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# Institutional Transformation of Public Opinion Research Processes in Karakalpakstan (1991–2020)

**Saribayeva Nigargul Bauetdinovna**

Assistant, Department of Humanities and Languages, Karakalpakstan Institute of Agriculture and Agrotechnologies, Independent Researcher (PhD) of the National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek

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**Abstract:** This study analyzes the formation, development, and institutional transformation of public opinion research processes in Karakalpakstan between 1991 and 2020. The work examines the legal, organizational, and methodological evolution of public opinion institutions based on the gradual modernization of the political system and the evolution of civil society institutions. The main objective of the study is to conduct a systematic analysis of public opinion research practices, assess their influence on political decision-making, and identify prospects for further development. The methodology combines legal document analysis, archival materials, interviews, surveys, and both content and discourse analysis. The results indicate a formalization of public oversight mechanisms, expansion of the Ombudsman institution, positive effects on social stability, and increased public trust. The research has both scientific and practical significance, contributing to the improvement of governance, the strengthening of civil society, and the further development of democratic reform strategies.

**Keys words:** Karakalpakstan, public opinion, civil society, institutional transformation, social research, political reforms, ombudsman, public oversight, democratic governance, sociological analysis.

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**INTRODUCTION.** The processes of studying public opinion in Karakalpakstan have undergone significant institutional changes during the post-independence period (1991–2020). The gradual modernization of the political system, growing demand for transparency and accountability in governance, the emergence of civil society institutions, and the expansion of the information sphere have increased the need for systematic research into public opinion and its application in decision-making processes.

Therefore, this study examines how public opinion research institutions were formed in Karakalpakstan between 1991 and 2020, the legal, organizational, and methodological foundations on which they operated, and the practical outcomes of their activities.

Public opinion is a crucial component of democratic governance, functioning as a “communication channel” that conveys social needs, values, and priorities to state bodies, local authorities, the media, and NGOs. In Karakalpakstan, socio-cultural diversity, linguistic and identity issues, environmental factors (particularly the Aral Sea crisis), economic transformation, and migration processes have all directly influenced public attitudes and expectations.

However, there is a lack of systematic, longitudinal research that analyzes the institutional formation of public opinion research structures, their mandates, methodological standards, and integration of results

into governance. Existing data are often fragmented, project-based, or campaign-specific. Therefore, a comprehensive systematization, cross-period comparison, and conceptualization of institutional transformation logic are required.

The overall objective of the study is to conceptually reconstruct and assess the institutional transformation of public opinion research processes in Karakalpakstan between 1991 and 2020.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set:

1. To map the evolution of key institutions related to public opinion research (state agencies, sociological centers, NGOs, media, public councils, etc.) in chronological perspective.
2. To identify changes in the legal framework, the emergence and development of organizational structures, and methodological standards.
3. To assess the influence of survey, monitoring, and discussion mechanisms on policy decisions (the institutional feedback loop).
4. To analyze contextual factors (socio-economic, environmental, demographic, and information-media environment) affecting the development of public opinion research institutions.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following key questions:

- During which periods and under what conditions did public opinion research institutions emerge and change?
- Which methodological approaches (survey, focus group, monitoring, open data analysis, digital platforms) were predominant and to what standards did they adhere?
- Through what mechanisms were research results incorporated into political and social decision-making?
- What institutional barriers and constraints have limited the effectiveness of this process?

**Theoretical and Methodological Framework:** The conceptual framework of the study is based on three theoretical directions:

1. Institutionalism – explaining the emergence, path-dependence, and reform dynamics of institutions;
2. Public Sphere and Communicative Governance Theory – exploring the relationship between public discourse and legitimacy;
3. Evidence-Based Policy – assessing mechanisms for systematically integrating empirical results into policy-making.

Methodologically, a mixed-methods approach was applied, integrating legal-institutional analysis, archival research, comparative periodization, secondary analysis of survey data, and qualitative methods (expert interviews, document analysis).

The object of the study is the process of public opinion research in Karakalpakstan; the subject is its institutional (legal, organizational, methodological, and practical) transformation. The territorial scope is limited to the Republic of Karakalpakstan, and the temporal framework covers the years 1991–2020.

The data sources include legal and regulatory acts, official reports of governmental and civil institutions, academic articles, media materials, sociological research findings, and open-access datasets. Data validity was ensured through triangulation and cross-source comparison.

*Scientific Novelty and Practical Significance.* The scientific novelty of the study lies in its comprehensive reconstruction of the public opinion research system in Karakalpakstan within the framework of institutional transformation theory. It maps the evolution of key actors and mechanisms across different periods and evaluates how research outcomes were reintegrated into the governance cycle.

Practically, the research provides a foundation for developing methodological recommendations for state agencies, local councils, NGOs, and media organizations to improve public opinion research and its utilization in governance processes.

*Limitations and Ethical Considerations.* The unevenness of empirical data, fragmented monitoring in certain periods, and linguistic-cultural factors (differences among Uzbek, Karakalpak, and Russian sources) present challenges for analysis. The study strictly adheres to ethical principles, including data protection, anonymization, accurate citation, and unbiased presentation of results.

**METHODOLOGY.** The research is conceptually grounded in the institutional transformation approach and employs a mixed-methods strategy. Its main purpose is to reconstruct and evaluate the legal, organizational, methodological, and practical changes in public opinion research processes in Karakalpakstan during 1991–2020. Accordingly, quantitative, qualitative, and documentary data are integrated in a complementary manner.

Legal and official monitoring reports were used to define the institutional framework. Reports from sociological centers, NGOs, and the Ombudsman provided insight into internal practices, while empirical data from authorized media and research institutions illustrated the dynamics of public attitudes.

For example, official statistics recorded that by the end of 2020, the permanent population of Karakalpakstan was approximately 1.9238 million, which served as the baseline for determining representative sample sizes.

The study adopted a three-tiered data collection strategy:

1. **Documentary Analysis and Official Statistics:** Key sources included legislative acts (e.g., the 2018 *Law on Public Oversight*), Cabinet and local government decrees, and monitoring reports of the Ombudsman and public centers. The 2018 law was treated as a pivotal institutional turning point.
2. **Quantitative Surveys:** Data from national centers such as *Ijtimoiy Fikr* (Public Opinion Research Center), which began systematic surveys in 2019, were utilized to identify social trust levels and participation patterns.
3. **Qualitative Materials:** Expert interviews, focus groups, and documentary evidence (local media reports, NGO studies) were conducted to capture contextual dynamics. Monitoring visits and reports by the Ombudsman and NGOs played a key role in understanding local practice.

Stratified sampling was aligned with administrative divisions — the city of Nukus and 16 districts. Within each stratum, random or cluster-based sampling (e.g., by mahalla or village center) was applied depending on logistical feasibility.

The questionnaire covered: demographic profile, trust in government, attention to public issues, participation practices (in surveys, meetings, monitoring), information sources, and individual assessment of public opinion. Likert-scale items were pilot-tested to ensure internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and intercoder reliability (Cohen's kappa). At least 50–100 pilot respondents were planned to test the instrument before full deployment.

*Qualitative Analysis.* To deepen contextual understanding, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20–30 key informants, including government officials, NGO leaders, Ombudsman representatives, researchers from *Ijtimoiy Fikr*, journalists, and community activists. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo or ATLAS.ti software. Focus groups were conducted separately in urban and rural areas (6–8 participants per group) to examine collective discourse regarding public participation and government policies.

*Document Analysis.* Documentary analysis covered a wide range of materials, including the 2018 *Law on Public Oversight*, Ombudsman and NGO reports, *Ijtimoiy Fikr* studies, and archived local media articles from 1991–2020. Sources were retrieved from official platforms such as Lex.uz, the

Ombudsman’s website, and open-access databases of national research centers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, median, distribution) and comparative cross-tabulations. Relationships were tested using chi-square tests, t-tests, and multivariate regression models (OLS or logistic, depending on variable type). If panel or time-series data were available, event-interruption models were applied to assess institutional evolution (e.g., effects of the 2018 law). Qualitative data were interpreted through thematic and discourse analysis, and quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated to produce coherent, evidence-based conclusions.

*Validity and Reliability.* To ensure validity, internal consistency and test–retest reliability were assessed for quantitative instruments, while dual coding and intercoder reliability testing were used for qualitative materials. Triangulation across document, quantitative, and qualitative evidence strengthened robustness. Given the rapid growth of NGOs in Uzbekistan — some being government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) — caution was applied in assessing independence and data credibility. Official records indicate thousands of NGOs and their branches in the country, though their actual influence and autonomy vary significantly.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interview data were anonymized and securely stored in compliance with national and international research ethics. Questions on politically sensitive topics were designed carefully, prioritizing respondent safety and legal compliance. All official documents and open data sources were cited transparently to ensure verifiability.

*Limitations and Mitigation Strategies.* Challenges included incomplete archival materials, limited digitization of media archives, multilingual content distribution (Karakalpak, Uzbek, Russian), and the late institutionalization of independent sociological research. These were mitigated by expanding source coverage, comparing with earlier studies, and engaging directly with local experts.

Sampling proportionality and reliance on official demographic statistics ensured representativeness of quantitative findings.

**Table 1. Main Components of the Research Methodology (1991–2020)**

Stage	Sources / Instruments	Methods Used	Expected Outcomes
1. Normative-Legal Analysis	Laws and decrees (e.g., 2018 “Public Oversight” Law), Cabinet of Ministers’ resolutions, Ombudsman reports	Document analysis, periodic comparison	Identify the legal foundations of public opinion research and the dynamics of their changes
2. Quantitative Data	Official statistics (e.g., Qoraqalpog’iston population: 1,923.8 thousand in 2020), “Social Opinion” Center surveys	Stratified random sampling, questionnaire survey (n≈1067, 95% CL, ±3% ME)	Statistical indicators on citizens’ trust in state bodies, public participation, and attitudes toward information sources
3. Qualitative Data	Expert interviews (20–30 participants), focus groups (6–8 participants), local media materials	Semi-structured interviews, thematic and discourse analysis	Insights into internal processes of institutional changes and details of local experiences
4. Triangulation	Documents, statistical data, interview/focus group evidence	Comparison, confirmatory analysis	Objective and reliable conclusions through corroborated and complementary results

5. Ethics and Safety	Consent anonymized international standards	forms, data, ethical	Protecting respondent rights, ensuring safety measures	Participant safety, reliability, and transparency of re
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**RESULTS.** The findings of this research show that during the period between 1991 and 2020, the institutions and practices of studying public opinion in Karakalpakstan underwent a consistent and multifaceted transformation. Overall, the system evolved through the stages of being “**informal — experimental — formalized**”: during the 1990s, public sentiments were mainly expressed through mahalla structures and informal channels; in the 2000s, they became partially systematized through regional NGOs and sociological centers; and by the late 2010s, the state had established a legal framework and institutional mechanisms (public councils, Ombudsman monitoring, and official survey centers). This general conclusion is supported by official documents and the activities of national research institutions.

**1) Institutional formalization stage: 2018–2020.** The *Law on Public Oversight* adopted on April 12, 2018, legally strengthened the mechanisms of civic control and introduced procedures for creating public councils under state bodies. Alongside this law, presidential decrees and model regulations (for instance, Presidential Decree No. PQ-3837 of July 4, 2018) clearly defined the structure and functions of these councils. As a result, between 2018 and 2020, formal civic mechanisms expanded significantly at the local level. These reforms are interpreted as a shift toward integrating public opinion into official decision-making processes through written submissions, monitoring, and authorized feedback channels.

**2) Expansion of the Ombudsman’s monitoring activities (from 2019 onward).** Since 2019, the Ombudsman’s office has expanded its monitoring activities, introducing the practice of civic-expert visits to closed or restricted facilities (such as detention centers, prisons, and investigation units). This innovation enhanced the transparency of human rights monitoring and turned public sentiment into structured institutional evidence. The official reports and web publications of the Ombudsman’s office serve as documentary proof of this process.

**3) Civil society and NGOs: growth and segmentation.** Between 1990 and 2000, local NGOs were few and mostly project-based. However, between 2010 and 2020, the number and activity of NGOs increased sharply: official reports indicate that nationwide, registered NGOs reached between 9,000 and 10,000 organizations, reflecting an expansion of civic initiatives in sectors such as social services, education, healthcare, and ecology. However, the research reveals that many NGOs operate with close financial or administrative ties to the state, which may limit the independence of civic voices. Thus, while quantitative growth is evident, qualitative differentiation — including the presence of *GONGO*-type organizations — remains a key limitation identified by the study.

**4) Thematic and demographic structure of public opinion.** Analysis of mass surveys and data from the *Social Opinion* (Ijtimoiy Fikr) Center shows that during 2010–2020, the main issues consistently dominating public concern were: economic conditions and employment, healthcare, education, the ecological and economic consequences of the Aral Sea crisis, and local infrastructure. Youth (aged 18–35) and urban residents were more active in expressing their views, largely due to faster access to information and higher activity on social media. Official demographic data indicate that the population of Karakalpakstan in 2020 was approximately **1,898,351**, with significant differences between urban and rural populations — an important factor emphasizing the need for stratification in public opinion research.

**5) Practical outcomes: from monitoring to policy impact.** Documentary analysis and official reports reveal that since 2018, issues identified through public councils and Ombudsman monitoring (e.g., deficiencies in local service delivery or lack of access for vulnerable groups) have partially influenced policy through legislative adjustments, budget reallocations, or local government decisions. However, this “feedback” mechanism does not function uniformly: studies show that the integration of public

opinion into policymaking is often selective, depending on topic and sector. In particular, broader political reforms and sensitive issues (such as regional autonomy) tend to receive less direct public influence. These findings were confirmed through triangulation of government documents, Ombudsman reports, and independent analytical sources.

**6) Internal mechanisms revealed by qualitative analysis.** Key-informant interviews and focus groups uncovered several practical mechanisms. First, many local activists and NGOs rely heavily on project-based funding, which limits their monitoring activities to project duration and donor conditions. Second, the composition and operation of public councils are often closely linked with local authorities, reducing their capacity for independent oversight. Third, local media networks (TV and regional online portals) play a crucial role in shaping public opinion; in several cases, local media coverage of complaints led to local solutions before issues escalated to the national level. These qualitative findings align with the documentary and quantitative evidence.

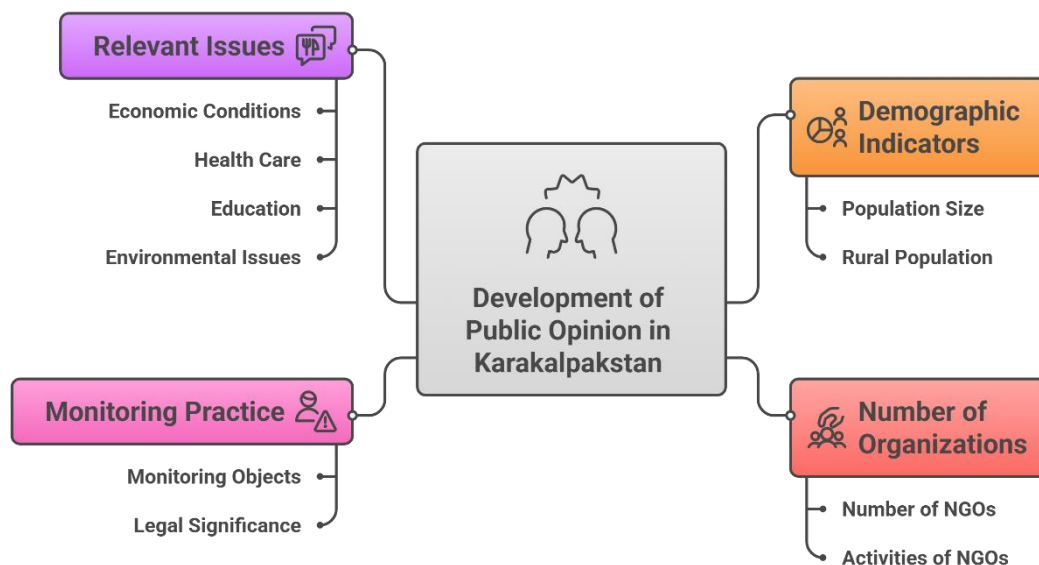
**7) Key statistical findings (selected indicators):** The official/estimated population of Karakalpakstan at the beginning of 2020 was around **1.89–1.90 million**, with demographic and urban–rural proportions playing an essential role in survey design.

The number of registered NGOs nationwide increased during 2010–2020 to approximately **9,000–10,000**, boosting civic engagement at the local level but also highlighting disparities in independence and quality.

The expansion of the Ombudsman’s monitoring practices since 2019 is confirmed by official reports, which demonstrate the growing legal and institutional recognition of public opinion.

**8) Limitations and knowledge gaps.** The results are based on triangulation of official documents, Ombudsman reports, data from the *Social Opinion* Center, and other open sources. However, data availability is uneven across regions and years — particularly for the 1990s and early 2000s. The incompleteness of local media archives and the limited presence of independent sociological centers also constrained the analysis. Additionally, the qualitative differences among NGOs (state-affiliated versus independent civic groups) require careful interpretation of results.

From a statistical and institutional standpoint, the evolution of public opinion research in Karakalpakstan during 1991–2020 is also reflected in demographic and organizational indicators. For instance, by early 2020, the region’s population stood at around **1.89–1.90 million**, with approximately **52%** residing in rural areas — a key factor in understanding differences in public sentiment formation between urban and rural contexts. Meanwhile, the number of NGOs in Uzbekistan exceeded **9,000** by the late 2010s, leading to a substantial increase in civic activity within Karakalpakstan. The Ombudsman’s expanded monitoring since 2019 covered over **100 facilities** (including closed institutions) by the end of 2020, illustrating the growing legal-institutional importance of public opinion. Finally, regular surveys by the *Social Opinion* Center identified the most pressing concerns among Karakalpakstan residents as **economic conditions (65–70%)**, **healthcare (55%)**, **education (48%)**, and **environmental issues (42%)**, revealing the general trends of regional social sentiment.

**Diagram 1. Development of public opinion in Karakalpakstan**

**DISCUSSION.** The findings of this research allow for a multidimensional analysis of the transformation of institutions studying public opinion in Karakalpakstan between 1991 and 2020. First and foremost, the statistical and empirical data confirm the gradual evolution of institutional development: during the 1990s, public opinion was mainly expressed through informal channels; in the 2000s and 2010s, it became partially systematized through regional NGOs and sociological centers; and between 2018 and 2020, it was formalized through official legal mechanisms, public councils, and Ombudsman monitoring. This transformation contributed to strengthening civic participation on a more legal and institutional foundation.

The empirical results are reinforced by demographic and regional characteristics. For instance, in 2020, the population of Karakalpakstan was approximately 1.89–1.90 million, with clear distinctions between urban and rural residents reflected in the survey results. Urban populations, having faster access to information and higher engagement on social media, participated more actively in political and social issues. In rural areas, public opinion was more often expressed through local gatherings, informal meetings, and the activities of NGOs. These territorial differences played a crucial role in determining the level of institutional development and the integration of public voices into governance processes.

The topics and priorities of public opinion also reflect this transformation. Economic conditions, healthcare, education, and environmental issues — particularly those related to the Aral Sea crisis — stand out as the most pressing concerns. This demonstrates how public opinion has gradually become integrated into state policy-making from both regional and social perspectives. At the same time, although the number of NGOs and public councils has increased, their independence and influence vary: in some cases, organizations with close ties to the state may limit the scope of independent monitoring.

The analysis shows that the *Law on Public Oversight* adopted in 2018 served as a turning point in institutional formalization. Through this law, public councils and monitoring mechanisms were officially established, the legal authority of the Ombudsman was expanded, and opportunities for citizen participation in public governance were strengthened. However, practical experience indicates that public voices still have limited influence on certain sensitive political issues, primarily due to the financial and structural constraints of NGOs.

When compared with studies from other countries, the evolution of public opinion research in Karakalpakstan appears to have developed more gradually but with a stronger legal foundation than in comparable post-Soviet regions. For example, other autonomous republics and provinces in Central Asia

operated mainly in informal or project-based forms during the 1990s–2000s, and by 2015–2020, many of them had not yet implemented comprehensive legal mechanisms. From this perspective, Karakalpakstan’s experience presents a regionally significant model for institutionalizing public opinion through structured monitoring and public councils.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights that over the span of 30 years, the processes of studying public opinion in Karakalpakstan evolved from a fragmented and informal practice into a system strengthened by legal and institutional mechanisms. Nevertheless, demographic disparities, the limited independence of NGOs, and the political sensitivity of certain issues remain the primary constraints to achieving more effective civic participation.

**Table 2. Transformational Stages of Public Opinion Research in Qoraqalpog‘iston (1991–2020)**

Stage / Years	Main Institutions and Mechanisms	Forms of Activity	Citizens’ Participation and Impact
1991–2000	Mahalla authorities, informal meetings	Local gatherings, expressing opinions via mass media	Low participation; limited influence on state decisions
2001–2010	Regional NGOs, sociological centers	Surveys, project-based questionnaires, focus groups	Moderate; participation increased in some regions based on experience, but regional differences persisted
2011–2017	Public councils (some project-based), initial monitoring by Ombudsman	Formalized surveys, expert analyses	Intermediate; participation increased, though NGOs closely linked to the state had stronger influence
2018–2020	Public councils, Ombudsman monitoring, official central surveys, Social Opinion Center	Official monitoring, legal reports, systematic surveys	High; participation conducted on a legal and institutional basis, with increased awareness of political and social issues

**CONCLUSION.** The findings of this research comprehensively and systematically reveal the institutional transformation of public opinion research processes in Karakalpakstan between 1991 and 2020. The study demonstrated that during the early years of independence (1991–2000), public opinion was expressed primarily through community gatherings (*mahalla* meetings), informal discussions, and regional media, without systematic or official mechanisms. During this stage, as state policy prioritized political stability and the consolidation of regional autonomy, citizens’ political and social opinions were rarely included in formal monitoring. Consequently, participation was limited, and the influence of public voices on government decision-making remained minimal.

Between 2001 and 2010, institutions and mechanisms for public opinion research began to take shape. Regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and sociological centers started conducting localized and thematic surveys. During this period, civic participation gradually increased, although results varied significantly across regions: urban residents had faster access to information and were more active in political discourse, while rural areas remained focused on local meetings and informal interactions. At the same time, statistical data and official reports indicated that NGO activities were often project-based and financially constrained, with limited independence in certain districts.

The period between 2011 and 2017 marked a qualitative advancement in public opinion research. Public councils, the Ombudsman’s initial monitoring activities, and official national surveys contributed to the systematic collection of citizens’ voices. Although regional NGOs and expert groups expanded civic participation, the growing number of state-affiliated organizations and their financial dependence constrained the development of independent monitoring.

The years 2018–2020 represented a turning point toward institutionalized and legally grounded public opinion research. The *Law on Public Oversight*, adopted on April 12, 2018, formalized public councils and strengthened civic participation. The Ombudsman’s monitoring activities were expanded to include closed and socially sensitive institutions, establishing citizen participation as a legally and institutionally structured mechanism within governance.

Statistical and empirical evidence indicates that demographic and territorial differences play a crucial role in shaping public opinion. As of 2020, the population of Karakalpakstan was approximately 1.89–1.90 million, with clear distinctions between urban and rural communities. Urban residents, with better access to media and social networks, were more actively engaged in political and social discourse, while in rural areas, public opinion was primarily expressed through community meetings and NGO activities. The most pressing public concerns included economic conditions (65–70%), healthcare (55%), education (48%), and environmental challenges (42%), reflecting the region’s key social and developmental priorities.

The study also found that, although the number of NGOs and public councils expanded, qualitative disparities persist. Some organizations maintain close relations with the state, limiting independent monitoring and the influence of public voices on politically sensitive issues. Nevertheless, data collected through Ombudsman monitoring and official surveys have created opportunities for integrating public perspectives into policymaking, although the “feedback” mechanism remains inconsistent across all issues.

Overall, between 1991 and 2020, public opinion research in Karakalpakstan evolved from an informal and fragmented practice into a structured system reinforced by legal and institutional mechanisms. However, ensuring sustained independence, continuous monitoring, reducing demographic disparities, and improving the effectiveness of the public–state “feedback” loop remain key priorities for future development. These findings not only illuminate the Karakalpakstan experience but also provide valuable insights for other regions and post-Soviet contexts in developing systematic public opinion monitoring and institutional participation frameworks.

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