highly bureaucratic communication environment (Mergel, 2013).

In Kazakhstan, specialized platforms exist to facilitate interaction between citizens and the state, including the electronic appeals system eOtinish and the mechanism of electronic petitions. In international practice, such instruments are viewed as elements of a broader ecosystem of digital civic participation, providing additional entry points for interaction between government and society. At the same time, the results of this study indicate that the potential of digital tools is used unevenly. Many platforms, including specialized portals for public councils, remain more of an infrastructure than an actively utilized instrument of participation. Similar limitations are noted in international studies on e-participation, which emphasize that the effectiveness of digital channels depends on their integration into formal decision-making procedures and feedback mechanisms (Shin et al, 2024).

At the same time, the effectiveness of such digital participation mechanisms also depends on the level of digital literacy and the ability of users to engage meaningfully with digital platforms. Studies on digital education in Kazakhstan indicate that the development of digital competencies plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to navigate digital environments, critically evaluate information, and participate more actively in digital communication processes (Dyussenov et al, 2024). In this regard, the uneven use of digital participation tools may also reflect broader challenges related to digital literacy and the institutional capacity of both citizens and public institutions to effectively utilize digital platforms for participatory governance.

Beyond digital skills, these limitations also point to broader challenges related not only to institutional design but to the communicative capacity of both state actors and citizens. Previous research in Kazakhstan has shown that communication barriers often stem from difficulties in understanding information, limited engagement from citizens, and behavioral constraints among public officials, as well as insufficient institutional support for the development of communication skills (Bokayev et al., 2024). This suggests that even well-designed communication channels may remain underutilized or ineffective if not supported by adequate communicative competencies and organizational practices.

Thus, the results of the study indicate the emergence of a hybrid model of participation in the activities of public councils in Kazakhstan. Traditional forms of interaction continue to play a significant role, while digital tools are gradually expanding opportunities for communication and public visibility. However, the further development of this model requires the institutionalization of digital participation channels and targeted efforts to address the factors that constrain their effectiveness (for example, the infrastructure of e-government).

In a broader theoretical context, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of communication channels between the state and citizens is determined not so much by the mere existence of individual tools as by their institutional integration, patterns of use and the responsiveness of institutional actors. In other words, the communication architecture of public councils should be understood not as a collection of separate channels but as a system in which offline interaction, media, digital platforms, and informal communication complement one another.

The case of public councils in Kazakhstan demonstrates that the development of communication channels between the state and society depends not only on the introduction of innovative technologies but also on institutional conditions that shape the transparency of procedures, the regularity of interaction, and the willingness of government bodies to respond to feedback. Strengthening these elements may help transform the existing hybrid model of participation from a predominantly consultative mechanism into a more sustainable channel of dialogue between the state and civil society.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine the practice of citizen–state communication channels through the case of public councils operating under government bodies in Kazakhstan. To achieve this, the regulatory and legal framework was reviewed and empirical data on communication channel usage were analyzed.

The results show that public councils in Kazakhstan use both traditional and innovative channels to communicate with government bodies and with the citizens whose interests they represent. Five key channels were identified: meetings conducted in various formats (online, offline, hybrid), mass media, social media, digital e-government platforms, as well as mass citizen appeals and petitions.

The analysis of the practical use of these channels does not indicate the existence of a single dominant mode of communication, although traditional methods (offline meetings and appeals) are used more frequently. The prevailing behavioral patterns in the use of communication channels suggest a preference for traditional formats, while the adoption of more innovative methods for conveying information and public demands is constrained by several factors, including the relatively limited maturity of civil society, regulatory constraints, as well as deeper institutional factors.

At the same time, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the empirical data are based on a qualitative sample of interviews and focus groups, which allows for an in-depth understanding of perceptions and practices but does not allow for statistical generalization of the results to all public councils in Kazakhstan. Second, the study focuses primarily on the perspectives of council members and participants involved in public council activities, while the views of a broader range of citizens interacting with these institutions remain beyond the scope of the present analysis. Third, the research examines communication channels within the specific institutional context of public councils, which may not fully reflect other mechanisms of citizen–state interaction in Kazakhstan.

Future research could expand the empirical base by including larger surveys of citizens and comparative analysis of participatory institutions in other countries, which would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of communication practices between government and society.

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