CENTER FOR REGIONAL & LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

POLICY NOTE

ReaLDev Policy Note No. 2 · November 2026

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From Local Community to Local Representation: Do Large Rural Districts Need Their Own Maslikhat?

Why fast-growing rural territories with an elected akim and their own budget still have no representative body

KEY MESSAGES

- Over the past decade, Kazakhstan's rural districts have gained their own (fourth-tier) budget, an elected akim and mechanisms for resident participation — but not a representative body of their own: their budget is approved by the district (raion) maslikhat.
- Interviews reveal three modes of community engagement depending on scale: direct contact in small villages, structured participation in mid-sized districts, and a representation gap in large districts of over 10- 15 thousand people.
- We illustrate the issue in five scenarios: the maslikhat's quarterly calendar versus everyday problems; the distance of district-level deputies; participation without budget authority; unequal representation of villages within one district; and the physical limits of an akim's personal communication.
- We propose piloting an elected local maslikhat with budgetary, representative and oversight powers in large villages (over 15,000 residents) and multi-village rural districts (over 30,000).
- The pilot separates the question of representation from the costly reclassification of a village as a town: the territory keeps its rural status and the support measures tied to it.

About the study

This note draws on in-depth interviews with akims and akimat staff of villages and rural districts in Almaty Region and Zhetisu Region. All respondents are anonymised; place names are withheld, and population and other figures are rounded.

Summary

Over roughly a decade, Kazakhstan has built three interlinked elements of decentralised governance at the grassroots level: a local budget, direct elections of akims and mechanisms for community participation. The reform was far-reaching not only in geographic coverage but in depth: the rural district has become at once a separate budget unit, a territory of direct electoral accountability and a space for residents' direct participation in governance.

The core question of this note is whether the current architecture of local political representation matches the scale and nature of the communities that have emerged since decentralisation. **Why does a large rural district with an elected akim and its own budget have no maslikhat of its own, while a separate district with fewer residents has one by virtue of its administrative status?**

Drawing on in-depth interviews, we identify five situations, each illustrating a specific limitation of the current model: (1) the dependence of urgent budget decisions on the session schedule of the district maslikhat; (2) the limited representation of a rural district's interests by district-level deputies; (3) the gap between residents' participation in setting priorities and final budget decisions; (4) the unequal representation of individual villages within one rural district; and (5) the declining effectiveness of the akim's direct engagement with residents as the community grows.

We propose piloting an elected local maslikhat with real budgetary, representative and oversight powers in two types of territory: **large villages with over 15,000 residents** and **multi-village rural districts with over 30,000 residents**.

Context

Kazakhstan's current decentralisation has unfolded step by step. Reforms in the 2010s expanded the range of local tasks and formalised local community gatherings and assemblies. Legislative changes in 2017 prepared the fourth-tier budget, introduced in 2018–2020. In 2021, direct elections of rural akims were introduced. These changes did not dismantle the vertical of state administration, but they fundamentally changed the rural akim's position: to residents, the akim is an elected leader; to the budget system, a programme administrator; and to the district, part of the executive hierarchy.

As a result, the preconditions for meaningful self-government have emerged: residents can not only appeal to their leader but also help shape spending, monitor budget execution and judge the akim's performance politically. The question is how the last link of this chain works — turning local demands into legally binding budget decisions.

A rural district has an elected akim but no maslikhat of its own. The budget and any significant amendments are approved at the district level. **The representative and executive functions serving a single local community are institutionally split across different territorial levels.** In small territories, personal contacts can smooth over this gap; in large ones, it becomes an organisational problem in its own right.

Three modes of community engagement

Interviews with akims of villages and rural districts reveal three stable patterns of engagement with the community, distinguished primarily by the size of the territory.

Small villages up to 1,000–1,500 residents	**Direct contact:** personal requests, village chats, everyday interaction with the akim.
Mid-sized districts ≈ 3,000–6,000 residents	**Structured participation:** gatherings, local community assemblies, street representatives, councils of elders.
Large districts over 10,000 residents	**Representation gap:** gatherings and personal contact are no longer enough for tens of thousands of residents.
Proposed pilot over 15,000 / 30,000	**An elected local maslikhat:** a large village of over 15,000 or a multi-village district of over 30,000 residents.

Figure 1. Three modes of akim–community engagement by population size, and the proposed thresholds for pilot maslikhats. Source: compiled by the authors from interview data.

In small villages and rural districts (up to 1,000–1,500 residents), direct engagement prevails: the akim personally knows a large share of residents, and the main channels of communication are personal requests, village chats and everyday contact.

In mid-sized rural districts (mostly 3,000–6,000 residents), a more structured system of participation takes shape: local community gatherings and assemblies, street representatives, councils of elders and other residents' associations. These mechanisms help agree on local priorities and maintain regular contact between the akim and residents.

> *"I have [several dozen] streets, and [slightly more] people were elected from them — from each street. Then they voted among themselves and selected [about ten] people. For example, the community assembly can be 1% of [several thousand] residents. They review the budget."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Zhetisu Region; translated from Kazakh

> *"Actually, the community's role is stronger than the elders'. The community opens an assembly, and its resolution carries weight. The elders' resolution has no force, because tomorrow an elder may go back on his word. After all, the council of elders is not a legal entity."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Zhetisu Region; translated from Kazakh

In large rural districts (over 10,000 residents), especially in fast-growing suburban areas, not only the scale but the very nature of local governance changes. Traditional forms of direct engagement no longer reach enough residents, while the volume of requests, the diversity of interests and the complexity of infrastructure tasks call for more developed mechanisms of political representation.

In population, economy and infrastructure complexity, large rural districts are approaching small towns. Migration, new housing estates, dacha settlements, utility breakdowns, overcrowded schools and the gap between registered and actual residents create a year-round agenda. Here, an ordinary gathering can no longer be the main mechanism for representing tens of thousands of people.

> *"According to statistics, [almost 50,000] people live in the rural district. But in reality far more live here — our traffic jams are worse than in the city. By some estimates [twice as many] live in the district, by others more than 100,000."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region

×2 gap between the official and the actual population in one of the large suburban districts, according to its akim

The administrative category of "rural district" itself no longer captures the substance of local tasks here. Interviewees mention schools running three shifts, pressure on utilities and transport, difficulties in financing infrastructure and a growing unregistered population.

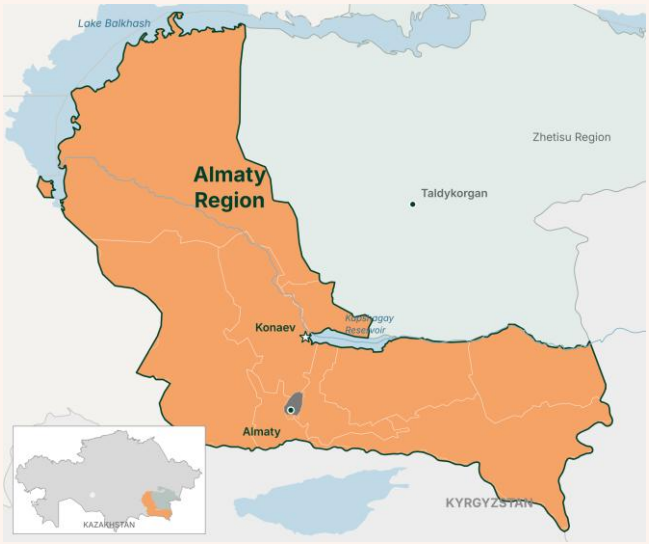


Figure 2. Almaty Region — home to the largest suburban rural districts covered by the study. ☆ — regional centre (Konaev); ● — Almaty city. Boundaries are schematic. Source: compiled by the authors from geoBoundaries and Natural Earth data.

Five illustrative scenarios

1. The district maslikhat's calendar does not match the rhythm of local problems

The most visible problem is waiting for a session and a budget amendment procedure when a local need demands an immediate response. In large rural districts, this is not an exception but a recurring situation.

> *"We wait three months for a maslikhat session. Right now, for example, there is flooding and we need funds now, but by the time they approve it, it is no longer relevant."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region

> *"We had savings and wanted to patch the road in front of the school. We had to wait for the October maslikhat session for them to allow us to move money from one programme to another. In short, we had to do the repairs in November."*
> — Interview with akimat staff of a rural district, Almaty Region

> *"Everything here is approved at a maslikhat session. Once a quarter we sit and wait for them to give it to us."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region

Akims suggest reviewing such issues at least monthly. These accounts reveal a clash between two rhythms: the planned quarterly cycle and the day-to-day municipal one.

2. A district deputy does not always represent the everyday interests of a specific rural district

The second gap stems from the distance between a rural district's residents and the representative body that approves its budget. Even having a deputy elected from the territory does not guarantee sufficient knowledge of its infrastructure, spatial layout and internal conflicts.

> *"Just imagine: one deputy is elected from each constituency. There are many deputies sitting there, and only one represents your district. By law, excuse me, he must live here. Show me a deputy who lives in his constituency."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region

> *"How would he know our internal problems? How would he know what I need here? I can't meet him all the time either. He has his own worries, and I have mine."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region

3. Public participation and budget authority are institutionally separated

Gatherings and meetings do real work: they collect requests, shape public expectations and force the akim to explain constraints. But a residents' request does not yet become a budget decision. The local agenda passes through the district's approval system, and residents cannot always trace where and why priorities change.

> *"People come, speak up, you make them promises, and on the basis of those promises you draw up the budget request."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region

The problem is not only that community participation lacks decision-making power. Large and fiscally self-sufficient rural districts already have the main preconditions for meaningful local autonomy: a sizeable population, their own revenue base, a separate budget and an elected akim who is politically accountable to residents. Yet key budget decisions are still made at the district level. The community articulates its needs and tax revenues are generated on its territory, but the final decision on how to use them rests with a higher-level representative body.

Where the population is large and financial self-sufficiency is sufficient, there is a case not merely for faster budget approvals but for expanding the space of local autonomy itself.

4. Multi-village districts: representing the centre is not the same as representing the whole territory

A separate issue is the composition of local councils and assemblies in rural districts that bring together several settlements. Even where a district as a whole is quite active, neighbouring villages may carry very different weight in setting shared priorities.

> *"I have [about ten] people. […] They are all from here; from [the small] village there is only one person. It is a small village, about [a few hundred] people live there."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region; omission marked with square brackets

How can several villages be represented in a shared budget? The multi-village districts in our study are telling examples: one has almost 50,000 officially registered residents, several villages and dozens of dacha settlements; another has about 20,000 residents, five villages and several dacha settlements.

5. Direct accountability runs into the physical limits of communication

In a small village, the akim's constant availability is a real asset. But in a large district with thousands of homes, hundreds of streets and many new housing estates, the personal-contact model does not scale linearly. A large chat helps spot problems quickly, but it cannot replace representation, public debate of alternatives and independent oversight.

> *"We have a village chat with [over 500] people in it. And I have only [about 600] households. That is practically 90 percent of the population in one chat. I learn about all the problems through the chat."*
> — Interview with a rural district akim, Almaty Region

Even in a relatively compact district, such communication requires constant personal involvement. For a district with tens of thousands of residents, reproducing the same density of contact is virtually impossible. The problem is therefore not a lack of openness on the akim's part; solving it requires a collective representative institution capable of structuring many competing demands.

> *"— How often do you hold report-back meetings with residents? — Practically once a month. My reception days are, say, Tuesday and Thursday, but people come every day. And how can you turn someone away once they have come? People are not yet used to a schedule. It takes up a lot of my time, and there is a lot of routine work — later this affects the quality of the work. Sometimes they even take up my lunch break. And we have a lot of residents: many according to statistics, and even more according to unofficial data."*
> — Interview with the akim of a large rural district

Proposal: a local maslikhat without changing administrative status

The proposed reform does not envisage yet another public council or a nominal "proto-maslikhat". Kazakhstan already has an institution of elected territorial representation — the maslikhat. The question is how justified it is to tie it rigidly to the administrative category of district and town when some rural districts have grown so substantially.

Pilot territories for an elected local maslikhat

1. **A large village with over 15,000 residents** — a single settlement whose population and intensity of governance tasks call for a shift from mainly direct participation to full political representation.
2. **A multi-village rural district with over 30,000 residents** — an administrative unit bringing together several settlements whose interests must be represented when shared budget decisions are made.

A pilot maslikhat should hold **budgetary** (approving and amending the local budget), **representative** (voicing the interests of all villages and housing estates) and **oversight** (monitoring budget execution and holding the akim to account) powers.

Today, one way to recognise the growth of a rural settlement institutionally is to reclassify it as a town. But this has far broader consequences: revised infrastructure requirements, changes in financing and budget planning mechanisms, and the potential loss for residents of certain benefits and state support measures tied to rural status.

As a result, the decision to develop local political representation is blocked by a far costlier decision to change the territory's administrative status. The need to account for additional budget obligations can hold back reclassification even where the size of the population already calls for different governance mechanisms.

The proposed pilot makes it possible to separate these two processes. A large village or rural district keeps its rural status but gains its own elected representative body, able to decide on the local budget, oversee its execution and represent residents' interests. The state can thus make local governance more responsive and accountable without automatically triggering the whole package of changes that comes with turning a village into a town. The costs of establishing and running the new body should be assessed separately, but they are of a different order from a full change of administrative status.

This approach allows decentralisation reform to continue without necessarily redrawing the territorial structure:

not every large village has to become a town to gain full local political representation

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Funding

This research was conducted within the grant project “Decentralization, Local Governance and Regional Development in Kazakhstan,” funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan and led by Bauyrzhan Yedgenov.

Disclaimer

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this note are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Center for Regional & Local Development, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan or the authors’ affiliated institutions.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the akims and akimat staff who agreed to be interviewed.

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