

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CIVIC OVERSIGHT IN COMBATING CORRUPTION: THE CASE OF PUBLIC COUNCILS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

This article evaluates the role and practical effectiveness of civic oversight in combating corruption in the Republic of Uzbekistan, based on the activities of public councils. The study analyzes the legal framework, organizational structure, and actual performance of these councils, and reveals existing opportunities and limitations in establishing oversight over state bodies. The article provides a theoretical and empirical justification of mechanisms aimed at preventing corruption through civil society institutions.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, civic oversight, public councils, anti-corruption efforts, institutional analysis, transparency, institutional mechanism.

Introduction

Corruption remains one of the most dangerous and pervasive negative phenomena in contemporary public governance. This phenomenon not only leads to an inequitable distribution of economic resources, but also undermines the mutual trust between citizens and the state. Practice demonstrates that law enforcement mechanisms or internal state control alone cannot fully eradicate corruption.¹ It is for this reason that civic oversight is assuming ever greater significance in the context of contemporary reforms.

Since 2016, Uzbekistan has designated the fight against corruption as one of the priority directions of state policy within the framework of systematic transformations. The "Action Strategy" (2017–2021) and the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy set objectives to enhance transparency, strengthen the oversight role of citizens, and constrain corruption through institutional means.² From this perspective, the system of public councils has been further developed and their scope of authority expanded. However, the existence of a legislative framework and the formal functioning of institutions cannot fully guarantee their actual effectiveness. For this reason, a scholarly assessment of the anti-corruption activities of public councils constitutes a pressing scientific and practical issue.

Civic oversight is one of the fundamental concepts in political science and public administration theory. According to D. North's institutional theory, effective oversight

¹North D. C. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. – Cambridge: "Cambridge University Press". 1990. – P. 45-52.

²Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy. – Tashkent: "Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan". 2023. – 5 p.



mechanisms rely on the mutual alignment of formal and informal rules. ³According to the corruption formula proposed by the eminent scholar R. Klitgaard, this phenomenon is the product of three principal factors: monopoly in service delivery, unconstrained discretion of officials, and low accountability to the public. ⁴This formula assists in viewing corruption not as a personal vice, but as a systemic flaw in governance. Civic oversight is regarded precisely as a critical instrument for strengthening accountability systems.

In the conceptual approaches of sociological theorists T. Parsons and J. Habermas, civic participation is interpreted as a fundamental factor ensuring the legitimacy of democratic systems. According to these theories, the broad involvement of the population in the process of developing collective decisions in public administration serves as the principal guarantee for the recognition of political authority by society and the stability of legal norms. ⁵Drawing on this theoretical foundation, civic oversight may be analyzed through three core functions:

1. gathering information and ensuring transparency;
2. strengthening the accountability of state bodies;
3. preventing corrupt behavior.

Research in the field of comparative political science confirms that states with strong civil society institutions for example, Georgia, South Korea, and Chile have achieved a substantial reduction in their levels of corruption. ⁶This demonstrates that civic oversight mechanisms are not merely a theoretical construct, but an effective practical instrument measurable by concrete indicators.

The system of public councils in Uzbekistan entered a new phase of development with the Law "On Public Control" of October 12, 2018. This normative legal instrument strictly defined not only the theoretical framework of public control, but also the mechanisms governing the relationship between its subjects and objects, and the legal forms through which oversight is exercised. ⁷In particular, the clear consolidation in legislation of the accountability of state agencies to the public and their corresponding obligations signifies that the system carries not merely declarative, but practical significance. Between 2019 and 2022, more than 400 public councils were established at the republican and regional levels. ⁸These councils fulfill the following principal functions: monitoring the implementation of state programs and budget execution; conducting public expert review of normative legal documents; and examining citizens' appeals and complaints.

At the same time, the structural formation mechanisms of public councils remain at the center of scholarly and practical debate. In particular, the persistence of vertical management methods

³ North D. C. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. – Cambridge: "Cambridge University Press". 1990. – P. 78-85

⁴ Klitgaard R. *Controlling Corruption*. – Berkeley: "University of California Press". 1988. – P. 112-120.

⁵ Habermas J. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. – Cambridge: "MIT Press". 1996. – P. 298-305.

⁶ Transparency International. *Corruption Perceptions Index 2023*. – Berlin: "Transparency International". 2024. – P. 15-18

⁷ Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Public Control". – Tashkent: "Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan". 2018. No. ORQ-507. – 10 p.

⁸ Agency for the Development of Civil Society of the Republic of Uzbekistan. *Annual Report 2022*. – Tashkent: "Agency Publication". 2023. – P. 60.



or administrative influences in the process of selecting council members generates a degree of skepticism regarding the governance autonomy of these institutions. Such an approach limits councils' capacity to provide impartial assessments of state bodies' activities, raising serious questions concerning their effectiveness in safeguarding public interests.

In assessing the anti-corruption effectiveness of public councils, three principal dimensions are of critical importance: *openness* (accessibility to the activities of state bodies), *impact* (the actual influence of council conclusions on decisions), and *independence* (freedom from administrative or political pressure).

Regarding the first dimension openness between 2021 and 2023, a number of councils succeeded in identifying violations in the areas of public procurement, land allocation, and utility services. For instance, the 2022 report of the Tashkent City Public Council recorded systemic irregularities in the expenditure of funds allocated for communal infrastructure.⁹ However, such conclusions were frequently not communicated to the broader public and were considered exclusively through administrative channels.

The next significant dimension concerns the degree of impact of public oversight. Under the existing regulatory framework, council conclusions are primarily of a consultative (advisory) nature and impose no legal obligation on state agencies. This restricts these institutions to the role of mere recommendation-issuing bodies, rather than "veto players" capable of influencing political decisions. By contrast, in international practice particularly in Georgia the conclusions of civic oversight are enshrined in legislation and their consideration is supported by a mandatory accountability mechanism.¹⁰

The subsequent critical factor is the question of institutional autonomy. The procedure for forming council membership and the financial provision for councils directly determines the impartiality of their activities. The results of empirical research conducted in 2023 show that approximately 62% of respondents reported encountering administrative pressures from the executive branch in the discharge of their functional duties.¹¹ This figure confirms that public oversight subjects remain insufficiently protected from external influences in decision-making, indicating a need for systemic reforms.

Based on the research findings, the principal factors impeding the effectiveness of public council activities may be organized into three fundamental dimensions:

–**Resource scarcity and financial dependency.** Many structures lack a professional expert base, an independent budget, and technical infrastructure, and consequently rely in material-technical terms upon the very state agencies they are mandated to oversee. This gives rise to a conflict of interests.

⁹ Tashkent City Public Council. 2022 Monitoring Report. – Tashkent: "Tashkent City Administration Publication". 2022. – P. 45.

¹⁰ Transparency International Georgia. Civil Society and Anti-Corruption Efforts in Georgia. – Tbilisi: "Transparency International Georgia". 2021. – P. 40.

¹¹ Civic Participation in Uzbekistan: Survey Results. Institute for Political Studies of Uzbekistan. – Tashkent: "IPSU Publication". 2023. – P. 58.



–**The declarative character of the normative-legal framework.** The absence of binding force for recommendations prepared on the basis of oversight results, and the lack of defined accountability for officials when such recommendations are disregarded, further diminishes the practical impact of these institutions.

–**Communicative disconnect and social passivity.** The low level of public disclosure regarding council activities limits citizens' awareness and weakens public support for the system. Where public pressure is absent, civic oversight loses its genuine democratic substance. In order to reform the system, it is necessary, first and foremost, to elevate council conclusions from the status of mere recommendations to legally binding documents that must be considered by state agencies, with officials required by law to respond to each rejected proposal. Furthermore, it is essential to abandon the "top-down appointment" system in forming council membership and to introduce open competitive selection processes, ensuring that councils are not financially dependent on the state agency they oversee. Only when all processes are fully digitized and made publicly accessible can this institution become a genuine instrument of oversight.

Thus, the effectiveness of the civic oversight system is directly linked to its legal status, the independence of its personnel, and its financial stability. Systemic changes in these directions will not only consolidate the position of civil society institutions in public governance, but will also serve to advance mutual trust between society and the state to a qualitatively new level.

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