

THE INSTITUTIONAL CHANNEL OF YOUTH SOCIAL ACTIVITY AND ITS RESTORATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract. The thesis approaches youth social activity from an institutional and cultural perspective and asks why the traditional institution of *hashar* has lost its capacity to convert readiness into collective action in a country whose median age is 27 and whose internet penetration exceeds 89 per cent. Four pillars of mobilisation – the call, the address, the result and the recognition – are isolated and operationalised through the civic voluntarism model of S. Verba and colleagues, E. Ostrom's boundary principle, A. Bandura's collective efficacy, P. Bourdieu's symbolic capital, M. Granovetter's threshold model and A. Hirschman's exit–voice–loyalty scheme. The empirical core is a most-similar-systems comparison of two national platforms: of more than 6,900 appeals submitted to the «Mening fikrim» portal only 495 (7.2 per cent) reached the voting stage, whereas voting in the «Initiative Budget» grew from 87,700 citizens in 2019 to 10.28 million in 2026, a 117-fold increase. The difference is attributed to institutional design rather than to values, motivation or technological access, and a «digital *hashar*» model with four measurable indicators is proposed.

Key words: youth, social activity, *hashar*, mahalla, social institution, volunteering, threshold of participation, institutional design, slacktivism, collective efficacy, symbolic capital, participatory budgeting, digital civic engagement.

Introduction

An illustrative case makes the problem concrete. In an outlying mahalla of Tashkent a street lamp has long been out of order. Twenty years ago the answer was simple: the *oqsoqol* was told, a *hashar* was announced for Friday, fifteen people gathered, and by nightfall the lamp was burning. Today the students of that mahalla write to the neighbourhood chat group and publish a post that collects hundreds of likes – and the lamp does not come on. No one here is indifferent, yet there is no result. This is not a deficit of motivation but the absence of the intermediary structure that turns intention into action – the institutional channel.

The scale of the problem is visible against the country profile. Under the «**New Uzbekistan Youth – 2030**» strategy, 9.5 million of the 38 million inhabitants, roughly 25 per cent, are citizens aged 14–30 [1]. DataReportal's *Digital 2025*:

Uzbekistan report puts the median age at 27 and internet users at 32.7 million, a penetration of 89.0 per cent. The preconditions for digital mobilisation are thus in place, yet a 2024 survey covering 9,452 mahallas identified the needs of 8.3 million young people while youth proposals entered through the platform that year amounted to about 3,500 – some 0.042 per cent of those covered. This mismatch between digital opportunity and institutional outcome is the problem field of the study.

The reproach that «this generation only looks at its phone» is emotionally intelligible and scientifically unfounded. The most reliable refutation is the «Initiative Budget», where 87,700 citizens voted for projects in 2019 [2] and 10,284,000 in the first season of 2026 [3]: a 117-fold increase in seven years falsifies the hypothesis of social passivity and locates the problem in the channel rather than in motivation.

The principal hypothesis (H0) holds that Uzbek society has possessed for centuries an institution converting inner willingness into collective benefit – *hashar* – and that the digital age has destroyed not the willingness but the channel. **H1:** conversion of activity into action depends on the simultaneous presence of four institutional conditions – a personal call, a localised task, a visible result and collective recognition. **H2:** when at least one disappears, activity turns into a symbolic form, that is into slacktivism. **H3:** when the four are restored through functional equivalents, participation rises by an order of magnitude. The question is thus not «how should young people be activated?» but «through which channel can existing activity be turned to public benefit?». The object of the study is the social activity of youth in Uzbek society, its subject the institutional mechanism converting that activity into collective action; the aim is to identify that mechanism, explain its weakening and propose a model of restoration grounded in the national tradition.

Literature review and methodology

In the approach of Uzbek scholars the question of activity is inseparable from that of spirituality. Professor **S. Otamuratov** holds that under globalisation the decisive factor in a nation's spiritual security is national self-awareness and spiritual immunity [4]; Professor **M. Bekturodov** shows that youth activity depends on inclusion in decision-making and that an initiative left unheard produces alienation from institutions [5] – substantively Hirschman's conclusion.

Each of the four pillars rests on a separate theoretical foundation. The civic voluntarism model of S. Verba, K.L. Schlozman and H.E. Brady distinguishes three reasons for non-participation – lack of resources, lack of motivation, and remaining outside the mobilising network («nobody asked»), the third often outweighing the first two [6]. **E. Ostrom's** principle of clearly defined boundaries explains why collective action does not begin where it is unspecified who does what, where and when: the condition minimises the cognitive and organisational costs of entry [7]. A. Bandura's

collective efficacy establishes that a group's belief in its capacity to obtain a result determines its mobilisation potential, so that where action and result are repeatedly disconnected the subject refrains from acting even when opportunity arises [8]. P. Bourdieu's symbolic capital grounds the fourth pillar: recognition, though not an economic resource, is a convertible form of capital [9].

Two further frameworks organise the analysis. **M. Granovetter's** threshold model holds that every individual has a personal threshold defining how many others must have joined before they act, so that two groups with identical values and resources may produce opposite outcomes through a small difference in the distribution of thresholds [10]. A. Hirschman's exit–voice–loyalty scheme completes the picture: when a system does not answer voice, members switch to exit [11] – for youth, passivity or outward migration.

The counter-argument to digital optimism matters equally. E. Morozov advanced the concept of slacktivism: activity demanding neither effort, nor time, nor risk yields no real result [12]. K. Kristofferson, K. White and J. Peloza then showed experimentally that the more public the initial symbolic act of support, the lower the probability of a subsequent meaningful contribution, since a public act satisfies impression management and satiates motivation [13].

Two gaps remain: *hashar* has not been decomposed structurally and functionally, and operating platforms have not been compared in terms of institutional design, so that the difference in their effectiveness is unexplained. The study uses a qualitative comparative-institutional methodology – institutional analysis, document analysis, case study and observation. Decomposition of *hashar* first isolates the conditions of effectiveness; these are then turned into criteria and applied to two national platforms and four foreign solutions on a most-similar-systems logic, since both platforms work on the same infrastructure, in the same legal space and among the same population and differ only in design. The data are secondary statistics unsupported by a representative survey.

The four institutional pillars

Viewed sociologically, *hashar* is not a custom but an engineered social technology whose effectiveness derived from four elements present at once.

The first pillar is the **calling voice**. A *hashar* was announced face to face by a person of recognised standing, and because the appeal was addressed and authoritative, leaving it unanswered carried a social price; many non-participants stay away not from lack of resources but because nobody invited them [6]. In the digital environment the call is impersonal – «whoever wishes may join» is addressed to everyone and therefore to no one.

The second pillar is a **precise address and time**. In traditional *hashar* the task was given as «Friday at eight, in front of the *guzar*, with a spade» [7]. Most digital

appeals stop here: the problem is stated, but no action, place or deadline is specified – intention without a plan of action.

The third pillar is a **visible result**. The outcome of a *hashar* was physically visible within a day: the ditch was cleaned, the lamp came on. This reinforces the belief in collective efficacy [8] and closes the feedback loop that raises the probability of repeated participation; otherwise learned helplessness sets in. Showing the result is not a technical function but the mechanism that sustains the institution.

The fourth pillar is **collective recognition**. The participant received no wage but another reward – public thanks and a rise in standing, that is symbolic capital [9] and, in Olson's terms, the selective incentive that solves the free-rider problem. The digital like is the cheapest form of recognition: resting on no scarce resource – time, reputation or risk – it loses its value as a social signal.

The secret of *hashar* lay neither in coercion nor in propaganda but in the completeness of the system. The pillars stand in a multiplicative, not an additive, relation: if one becomes zero the result is zero. Tested against this criterion, the opening case shows no calling voice, no address and time, no visible result, and recognition only at the level of a like: the students lacked neither intention nor skill, and slacktivism is the natural appearance of that void.

Table. The four institutional pillars in three environments

Institutional pillar	Traditional hashar	Activity in social networks	“Initiative Budget”
Calling voice (addressedness)	Full: face-to-face call by a person of standing	Absent: impersonal mass appeal	Partial: territorial mobilisation and outreach
Precise address and time (boundedness)	Full: place, date and task fixed in advance	Absent: no plan of action is formed	Full: concrete object, fixed voting window
Visible result (feedback)	Full: result physically visible within a day	Absent: the action–result link is broken	Full: winners announced and financed
Collective recognition (symbolic capital)	Full: public thanks, rise in standing	Devalued: a like rests on no scarce resource	Partial: a local win as a shared achievement
Scale of participation	High at mahalla level	High reaction, conversion close to zero	2019 – 87,700 votes; 2026 – 10.28 mln votes

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of data from [2; 3; 14].

The table reveals a regularity: where two pillars operate fully and two partially, participation reaches the order of ten million; where most are weakened, the initial reaction is high but its conversion into action is almost absent. This confirms H1 and H3. The criterion also explains why we organise ourselves in a disaster but not in everyday work: an emergency makes the call urgent, the task precise and the result visible, and is thus a short-lived substitute for the institution.

Comparative evidence: two national platforms

According to the resolution of the Council of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis of 12 February 2025, the «Mening fikrim» portal established in 2018 received over seven years more than 6,900 electronic collective appeals, of which only 495 – 7.2 per cent – were brought to a vote; the signature threshold is 10,000 at national level and 1,000 for district councils, with 60 days for a reply [14]. By design the citizen is guaranteed none of the four pillars – nobody addresses them personally, the result is invisible and no mechanism of recognition exists – and 92.8 per cent of appeals leave the system at the first filtration.

The «Initiative Budget», introduced in 2019, allows a citizen to propose and vote on a specific object in their own locality. In 2019, 28,704 proposals were submitted, 87,700 citizens voted and 1,102 projects were selected; by 2022 voters had reached 6.7 million [2]. In the first season of 2026, 21,049 initiatives were submitted, 10,284,000 votes were cast and 1,996 projects won, with 3,005.8 billion soums allocated [3].

Two platforms thus operate in the same country, on the same infrastructure and among the same population, yet «Mening fikrim» received on average some 985 appeals a year while the «Initiative Budget» received 21,049 initiatives in a single season: the difference in the flow of initiatives exceeds one order of magnitude and in votes approaches three. The gap cannot be explained by the values or the technical capabilities of young people, which are identical in both cases. The only systemic difference is institutional design – in the «Initiative Budget» the task is localised (the second pillar) and the result is returned publicly as a financing decision (the third pillar). The most effective lever is therefore not persuasion but institutional engineering: lowering the threshold and making the result visible.

This sharpens against the resource already available at mahalla level: under Resolution PQ-92 of 19 January 2022, 10,008 staff positions of mahalla youth leader have been introduced [15], so the infrastructure required for the first pillar already exists. The problem is not the absence of the institution but its functional orientation.

Foreign experience is a repository of tested solutions rather than a template. Estonia's citizen initiative portal requires 1,000 electronic signatures and obliges the Riigikogu to discuss the initiative with its authors and answer officially within six

months – the third pillar converted into a legal norm. Relative to population that threshold is about 0.07 per cent, whereas 10,000 signatures are only 0.026 per cent of Uzbekistan's population: the obstacle here lies not in the threshold but in the filtration preceding it [14]. Singapore lowered the threshold to a single action, photographing what is broken; Europe certifies volunteer work by a document describing competences rather than hours [9]; Korea's petition portal unites hundreds of state bodies in one system.

Results: the «digital hashar» model

The study proposes a «digital *hashar*» model – restoration of the four pillars on the principle of functional equivalence: the form of the institution must change, its functions must be preserved. **First pillar, returning a face to the voice:** for every initiative a named person, the mahalla youth leader or a coordinator, is made responsible, and the measure is the share of personal invitations rather than of mass appeals [6]. **Second pillar, address and date:** at acceptance an initiative is structured by geographical object, expected result and deadline; an appeal that does not meet these remains an «opinion» [7]. **Third pillar, showing the result:** the status of every initiative must be trackable and the outcome expressed as a measurable indicator – completed, partially completed, or reasoned refusal; a reasoned refusal is a result, silence is not. **Fourth pillar, restoring recognition:** recognition is raised from a like to an official record or reference. Two principles are added: gradation, since without intermediate steps groups with high thresholds do not act [10], and being inside, since an excluded author switches to exit [11].

The proposals follow. (1) **An end to silence** – a duty to answer any sufficiently supported initiative substantively within a fixed term, «under consideration» not counting as an answer [14]. (2) **Inviting the author to the discussion**, the cheapest element of the Estonian experience, which turns an applicant into an interlocutor. (3) **A ladder of participation** – at least three steps between the like and the formal application: a photo report, a one-off volunteer task and membership of a permanent group, each with a higher threshold than the last [10]. (4) **Reconfiguring the mahalla youth leader link**, moving evaluation from reporting to mobilisation outcomes [15], with a «before and after» rule: two photographs and two sentences published for every completed initiative [8]. (5) **A volunteering record** used in education and employment, with protection of voluntariness, since platform activity turned into a reporting indicator displaces intrinsic motivation [13]. (6) **Four indicators** matching the pillars: the addressing coefficient, the share of structured initiatives, the closure rate and the conversion rate from symbolic to real participation.

Conclusion

First, the notion that young people are indifferent is unfounded: the growth of voters in the «Initiative Budget» from 87,700 to 10.28 million [2; 3] cannot coexist

with a hypothesis of social passivity – the problem is to be sought in the arrangement, not in the person. **Second**, any effective institution converting activity into action rests on four pillars: a personal call, a precise address and time, a visible result and collective recognition. In traditional *hashar* all four worked together; in the virtual environment all four have weakened, and because they stand in a multiplicative relation the reduction of any one to zero disables the whole mechanism [6; 7; 8; 9]. **Third**, slacktivism is therefore not a moral defect but the absence of a step on which to place the next foot [13]: the task is institutional engineering rather than moral education [10].

Fourth, the central empirical conclusion: the difference of several orders of magnitude between two platforms working in the same technological and legal environment is explained mainly by institutional design – the mechanism in which the task was localised and the result made visible mobilised 10.28 million participants [3], whereas in the mechanism lacking these conditions 92.8 per cent of appeals were lost at filtration [14], which confirms H1 and H3. **Fifth**, foreign experience is a repository rather than a copy: the duty to respond may be taken from Estonia, the lower threshold from Singapore and the formalisation of recognition from Europe. The target of 900,000 volunteers [1] will accordingly be reached through a design that activates the four pillars, and the 10,008 mahalla youth leader positions [15] show that the problem lies not in resources but in orientation.

The street lamp is still not burning and the students are still writing. There is no need to tell them to be active – they already are. What they need is a voice saying «come to the *guzar* at eight in the morning», and a lamp burning in the evening. *Hashar* gave exactly that; our task is to move it onto the screen.

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