

# Chatham House Report

Annette Bohr, Birgit Brauer, Nigel Gould-Davies, Nargis Kassenova,  
Joanna Lillis, Kate Mallinson, James Nixey and Dosym Satpayev

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# Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition



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Cover image: The front cover shows a gilded imprint of the right hand of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the First President of Kazakhstan. Entitled 'Caring Hand', the impression is mounted on an ornate pedestal on the observation deck of the Baiterek Tower in the centre of the capital, now renamed Nur-Sultan. Visitors are encouraged to place their own hands in the print and make a wish.  
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# Executive Summary

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*A partial handover of political power through an orchestrated transition takes Kazakhstan into uncharted territory. Will it be able to pursue modernization and reform, and break from its authoritarian past?*

Kazakhstan is at a turning point in its history. At face value, at least, Central Asia's wealthiest state has embarked on a bold experiment following the March 2019 decision by its founding father and long-standing ruler, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to resign from the presidency and initiate a managed political succession. A generational transition of this nature, untried in other former Soviet republics, brings with it high stakes. As well as looking to secure his own legacy, having dominated the country since before independence in 1991, Nazarbayev seeks to ensure Kazakhstan does not depart from the course he has set, while safeguarding regime stability in the context of multiple and evolving domestic and international challenges. This is easier said than done.

The uncertainty around this project is substantial, especially considering a 'rollback' decree just seven months after Nazarbayev's resignation, limiting the powers of his anointed successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. How long can Tokayev credibly remain president considering such a transparent undermining of his authority? Is Nazarbayev, in fact, grooming his daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, another relative or a power player from outside the family for the leadership in the longer term? Will the 'Kazakh tandem' of Nazarbayev and Tokayev function effectively, or will tensions and conflicts arise between them as many claim is happening already? How will the leadership cope with the protest mood now manifest on the streets of Kazakhstan, and address the political and socio-economic grievances fuelling this discontent? How might the political transition play out if Nazarbayev were to suddenly exit the political scene altogether? And what is the long-term transition plan for the time when Nazarbayev has departed, and how effective will it be?

*Far deeper political, economic and social reforms will be needed if Kazakhstan is to meet the growing challenges to its stability, prosperity and development*

As Kazakhstan enters uncharted territory, the purpose of this report is twofold. First, to make the case for the West to devote more attention to Kazakhstan. The country's relative importance in Central Asia, and as the constant focus of intense attention from China and Russia, suggests that the West is wrong to direct so little time and diplomatic effort and so few resources towards it. This is not so much a miscalculation (that would be to assume there had been a calculation in the first place) as a misstep through neglect, presupposing that the future will resemble the present – with Kazakhstan remaining stable internally, relatively inconsequential geopolitically but nevertheless a friendly ally to the West. In fact, the country's trajectory over the next few years is of potentially strategic import. This is because even its political semi-transition presents the West with a rare opportunity to push back against the global rise of authoritarianism, in a state that is open to rational argument and economic logic.

The second function of the report is to serve as a well-intentioned message to the leadership of Kazakhstan. The research undertaken by the report's eight authors shows that Kazakhstan is at risk of failing to achieve the goals its leadership has set for the country. As significant as it has been, the partial stepping aside of Nazarbayev by no means guarantees the modernization and renewal that he and his successor have promised.

Far deeper political, economic and social reforms will be needed if Kazakhstan is to meet the growing challenges to its stability, prosperity and development. Street protests since Nazarbayev's resignation have demonstrated a level of popular disaffection far higher than the authorities acknowledge. The leadership needs to bridge the disconnect between the rulers and the ruled and start listening to its people.

To avoid slipping into decline, and to resist external pressures and geopolitical overtures that could diminish the sovereignty that its leadership is so determined to safeguard, Kazakhstan needs new faces – innovators and reformers – throughout every level of the administration, as well as new ideas. This report is intended to help with the 'ideas' part of that proposition.

## Kazakhstan's principal challenges

### Internal

#### *Governance*

Although significant economic reforms occurred under Nazarbayev's rule, political reforms conspicuously lagged during his presidency – with Nazarbayev choosing not to establish an independent judiciary, a parliament with meaningful oversight powers, or even a constitution that is respected by the authorities themselves. Indeed, Nazarbayev frequently amended the constitution to bolster and prolong his rule, and an opaque, informal political system persisted. This stymied the development of institutional governance and the country more broadly.

*As president in a system still shaped in the image of his predecessor, Tokayev is effectively one half of a duopoly*

President Tokayev, meanwhile, faces formidable challenges. He needs to improve the government's responsiveness to the needs of the population, address long-term structural economic challenges, and head off rising popular disaffection with the political system and socio-economic conditions, all while negotiating the very real constraints associated with his own limited authority. As president in a system still shaped in the image of his predecessor, Tokayev is effectively one half of a duopoly, no matter how often Nazarbayev himself and Tokayev's own people deny the existence of any such thing. Although he is attempting to create his own power base beyond Nazarbayev, the latter retains extensive entrenched powers that make major political or economic reforms unlikely. Only once Nazarbayev fully retreats from the political front line will it be possible to harness the potential for change. But the capacity to do so will depend greatly on how the political system develops in the immediate transition period.

#### *The political economy*

Since independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's strong economic performance on the back of its natural resource endowments has enabled it to reach upper-middle-income status. It is one of the most successful economies in the region and has been among the best-performing of the post-Soviet resource exporters. To achieve this, it has overcome formidable barriers of geography, climate and history.

But the post-Soviet system and the natural-resources wealth that delivered this success have accumulated new problems that hinder further economic development. The economic crisis of 2014 exposed structural shortcomings that were hidden by the oil

boom. Among them are the excessive role of state-owned enterprises and their holding companies, weak regulatory institutions penetrated by vested interests (especially in the financial sector), costly and inefficient trade arrangements, and corruption. Kazakhstan must address these problems if it is to meet looming challenges that include: a growing population in need of high-quality jobs; rapid technological change; the transformation of energy markets; and increasingly assertive behaviour by China and Russia. A new reform impulse is needed.

#### *Political and civil liberties and human rights*

The government does not respect political and civil liberties. It fails to uphold its commitments either under international agreements or under its own constitution and laws. It holds choreographed elections. There are *de jure* and *de facto* restrictions on press freedom and freedom of expression. Although some dissent is tolerated, citizens who cross the government's boundaries in expressing their opinions – whether online or offline – face sanctions, including prison terms. Restrictive legislation limits the right to freedom of assembly, with peaceful protesters facing arrest and imprisonment. Freedom of association is curtailed for civil society groups, trade unions and religious congregations. The judiciary is abused for political ends.

Western governments have typically shied away from challenging Kazakhstan over human rights, further fuelling a sense of impunity on the part of the authorities. However, the political transition opens a window of opportunity for Kazakhstan to improve its human rights record, and President Tokayev is already making specific pledges to do so. This would enable the government to address citizens' mounting concerns and grievances in a more inclusive manner by amending restrictive legislation and creating space for the exercise of greater political and civil liberties in practice as well as on paper. International actors could support this process.

#### *Identity politics*

One challenge for the transition of power is that it is occurring while various identity groups compete for dominance. Ongoing rural-to-urban migration has contributed to this phenomenon. Many migrants remain marginalized, without access to welfare. Feeling little attachment to the state, they instead prioritize ethnic or tribal forms of identity. As the use of the Russian language diminishes, the number of supporters of these forms of identity is likely to increase. Tribal and clan factors hold sway in certain sectors of society where group loyalty still comes before civic loyalty.

Meanwhile, new forms of religious expression are replacing those destroyed by urbanization and 70 years of Soviet rule, creating clashes between secular and clerical identities. Such tensions are aggravated by the fact that nationalist and populist movements are simultaneously gaining support. Ethnic Kazakhs are the most vocal group, which exacerbates the sense among minorities that they are disenfranchised, even though they are not as politically or civically active as Kazakhs are. This trend will continue as the ratio of minorities keeps shrinking.

#### External

##### *Relations with Central Asian neighbours*

Kazakhstan has begun to identify itself more clearly as an integral part of the Central Asian region, rather than as a mere bridge between the other Central Asian states and Russia. The result has been a palpable and growing trend towards cooperation *among* Central Asian states, with a cautiously reforming Uzbekistan acting as an important driver. A confluence of factors has underpinned this gradual shift:

*Kazakhstan has begun to identify itself more clearly as an integral part of the Central Asian region, rather than as a mere bridge between the other Central Asian states and Russia*

- The growth of a more ethnic Kazakh identity to the detriment of the civic-based Kazakhstani identity developed after independence, as a result of demographic and educational changes and a growing ethno-nationalist narrative.
- A perceptible disentangling and distancing of Kazakhstan from Russia and its policy directions.
- A focus on increasing geographic connectivity as a means to promote national development.
- The liberalization of Uzbekistan's economy and its new openness to regional cooperation, following the death in 2016 of that country's long-serving ruler, Islam Karimov.
- A growing recognition among the Central Asian states that deepening regional trade is mutually beneficial, especially in light of the constraints associated with Russia's economic problems.

Yet while Kazakhstan's leadership welcomes improved prospects for trade with the other Central Asian states, it knows that trade with those countries cannot begin to equal the value of trade with Russia, China and Europe. This automatically makes the cultivation of Central Asian trade a lesser priority. As a result, Kazakhstan continues to give greater importance in its foreign policy to positioning itself as a global player rather than as a regional leader. Nonetheless, as the country begins its transition to a post-Nazarbayev era, it is at last set to cooperate more closely with its Central Asian neighbours.

##### *Relations with Russia and China*

Since independence, fostering good relations with Russia and China has been at the core of Kazakhstan's 'multi-vector' foreign policy. However, behind the façade of strategic good neighbourliness, there are tensions and potential cracks. Kazakhstan's positioning *vis-à-vis* Russia and China takes place on three levels: bilateral relations, regional dynamics in Eurasia, and the international system.

At the bilateral level, the major issues for the government are the treatment of minorities and how such groups fit into domestic and foreign facets of nation-building. Changing demographics notwithstanding, the challenge of reducing the susceptibility of Kazakhstan's Russian minority population to Moscow's 'information wars' will remain acute. The upward trend in economic cooperation with China is set to continue, albeit in the face of growing public opposition. In particular, China's repression of ethnic Kazakhs in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region feeds into anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan and clouds bilateral relations.



At the regional level, the principal developments have concerned economic integration through the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The progress of the former has been undermined by the Russia–Ukraine crisis and perceptions among member states that Russia is pursuing a political rather than economic agenda, while the BRI faces public opposition that the government broadly ignores.

Finally, at the systemic international level, authoritarian state worldviews similar to those in Kazakhstan, Russia and China are on the rise, though there are important differences in how each state positions itself in the global order. Developments at all three levels are likely to affect – and be affected by – the unfolding and unpredictable power transition in Kazakhstan.

#### *Relations with the West*

Since independence, Kazakhstan has actively sought acceptance and validation from the West, which it sees as a geopolitical counterweight to Russia. Western attention has fluctuated, shaped mostly by interest in Kazakhstan's mineral resources and in the country's role as a military transit route to Afghanistan for the US and its allies. For both the EU and the US, Kazakhstan has been the main partner in Central Asia (a position Uzbekistan may come to rival), but the region as a whole remains of marginal interest to Western policymakers. This fact – along with the country's reputation for being undemocratic and corrupt, and for violating human rights – means Kazakhstan, though clearly a valued partner for Western governments and institutions, is not by any means treated as an equal. That said, starting from a low base also presents an opportunity for President Tokayev, a former diplomat. Better treatment of dissenters and activists, for example, or the swift punishment of corrupt officials who try to hide the proceeds of illicit activity in offshore bank accounts could change how the country is perceived internationally, as well as earn him public respect at home.

## Recommendations

### For Western governments and institutions

- Western countries and institutions need to be more involved in Kazakhstan than they have been in recent times. They should not be fooled by Kazakhstan's past stability. Systemic vulnerabilities are growing. Economic challenges and the transition process have exposed and intensified such vulnerabilities. Powers seeking to maintain their geopolitical footholds, such as Russia, and rising powers, such as China, have proven themselves more than willing and able to fill geopolitical vacuums as these appear. The more the West retreats from engagement with Kazakhstan, the more others will fill the gap – and potentially clash. **Kazakhstan needs to rise among the West's priorities now.**
- Constraints on his power notwithstanding, President Tokayev should be cultivated as a respected interlocutor. As one of the architects of Kazakhstan's successful multi-vector foreign policy, he should be welcomed in Western capitals, which constitute one such vector. Kazakhstan should not, however, benefit from unqualified Western support. **Subtle pressure aimed at addressing deficiencies in domestic governance will help foster a culture of change in Kazakhstan.**

Western interlocutors should impress upon the government that reform is in its own interests to prevent greater upheavals later. This reform needs to be carefully managed, but not micromanaged to the extent that it excludes independent voices.

- Western policymakers should proactively **counteract the Kremlin's propaganda machine**, which seeks to discredit Western values in the eyes of Russian-speaking TV viewers in Kazakhstan. This means undertaking a more targeted, creative and diversified strategy of public information, including opening opportunities for Western news and entertainment.
- Recognizing the ongoing changes in global governance, Western governments and institutions should **frame their policies towards Kazakhstan in such a way that there are incentives and engagement formats/arrangements** for Kazakhstan to value a genuine partnership with the West. The UK and other European countries should enhance their diplomatic presences in Kazakhstan with foreign ministry officials who are less focused on narrow economic engagement and more on better governance. In addition to commerce, Western officials should offer the Kazakhstani leadership assistance with the country's energy transition, for example via the EU's connectivity initiative.

#### For the government of Kazakhstan

- Kazakhstan's authorities need to **introduce more transparent and inclusive governance** to reduce the disconnection between the population and the ruling elite, respond better to the needs of citizens, and ultimately restore faith in government.
- The government needs to **give more clarity over its intentions for the political transition and the disbursement of power** (especially considering the decree published on 21 October 2019 giving Nazarbayev extra powers over ministerial and security appointments). The abiding influence of the 'First President' as the official 'Leader of the Nation' (*Elbasy*), as the head of the ruling Nur Otan party, and particularly as the chair of the Security Council creates ambiguity, diluting the ability of the new president to spearhead reforms.
- President Tokayev should create conditions that would **foster a more open political environment**. The introduction of parliamentary checks and balances instead of a rubber-stamp legislature would yield significant benefits for the robustness of political institutions and governance. Introducing elections for regional governors and the mayors of large cities would also boost accountability.
- To deliver the more responsive state that he has promised Kazakhstan's citizens, President Tokayev needs to **ensure that his National Council of Public Trust becomes not only a genuine platform for dialogue but also an engine of reform** by rapidly enacting some of its proposals. The authorities need to make the platform more inclusive by encouraging the attendance of constructive civil society groups or actors that have hitherto been excluded or have declined to join.

- The government should **halt detentions of peaceful protesters and should amend legislation governing the right to free assembly**, replacing the requirement to obtain permission for public gatherings with a requirement to inform local authorities of such events. The leadership should also halt prosecutions of dissenters for freely expressing their opinions, and should establish genuine dialogue with the public. The cases of citizens deemed ‘political prisoners’ should be reviewed, and the judiciary should not be abused for political ends.
- The government needs to **take credible action to strengthen the rule of law**, through comprehensive reform of the judicial and criminal justice systems. Such reform needs to eradicate practices rooted in the Soviet system, and foster instead an ‘innocent until proven guilty’ mentality to deliver on President Tokayev’s promise of delivering justice for all.
- The government needs to **take meaningful action to combat corruption**, not only by following through with high-profile trials but by establishing genuine zero-tolerance policies at all levels of the public sector, the civil service, the criminal justice system and the judiciary. Reform should be modelled on international best practice for transition economies, in particular on Georgia as the most relevant post-Soviet example.
- **A wide programme of financial and commercial reforms** is vital if Kazakhstan is to be a major economic player. These should include, but not be limited to: reform of state-owned enterprises through more effective regulation and management, and orderly divestment of their public-sector stakes; policy support for SME development, especially in combating predatory practices of corporate raiding; transparency and reform of the financial sector to root out conflicts of interest; and more consistent and supportive policies for smaller foreign investors and minority shareholders.
- In addition to the planned creation of an international centre for trade and economic cooperation on the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border, Kazakhstan would benefit from adopting **measures to boost border efficiency by tackling informal payments and other non-tariff barriers**. Given the limited size of its domestic market, Kazakhstan should seek to coordinate its industrialization strategy with Uzbekistan in order to increase complementarities, rather than compete with its neighbour by diversifying into the same activities, such as the manufacture of automobiles and agricultural and electronic equipment.
- The leadership should continue to **pursue the informal or ‘soft’ regionalism** advocated by a group of Kazakhstan’s leading political analysts. A focus on consensus-seeking and continuous consultation, rather than on integration and the creation of formal structures, would allow Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states to avert potential Russian efforts to hijack or thwart intra-regional cooperation.
- The dominance of various forms of religious and tribal group identity is often a reaction to the socio-economic environment. Thus, the government should strive to create conditions that will **ensure the emergence of a stronger middle class and develop a corresponding civic identity**. Improving the quality of Kazakhstani education (secular and religious), and a better appreciation of Kazakhstan’s culture, will reduce the risk of archaic or aggressive forms of identity becoming popularized.

- More of an effort needs to be made to **reduce the ability of external players to shape public opinion and manipulate information channels**. This must be done by supporting and increasing the competitiveness of independent media, both traditional and digital, particularly Kazakh-language media. The undue influence of foreign media, at times purveying fake news, creates risks for the government in terms of its own ability to foster a civic identity and encourages divisions in society.
- The government should **live up to its international commitments on the granting of asylum to refugees**, and ensure Kazakhstani citizens fleeing persecution – particularly from China – are not subject to forcible return.
- The government should **recognize the growing link between domestic public opinion and its foreign policy**, develop better channels of communication to explain international policy, and provide more transparency over its plans – such as, for example, accepting BRI money – in order to foster greater public trust in its actions.

## Conclusion

As Kazakhstan negotiates this major turning-point in its development, it has an opportunity to become a model for other states undergoing or set to undergo complex transitions in the post-Soviet region. The country has much to build on: astute and experienced leaders who have Kazakhstan's best interests at heart; an economy with unfulfilled potential that continues to deliver sustained growth, despite all its failings; a vibrant – albeit pressured, fractured and frustrated – civil society that stands ready to assist in the reform process; and a young, dynamic and educated population.

Kazakhstan should rise up the priority list for Western powers because it presents an opportunity for a relatively 'easy win' if their engagement can successfully support the country's reform and development – and be seen doing so. This is an opportunity liable to be lost if it is not actively grasped. Kazakhstan needs honest, critical friends, as opposed to disingenuous partners with dubious motivations. For the West to fulfil this role, it will need to reassess its main areas of concern and its allocation of financial and diplomatic resources. In turn, Kazakhstan will need to be more honest with itself about its own failings, and more willing to listen to its own people – the critics as well as the supporters. If these things can happen more or less in concert over the next five years, then there is an opportunity for Kazakhstan to become a model for others as the leading success story of the post-Soviet period.

# Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition

## Executive Summary

Map 1: Kazakhstan



Source: Adapted from United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations Cartographic Section (2004), Kazakhstan, Map No 3771 Rev 6, <https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/kazakhst.pdf>.

# 1. Introduction

James Nixey

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*Kazakhstan has come a long way since independence, but prosperity gains and astute foreign policy have not been matched by political or institutional modernization.*

For most people, even for most students and practitioners of international relations, the world's ninth-largest country by land area rarely appears on their radar. Kazakhstan is often overlooked as a regional backwater, not yet shed of its Soviet past, dismissed by some as a state that was never designed to evolve into independence. At the same time, a small minority of specifically interested parties tend to exaggerate Kazakhstan's strategic potential, bestowing upon it an unmerited level of geopolitical and economic importance.<sup>1</sup> This Chatham House report, researched and written by Western and Kazakhstani analysts, aims to correct both of these inaccuracies and offer a realistic analysis of the country's condition and prospects. *Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition* seeks to present a balanced view of the country's politics and society, and to provide facts, insight and assessment of a polity both under-analysed in the West and facing substantive change. Both credit and criticism are given where due, reflecting the complex contemporary picture of development in the country.

The diversity of expert and popular impressions of Kazakhstan largely reflects differences in the motivations of observers, not all of whom are impartial. But it is also a function of the country's mixture of genuine achievements and obvious shortcomings after 28 years of independent, post-Soviet existence (and less than a century with its current recognized borders).

The ruling elite's official statements suggest that the leadership is ambitious – that it sees Kazakhstan not as an ex-Soviet state, nor even as a Central Asian country or 'bridge' between East and West. Kazakhstan is keen to transcend these definitions and become a more multi-dimensional, world-class player with a modernized economy and society. To do this, however, the country will above all need to overhaul its political system and improve governance. Without deeper and more extensive reforms than those effected to date, Kazakhstan risks falling into economic stagnation and squandering its progress.

## Assessing the post-independence record

Relatively speaking, Kazakhstan has modernized and stabilized to a far greater extent than its four Central Asian neighbours – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In most respects, as noted by Nigel Gould-Davies in Chapter 3, it has been among the top-performing economies in the former Soviet Union (FSU), if one excludes the Baltic states. Protests over land laws and workers' rights in recent years have had little systemic political impact. Partly, this reflects state-led repression, but it is also because demonstrations have prompted policy climbdowns by a nervous government that has observed severe unrest in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Georgia and even Russia. A 'colour revolution' or upheaval equivalent to the Arab uprisings remains unlikely

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<sup>1</sup> For a hagiographic exposition of Central Asia's potential, and Kazakhstan's in particular, see Cohen, A. and Grant, J. (2018), *Future Calling: Infrastructure Development in Central Asia*, Washington, DC: International Tax and Investment Center (ITIC). On another level entirely is Jonathan Aitken's widely criticized *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan*. See Aitken, J. (2009), *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan*, London: Bloomsbury.

*The political protests of 2019 have been larger and more sustained than most observers expected when Nursultan Nazarbayev – the country’s leader since before independence in 1991 – resigned as president in March 2019*

in Kazakhstan in the near future. Yet the political protests of 2019, although minor by the standards of many democracies, have been larger and more sustained than most observers expected when Nursultan Nazarbayev – the country’s leader since before independence in 1991 – resigned as president in March 2019.

Having made it through the chaos of the 1990s, Kazakhstan saw its prosperity increase rapidly – outpacing the world average – throughout the 2000s on the back of high oil prices and innovative reforms.<sup>2</sup> It was hit by the global financial crisis in 2008, however, and suffered a further sharp slowdown in full-year GDP growth in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, enough progress had been made in the previous two decades for Kazakhstan to continue as Central Asia’s economic leader. The country’s uneven, albeit broadly upward, economic trajectory in recent years is reflected in the stop-start process of privatization. The government has successfully transitioned some parts of the economy away from the Soviet-era model, selling off large chunks of approximately 800 (mostly smaller) state-owned enterprises. At the same time, it has instinctively attempted to retain control of key sectors and companies. The need for liberalization is of particular salience given the slightly improved prospects for reform in neighbouring Uzbekistan, which – as Annette Bohr explores in Chapter 6 – could provide a catalyst for the development of a healthy dynamic between the two countries. Moves by Kazakhstan’s authorities to develop the private sector and establish more effective markets could help the country to make the most of opportunities presented by potential increases in bilateral or regional economic cooperation.

Kazakhstan’s similarity – in essence, not scale – to Russia is notable. Both countries are regional heavyweights with analogously structured economies, comparable levels of GDP per capita, and political systems designed to allow the elite to retain power through managed elections. Both are or were until recently formally led by ‘strongmen’ with ambitions for something more than their countries have already achieved. Both those men – namely Nazarbayev and Vladimir Putin – are presumably satisfied with their performances as leaders (though many of their people are not). Yet the two countries are also in relative economic decline compared to, say, China and the US. This is partially a result of Nazarbayev and Putin being less comfortable with political than economic reform, and having established social contracts – now increasingly under strain – in which the promise of prosperity is exchanged for centralized control. Most obviously of all, both men are products of a Soviet upbringing, culture and political system.

But the clear difference between Kazakhstan and Russia is that, in working towards his country’s relatively modest goals, Nazarbayev has not made external enemies as Putin has. During the crisis around Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, Nazarbayev made a point of endorsing the territorial integrity of Ukraine but was also careful not to criticize Putin. And just as Nazarbayev maintained domestic control by balancing the interests of various financial-industrial and ethnic groups,<sup>4</sup> he adopted

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<sup>2</sup> Kazakhstan’s GDP per capita overtook global GDP per capita in 2011, peaking at \$13,891 in 2013 compared to a world level of \$10,764. In 2016, Kazakhstan’s GDP per capita fell below the world level again, to \$7,715, before rising to \$9,331 in 2018. World Bank (undated), ‘GDP per capita (current US\$) – Kazakhstan, World’, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?end=2018&locations=KZ-1W&start=2000> (accessed 11 Sep. 2019).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (undated), ‘GDP growth (annual %) – Kazakhstan’, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=KZ> (accessed 1 Nov. 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Kazakhstan has more than 100 ethnicities. Nazarbayev’s success in maintaining peace among them is the principal justification for his title of *Elbasy* – ‘Leader of the Nation’.

a similar approach to navigating external pressures. His much-lauded ‘multi-vector foreign policy’ has been highly successful. There are surely limits to Kazakhstan’s freedom of geopolitical manoeuvre, but Nazarbayev was comfortable with, or at least accepted, these limits during his presidency. His foreign policy was above all pragmatic: Kazakhstan is unlike Georgia, for instance, and seeks neither European Union nor NATO membership. Russia, for its part, may not be overjoyed with some of the trade and investment deals that Kazakhstan signs – which are more often with Chinese partners than the West – but the Kremlin tolerates this and is careful not to overreact.

### Changing times

With the change of president, however, the pre-existing power dynamics may no longer apply. There is no guarantee that the strategies and policies that worked for Nazarbayev will work for his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The new president has clearly been selected to follow in his patron’s footsteps. However, contemporary Kazakhstan very much remains Nazarbayev’s country, moulded in his image. As Kate Mallinson explores in Chapter 2, Tokayev seems unlikely to be able to replicate that level of dominance. Russia and China are anxious that any political transition in Kazakhstan remain compatible with their interests (chiefly, access and control), and so far their wish seems to have been granted. Kazakhstan’s ties with and orientation towards the West today are weaker than at any time in the post-Soviet era. US and European interlocutors thus risk having less influence over the future of the country, even though Kazakhstan is now at a critical juncture and needs Western support more than ever.

Russia’s historically strong leverage in the country is also evolving, although efforts to ‘de-Russify’ Kazakhstan in recent years have been mixed. While the written language is to be moved from a Cyrillic to a Latin base by 2025, and many signs and government posters are already in Latin script, the principal language of business and government is likely to remain Russian for the foreseeable future. Due to a century of rule from Moscow, a majority of Kazakhstanis remain more comfortable with Russia’s embrace than that of any other external power.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true of the older generation. A younger generation without the same historic attachment to the Soviet yoke is beginning to think differently. Youngsters appear to have less of an inferiority complex about Russia than their elders. Not that Western democracies fare much better: research by Marlène Laruelle shows that younger Kazakhstanis do not consider the West to have a superior political and social model.<sup>6</sup> (In 2018 more than 40,000 people left the country, according to data from the research agency Finprom, although many leavers return.)<sup>7</sup> These attitudes may change, however, if liberal Western policies see a resurgence and Kazakhstan’s own reforms fail to spark.

So far, the most significant laying to rest of Soviet-era ghosts has come in the form of China’s increasing economic presence and political assertion in the region. This is evident in projects associated with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a sweeping

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 5 by Dosym Satpayev. In a recent survey, 72 per cent of Kazakhstanis polled were supportive of Vladimir Putin.

<sup>6</sup> Laruelle, M. (2018), ‘Kazakhstan’s Nationhood: Politics and Society on the Move’, lecture at the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies (CERES), Georgetown University, 8 February 2018, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/kazakhstans-nationhood-politics-and-society-on-the-move/> (accessed 11 Sep. 2019).

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 5.



investment programme designed to boost transport and trade links between China, Central Asia, Europe and (increasingly) other regions.

As with Kazakhstan itself, the BRI is variously dismissed and overhyped by observers. For some – not least, Nazarbayev himself – the BRI is the defining modernization project of the 21st century, with the potential to generate \$26 billion worth of joint projects in industry and infrastructure for Kazakhstan by 2021.<sup>8</sup> According to this school of thought, the BRI will provide Kazakhstan with the long-term means to achieve the prosperity denied to it under Soviet rule.

*Despite risks both real and perceived, the government is forging ahead with deals with Chinese state entities on numerous transport infrastructure projects*

For others, however, the BRI merits a more cautious embrace. There are concerns that it risks indebting Kazakhstan over loan repayments for costly projects, and that it may be the next step in a Chinese agenda of ‘regional capture’. In the 1990s, Western oil companies were chosen over Chinese ones as partners, as Kazakhstan considered only Western firms to have the know-how to extract hydrocarbons from the country’s most promising deposits. But this is no longer the trend. Despite risks both real and perceived, the government is forging ahead with deals with Chinese state entities on numerous transport infrastructure projects (not all are proceeding smoothly). This report addresses some of the BRI’s implications for Kazakhstan, especially in Chapters 6 and 7, although it does not aim to do so in full.

### Authoritarian legacies

Kazakhstan is not a hard-line dictatorship, but its state machinery undoubtedly has a darker side – as Joanna Lillis makes clear in her chapter on the country’s political, civil and human rights record (see Chapter 4). As in many authoritarian states, the regime seeks to police information, and has stepped up its efforts in this area. Internet access, once widely available in towns and cities, has been restricted. The authorities have been heavily blocking the internet in the evening hours, with the resultant disruption the subject of much frustration and debate. This has especially been the case since the political protests of 2019.<sup>9</sup>

Current levels of repression remain a far cry from past abuses – such as a series of unexplained killings in the early to mid-2000s – and the coercive power of the deep state has been less overt of late. Nonetheless, a wide range of political rights and freedoms are effectively non-existent. In addition to access to information, these include political plurality; media freedom; freedom of assembly; the freedom of civil society to operate without pressure, intimidation or official consent; and freedom of association for trade unions and political parties other than the ruling Nur Otan party and ‘accepted’ political organizations. At the same time, other freedoms are often unchallenged and modern luxuries widely available, at least in the cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan.

If another common feature of autocratic regimes is a weakness for grand projects or monuments, Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev has been true to type. The extent to which some of the country’s showier ‘achievements’ can be described as such is

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<sup>8</sup> Kazinform (2016), ‘Kazakhstan, China to create 50 joint enterprises’, 21 September 2016, [https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-china-to-create-50-joint-enterprises\\_a2951403](https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-china-to-create-50-joint-enterprises_a2951403) (accessed 31 Oct. 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Recently the government called upon all citizens to download an ‘internet security certificate’, which allows full access even to encrypted information. The move was widely questioned (and criticized at a global level) for being more about surveillance than security. The government subsequently backed down from implementing the scheme.

*If a new generation and an emergent middle class feel ready for power before the elite is ready to bequeath it, transition will not come as peacefully as everyone desires*

debatable, however. Many events and initiatives appear to be status symbols rather than content-driven. Examples include EXPO-2017, the Astana International Financial Centre (yet to prove its worth), the country's unsuccessful 2022 Winter Olympics bid, its take-up of a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2017–18, the hosting of Syria peace talks, and the 2010 chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This is to say nothing of the gravity-defying architecture of Nur-Sultan, a purpose-built and now rebranded capital city in the steppe.

It is easy for Westerners to scoff at such apparent vanity projects, yet the underlying ambition is genuine and impressive. No other Central Asian country – indeed, perhaps no other FSU country save Russia – is capable of turning such aspiration into reality. A more merited criticism is that these projects divert resources from everyday issues that matter more to the average Kazakhstani.

In time, more rational, needs-based policymaking is likely to be driven by quiet generational change in the lower levels of the administration. Younger people appear more promising future stewards of Kazakhstan's society and economy, and less susceptible to domestic and Russian propaganda than many of their counterparts elsewhere in the FSU. The effects of the government's Bolashak programme – which has sent thousands of students to study abroad – are already beginning to feed into public administration, and will be more visible as younger leaders take the reins. If, however, a new generation and an emergent middle class feel ready for power before the elite is ready to bequeath it, transition will not come as peacefully as everyone desires. Such tensions are what we appear to be witnessing now.

### A transition with multiple risks

Until March 2019, the most striking feature of the political system was Nursultan Nazarbayev's unchallenged rule since independence. That is a long time for any leader, even by the standards of post-Soviet countries. His near-neighbour counterparts from the early days of independence had mostly died off or been deposed. Though Nazarbayev's regime was neither as cruel as that of Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan) nor as erratic as that led by Saparmyrat Nyýazow (Turkmenistan), the president occupied a position that in many respects was of questionable legitimacy, given routine abuses of the electoral process.

Yet that is only half the picture. Nazarbayev was also genuinely popular. According to local observers, he would most likely have won all the elections in which he stood (see 'Appendix: Facts and Figures'), even had they been held democratically. He had always enjoyed a broad support base – although he might perhaps have won 'only' 70 per cent of the vote in an open contest, instead of the 95 per cent or more officially recorded for most elections. Whatever the real level of support, Nazarbayev's cult of personality was – and still is – manifest.

The appointment of 66-year-old Tokayev<sup>10</sup> as his successor has done nothing to quell uncertainty over the future, or to encourage internal innovation and foreign investment. The leadership claims to want to modernize and reform. Yet for now it means to

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<sup>10</sup> At the time of his actual appointment, Tokayev was 65 years old.

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do so with the politicians of yesteryear and a vertical power system. Notwithstanding the potential longer-term impact of an influx of youth into the system, as mentioned above, this contradiction remains unresolved.

The centralization of power means that civil society and political opposition are largely a sham – that is to say, they are not so much tolerated as manipulated, approved and exploited for show and expediency. Kazakhstan does not have a genuine, high-profile opposition figure, although it does have notable free-thinking analysts, not least two of the co-authors of this report.

*The failure of the Eurasian Economic Union to bring tangible economic benefits has elicited popular resentment towards both Russia and the Kazakhstani government*

A further challenge for the regime is that Kazakhstan's resource export-dependent economy no longer looks so buoyant, despite a partial recovery since 2016 (see Chapter 3).<sup>11</sup> The tenge crashed in 2014 and has been devalued. Dependence on the oil sector lies behind many problems that will not be masked simply by a higher oil price, currently hovering at around \$60/barrel for Brent crude. The banking sector is weak. Privatization – as mentioned – has had mixed results, with the resistance reformers have encountered in part due to the job cuts involved. Further afield, Chinese growth has slowed, and the Russian economy is stagnant – with negative knock-on effects for Kazakhstan's growth and trade. The economy has also suffered heavily from corruption-related inefficiencies, declines in global commodity prices and the fallout from international sanctions on Russia. Economic reforms are also harder to implement than they are to announce. The failure of the unloved Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) – originally Nazarbayev's idea, but enacted by Putin – to bring tangible benefits has elicited popular resentment towards both Russia (its undisputed leader)<sup>12</sup> and the Kazakhstani government. This, in turn, has increased nationalist fervour and reduced the leadership's appetite for constructive engagement with Russia – the regime would now prefer to deal with Beijing directly, without Moscow looking over its shoulder.

Although Kazakhstan has implemented limited governance reforms, lately these have been of a technocratic nature and have targeted less senior tiers of the administration. Personnel in the upper levels of government are often shuffled, but the system essentially remains unchanged. There are few women in senior positions. The pool of talented recruits to senior government posts is shallow, as a patronage system ensures that positions are distributed among business interests, often as a way of balancing out rivalries. Major decisions and strategy are determined within a close-knit circle and in deference still to Nazarbayev. Political liberalization has yet to occur to any substantive degree. While reform brings its own dangers, Nazarbayev has amassed as much security for himself as is surely possible, especially with his new positions as senator for life and head of the government's Security Council – giving him the power to make significant ministerial appointments. Nonetheless, in such a personalized system a more powerful future leader could one day turn against him.

Kazakhstan's Central Asian neighbours, each with at least some experience of political succession, are not necessarily good indicators of where Tokayev (or future leaders) may take the country, assuming the new president ever acquires real power to wield

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<sup>11</sup> Real GDP increased by 1.2 per cent and 1.1 per cent in 2015 and 2016 respectively, and by 4.1 per cent in both 2017 and 2018, according to World Bank data. World Bank (undated), 'GDP growth (annual %) – Kazakhstan'.

<sup>12</sup> Russia's share of the combined GDP of the five economies of the EAEU is 86.9 per cent. World Bank (undated), 'GDP (current US\$) – Russian Federation, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2018&locations=RU-AM-BY-KZ-KG&start=1988> (accessed 11 Sep. 2019).

as his own. The other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan aside, have political systems that are even less open than Kazakhstan's, and each transfer of power in the region has been *sui generis*. The continued uncertainty in Kazakhstan is a disincentive not just to investors, but also to those who genuinely wish to help the country with more substantial economic or political reforms – as opposed to facilitating the orchestrated enthronement of a pretender.<sup>13</sup> The issue of the presidential succession, though more headline-grabbing, has always been less important than the question of whether there can be a new political configuration. This report addresses the latter topic in Chapter 2 in particular.

### Why should the West care?

One of the West's primary interests in Kazakhstan since 1991 has been in making money there. This has not so much been about accessing the country's relatively low-income domestic market, but rather about extracting and exporting natural resources – oil primarily, but also uranium, other precious metals, grain and phosphates. In itself, this is not a bad thing. Western companies have contributed to Kazakhstan's economic success, and at times have borne great risks to do so. The EU is Kazakhstan's biggest trade partner, with a 40 per cent share of the country's external trade in goods.<sup>14</sup> However, the activities of some less-than-scrupulous foreign investors have made Kazakhstan's leadership and its people suspicious of the West, reinforcing beliefs about double standards and the perception that foreigners talk democracy but pander to the regime to make money.

Western policymakers' commitment to Kazakhstan, likewise, has been uneven. Kazakhstan's distance from Afghanistan meant that it never was a prime object of the West's renewed interest in the broader Central Asian region after the 9/11 attacks. But the drawdown of Western forces from Afghanistan in 2014 has led to further detachment from the region by Western governments, which see no terrorist threat substantive enough to require deeper security engagement. Terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan, mostly against the domestic security services, have been few and far between – although the secular government sometimes exaggerates the threat to justify tighter controls. (Some blame is directed at Moscow for stirring up trouble and, more implausibly, at the West for supposedly fomenting 'colour revolution'.) The souring of US relations with Pakistan has not, as some predicted in 2017, led to a commensurate increase in US activity in Kazakhstan as an alternative strategic jumping-off point for the region, despite some terrorist attacks in Europe having been traced back to Central Asia.

Revisionist powers like Russia and rising powers like China will fill geopolitical vacuums if they appear. The more the West retreats from Central Asia, the more other global actors will move in – and potentially clash. There is conflicting evidence as to whether China or Russia is the more dangerous of the two. Russia's actions abroad have caused the deaths of tens of thousands in Ukraine, Syria and beyond. China, meanwhile, is clearly flexing its muscles, and some of its actions – for example, in the South China Sea – are

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<sup>13</sup> As noted elsewhere in this report, several Western consultancies were hired over the past two decades, supposedly to help develop modernization plans – though in reality, more to help Kazakhstan gloss over its glaring democratic deficit. The fact that one of these firms was Tony Blair Associates actually increased scrutiny of human rights issues where the leadership did not desire it, having the opposite effect of what was intended.

<sup>14</sup> World Trade Organization (2019), 'Kazakhstan' trade profile, [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/statis\\_e/daily\\_update\\_e/trade\\_profiles/KZ\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/daily_update_e/trade_profiles/KZ_e.pdf) (accessed 1 Nov. 2019).

certainly provocative. But in recent years, unlike Russia, it has not embarked on any expansionist adventures that have directly resulted in deaths beyond its borders.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, China's domestic behaviour – in particular towards the Uighurs, and even towards ethnic Kazakhs<sup>16</sup> – is far more problematic, and the Kazakhstani population's fears on this matter cannot easily be assuaged. Alarm over Chinese expansionism is being fed by Kazakh nationalists, the Russian media, and China's increasing presence in Kazakhstan through land rental and acquisition.<sup>17</sup> This suggests that Beijing will struggle to be seen as a trusted power in Kazakhstan. But it also presents an opportunity for the West, if it so wishes.

Western efforts to balance humanitarian concerns against the need to cultivate Kazakhstan's government (and ensure access to mineral rights) have always seen human rights lose out. This pattern seems set to continue for the immediate future as legislation – for example, on religious freedoms – becomes ever more repressive, as explained in Chapter 4. But as similar issues elsewhere enrage publics and topple governments, the West may be forced to redress that imbalance in the medium to long term.

The West has arguably more pressing concerns elsewhere, so it is unrealistic to expect it to shift significant attention and resources to a country that presents much less of a threat to stability than many others. Yet there are also perils with the other extreme: the near-complete disregard for anything other than profiteering. These perils are made clear throughout this report, considering the prospect of increased political turbulence for Kazakhstan in the near future. But the 'tyranny of the immediate' means that Western politicians are currently unlikely to heed this warning; paying *no* heed is a serious policy mistake occurring right now.

### Stasis, reform or revolution?

Since 2012, when Nazarbayev announced 'Strategy Kazakhstan-2050', it has been an official policy goal of the government to turn Kazakhstan into one of the world's top 30 economies by 2050.<sup>18</sup> (It entered the top 50, measured in terms of nominal GDP, in 2011 but slipped back just four years later.)<sup>19</sup> In 2015 the government published an institutional reform plan – dubbed '100 concrete steps' – designed to help the country meet its development targets.<sup>20</sup> But implementation has been patchy, and the plan itself, while laudable in principle, is not particularly ambitious, especially in terms of political reform.

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<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Bobo Lo for this point on relative death counts caused by Russia and China.

<sup>16</sup> There are more than 1 million ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang. Many have escaped and crossed the border, seeking refuge and support from the government of Kazakhstan.

<sup>17</sup> Proposed changes in the Land Code that would have allowed foreigners (in this case, Chinese) to lease land for 25 years were retracted by the government after widespread opposition in 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2012), 'Strategy "Kazakhstan-2050": new political course of the established state', state-of-the-nation address, 14 December 2012, [http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state](http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state) (accessed 11 Sep. 2019).

<sup>19</sup> International Monetary Fund (2019), World Economic Outlook Database, October 2019, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2019/02/weodata/index.aspx> (accessed 1 Nov. 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Ostensibly aimed at shoring up the legal system, professionalizing the civil service, boosting the economy, strengthening national identity and, allegedly, increasing transparency. See Consulate General of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Sydney (2015), 'The 100 concrete steps set out by President Nursultan Nazarbayev to implement the five institutional reforms', 20 May 2015, <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/sydney/content-view/100-konkretnyh-sagov-sovremennoe-gosudarstvo-dla-vseh> (accessed 25 Oct. 2019).

*Kazakhstan is reaching the limits of politically palatable reform. The policy of ‘economy first, politics later’ has run its course*

Kazakhstan is undoubtedly a hard country to govern, perhaps more so now that it has a technocratic new president who is not yet, and may never be, fully in charge. But things can turn quickly. Following an explosion at an ammunition warehouse in the southern town of Arys in June 2019, Tokayev flew to the scene of the incident within hours and met with displaced residents. For Kazakhstan, this was an unprecedented response by a president. Shortly afterwards, a number of people had written on social media: ‘Tokayev – our president.’<sup>21</sup>

The judgment of this report is that Kazakhstan has done well to get where it has in unfavourable conditions. It has had to deal with challenging topography (only 10 per cent of the agricultural land is under arable cultivation),<sup>22</sup> heavy environmental damage from the Soviet era, the sheer distance from any major sea port, a political legacy of authoritarianism, and a relative lack of interest from outside powers.<sup>23</sup> But the difficulties the country now faces have come as Kazakhstan reaches the limits of politically palatable reform. The policy of ‘economy first, politics later’ has run its course. The irony of the worst-case scenario for Kazakhstan’s leaders is that a combination of inadequate reform momentum and, conversely, ‘dangerous’ political liberalization could induce change at the top faster than they wish, as recent events indicate.

The long rule of Nazarbayev, often referred to as the ‘Father of the Nation’, is nearly at an end. Now Kazakhstan faces a critical and emotionally turbulent period in its history. It will not progress further as things stand, yet to get back on track will require time and political reform beyond the cosmetic.

### About this report

This report claims to be definitive of its type, but it is not exhaustive. The seven principal chapters (in addition to this introduction) offer a multi-dimensional assessment of Kazakhstan’s development and progress, considering its size, complexity, position and history. They cover governance, the political economy, political and civil liberties, society and identity, relations with other Central Asian states, relations with Russia and China, and relations with the West. Each of the authors – of whom six are Western and two Kazakhstani – is responsible for his or her own chapter. But the authors have collectively written and agreed the executive summary and the report’s modest policy recommendations. We have striven to be fair-minded, but we have not held back.

<sup>21</sup> Note that this is hard to verify. There are always some pro-government trolls.

<sup>22</sup> Farchy, J. (2016), ‘Kazakhstan unrest highlights reform conundrum’, *Financial Times*, 6 June 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/34e688d4-2bbf-11e6-bf8d-26294ad519fc>.

<sup>23</sup> Sullivan, C. J. (2018), ‘Kazakhstan at a Crossroads’, *Asia Policy*, 13.2, April 2018, pp. 131–34. Sullivan points out that no one is looking to make Kazakhstan into an economic powerhouse as the US did for Japan after the Second World War; and especially while China’s intentions in the region are unknown.

## 2. Governance

*Kate Mallinson*

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*Kazakhstan's formal political system is largely decorative, with true power exercised via a 'hidden constitution' built on patronage. A rising protest mood is increasing pressure for reform.*

Despite myriad signals that Kazakhstan's First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was preparing the ground for a political transition,<sup>24</sup> most observers were still surprised by his eventual decision to step aside in March 2019, in the first ever voluntary resignation by a Central Asian leader. Nazarbayev handed over the presidency to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a former diplomat and prime minister, with the transfer of power validated – at least nominally – in an election on 9 June 2019.

However, the extent to which Tokayev wields real political control is highly debatable. Upon entering office, he inherited a weakened presidency. His room to manoeuvre has consistently been undermined by his predecessor, notably through legal measures prior to the official change in leadership (see below) and, most recently, in an October 2019 decree increasing Nazarbayev's behind-the-scenes role via the powerful Security Council. The constraints on the new president, and the contradictions and potential conflicts inherent in what is an effective sharing of power, will play a large role in determining Kazakhstan's stability, political trajectory and reform prospects.

For almost 20 years, Nazarbayev had steadily adopted measures to secure his position, both in office and in the case of his resignation. These measures included amending the constitution (see Box 1) and eliminating all vestiges of opposition to his rule. In the months prior to his resignation, Nazarbayev had ordered ministerial reshuffles<sup>25</sup> and introduced social policies designed to alleviate public discontent. The aim was to provide a safe environment in which to begin the transition. While it was clear that – barring disaster – Nazarbayev would never fully relinquish political control in his lifetime, the idea of anyone replacing the man who had shaped Kazakhstan's political economy was difficult to envisage.

### Autocratic legacy

The election of a new president marks an important inflection point for Kazakhstan, and an appropriate juncture from which to review the evolution of the country's governance and assess how its institutions are preparing for its next phase of development. Under Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan evolved from a Soviet republic with an outdated economic model into an impressive global player, the recipient of significant foreign investment in its natural resources. However, Nazarbayev's 'economy first, then politics' motto meant that political reforms lagged under his presidency.<sup>26</sup> The country

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<sup>24</sup> In a BBC interview in June 2018, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev anticipated that Nazarbayev would not be running in the next presidential election. In June 2019, Tokayev admitted that the succession question had been internally discussed since 2016. See BBC (2018), 'Tokayev: I don't think Kazakh president will run in 2020', 20 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-44546885/tokayev-i-don-t-think-kazakh-president-will-run-in-2020> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019). See also Tengrinews (2019), '3,5 года тому назад он мне сказал – Токаев о решении Назарбаева' [3.5 years ago he told me – Tokayev on Nazarbayev's decision], 17 June 2019, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/35-goda-nazad-mne-tokayev-reshenii-nazarbaeva-371525/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/35-goda-nazad-mne-tokayev-reshenii-nazarbaeva-371525/) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Nazarbayev dismissed the government in February 2019, four weeks prior to his resignation.

<sup>26</sup> Kazakhstan Today (2002), 'Конституция РК "не исчерпала своей возможности" – глава государства' [The possibilities of the constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan have not been exhausted], 29 August 2002, <http://nomad.su/?a=3-2002-08300014> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

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has failed to develop the necessary institutions – including an independent judiciary, a properly functioning parliament and a trusted constitution – to abet its otherwise stable development.<sup>27</sup>

While an opaque and informal neo-patrimonial system of governance still shapes the political economy, popular patience with the Nazarbayev-era settlement is wearing thin. In terms of their size, demands and demographics, the protests around the June 2019 presidential election illustrated the magnitude of the task for Kazakhstan's leaders over the next few years. Key among the challenges for the administration will be to introduce transparent and inclusive institutional governance, in order to bridge the gulf between the population and the ruling elite.

After Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, Nazarbayev had pledged to dismantle Soviet-era institutions and introduce democratic governance, modern political institutions and a market economy.<sup>28</sup> Until the Soviet era, Kazakhstan had had no written constitution,<sup>29</sup> and after the collapse of the USSR the leadership chose to look westwards towards a democratic constitutional model. In 1993, the government enacted a new constitution, proclaiming Kazakhstan a 'democratic, secular, rule of law and social state', with power divided between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.<sup>30</sup>

Although this constitution appeared broadly balanced between the three branches of government, in practice the system allowed the president to increase his executive authority. The regime justified this as being necessary to overcome the challenges of the post-Soviet transition period – which included addressing economic decline and countering threats to the unity of a large, multi-ethnic state. Nazarbayev insisted throughout his presidency that only strong leadership could guarantee stability and keep ethnic conflict, religious extremism and social unrest at bay.<sup>31</sup> Yet his recent departure, conceivably timed to occur before already high levels of social disaffection potentially increase, suggests this is not the case.

### A long-planned transition

In 1995, following parliamentary crises caused in part by a lack of clarity in the 1993 constitution and by parliament's obstruction of government and presidential policies, a new constitution was enacted by referendum.<sup>32</sup> Based on the French constitution, this version introduced a bicameral parliament and maintained the nominal separation between the branches of government. However, the president was given more extensive powers, including the right to dissolve parliament at will.

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<sup>27</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), 'Алмазбек Атамбаев заключен под стражу до 26 августа' [Almazbek Atambayev detained until 26 August], 9 August 2019, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30100875.html> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the United Nations (2019), 'Address of the Head of State Nursultan Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan', 19 March 2019, <http://kazakhstanun.com/address-of-the-head-of-state-nursultan-nazarbayev-to-the-people-of-kazakhstan/> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Schatz, E. (2005), 'Reconceptualizing clans: kinship networks and statehood in Kazakhstan', *Nationalities Papers*, 33(2): pp. 231–254, doi: 10.1080/00905990500088594 (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>30</sup> 'Конституция Республики Казахстан от 28 января 1993 года' [Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 28 January 1993], [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=1010212#pos=1;-110](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=1010212#pos=1;-110) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Gabdulin, V. A. (2010), 'Роль президента Н.А.Назарбаева в укреплении института президентства и демократизации общества на современном этапе' [The role of President N.A. Nazarbayev in strengthening the presidency and democratization of society at the present stage], *Articlekz*, <https://articlekz.com/article/7623> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Kanapyanov, T. (2018), 'Role and place of the parliament of Kazakhstan in the system of checks and balances', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 51(1): pp. 81–87, doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.01.007 (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).



The constitution has since been amended several times (see Box 1), with the changes doing little to strengthen formal democratic institutions.<sup>33</sup> Most political reforms and constitutional amendments have served only to entrench Nazarbayev's power while in office, as well as to safeguard his future position after leaving the presidency.

### Box 1: Kazakhstan's constitutional amendments to increase Nazarbayev's powers

Since independence, multiple constitutional amendments have consolidated President Nazarbayev's power and position. In April 1995, a national referendum extended his term to the end of 1999.<sup>34</sup> In October 1998, parliament extended the president's term from five to seven years and eliminated the presidential age limit of 65.<sup>35</sup> In May 2007, the presidential term was restored to five years, but the two-term limit was lifted for Nazarbayev.

In parallel to these amendments, several other constitutional manoeuvres occurred. A new law in 2000, amended in 2010, introduced the concept of the 'First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan' and 'Leader of the Nation', thereby giving Nazarbayev certain powers for life, such as the right to address the people of Kazakhstan, parliament, government agencies and officials on matters of domestic and foreign policy and national security.<sup>36</sup> And legal and constitutional amendments in 2007, 2010 and 2017 respectively provided Nazarbayev with an unlimited number of terms in office, legal immunity, and immunity of his family's property.

In a further constitutional amendment in May 2018, the Security Council, hitherto a consultative body, received the status of constitutional organ. This rendered all its decisions legally binding, making it an alternative to the presidency. In effect, it became a mechanism for the bifurcation of presidential power while Nazarbayev is alive.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the law awarded Nazarbayev lifelong chairmanship of the Security Council.

*The current system enables Nazarbayev to continue to wield power from behind the scenes*

The current system enables Nazarbayev to continue to wield power from behind the scenes, notably through positions he has retained in the Security Council (a constitutional organ which sets the guidelines for foreign and domestic security policies), the ruling Nur Otan party, and the Constitutional Council. In particular, as chairman of the Security Council, Nazarbayev can control the overall political system through the security structures. At the same time, he continues to dominate an extensive informal system of power through an advisory role similar in some respects to the 'minister mentor' model adopted in retirement by the late Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding figure. His influence in this advisory role is rendered more pervasive, moreover, by his

<sup>33</sup> Isaacs, R. (2010), 'Informal politics and the uncertain context of transition: revisiting early stage non-democratic development in Kazakhstan', *Democratization*, 17(1): pp. 1–25, doi:10.1080/13510340903453773 (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Radio Azattyk (2011), 'Конституция дополнена термином «Елбасы», который может править без выборов' [The Constitution is supplemented with the role of "Elbasy", who can rule without elections], 15 January 2011, [http://rus.azattyq.org/content/referendum\\_nursultan\\_nazarbayev\\_power\\_prolongation/2276376.html](http://rus.azattyq.org/content/referendum_nursultan_nazarbayev_power_prolongation/2276376.html) (accessed 6 Nov. 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (1999), 'Kazakhstan, Presidential Election, 10 January 1999: Final Report', 5 February 1999, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/14771> (accessed 6 Nov. 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2000), 'О Первом Президенте Республики Казахстан – Лидере Нации: Конституционный закон Республики Казахстан от 20 июля 2000 года N 83-II' [On the First President of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation: The Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 20 July 2000 No 83-II], [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official\\_documents/constitutional\\_laws/o-pervom-prezidente-respubliki-kazahstan-lidere-nacii](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitutional_laws/o-pervom-prezidente-respubliki-kazahstan-lidere-nacii) (accessed 7 Nov. 2019).

<sup>37</sup> 'Закон Республики Казахстан: О Совете Безопасности Республики Казахстан' [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan: On the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan], [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=38039248](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=38039248) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

direct and indirect control of key economic sectors and state institutions. This positions Nazarbayev as an indispensable arbiter between business groups, as well as Kazakhstan's principle interlocutor with key international partners such as Russia and China.

None of this suggests the political transition will be straightforward. Competition between Nazarbayev and Tokayev could result in instability. Nazarbayev has dismissed the idea of a formalized duopoly of power,<sup>38</sup> as have Tokayev and his advisers. Indeed, the new president is using his formal office to develop his own 'brand Tokayev' and team. In line with a pattern of post-succession tensions elsewhere in Central Asia over the past decade, this raises concerns about the sustainability and efficacy of a system divided between two leaders. As a Kazakh proverb states, 'You cannot boil two heads of mutton in one bowl.'

### A move to curb the new president's power

In March 2017, in another signal that Nazarbayev was looking towards the eventual transition, Kazakhstan introduced constitutional amendments that purported to strengthen democracy by offering a more rigid and precise separation of powers and formally diminishing the president's role. The amendments increased the powers of the legislative branch at the expense of the presidency, suggesting Nazarbayev was seeking to limit the authority of any successor. The cabinet now reports its main initiatives to parliament as well as to the president, and in theory parliament now has more sway over the appointment and sacking of cabinet members – including the prime minister. The president can no longer issue legal decrees or override parliamentary votes of no confidence in cabinet members. However, without a competitive party system, the changes to the system will have little substantive effect on the parliamentary checks on the president.

The 2017 constitutional amendments were introduced not long after events in neighbouring Uzbekistan had starkly highlighted the importance of succession planning. In September 2016, President Islam Karimov, who had ruled the country since Soviet days, died in office. The subsequent political adjustment, in which members of Karimov's network were sidelined and his legacy in part discarded, clearly unnerved Nazarbayev. Notable were efforts to dismantle Karimov's personality cult, with Uzbekistan's media prohibited from mentioning his name more than once per broadcast or reporting positively about his rule.<sup>39</sup> Loyalists were stripped of power and his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, installed his own people (such a development would be anathema to Nazarbayev). Several days after Karimov's funeral, and even before the extent of this shake-up became clear, Nazarbayev moved to cement his own position, appointing his influential former prime minister, Karim Massimov, as head of Kazakhstan's powerful security service (KNB). Several senior officials were arrested in order to ensure the loyalty of the security services during the transition period.

*In March 2017, Kazakhstan introduced constitutional amendments that purported to strengthen democracy by offering a more rigid and precise separation of powers and formally diminishing the president's role*

<sup>38</sup> Regnum.ru (2019), 'Назарбаев о двоевластии: «Есть один президент, и он главный»' [Nazarbayev on power sharing: 'There is one president and he's in charge'], 16 May 2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/2629530.html> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Fergana News (2018), 'Журналисты уточнили норму упоминания Ислама Каримова на узбекистанском ТВ' [Journalists specified standard rules for referring to Islam Karimov on Uzbek TV], 24 August 2018, <https://www.fergananews.com/news/32240> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

### The hidden constitution

Although Kazakhstan's constitution formally defines the distribution of power, it is a largely decorative construct. This makes the political transition all the more unpredictable, because it is vulnerable to being amended to suit the whims of Nazarbayev's successor(s). The irony of the situation is that it weakens the cogency of the very constitutional amendments introduced by Nazarbayev in multiple attempts to entrench his power.

Rather, it is the 'hidden constitution' that truly defines how Kazakhstan is governed and provides the leadership with its authority.<sup>40</sup> This opaque decision-making process is played out among informal patronage networks. As president, Nazarbayev sat (and still sits) at the apex of a carefully maintained vertical power structure, managing a shrewd system of checks and balances on different interest groups. By facilitating the distribution of rents to family members and elite figures close to him, Nazarbayev has manipulated informal networks to create a buffer of loyalists who cleave to him, rather than to Kazakhstan's institutions. One of the consequences of this system is that it has impeded the country's full development into a globally competitive market economy.

Kazakhstan's political economy is centred around the Nazarbayev family and its associates. Like a corporation, the system relies on a top-down command structure. Rents accrue to an individual according to his or her position within the hierarchy, with those in closest proximity to Nazarbayev benefiting the most. The most valuable economic assets typically belong either to his family or to presidential gatekeepers. From the early days of independence, Nazarbayev relied on such aides or 'treasurers' to manage the patronage system. Each individual was used for different purposes, so that no single figure had full visibility over his affairs.

Various family syndicates have developed over the past 20 years, at the core of which are several key figures: Nazarbayev's eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva; his son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev (married to Nazarbayev's second daughter, Dinara); and his nephew, Kairat Satybaldy. These three individuals, along with their spouses, children and those close to them, influence a large proportion of the national economy.

This informal network is not static. It has undergone significant changes over the past two decades, as different actors have risen to prominence or disappeared from the scene. Two particular developments have been significant. One is the rise of Kulibayev. In 1998, the government suspended privatization of the oil sector, following years of factional infighting. This enabled Kulibayev to seize control of important oil and gas entities, and the result was a generational shift in the oil industry. (All three of Nazarbayev's daughters have competing interests in the energy sector through their husbands.) The other was the death in 2010 of Nazarbayev's confidant, Vladimir Ni, which resulted in a vacuum in the president's inner circle.

Rival interest groups, including the extended Nazarbayev family, often come into conflict over commercial and political matters. Kulibayev's rise to prominence, in particular, has not been entirely smooth. Benefits and impunity are quickly removed from those who exceed their designated privileges, fail to share profits with the ruling family, or become

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<sup>40</sup> Isaacs, R. (2009), *Between Informal and Formal Politics: Neopatrimonialism and Party Development in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan*, doctoral dissertation, Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

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involved in public scandals. That said, disgraced figures have often been allowed to return into Nazarbayev's circles on payment of financial penalties for 'misdemeanours' and/or particularly when the president has felt the need to rebalance the system.

Over the past few years, as the issue of political succession has loomed larger, tensions have increased between factions and individuals competing for proximity to Nazarbayev. There is inevitable uncertainty within the elite as to what comes next, and how the spoils of the patronage system will be divided in the future. The extent to which Nazarbayev will continue to regulate this system is a key question as he cedes some power to his successor, and if or when he becomes less able to mediate between vested interests. After Nazarbayev ultimately leaves the political scene, a significant economic power struggle is likely.

### Dual governance models

Kazakhstan exhibits different governance models to different audiences. It extols its democratic principles to its Euro-Atlantic partners, vaunting Kazakhstan's 'subtle balance between stability and democracy'.<sup>41</sup> To its principal economic, political and security partners – Russia and China – the administration acknowledges the utility of authoritarian governance. The government's successful multi-vector foreign policy and achievements on the Western security stage, including the attainment in 2017–18 of a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council and the convening of the 'Astana process' of peace negotiations on Syria, mask a reality of increasing detachment from the West's value-based norms.

Engagement with the international system has provided the regime with legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Kazakhstan's deft foreign policy in a geopolitically contested region, combined with its importance as an investment destination owing to its energy resources, has sustained an external image of the country at odds with how it truly functions. As a result, Kazakhstan has been largely misunderstood by Western policymakers, and the true deficiencies of its political system overlooked. The republic is increasingly sophisticated at presenting itself as a progressive, ambitious nation, and at using international public relations companies and media publications to control its narrative.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of significant democracy promotion after the Central Asian states gained independence, Western governments and institutions have played only a weak role in developing Kazakhstan's formal system. The importance of informal governance has also been poorly understood.<sup>43</sup> Kazakhstan welcomed Western support in helping it to determine its sovereignty, gain political independence and win much-needed investment. However, the country has felt threatened by its interlocutors' democracy

*Kazakhstan's deft foreign policy in a geopolitically contested region, combined with its importance as an investment destination owing to its energy resources, has sustained an external image of the country at odds with how it truly functions*

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<sup>41</sup> BBC Hard Talk (2018), Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, 21 June 2018, [https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS\\_20180620\\_233000\\_HARDtalk/start/120/end/180](https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20180620_233000_HARDtalk/start/120/end/180) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Tynan, D. (2012), 'Kazakhstan: Top-Notch PR Firms Help Brighten Astana's Image', Eurasianet, 18 January 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-top-notch-pr-firms-help-brighten-astanas-image> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Olikier, O. and Shlapak, D. A. (2005), *U.S. Interests in Central Asia. Policy Priorities and Military Roles*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND\\_MG338.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG338.pdf) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

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agendas.<sup>44</sup> This is now reflected in opinion among segments of Kazakhstan's population, who do not necessarily regard the West as a role model and who – abetted by the Russian media – question Western governments' intentions.

Freedom House classifies Kazakhstan as a consolidated authoritarian regime with a weak bicameral parliament.<sup>45</sup> Formally, the constitution stipulates that the prime minister should be appointed by the president with parliament's consent (although the legislature has never objected to the president's choice of prime minister).<sup>46</sup> To date, the prime minister and the executive have always been figures close to the First President, entirely subjugated to his will. Nazarbayev has imposed his own checks on these individuals, removing or reshuffling them frequently in a kind of political 'musical chairs'. While this has prevented any individual from amassing enough power to threaten his rule, it has also resulted in a short-term outlook in policymaking. Initial signs suggest that this is unlikely to change under the dual leadership.

### Informal governance stymies Kazakhstan's potential

During the era of high energy prices in the 2000s, when Kazakhstan's GDP growth reached double digits,<sup>47</sup> Nazarbayev's 'economy first' policy was acceptable to the population. The president was genuinely popular among the largely apolitical electorate. Kazakhstan's success in avoiding instability in a largely restive region reinforced support for Nazarbayev, as did the fact that living standards were higher than in neighbouring countries.

However, a slowdown in the economy in 2014, prompted by the collapse in oil prices and the repercussions of sanctions against Russia over the crisis in Ukraine, exposed many governance issues. These included the weakness and inefficiency of formal institutions, corruption, a shrunken civil society, and the lack of citizen participation in policy processes. Some of these issues were inherited from the Soviet era, and some a product of the country's present system. All impede sustainable and inclusive economic growth, just as they also prevent Kazakhstan from progressing towards an open society based on free markets, respect for human rights and the rule of law. These grievances are now being voiced by an emboldened tranche of protesters.

Informality and weak institutions go hand in hand with corruption. In Kazakhstan, the patronage system obfuscates the lines between the legitimate and the corrupt, the private and the public, the formal and the informal, and the political and the economic. Corruption and inadequate rule of law inhibit economic growth. They render the country less capable of providing employment, healthcare and adequate education to citizens. The failure of government structures to reach vulnerable parts of society is leading to increased use of Muslim governance or community structures (see Chapter 5).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Tengrinews (2019), 'Токаев об отчете наблюдателей ОБСЕ: Знаю эту кухню' [Tokayev on the report by OSCE observers: 'I know everything about this routine'], 10 June 2019, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/tokayev-ob-otchete-nablyudateley-obse-znayu-etu-kuhnyu-371041/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/tokayev-ob-otchete-nablyudateley-obse-znayu-etu-kuhnyu-371041/) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Freedom House (2018), 'Nations in Transit: Kazakhstan', <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2018/kazakhstan> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Article 44/1.

<sup>47</sup> World Bank (undated), 'GDP growth (annual %) - Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=KZ> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Seydakhmetova, B. (2018), 'Fighting patriarchy in Kazakhstan: problems and perspectives', openDemocracy, 19 June 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fighting-patriarchy-in-kazakhstan/> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

Meanwhile the elites, uncertain of their status in the post-Nazarbayev landscape, have sought to use Western institutions to legitimize their wealth outside Kazakhstan. This has resulted in significant capital flight, with the total since independence exceeding \$140 billion.<sup>49</sup> Global Financial Integrity, a US-based think-tank, ranks Kazakhstan 18th worldwide for illicit financial flows.<sup>50</sup>

Anxiety over rising socio-economic disaffection prompted the regime to call an early presidential election in April 2015 and a parliamentary election in March 2016. It may well also have been a factor behind Nazarbayev's resignation in 2019.<sup>51</sup> In his 2015 election manifesto, Nazarbayev announced policy objectives designed to address governance issues. Upon being re-elected (with almost 98 per cent of the vote), Nazarbayev reduced the powers of the presidency and gave more independence to the government and parliament. He announced a '100 concrete steps' programme of reforms, the goals of which include the formation of a professional state apparatus; streamlining of the civil service, police and courts; improved transparency and public accountability; and increased support for the rule of law.<sup>52</sup>

The authorities publish almost no information on the progress of this programme, although some improvements to the judiciary have been noted.<sup>53</sup> Implementation has been hindered by political inertia and the leadership transition, the latter of which has added further bureaucratic layers as well as caution to the decision-making process in Kazakhstan.

The administration is also implementing the second stage of its 2013–20 local governance strategy, which includes transferring greater administrative and financing powers to local authorities. An ambition of increased public participation in budgetary and other discussions is laudable, but meaningful engagement has suffered from the government's tendency to install its own people, rather than create opportunity for members of civil society to enter public councils.

### Growing gulf between elite and grassroots

Unpopular top-down initiatives over the past few years, undertaken without public consultation, have angered people and led to expressions of political discontent. Controversial decisions have included the renaming of the capital, Nur-Sultan (previously Astana);<sup>54</sup> the merger of pension funds; the selection of a Latin script to replace the Cyrillic alphabet in the Kazakh language; and land reforms. The constant reappointment to important roles of ministers who have failed in previous positions has also fuelled

*Unpopular top-down initiatives over the past few years, undertaken without public consultation, have angered people and led to expressions of political discontent*

<sup>49</sup> MK.ru (2015), 'Отток капитала из Казахстана в офшоры составил 140 млрд. долларов' [Capital outflow from Kazakhstan to offshore companies amounted to 140 billion US dollars], 21 May 2015, <https://mk-kz.kz/articles/2015/05/21/ottok-kapitala-iz-kazakhstan-a-v-ofshory-sostavil-140-mlrd-dollarov.html> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>50</sup> Global Financial Integrity (2019), *Illicit Financial Flows to and from 148 Developing Countries: 2006–2015*, <https://www.gfintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/GFI-2019-IFF-Update-Report-1.29.18.pdf> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Information received by the author during interviews in Astana in March 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Consulate General of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Sydney (2015), 'The 100 concrete steps set out by President Nursultan Nazarbayev to implement the five institutional reforms', 20 May 2015, <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/sydney/content-view/100-konkretnyh-sagov-sovremennoe-gosudarstvo-dla-vseh> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>53</sup> International Monetary Fund (2018), 'Kazakhstan: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2018 Article IV Mission', 28 June 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2018/06/28/ms062818-kazakhstan-staff-concluding-statement-of-the-2018-article-iv-mission> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

<sup>54</sup> MK.ru (2019), 'Мемы о переименовании Астаны в Нурсултан заполнили соцсети' [Memes on renaming Astana to Nursultan flooded social networks], 20 March 2019, <https://www.mk.ru/social/2019/03/20/memy-o-pereimenovanii-astany-v-nursultan-zapolonili-socseti.html> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

*Proposals to change the constitution elicit dissatisfaction. Middle-class segments of the electorate have become cynical about reform and governance rhetoric*

popular discontent. The perception that Nazarbayev over-reached in setting unachievable goals, including that of making Kazakhstan one of the 30 most developed countries by 2050,<sup>55</sup> has added to the cynicism and frustration of the population.

Immense financial resources have been spent on prestige projects, including the EXPO-2017 trade show, which have produced no tangible benefits for the population and have almost invariably ended in corruption scandals. The establishment in 2018 of the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), intended as a global finance hub similar to the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), is one example of a project that has had difficulty getting off the ground. The AIFC's legal system is partly based on common-law principles. Kazakhstan has chosen to emulate the DIFC model, which includes the creation of new and unique laws, rather than the Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) financial centre model, in which English law has direct application. But the amalgamation of common- and civil-law norms and principles in the drafting of AIFC legislation has led to confusion. Kazakhstani lawyers have also complained in private conversation with the author that the government should be addressing the failings of the judicial system nationwide rather than providing a silo where the rule of law exists. Concerns therefore exist that the country will not only have a dual system of law, but that the AIFC will not be able to operate efficiently given its hybrid legal system.

Social media commentary frequently criticizes the profligacy of the government in holding lavish conferences and subsidizing officials' transport costs. Proposals to change the constitution also elicit dissatisfaction; middle-class segments of the electorate have become cynical about reform and governance rhetoric.

Economic difficulties have further contributed to popular discontent. A recovery in official GDP growth, associated with increased production at the Kashagan oil field and spikes in oil prices in 2018, masks harsh socio-economic conditions and the lingering impact of the 2015 currency devaluation on real wages. Over the past few years, several violent security incidents and an increasing number of labour and civil protests have unnerved the government. These have coincided with a more febrile situation in the patronage system as members of the elite have competed for dwindling state resources. An anti-corruption drive – involving a substantial element of selective justice – between 2015 and 2018 resulted in an unprecedented number of arrests of current and former government ministers. State control is on the rise. The KNB is assuming an ever more pervasive role, and there has been increased surveillance and monitoring of civil society. This leaves little room for a move towards more liberal governance.

Following the nomination of Tokayev as Nur Otan's candidate for the June 2019 presidential election, thousands of protesters in cities and towns took to the streets, in the country's largest demonstrations in several years.<sup>56</sup> Protests during and after the campaign illustrated unprecedented civil courage in the face of the republic's repressive law enforcement agencies. While the protests were small in scale compared with anti-government protests seen during the Arab Spring or recently in Hong Kong, Chile

<sup>55</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2012), 'Strategy "Kazakhstan-2050": new political course of the established state', state-of-the-nation address, 14 December 2012, [http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state](http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state) (accessed 28 Oct. 2019).

<sup>56</sup> BBC (2019), 'В Казахстане большинство голосов набирает Токаев. На улицах беспорядки, задержаны более 500 человек' [In Kazakhstan, Tokayev is winning the majority of votes. Riots in the streets, more than 500 people detained], 9 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-48572464> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

and Bolivia, they reflected a diverse demographic in terms of age, gender and social background, mirroring widely held disaffection. With Kazakhstan standing at a political crossroads following the signal that Nazarbayev could be stepping back from the scene, the population sensed an unprecedented opportunity to demand a say in its political future.

### Kazakhstan 2.0

With his most trusted people gathered in the Security Council and the executive council of Nur Otan, Nazarbayev's future ability to maintain his authority will be based on the loyalty of these power centres and the security agencies. However, the introduction of a bifurcated power architecture is simpler in theory than is likely in practice. History of the independent post-Soviet states in Central Asia has repeatedly demonstrated that a supposedly loyal successor will accrue real power over time and then challenge the system from which he emerged. Moreover, Kazakhstan has embarked on an experiment that no other Central Asian country has attempted: a transition of power with a political tandem, which is even more testing. While Nazarbayev will want to reinforce his long-cultivated image as 'Leader of the Nation', Central Asian societies tend to rally around the individual with the most formalized authority to deal with domestically relevant issues. In Kazakhstan's case, this means Tokayev. However, for this to become a reality Tokayev will have to assert himself, potentially setting him up for conflict with Nazarbayev or his associates.

Experience in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan offers a potentially salutary lesson. In 2017, Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev, unable to stand for re-election because of term limits, hand-picked Sooronbay Zheenbekov as his successor. Benefiting from the state's administrative resources, Zheenbekov then secured victory (by a relatively narrow margin) in the October 2017 presidential election. However, Atambayev was reluctant to retreat from power completely, prompting Zheenbekov to strip his former mentor of immunity and have him and central figures from the previous administration arrested.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, the managed presidential transition in Turkmenistan, following the death of Saparmyrat Nyýazow in 2006, failed to have the intended effect of entrenching the pre-existing elite. Rather, it precipitated a purge of the old guard as Nyýazow's anointed successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, shook off his predecessor's watchdog-generals to promote networks favouring his own family.

To avoid similar scenarios for his relatives and confidants in the future, Nazarbayev could conceivably adopt a model from across the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan, where power was transferred from father to son. This could involve Tokayev eventually abdicating to Dariga Nazarbayeva, a former deputy prime minister and currently speaker of the Senate (and therefore constitutionally next in line). However, for some segments of the Kazakhstan population, the continuation of Nazarbayev family rule would be the least welcome outcome. The Security Council, headed by Nazarbayev, will be a key player in any succession scenario, as it will have insight into presidential appointments. In theory, this would allow the ruling family to rotate technocratic

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<sup>57</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), 'Алмазбек Атамбаев заключен под стражу до 26 августа' [Almazbek Atambayev detained until 26 August].



*New consultative powers on appointments, introduced in October 2019, render Nazarbayev's position on the Security Council even more influential*

presidents in and out of office while maintaining control of the key institutions of power via the Security Council. Dariga Nazarbayeva, or alternatively a loyal but less-known family member, would be among the leading candidates for such a role.

New consultative powers on appointments, introduced in October 2019, render Nazarbayev's position on the Security Council even more influential. At this stage, there are no contingencies for the chairmanship of the Council to be passed from Nazarbayev in the case of his death or resignation – the law on the Security Council awards him lifelong chairmanship of the body. This plays into a wider concern about the future role of Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan's political system. The question of what would happen to his powers in the case of his incapacitation remains unresolved in the current constitutional arrangement. Some of Nazarbayev's powers are granted to the 'First President' so they would presumably depart with him, but the particular powers to oversee appointments are granted to the chair of the Security Council and so, in theory, should pass to its next chair.

Although Kazakhstan is the Central Asian region's economic powerhouse, Nazarbayev's governance has not delivered the results that many expected of the country, given its unparalleled mineral wealth and well-educated population. Much of this has been due to the regime's failure to establish institutions. Prospects for improvement under the new president seem slim.

As interim president, Tokayev's first act was to rename Kazakhstan's capital Nur-Sultan in honour of his predecessor. The decision prompted widespread derision and confirmed suspicions that Tokayev was nothing more than an instrument of Nazarbayev. Since his election in June, Tokayev still finds himself in a secondary role in Kazakhstan's political economy, pledging to stick with Nazarbayev's strategic course. Nevertheless, he has been quietly working to change his image and differentiate his presidency from that of his predecessor. With a limited ability to build a power base among the political elite, Tokayev appears to be attempting to build legitimacy among the general population by displaying technocratic competence and delivering populist policies.

Since the first extended meeting of Tokayev's government in July, the new president has demonstrated an excellent grasp of detail across a range of policy issues. His performances at televised meetings have developed an image of efficiency and competence. His ability to quiz ministers on specific detail contrasts with Nazarbayev's approach, which was often to excoriate his ministers in emotional outbursts or resort to folksy aphorisms. Tokayev has also focused on delivering specific technocratic measures that are easily understood by the population. His state-of-the-nation address in September avoided references to major state programmes and outlined specific measures focused on quality of life, governance and social issues. These included tax holidays for small businesses and increases in benefits for vulnerable groups. In October, he increased the penalty for drink-driving, cancelled the construction of a controversial ski resort and announced the transfer of city heating systems from coal to gas, solving a major environmental concern for residents. His speech also strayed into areas that could undermine Nazarbayev family interests.

These policy announcements have allowed Tokayev to create some distance from his predecessor. He has actively criticized some decisions taken by Nazarbayev and his supporters, and has highlighted the shortcomings of city planning in Nur-Sultan – a notable step given Nazarbayev's close personal association with the development

of the capital. Tokayev has also called for revision of the alphabet selected for the planned shift from Cyrillic to Latin script in Kazakh, another policy closely associated with Nazarbayev.

Tokayev is also taking steps to build a base of support within the civil service. He has invested considerable political capital into the new National Council of Public Trust. Ostensibly set up to defuse public tensions following pre-election protests, the council includes representatives of independent civil society and operates as an independent policymaking body for the president. Meetings between Tokayev or his subordinates and various members of the council are held weekly. The president has also sought to recruit 300 individuals by year-end for a fast-track programme to develop new leaders in the civil service.

Tokayev's approach has certainly inspired some confidence among the public, who view him as competent and well-intentioned. However, such victories are relatively minor, and too infrequent for him to develop a loyal following among the elite or the wider population. His focus on administrative policies, for all its popularity, is also a symptom of his relative powerlessness on strategic issues, such as major investment decisions and management of economic assets held by the National Welfare Fund, Samruk-Kazyna. Moreover, his announcements are overshadowed by more frequent and better-covered public appearances by Nazarbayev and, increasingly, Dariga Nazarbayeva.

With Nazarbayev peering over his shoulder, Tokayev is unlikely to be able to undertake meaningful structural and institutional economic reforms, as this would threaten the financial bases of many influential people and prompt an examination of how they acquired their assets.

Owing to these governance factors, as well as problems associated with geography and geopolitics, ensuring a smooth transition will be a challenge. The demonstrators' demands in mid-2019 were more varied than in former protests, mostly addressing the nature of Kazakhstan's political system and long-standing socio-economic complaints. Tokayev has announced populist measures that include raising the salaries of state employees and extending the scope of state benefits. These spending commitments will increase the fiscal burden, however, and it will subsequently be harder both politically and financially to assuage systemic grievances.

In October, following disagreements with Nazarbayev over appointments, Tokayev signed a decree requiring his office to coordinate numerous senior appointments with the chairman of the Security Council (i.e. Nazarbayev himself). The positions covered by the decree include those of general prosecutor, National Bank chair and head of the KNB, as well as ministers and *akim* (mayors) of cities and regions. Appointments of the foreign, defence and interior ministers remain outside the remit of the decree. Its publication signalled that the dynamics of the transition are still evolving and that Nazarbayev is wary of Tokayev acting independently. Although the requirement to consult Nazarbayev is discretionary, Tokayev lacks the political capital to ignore the will of his predecessor.

As previously mentioned, the decree boosts the status of the Security Council, already the recipient in 2018 of vast powers (at the expense of the presidential office) that include the authority to give orders to any other state institution. This body thus has

*With Nazarbayev peering over his shoulder, Tokayev is unlikely to be able to undertake meaningful structural and institutional economic reforms*

the potential to become a kind of ruling council, similar to a Soviet-era politburo or the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China. It should also be noted that the Security Council is filled with close associates and family members of Nazarbayev, including Kalmukhanbet Kasymov (secretary of the Security Council) and Interior Minister Yerlan Turgumbayev.

The creation of the National Council of Public Trust in July 2019 demonstrated that Tokayev is aware of the inevitable need for structural reform. Change to the electoral system, perhaps the introduction of single-member constituencies and laxer requirements for the registration of parties, could deprive public protests of oxygen and strengthen the political system institutionally. If parliament gains more genuine political weight (as envisaged in constitutional amendments in 2017), it could serve as another insurance policy for Nazarbayev, and a means to keep Tokayev in check; equally, however, it could serve as a tool for Tokayev to legitimize his decisions. Tokayev knows that the current parliament, with its old cadres, is incapable of responding to emerging socio-political developments and grassroots demands. The new president, therefore, is attempting to circumvent traditional channels of communication with the public by setting up social media accounts and encouraging ministers to follow suit, as well as by introducing online platforms where citizens are offered the opportunity to file complaints.

Forthcoming parliamentary elections will signal the evolution of Kazakhstan's governance. The elections are officially due in 2021 but could be held earlier in order to wrongfoot opposition forces. The authorities are likely to allow some semblance of pluralism, via the participation of government-picked opposition candidates. But registration of truly independent parties would assuage some of the protest mood. Aware of the gradual erosion of Nazarbayev's power and his irreplaceability, members of the elite could also start to use the legislature to strengthen their power bases if the former president starts to retreat from public life. In particular, the elections could provide a new platform for his eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, who has been increasing her political profile recently. Her continued advocacy of greater legislative power over the executive, and her encouragement of renewed activism within the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, could provide a nationwide base of support for her.

Yet the chances of fair and more pluralistic parliamentary elections are slim. The most vocal grassroots movement, 'Oyan, Qazaqstan', was not invited to participate in sessions of the new National Council of Public Trust. New parties face the onerous administrative hurdle of finding 40,000 active members, with at least 600 members required for each registration in the 17 regions. Currently, only six registered parties are allowed to run for election – all on government-sanctioned platforms.

If permitted, Tokayev could seek to restore faith in the constitution and government by showing that he is able to implement genuine change, even if this occurs on a piecemeal basis. The constitution creates, empowers and checks the institutions that govern Kazakhstan's society, and is thus closely linked to the provision of public goods. With more attention to the formal constitution rather than to the informal, hidden constitution, and through tangible steps to introduce the rule of law and reduce corruption, Tokayev could be remembered as an effective caretaker. But only after the ultimate exodus of Nazarbayev will we see his true colours.

# 3. Political Economy

*Nigel Gould-Davies*

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*Kazakhstan's economy has largely outperformed those of other post-Soviet resource producers, but it needs to diversify and reform if it is to meet the challenges ahead.*

The economy is never just an economic matter. How wealth is created and distributed, and the interests it serves, always has systemic significance. The post-Soviet states illustrate this vividly. Across the region over the past three decades, different forms and degrees of transition from command system to market have shaped not only the economic performance of each country but the way power works, the state's relationship to society, and each country's relationship to the outside world.

Kazakhstan is no exception. Its economic achievements and prospects hold major implications for domestic cohesion and stability; they influence foreign policy choices; and they help to define the stakes of the ongoing leadership transition. In short, the political economy is intertwined with every other dimension of Kazakhstan's development and outlook.

This chapter begins by outlining the context of Kazakhstan's economic development since independence, and notes the difficult hand the country was dealt. It assesses how Kazakhstan has played this hand through its policy choices, noting its record in outperforming its peers. It then draws attention to the limits of these achievements, identifying the growing problems that have taken root. Finally, it examines the challenges that lie ahead and the reforms that will be needed if the country is to meet these effectively. It concludes that Kazakhstan must begin to manage its economy differently from the ways that have brought it success until now.

## Curses and legacies

Any assessment of Kazakhstan's economic development and future prospects must be measured against the formidable challenges of geography, nature and legacy that it has faced. These can be summarized as follows:

- **Geography:** An extreme continental climate afflicts the economy with a 'Siberian curse' of deadweight costs even more onerous than in Russia.<sup>58</sup> The growth of Nur-Sultan (previously Astana), the second-coldest capital city in the world, means that Kazakhstan is one of the few countries whose 'temperature per capita' is not only very low but may be falling. As a landlocked country, Kazakhstan faces inherently higher costs, and is prone to lower GDP growth, than those with natural access to maritime trade routes.<sup>59</sup> But geography is a political as well as a natural fact. Kazakhstan's two giant neighbours, Russia and China, harbour great-power agendas that pose foreign economic policy challenges for Kazakhstan. Until recently, the most sensitive issues have arisen from the country's close ties with Russia, inherited from the Soviet past. These encompass currency management, trading arrangements and hydrocarbon exports (revenues from which are the

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<sup>58</sup> For the impact of climate on Russia's economy, see Hill, F. and Gaddy, C. G. (2003), *The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold*, Washington, DC: Brookings.

<sup>59</sup> For a comprehensive analysis, see Arvis, J.-F., Raballand, G. and Marteau, J.-F. (2010), *The Cost of Being Landlocked: Logistics Costs and Supply Chain Reliability*, Washington, DC: World Bank.

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lifeblood of Kazakhstan's economy).<sup>60</sup> Russia's interests, ambitions and resurgence make this a challenging neighbourhood. At the same time, China's rise presents a new, and increasingly powerful, set of challenges to negotiate.

- **Nature:** Global experience shows that great resource wealth can be a curse as well as a blessing. An economy dependent on resource exports tends to produce patterns of governance dominated by elite struggle for title or rents. This leads to lower GDP growth, high corruption, stunted institutions, weak rule of law and little popular accountability.<sup>61</sup>
- **Legacy:** Kazakhstan inherited a system of laws, institutions and bureaucratic culture that were designed to manage a planned economy, not regulate a market one. In addition, Soviet-era industrialization and planning entrenched numerous economic distortions and inefficiencies, which in many cases have proven hard to eradicate.

*Cold and distance, the pitfalls of resource wealth and a legacy of failed institutions all dealt the newly independent Kazakhstan a difficult hand*

Cold and distance, the pitfalls of resource wealth and a legacy of failed institutions all dealt the newly independent Kazakhstan a difficult hand. Critics have since taken the country to task for its 'unfulfilled promise' and 'missed opportunities' in economic development, and laid these failings at the door of elite greed, corruption and indiscipline.<sup>62</sup> But a more comparative perspective suggests that many of Kazakhstan's difficulties are at least partly rooted in historical and systemic factors, which have incentivized elite behaviour and relationships that hinder full transition to an efficient and dynamic market economy.

The countries that most resemble Kazakhstan are the other major post-Soviet resource producers: Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These provide a natural yardstick with which to evaluate the successes and failures of Kazakhstan's policy choices since independence. Comparing Kazakhstan with its peers does not absolve it from failings or mistakes. But it does provide a more realistic basis on which to assess the path it has taken. It also helps to formulate feasible solutions for the future.

### Kazakhstan the outperformer

Kazakhstan has achieved the highest level of GDP per capita of all post-Soviet countries apart from the Baltic states. Table 1 shows how Kazakhstan and its closest comparators, the major natural resource producers in the region, have fared. With the doubtful exception of Turkmenistan (given problems of data reliability), Kazakhstan has enjoyed the biggest absolute and percentage increases in GDP per capita since 1991. Per capita GDP has more than trebled, propelling Kazakhstan to upper-middle-income status. From 2000 to 2011, it enjoyed one of the highest growth rates in the world.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The last of these issues includes oil transit through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) to Western markets via the Russian port of Novorossiisk, and gas offtake from the Karachaganak condensate field to Orenburg (not a major revenue earner, but key to maintaining production levels at the field).

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Ross, M. L. (2013), *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Olcott, M. B. (2002), *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<sup>63</sup> OECD (2017), *OECD Investment Policy Reviews: Kazakhstan 2017*, Paris: OECD Publishing, p. 15, Paris: OECD, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/finance-and-investment/oecd-investment-policy-reviews-kazakhstan-2017\\_9789264269606-en#page1](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/finance-and-investment/oecd-investment-policy-reviews-kazakhstan-2017_9789264269606-en#page1) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

This growth has been broadly inclusive. Kazakhstan's poverty rate has fallen to 6.5 per cent.<sup>64</sup> It ranks 58th out of 189 countries in the UN's Human Development Index, qualifying as a 'very high human development' country. Among post-Soviet states, only the Baltic states, Belarus and Russia rank higher.<sup>65</sup> According to UN Development Programme (UNDP) data, Kazakhstan is among the very few countries in the world with a Gender Development Index greater than one, indicating that women on average achieve slightly better human development outcomes than men – though this does not mean they enjoy de facto equal access to all economic opportunities.<sup>66</sup>

**Table 1: GDP per capita (\$PPP) of major post-Soviet resource producers**

Country	1991	2018	change	% change
Kazakhstan	7,744	27,831	20,087	259
Russia	7,846	27,147	19,301	246
Uzbekistan	2,019	7,020	5,001	247
Azerbaijan	5,765	18,012	12,247	212
Turkmenistan	5,174	19,270	14,096	272

Notes: Purchasing-power-parity (PPP) figures are used due to the exchange rate fluctuations of major oil exporters and their emerging-market status. Turkmenistan's performance is questionable given the difficulty of ensuring reliability of data. See European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (2019), 'Turkmenistan overview', <https://www.ebrd.com/where-we-are/turkmenistan/overview.html> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

Source: Calculated from World Bank Open Data, World Bank (2019), 'GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$) - Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?end=2018&locations=KZ-RU-UZ-AZ-TM&start=1991&view=chart> (accessed 14 Oct. 2019).

*Of the four other major post-Soviet resource producers, only Russia has made greater progress in transition since 1991*

What has driven this growth? As in other post-communist countries, progress in market transition has freed the economy from many of the distortions and inefficiencies of central planning. Of the four other major post-Soviet resource producers, only Russia has made greater progress in transition since 1991 (see Table 2). Kazakhstan's rate of reforms in its first decade following independence was especially impressive. It not only undertook the fastest transition within its peer group, but it reformed further than any post-Soviet states except the Baltic states and Georgia.

<sup>64</sup> World Bank (2017), *The Economy is Rising: It is Still All About Oil*, Kazakhstan Country Economic Update (Fall 2017), Washington, DC: World Bank Group, p. 14, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/563451512743145143/Kazakhstan-The-economy-is-rising-it-is-still-all-about-oil-country-economic-update-Fall-2017> (accessed 6 Nov. 2019). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) calculates Kazakhstan's rate of 'multidimensional poverty' at only 1.1 per cent. See UNDP (2016), *Human Development Report 2016*, Table 6, p. 218, <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2016-human-development-everyone> (accessed 6 Nov. 2019).

<sup>65</sup> UNDP (2018), *Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update*, New York: UNDP, Table 1, p. 22, <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/2018-update/download> (accessed 14 Oct. 2019).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Table 4, p. 34 (accessed 22 Aug. 2019). See also Asian Development Bank (2018), *Kazakhstan: Country Gender Assessment*, Mandaluyong: Asian Development Bank, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/479136/kazakhstan-country-gender-assessment.pdf> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019); and UNDP (2018), *Briefing note for countries on the 2018 Statistical Update: Kazakhstan*, New York: UNDP, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/KAZ.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/KAZ.pdf) (accessed 22 Aug. 2019). On continued de facto gender inequality of economic opportunity despite legal equality, see OECD (2019), *Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019: Kazakhstan*, Paris: OECD, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/KZ.pdf> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

**Table 2: Aggregate European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) transition scores of post-Soviet resource exporters**

Country	1991	1999	2014*	% change 1991–99	% change 1999–2014
Russia	7.0	16.6	19.7	137	18.7
Kazakhstan	6.0	18.3	18.4	205	0.5
Azerbaijan	6.0	16.0	17.4	167	8.8
Uzbekistan	6.0	13.4	13.8	123	3.0
Turkmenistan	6.0	10.1	10.6	68	5.0

\* Latest data available.

Source: Calculated from EBRD ‘transition indicators’. The EBRD assessed transition indicators for each country annually from 1989 to 2014. See EBRD (2019), ‘Forecasts, macro data, transition indicators’, <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/economic-research-and-data/data/forecasts-macro-data-transition-indicators.html> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019). In 2017, the EBRD introduced a new set of ‘transition qualities’. These are broader, more political and social in nature, and not directly comparable with the earlier indicators. The ranking of the five post-Soviet resource producers listed here is the same, however. The main difference relevant to this chapter is that, according to the new indicator, Kazakhstan performs relatively better than the next-best-performing country, Azerbaijan. Details of the new transition qualities can be found at Bennett, V. (2016), ‘EBRD updates transition concept’, EBRD, 2 November 2016, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2016/ebrd-updates-transition-concept-.html> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019). The latest country scores can be found at EBRD (2019), ‘Transition Report 2018–19’, <https://2018.tr-ebrd.com/reform/> (accessed 22 Aug. 2019).

In its second decade of independence, the major source of Kazakhstan’s exceptional performance was oil exports. This was due not only to the five-fold increase in the oil price from 1999 to 2008, but to the quadrupling of oil production from 1995 to 2015. About 60 per cent of Kazakhstan’s oil output is produced by its three supergiant fields: Tengiz, Karachaganak and Kashagan. These projects have overcome formidable technical and geological challenges – including, in the case of Kashagan, the building of artificial islands in the Caspian Sea where oil rigs are unfeasible due to winter pack ice. New technologies have also been developed to meet field-specific challenges. From 2000 to 2018, Kazakhstan’s oil production increased by an average of 2.7 per cent a year, comfortably the highest rate in the post-Soviet region and the ninth-highest rate in the world.<sup>67</sup> Kashagan, the biggest oil discovery in a generation, began sustained production in 2016. It is a game-changer that will significantly add to Kazakhstan’s output in coming decades. In June 2019, output from Kashagan reached 400,000 barrels/day, and is expected to achieve a peak run-rate of 450,000 barrels/day (61,400 tonnes/day). This one field was largely responsible for the 10.8 per cent jump in Kazakhstan’s oil output in 2017, effectively the highest rate of increase of any producer worldwide.<sup>68</sup>

Kazakhstan’s oil reserves are a gift of nature, but monetizing them – getting them out of the ground and to market – is a policy outcome. Kazakhstan’s production growth is largely a consequence of decisions taken in its first decade of independence to invite international oil companies (IOCs) to invest in its three biggest fields on attractive terms. Production-sharing agreements (PSAs) are at the heart of this relationship. PSAs include stabilization clauses that protect the projects from significant revisions

<sup>67</sup> BP (2019), *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019*, 68th edition, London: BP, especially p. 16, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-full-report.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>68</sup> Kazakhstan’s 2017 growth represents new production. The Republic of the Congo, Libya and Yemen recorded higher rates, but all, to varying degrees, did so by restoring larger, earlier, conflict-related cuts.

to national law and regulations. This helps account for Kazakhstan's success in attracting higher foreign direct investment (FDI) per capita than any other post-Soviet country: more than 75 per cent of this FDI has flowed into the extractives sector.

Importantly, the PSAs remain in force. Unlike Russia, where state companies have taken majority control over a number of major projects, Kazakhstan has not fundamentally revised the terms on which the three PSA-stabilized projects operate. When the national oil company, KazMunaiGaz (KMG), entered the Karachaganak consortium in 2012 as part of a dispute resolution agreement, it acquired a modest 10 per cent stake. This relative contractual security has allowed project shareholders to commit recently to further major investments. These include the \$37 billion Tengiz Future Growth Project, approved in 2016; the next-phase field development of Karachaganak; and continued investment in Kashagan, which, with \$50 billion now committed, is the most expensive energy project in the world.

Thus, Kazakhstan's strong economic record since the turn of the millennium has relied disproportionately not just on a single sector, but on three majority foreign-owned projects within it. Oil and gas production accounts for 17 per cent of Kazakhstan's GDP and almost 60 per cent of its exports.<sup>69</sup>

*Kazakhstan's strong economic record since the turn of the millennium has relied disproportionately not just on a single sector, but on three majority foreign-owned projects within it*

In fiscal terms, Kazakhstan has managed its oil windfall responsibly – especially during the oil boom of 2000–08 when the non-oil fiscal deficit remained broadly stable and a National Fund was set up to save a proportion of oil revenues. Fiscal stimulus equivalent to around 15 per cent of GDP was used to mitigate the shock of the 2008 global financial crisis, ensuring that Kazakhstan, unlike Russia, did not fall into recession. But this crisis, and the later fall in the oil price in 2014 (which led to a 70 per cent drop in revenues), weakened Kazakhstan's fiscal position, pushing the non-oil deficit up to 12.7 per cent of GDP in 2017. The public finances require consolidation if they are to be sustainable in the longer term.<sup>70</sup>

In sum, in its first decade of independence Kazakhstan navigated the disruption of Soviet break-up and systemic transition, dismantled much of its planned economy, and reached landmark agreements with international oil companies. This laid the foundations for strong economic performance in its second decade. Kazakhstan played its opening hand well, especially in comparison to its peers.

### The limits of progress

However, in the country's third decade since independence, the political economy has begun to accumulate new problems. These must be addressed if Kazakhstan is to meet the fresh challenges that lie ahead. Three issues are of particular concern.

<sup>69</sup> Samruk-Kazyna (2017), *Kazakhstan: Economic and Sector Dynamics 2017*, Astana: Samruk-Kazyna, <https://www.sk.kz/upload/iblock/68a/68af5cb26899f47572cf176a5565642d.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019). See also World Bank (2017), *The Economy is Rising*, Table 3, p. 9. Given oil price volatility, these figures vary significantly across years. For example, in 2013 oil revenues contributed 45 per cent of total revenues, but in 2017 only 27 per cent. Nonetheless, the economy is clearly dependent on the sector.

<sup>70</sup> For the fiscal situation and measures to address it, see International Monetary Fund (2017), *Republic of Kazakhstan: Selected Issues*, Country Report 17/109, Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2017/05/09/Republic-of-Kazakhstan-Selected-Issues-44885> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019); and World Bank Group (2017), *Kazakhstan: Enhancing the Fiscal Framework to Support Economic Transformation*, Washington, DC: World Bank Group, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/406131511790097777/pdf/121677-REPLACEMENT-PUBLIC-KAZPFR-ENG-A4-complete.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).



First, while oil production is set to continue rising, conditions in the oil and gas sector are beginning to shift. Though still strong, the state's relationship with the three super-giant oil projects is changing. The familiar model of the 'obsolescing bargain' between state and foreign investors in capital-intensive, long-term projects predicts that a host government is likely to seek to revise contract terms as a project matures. As noted above, Kazakhstan has wisely avoided forcing fundamental changes in ownership structure on investors and partners. But in other respects, the operating environment is becoming more difficult for IOCs. They report that challenges and objections by the authorities even to minor decisions and requests for approval are growing. These are creating delays and slowing project development.

Furthermore, both the national government and regional authorities have for some time been seeking to expand the range of obligations imposed on, or expected from, the major projects. Pollution charges and taxes on the oil and gas industry, disproportionately levied on major projects, are very high and continue to rise.<sup>71</sup> Draft regulations can also contain unpleasant surprises, requiring foreign investors and their governments to mobilize in pushing back. A good example is the Code on Subsoil and Subsoil Use that came into force in June 2018. Earlier drafts had included adverse provisions for major investors. Concerted corporate and diplomatic engagement succeeded in moderating these provisions, and the version eventually adopted improves the regulatory framework, especially in the mining sector.<sup>72</sup>

The authorities also seem intent on making the three major oil projects drivers of broader modernization beyond the energy sector, through local-content and labour requirements, domestic market obligations and other regulations. Local commercial interests, sometimes politically connected, can play a role in such demands. Beyond these projects, the picture in the oil sector is also mixed. In 2012 Kazakhstan signalled that it would sign no new PSAs, a decision that led to the exodus from potential projects of major investors – among them Norway's Statoil, which in 2013 withdrew from Kazakhstan after seven years of inconclusive negotiation.

The second area of concern is that the wider resources sector remains beset by challenges. Mining is a case in point. Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer of uranium, and possesses enormous deposits of a wide range of metals, including gold, iron, chrome, copper, zinc, vanadium and rare earths. But since 1991 almost no new exploration has taken place, few new mines have opened, and relatively little foreign investment has been attracted into the sector. As a result, less than 15 per cent of known reserves are in production, and current projects face depletion without new ones to replace them. Furthermore, in a pattern seen in other sectors, smaller foreign companies that lack protection face difficulties in entering the market; they may suffer adverse bureaucratic treatment if they succeed, and are sometimes forced out.

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<sup>71</sup> Environmental taxes and penalties are outlined in OECD (2019), *Multi-dimensional Review of Kazakhstan – Volume 2: In-depth Analysis and Recommendations*, [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/multi-dimensional-review-of-kazakhstan\\_9789264269200-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/multi-dimensional-review-of-kazakhstan_9789264269200-en) (accessed 23 Aug. 2019). As a result of Tax Code amendments in 2017, 'the oil and gas industry will pay 67 times more per unit of emission than the heating and power plants'.

<sup>72</sup> See OECD (2018), *Reform of the Mining Sector in Kazakhstan: Investment, Sustainability, Competitiveness*, Paris: Global Relations: Eurasia Competitiveness Programme, [http://www.oecd.org/eurasia/countries/Kazakhstan\\_Mining\\_report\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/eurasia/countries/Kazakhstan_Mining_report_ENG.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

Third, Kazakhstan has done little recently to modernize the overall economy. Kazakhstan's economic geography presents severe challenges for efforts to diversify away from dependence on natural resource exports. Creating new, competitive, high-productivity sectors is intrinsically difficult in countries, such as Kazakhstan, that have a low population density and are far from large export markets.<sup>73</sup> In the post-Cold War world, Halford Mackinder's Edwardian conception of Central Asia as a geopolitical 'heartland' has received much – perhaps too much – attention.<sup>74</sup> Economically, the region runs the risk of being more a remote periphery than a vital core.

Progress in diversification and modernization has been limited. Despite significant depreciation of the tenge, non-oil exports have barely grown over the past decade. Trend growth has fallen, especially in the non-oil sector, and in fact the economy has become *more* reliant on the oil sector.<sup>75</sup> Various indicators of market conditions continue to lag. Kazakhstan scores poorly for innovation, business sophistication, financial market development, local supplier quality and the breadth of its value chain.<sup>76</sup> As the World Bank notes, 'indicators of economic complexity have trended downward, suggesting that the country has been adding less rather than more value ... in both resource-based sectors and other sectors'.<sup>77</sup> Kazakhstan ranks 124th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>78</sup> Though better than the rankings of other direct comparators, this is still a poor score. Kazakhstan is in the bottom fifth of all countries for control of corruption, far lower than the average for upper-middle-income countries.<sup>79</sup>

### Roots of current problems

This chapter began by discussing the natural conditions and systemic legacies that Kazakhstan inherited as a newly independent country. Despite impressive progress in overcoming some of them, new hindrances have emerged for Kazakhstan's post-Soviet political economy. Three stand out: extensive involvement of the state in the economy, weak regulatory and judicial structures, and inadequate administration of trade.

The state's economic role is too large. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) are dominant, accounting for some two-thirds of all assets – nearly all concentrated in three holding companies: Samruk-Kazyna, Baiterek and KazAgro.<sup>80</sup> For an upper-middle-income economy, this share remains exceptionally high, and has even grown in recent years.

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of the effects of low population density and distance from export markets on economic diversification and development, see OECD (2015), 'Understanding the Krasnoyarsk Agglomeration', in OECD (2015), *OECD Territorial Reviews: The Krasnoyarsk Agglomeration, Russian Federation*, Paris: OECD Publishing, pp. 25–84.

<sup>74</sup> For a good discussion of Mackinder's thought and its relevance today, see Megoran, N. and Sharapova, S. (eds) (2014), *Central Asia in International Relations: The Legacies of Halford Mackinder*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>75</sup> International Monetary Fund (2017), *Republic of Kazakhstan: Selected Issues*, pp. 51–57; and World Bank Group (2017), *Kazakhstan: Enhancing the Fiscal Framework*, pp. 11–13.

<sup>76</sup> Schwab, K. (ed) (2019), *The Global Competitiveness Report*, Geneva: World Economic Forum, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf) (accessed 6 Nov. 2019).

<sup>77</sup> World Bank Group (2018), *A New Growth Model for Building a Secure Middle Class. Kazakhstan Systematic Country Diagnostic*, Washington, DC: World Bank Group, p. 8, <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/29792> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>78</sup> Transparency International (2019), 'Corruption Perceptions Index 2018', <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018> (accessed 27 Oct. 2019).

<sup>79</sup> Kazakhstan is in the 21st percentile, while the average for upper-middle-income countries is 48. See World Bank (2019), 'Worldwide Governance Indicators', <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#reports> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019). For corruption scores, see Transparency International (2019), 'Corruption Perceptions Index 2018'.

<sup>80</sup> World Bank Group, *The Economy is Rising*, drawing on OECD research, p. 15. For a good discussion of SOEs, see OECD (2018), *Reforming Kazakhstan: Progress, Challenges and Opportunities*, Paris: OECD, pp. 70–76, <https://www.oecd.org/eurasia/countries/OECD-Eurasia-Reforming-Kazakhstan-EN.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

The state's size brings problems familiar to global experience: economic inefficiency, political rather than market-based decision-making, insider interests and corruption. It also has adverse implications for state finances. While Kazakhstan's sovereign debt is equivalent to only 20 per cent of GDP, the debts of SOEs far exceed this, accounting for a further 29 per cent of GDP. Since most of these liabilities are foreign currency-denominated, this adds to fiscal risk.<sup>81</sup> The state's presence in the economy beyond formal asset ownership also remains significant, with widespread subsidies and price controls creating inefficiencies and distorted incentives. Significant tax incentives and exemptions, subsidized lending and implicit debt guarantees disproportionately benefit large state companies.

The corollary of an excessive state role is an underdeveloped private sector. The small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, a driver of growth in the most successful transition economies, contributes less than a fifth of GDP. Many SMEs deliberately stay small and limit their growth. If they become too successful, they risk attracting hostile attention from powerful interests that might seek to engineer a hostile takeover (*reiderstvo*) through access to administrative and legal systems.

At the same time, though its companies are dominant, the state's institutions remain weak. Too often, administration and the rule of law are applied in discretionary ways that favour privileged interests, rather than functioning impartially. Neither domestic nor foreign companies can be confident that the judicial system will protect their legitimate interests. While, as noted above, Kazakhstan has higher transition scores than natural comparators (with the exception of Russia), it has shown the *least* improvement since 1999. Virtually all its transition progress was achieved in the most challenging early years; progress has essentially halted since then (see Table 2). Plans to resume structural reforms, for example by floating minority stakes in major state companies such as KMG, have been repeatedly deferred.<sup>82</sup> A notable exception was the November 2018 floating of 15 per cent of Kazatomprom, the world's biggest uranium producer.

The banking sector epitomizes the country's transition problems in an especially acute form. Despite several rounds of consolidation, culminating in the merger of the country's two largest banks in 2017, and repeated large bailouts, the sector remains weak and excessively dependent on political connections.<sup>83</sup> In 2017 alone, bank bailouts totalled 3 trillion tenge (\$9.1 billion), accounting for more than a quarter of the 11 trillion tenge (\$33.7 billion) state budget. Bailout funds are also taken from the National Fund, the official purpose of which is to save oil and gas revenues for use when oil prices fall. The travails of Tsesnabank exemplify this chronic problem: it was given a \$1.3 billion bailout in September 2018, and a further \$3.4 billion in February 2019. Until the latter bailout, the bank had been controlled by the family of Nazarbayev's ex-chief of staff, Adilbek Zhaksybekov.<sup>84</sup>

*Neither domestic nor foreign companies can be confident that the judicial system will protect their legitimate interests*

<sup>81</sup> World Bank Group (2017), *Kazakhstan: Enhancing the Fiscal Framework*, p. 74.

<sup>82</sup> Denina, C. (2019), 'Kazakhstan delays flotation of national oil champion as IPO market stalls – sources', Reuters, 8 February 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/kazmunaygaz-ipo/kazakhstan-delays-flotation-of-national-oil-champion-as-ipo-market-stalls-sources-idUSL5N1ZZ5CF> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>83</sup> For a notable recent case, see Patrucic, M., Lavrov, V. and Lozovsky, I. (2017), 'Kazakhstan's Secret Billionaires', OCCRP, 5 November 2017, <https://www.occrp.org/en/paradisepapers/kazakhstan-secret-billionaires> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>84</sup> Zhaksybekov was appointed CEO of Tsesnabank on 10 September 2018, the same day that he was removed as chief of staff. He had previously held a series of senior positions, including mayor of Astana (now Nur-Sultan) and defence minister. See Kazakhstan 2.0 (2018), 'The backstory of Dzhaksybekov's resignation', 21 September 2018, [https://kz.expert/en/news/analitika/1011\\_the\\_backstory\\_of\\_dzhaksybekovs\\_resignation](https://kz.expert/en/news/analitika/1011_the_backstory_of_dzhaksybekovs_resignation) (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

*In the World Bank's 'Doing Business' rankings, Kazakhstan's sub-score for trading across borders is by far the weakest component in its overall rating*

A decade on from the global financial crisis, and with national income now growing at more than 3 per cent a year, such problems can no longer be attributed to 'fallout' from that crisis. Rather, they reflect systemic patterns of connected lending that arise from entrenched and opaque state–SOE–bank relationships and the moral hazard associated with those relationships. In effect, repeated banking failures are a systemic feature, serving to recycle a portion of oil revenues into profits for the biggest banks and their most powerful clients. Meanwhile, SMEs are poorly served by the financial system, especially outside Nur-Sultan and Almaty.

A further hindrance to growth and modernization is Kazakhstan's poor performance in respect of its trading arrangements. In the World Bank's 'Doing Business' rankings, Kazakhstan's sub-score for trading across borders is by far the weakest component in its overall rating. It ranks 102nd out of 190 in this category, bringing down an otherwise impressive overall ranking of 28th.<sup>85</sup> Customs clearance, documentary and inspection procedures still lag badly. These problems compound the inherent difficulties, noted earlier, for any landlocked country in accessing international markets for goods. Building new 'dry ports', better transport links and other hardware will achieve little unless the 'soft infrastructure' of regulatory systems is not significantly reformed.

In sum, the dysfunctions of Kazakhstan's political economy risk undermining its longer-term performance. Significantly, its greatest successes are specially created exceptions to, not exemplars of, its system. The Tengiz, Karachaganak and Kashagan oil fields are world-class operations that have surmounted formidable technical and geological challenges. But their success arises partly from being managed, operated and majority-owned by Western companies, and from enjoying legal stability and relative freedom from political and bureaucratic influence. They are, in effect, enclaves in Kazakhstan's system and not subject to most of the regulatory and institutional challenges that beset the rest of that system. Despite growing pressures, these projects work quite differently from other parts of the economy.

This is not the only such case. The flagship Nazarbayev University in Nur-Sultan, which has attracted international leadership and faculty to design and deliver a 21st-century education, is exempt from normal Ministry of Education oversight. A more recent example is the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), launched in July 2018. Intended to become a financial hub for Central Asia, the AIFC establishes an independent court system and jurisdiction based on English law, an international arbitration centre and a new stock exchange.

Although these are valuable initiatives, such centres of excellence in diverse sectors are an implicit admission of the limitations of the wider system. The ideal solution would be to reform the institutions that administer and regulate the whole country, rather than create enclaves of exemption. The need to do so is made more urgent by the fact that significant new challenges await.

<sup>85</sup> World Bank (2019), *Doing Business 2019: Training for Reform*, Volume 2, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/975621541012231575/Doing-Business-2019-Training-for-Reform> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

### Looming challenges

Four major economic challenges, two domestic and two external, lie ahead for Kazakhstan. These make it more important than ever that the authorities address the weaknesses of the political economy.

The first challenge is demographic. Fuelled by a baby boom that took off a decade ago, Kazakhstan's population is forecast to rise by 15 per cent between 2020 and 2040.<sup>86</sup> Handled well, this expanding labour force can fuel growth. But if good jobs are not available, discontent and social tensions will rise. Kazakhstan must therefore develop more labour-intensive, higher-value-added sectors, rather than relying primarily on oil and gas.

The second is technological. The emergence over the coming decades of artificial intelligence, robots and other aspects of a data-driven economy have profound implications for all countries. Investing in human capital through education is the best hedge against disruption and mass unemployment.

The third challenge comes from global energy markets. Kazakhstan remains highly dependent on a single variable, the price of oil. The emergence of the US as the world's swing producer is likely to keep this price lower than it has been for much of the past decade. A new global recession would drive the oil price down, with adverse growth and fiscal consequences for Kazakhstan. In the more distant future, transition to a post-carbon world will have profound implications for all hydrocarbon exporters. Astana's EXPO-2017 exhibition, themed around 'future energy' from sustainable sources, was a commendably far-sighted initiative for a major oil producer. But there is clearly much more to do to prepare for this eventual scenario. Green growth is also needed to tackle the pressing problem of Kazakhstan's energy intensity – among the highest in the world.

The fourth challenge is presented by Kazakhstan's giant neighbours. Russia faces bleak economic prospects and escalating Western sanctions, the effects of which already spill over into Kazakhstan. Rouble depreciation has hit local producers by making Russian goods relatively cheaper. It has also compounded the challenges of managing an oil-dependent currency. As a consequence, in recent years the tenge has been one of the world's most volatile currencies. This volatility has several harmful effects. It fuels inflation, hinders inward investment by exacerbating currency risk, increases the exposure of citizens and companies holding dollar-denominated liabilities, and undermines confidence in the currency.<sup>87</sup>

Russian moves to increase regional economic connectivity have also brought problems. Since 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has in principle established a mutually beneficial single market among Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. In practice, this project is laden with political uncertainties. Russia's sheer size means it dominates the EAEU. Moscow has sought to ensure the harmonization of member states' trade and regulatory practices on its terms, and has pressed for further integration, such as a common currency, that would weaken member-state sovereignty. Some of its actions have harmed member states' interests, such as by hindering the

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<sup>86</sup> Calculated from United Nations (2019), '2019 Revision of World Population Prospects', <https://population.un.org/wpp/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>87</sup> For example, after the near-halving of the tenge's value against the dollar between August 2015 and January 2016, consumer prices rose by 14.4 per cent in 2016.

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transit of Ukrainian goods and banning Western food imports. In 2014 Nazarbayev went so far as to suggest that Kazakhstan could leave the EAEU if membership threatened its sovereignty. Kazakhstan's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2015, on more liberal terms than Russia, has led to new complications for intra-EAEU trade.<sup>88</sup>

Russia is still Kazakhstan's largest single-country trade partner (though barely: in 2018, Italy and China followed close behind).<sup>89</sup> Russia is also a vital long-term transit route for energy exports. Kazakhstan has managed this relationship deftly. But doing so will become harder if Russia, facing poor economic prospects and troubled relations with the West (including the continued imposition of sanctions), becomes more crisis-prone, assertive and unpredictable.

China's rise presents a broader mix of opportunities as well as challenges. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first announced by President Xi Jinping in Astana in 2013, offers the prospect of infrastructure funding on a scale that no other country can match, as well as revenue flows from transit services associated with the transportation of cargo to Europe. In the best case, and with effective domestic reforms, BRI connectivity could ease Kazakhstan's isolation from major markets and spur economic development.

*China's Belt and Road Initiative offers the prospect of infrastructure funding on a scale that no other country can match*

Set against this are the severe problems with customs and border practices noted earlier, the uncertain economics of continental land routes, the risk that cheaper Chinese goods could hinder Kazakhstan's economic diversification, and the possibility that closer economic ties could boost Chinese influence in Kazakhstan in unwelcome ways. China's growing investments are already viewed with popular apprehension, especially when its companies bring labour to Kazakhstan. In 2016, rare public demonstrations broke out against land reforms, driven by fears this would lead to land being leased to the Chinese. This forced the government to delay the reforms, and the economy minister to resign.<sup>90</sup>

In sum, demographic trends will create a need for new jobs. Technological adaptation will demand a market environment in which innovators and entrepreneurs can thrive, as well as a high-quality education system. Spending on both education (less than 3 per cent of GDP) and research and development (0.17 per cent of GDP) is low by international standards. Responding to global market uncertainties will require greater economic and institutional resilience and a lower dependence on oil exports. Handling giant neighbours will require a stronger, more efficient economy.

Kazakhstan's current system does not equip it to achieve these goals. If the status quo endures, Kazakhstan will depend on, and likely squeeze, a few key oil projects even more; the rent-seeking positions of insiders will remain entrenched; and the state will continue to dominate the private sector. Growth, jobs and resilience will suffer. The resource curse may tighten its grip.

A better approach would be to use the cushion of rising oil production to push through structural reforms rather than to defer them, and to improve the quality of institutions and human capital. If Kazakhstan can reduce the state's role in the economy, reform its

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<sup>88</sup> These issues are well discussed in Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk, K. (2017), *The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-05-02-eurasian-economic-union-dragneva-wolczuk.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>89</sup> Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Committee on Statistics (2019), *Внешняя торговля Республики Казахстан 2014–2018* [Foreign Trade of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2014–2018], Nur-Sultan: 2019.

<sup>90</sup> For further details, see Chapter 7.

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institutions and tackle corruption, it can not only raise living standards but become more resilient and better prepared for the challenges associated with future trends, connectivity with international markets, and assertive neighbours.

Even in the best-case scenario, reform will not be easy. It will require disrupting arrangements that are profitable for vested interests. Some policy changes may be especially difficult to implement in Kazakhstan. The goal of privatization, for example, is to create private owners that respond efficiently to market incentives. But in any privatization process, major bidders for stakes in state companies would likely include parastatal companies that are owned partly or wholly by the state, or that are otherwise politically connected. If foreign bids were allowed, they would probably include Russian and Chinese firms. It will be a major challenge to transfer state assets into genuinely private hands without exacerbating the oligarchic concentration of power created by earlier privatizations in the 1990s.<sup>91</sup>

*Technocratic experts in Kazakhstan can be realistic and frank about both the scale of the reform challenges and the strength of the vested interests resisting change*

What are the prospects for driving through structural reforms? Interestingly, Kazakhstan appears to have suffered from less complacency at the highest level than might be expected from a regional outperformer. Nazarbayev frequently criticized aspects of the very system that had become established during his leadership. On occasion he expressed stern and public dissatisfaction with the failure to resolve chronic problems, especially in the banking system. His January 2019 comments to the government in connection with banking failures were especially striking: ‘You are simply cowards, not a government, not ministers.’<sup>92</sup> Nazarbayev also set out ambitious reform proposals to address such issues, notably in his May 2015 ‘100 concrete steps’ programme. International institutions find that technocratic experts in Kazakhstan can be realistic and frank about both the scale of the reform challenges and the strength of the vested interests resisting change. It is too early to know whether the leadership style of the new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, will extend to exhibiting overt dissatisfaction with the status quo as his predecessor did, and, if so, how he will seek to change it.

Kazakhstan is also sensitive to its position in global indices and benchmarks, and maintains an active dialogue with major international institutions.<sup>93</sup> WTO accession was a significant step, and its commitments – when fully implemented – will reduce barriers to trade and investment, especially in the services sector.<sup>94</sup> The country also aspires to join the OECD and become one of the 30 most advanced economies by 2050. This openness to international comparisons and standards is encouraging. But it is important that Kazakhstan follow such standards in spirit as well as letter, and that it internalize the norms and values behind them. The primary goal should be for Kazakhstan to improve the underlying systemic features measured by benchmarks, rather than simply seek to raise the country’s position in a ranking. Consistent implementation of laws and regulations is as important as their formal adoption.

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<sup>91</sup> On 1990s privatizations, see Peyrouse, S. (2012) ‘The Kazakh neopatrimonial regime: balancing uncertainties among the “Family”, oligarchs and technocrats’, *Demokratizatsiya*, 20(4): pp. 345–70.

<sup>92</sup> Nur.kz (2019), ‘Назарбаев – правительству: Вы просто трусы’ [Nazarbayev – to the government: you are just cowards], 30 January 2019, <https://www.nur.kz/1775877-nazarbaev-pravitelstvu-vy-prosto-trusy.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>93</sup> After Kazakhstan fell one place in the World Bank’s ease-of-doing-business rankings in 2017, a delegation reportedly visited Washington to determine why.

<sup>94</sup> OECD (2017), *OECD Investment Policy Reviews*, Chapter 6.

Furthermore, many reform impulses are directed at state-led, rather than market-facilitating, development. They create new spending projects that increase the state's role and replicate the problems they are designed to address. As one veteran country head of an international institution put it, the most important thing is for 'the state to get out of the way', rather than try to fix problems of its own making.

In other ways, too, state-led initiatives reproduce the problems they are intended to solve. Top-down demands to fulfil directives and meet targets encourage a 'storming' approach to achieving outcomes – or the appearance of doing so – among officials. This premium on demonstrating quick results encourages shortcuts and quick fixes, in particular through imported technology or physical capacity rather than the slower, less tangible but essential work of building enabling systems and institutions.

The agriculture sector illustrates this. To develop its beef industry, Kazakhstan has imported cattle from North America. However, it has not put in place the necessary supporting infrastructure of veterinary care, feed production, transportation and other management policies. This has sometimes led to predictably unhappy results. Despite active state support, Kazakhstan's wheat yields also remain low by international standards and of poor quality.<sup>95</sup> In this, as in other areas of economic policy, Kazakhstan's priority should be not more strategies, initiatives and targets, but more consistent and effective delivery.

## Conclusions

Judged against its inheritance of geographical challenges and systemic legacies, and against the performance of other post-Soviet natural resource producers, Kazakhstan's economic record since independence can be characterized more as one of 'outperformance' than one of 'unfulfilled promise'. There was nothing inevitable about this success: it was a consequence of policy choices that might have been different – and that, in peer countries, have been different. Post-independence Kazakhstan has played its difficult hand well.

But this overall picture masks growing problems. While Kazakhstan was the fastest reformer in its peer group during its first decade of independence, it became the slowest in its second. In the early 2000s, reform progress fell away as economic growth picked up. This growth was driven primarily by oil and gas revenues, above all from three big majority foreign-owned projects. The latter have worked well not because of a strong local business environment, but because they enjoy the special, protected status of PSAs. The contrasting fortunes of the energy and mining sectors vividly illustrate how the normal rules of the system can lead to failure to realize great natural potential.

During the years of buoyant GDP growth, new political-economic dysfunctions accumulated. The state's role in the economy remains far too large. State institutions that regulate the economy are too weak, partial and penetrated by vested interests, especially in the financial sector. The management of trade remains costly, corrupt and inefficient. The system that delivered past success must now evolve if Kazakhstan is to meet

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<sup>95</sup> Index Mundi (2019), 'Wheat Yield by Country in MT/HA', <https://www.indexmundi.com/agriculture/?commodity=wheat&graph=yield> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).



the challenges of demography, technology and the transformation of global energy markets, and address the dual risks of a rising China and a declining but geopolitically resurgent Russia.

There is no room for complacency. ‘More of the same’ is not a recipe for further success. In principle, the top leadership appears to recognize this, and engages closely with international institutions to work towards its declared goal of ranking among the most developed countries. The danger is that special interests will confine reform largely to technical measures and frustrate implementation of more substantial changes.<sup>96</sup> Without deeper structural reforms to support a more diverse and competitive market economy, rising oil production will likely mask declining relative performance. In the worst-case scenario, the ‘resource curse’, which has so far afflicted Kazakhstan less than might have been expected, will gain a stronger grip.

In its first decade of independence, Kazakhstan demonstrated to itself and others that bold policies can deliver major benefits for the country and its people. Nearing the end of its third decade, the country needs to take up this challenge again. It would be helpful for Kazakhstan’s leadership to think in terms of a new phase of reform that challenges the *post-Soviet* legacies that have built up. This will not be easy, just as past successes were hard-won. But it will be central to Kazakhstan’s prospects. For, as noted at the start of this chapter, Kazakhstan’s economic choices will shape its political future too.

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<sup>96</sup> OECD (2018), *Reforming Kazakhstan* provides an excellent overview.

# 4. Political and Civil Liberties and Human Rights

Joanna Lillis

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*Kazakhstan's abuses of political and civil liberties are routinely overlooked by the West for reasons of expediency. Tokayev promises a more tolerant approach, but still has much to do to prove the regime is serious about liberalization.*

The trajectory of Nursultan Nazarbayev's 28-year rule of independent Kazakhstan was one of creeping authoritarianism, but in the early years of independence, when the country – like most of the post-Soviet world – briefly flirted with the notion of developing into a Western-style democracy after the USSR's collapse. Under Nazarbayev, the regime's attitude towards human rights reflected the downward spiral into authoritarianism. Political and civil liberties were routinely flouted, and violations have continued since his resignation in March.

Since this report does not have scope to cover the full spectrum of human rights issues, this chapter focuses on political and civil liberties, which are in the spotlight as Kazakhstan navigates its political transition. This chapter specifies some of the human rights obligations that the government is failing to uphold, both under international agreements to which it is signatory – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)<sup>97</sup> and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>98</sup> – and under Kazakhstan's own constitution<sup>99</sup> and legislation.

Nazarbayev's resignation creates a window of opportunity for improvements in the country's troubling human rights record, and there are some indications that the new administration may seize it, if it perceives this to be in its interests. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the new president, has described himself as a 'reformer';<sup>100</sup> has offered dialogue (of sorts) with civil society;<sup>101</sup> has pledged to liberalize restrictive legislation governing the right to protest;<sup>102</sup> and has permitted some demonstrations.<sup>103</sup> A 'Kazakh Spring' may not be in the air, but the winds of change are blowing. These are positive developments on which to build. International actors should seize the moment to nudge for reform.

Under Nazarbayev, the government paid lip service to democratic values and the protection of human rights, while simultaneously clamping down on political and civil liberties. The regime became increasingly intolerant of challenges not only to its rule, but also to its vision of what Kazakhstan should be and how its people should think.

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<sup>97</sup> United Nations (1948), 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>98</sup> United Nations (1966), 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights', Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>99</sup> For the full text, see Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (undated), 'The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan', <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/hague/content-view/the-constitution-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan>.

<sup>100</sup> Simmons, A. M. (2019), 'Kazakhstan's Newly Elected Leader Calls Himself a "Reformer"', *Wall Street Journal*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/kazakhstans-newly-elected-leader-calls-himself-a-reformer-11560452047> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>101</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), 'Выступление Касым-Жомарта Токаева на официальной церемонии вступления в должность избранного Президента Республики Казахстан' [Speech by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the official inauguration ceremony of the elected President of the Republic of Kazakhstan], 12 June 2019, [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/speeches/internal\\_political\\_affairs/in\\_speeches\\_and\\_addresses/vystuplenie-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-na-oficialnoi-ceremonii-vstupleniya-v-dolzhnost-izbrannogo-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstana](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/speeches/internal_political_affairs/in_speeches_and_addresses/vystuplenie-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-na-oficialnoi-ceremonii-vstupleniya-v-dolzhnost-izbrannogo-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstana) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>102</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), 'Токаев обещает новый закон о митингах. Скепсис активистов' [Tokayev promises new legislation on rallies. Activists' scepticism], 17 June 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-tokayev-protests-law/30003748.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>103</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), 'Два разных митинга за политические перемены' [Two different rallies for political change], 30 June 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-rallies-in-almaty-and-nur-sultan/30028339.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

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It interpreted trifling challenges to its policies as existential threats, revealing profound insecurities about the true level of public support for Nazarbayev. Admitting to problems was – and continues to be – troublesome, for it debunks the myth that Nazarbayev enjoys near-universal public backing, which remains a cornerstone of official ideology to foster regime legitimacy. As a result, political, economic and social problems remain unaddressed and unresolved. This has created disaffection and prompted protests, which gathered pace after Nazarbayev’s resignation. The authorities have generally responded to outbursts of dissent with clampdowns and arrests.

Despite constraints on his power, Tokayev has the opportunity to break this destructive cycle by loosening the state’s control, engaging in genuine dialogue with the people he governs, and reforming both policy and practice. ‘Different views, but one nation’ was an encouraging slogan he voiced on his inauguration day in June.<sup>104</sup> But delivering on the promises of liberalization is more challenging than reciting slogans. Nazarbayev retains broad powers, and these were expanded in October via a decree granting him – in his capacity as Security Council chairman – a consultative role in senior political and law-enforcement appointments that could in practice be wielded as a veto.<sup>105</sup> This expansion of the role of the security apparatus in decision-making is troubling, and compounds concerns that the former president and hawks in his entourage may resist reforms. Yet pragmatic decision-makers – including Tokayev and (in certain conditions) Nazarbayev – may conclude that democratic liberalization and action to bolster human rights are in the regime’s interests in terms of both accommodating and controlling the disaffection that is manifest.

*The social contract is wearing thin, with political and socio-economic grievances more vocally and widely expressed, both online and on the streets*

Kazakhstan’s troubling human rights record notwithstanding, there are at least some foundations on which to build. Citizens enjoy greater political and civil liberties than some of their neighbours (a comparison is beyond the scope of this report). Many respect (some revere) Nazarbayev (see Chapter 1). Many gladly endorsed Tokayev as his chosen successor. Many accept the tacit social contract of social stability and (relatively, and patchily) rising prosperity in exchange for restricted political and civil liberties. Those who consent to this trade-off generally live free of state harassment.

Yet there is abundant evidence that the social contract is wearing thin, with political and socio-economic grievances more vocally and widely expressed, both online and on the streets. The leadership transition has lifted the lid on popular frustrations. The detention of thousands of peaceful protesters early in Tokayev’s rule has exacerbated resentments. Under Nazarbayev, people who rejected the social contract and crossed certain boundaries in expressing their opinions faced penalties ranging from harassment and intimidation to prosecution and prison – and, on occasion, violence. This is a cycle that Tokayev needs to break.

Under Nazarbayev, the administration established a virtual stranglehold over almost all aspects of public life: from politics to the press, from civil society to religious worship to trade unionism. Ridding Kazakhstan’s political scene of organized opposition

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<sup>104</sup> Mukanov, B. and Masanov, Yu. (2019), ‘В Нур-Султане прошла инаугурация президента Касым-Жомарта Токаева’ [Inauguration of president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev took place in Nur-Sultan], *Informburo*, 12 June 2019, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/inauguraciya-prezidenta-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-novost-dopolnyaetsya-.html> (accessed 23 Sep. 2019).

<sup>105</sup> Reuters (2019), ‘Kazakhstan’s Nazarbayev to confirm ministers, governors: decree’, 21 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-nazarbayev/kazakhstan-nazarbayev-to-confirm-ministers-governors-decree-idUSKBN1X0112> (accessed 29 Oct. 2019).

proved easier than ridding the public discourse of dissenting views, so the authorities expended – and continue to expend – large amounts of time and energy chasing down advocates of reform. Redirecting the administration’s energies towards addressing grievances rather than crushing dissent would benefit not only Kazakhstan’s populace but also its rulers, who could boost social stability and economic competitiveness by addressing human rights. Intolerance of alternative views hampers the development of accountable governance and rational policymaking, with risky future implications. So far, Tokayev has ‘failed to bring Kazakhstan closer to UN human rights norms’, Human Rights Watch said in November.<sup>106</sup> Time will tell if Tokayev will deliver on his pledge to head a ‘listening state’ – a government that listens to its citizens and is open to constructive dialogue.

### Human dignity

Kazakhstan’s government sees human rights as ‘closely linked with development, namely with economic growth, political and social development’.<sup>107</sup> There is a heavy – and laudable – emphasis on improvements in areas that ‘directly concern the basic rights of our citizens to a life of dignity and quality’, such as healthcare, education, job creation and poverty reduction, a minister told the UN Human Rights Council in 2011.<sup>108</sup> This is true, although the statement that Kazakhstan had ‘steadfastly worked to realize basic human rights and freedoms’ was highly disputable, given restrictions on the exercise of fundamental political and civil liberties.

Kazakhstan has paid greater attention than many neighbours to improving economic and social well-being, with tangible results – from dramatic declines in poverty to a sharp rise in life expectancy since independence.<sup>109</sup> The country performs strongly on protecting the rights of minorities (who account for 32 per cent of the population). Anti-discrimination laws exist; education in minority languages is provided; the right to use Russian – the language of the largest minority – in the public domain is legally enshrined.

In human rights dialogues with the international community, the government shifts the focus away from infringements of political and civil liberties, where it performs poorly, towards its stronger performance in protecting minority rights and its strides in achieving development goals. It acknowledges problems with its record on civil liberties, but denies the existence of systemic abuses – although many fundamental rights are guaranteed *de jure* but flouted in practice.

That Western powers shy away from publicly challenging Kazakhstan, a reliable ally in a volatile region, fuels the regime’s sense of impunity. The image-conscious government has hired global lobbying firms to fine-tune an astute public relations strategy

*Kazakhstan has paid greater attention than many neighbours to improving economic and social well-being, with tangible results – from dramatic declines in poverty to a sharp rise in life expectancy since independence*

<sup>106</sup> Human Rights Watch (2019), ‘Kazakhstan: UN Review Should Press for Reforms’, 4 November 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/04/kazakhstan-un-review-should-press-reforms> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>107</sup> United Nations (2016), ‘Human Rights Committee reviews the report of Kazakhstan’, Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 23 June 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20166&LangID=E%20http://kazakhstanhumanrights.com/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>108</sup> Lillis, J. (2011), ‘Kazakhstan: Astana’s Rights Record in the Spotlight’, Eurasianet, 11 March 2011, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-astanas-rights-record-in-the-spotlight> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>109</sup> World Bank (2019), ‘Kazakhstan’, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kazakhstan> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019); and UNDP (2018), ‘Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update’, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/KAZ.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/KAZ.pdf) (accessed 19 Sep. 2019).

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that counteracts criticism by spinning an alternative narrative of a ‘young’ country finding its feet on the path to democracy.<sup>110</sup> Instead of acting to improve its record on political and civil liberties, the government focuses on denial, distraction techniques and counter-narratives.

### Political freedoms

Kazakhstan is a democracy in name only: elections are micromanaged plebiscites designed to put a democratic gloss on proceedings conducted to legitimize the regime’s political choices and perpetuate its existence. The presidential election in June 2019 was conducted according to the same formula, albeit with greater efforts at legitimization through the inclusion for the first time in 14 years of a candidate – Amirzhan Kosanov – with a track record of opposition politics.<sup>111</sup> The regime’s candidate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, was duly elected with 71 per cent of the vote.

During his rule, Nazarbayev increased his vote share to eye-popping levels: 98 per cent in 2015. Organized political opposition was all but eradicated: banned by the courts; withered into insignificance through regime pressure and party infighting; usurped by pro-government forces.<sup>112</sup> Parliamentary elections became toothless affairs fought out among government-friendly parties shunning political debate. The presence of opposition parties in parliament dwindled to zero after 2007, when the election produced a one-party legislature containing only the ruling Nur Otan. The 2012 and 2016 elections delivered small numbers of seats to two pro-regime movements (Ak Zhol and the Communist People’s Party of Kazakhstan), present as democratic window-dressing for the pliant legislature. The next election – due in 2021, although an earlier vote is not ruled out – may deliver a more pluralistic parliament as part of the political transition strategy. However, if the regime micromanages the formation of parties and controls their activity, the political process will remain top-down and undemocratic, and will fail to deliver the parliamentary plurality that Kazakhstan needs in the post-Nazarbayev landscape.<sup>113</sup>

Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have never deemed an election in Kazakhstan free and fair. Tokayev brushed off the OSCE’s findings that the June 2019 presidential election displayed ‘a lack of regard for fundamental rights’ and ‘scant respect for democratic standards’.<sup>114</sup> He later argued in a US media op-ed article that ‘the peaceful transfer of power and competitive

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<sup>110</sup> Gotev, G. (2017), ‘Kazakhstan, a fledgling democracy bent on “stability”’, Euractiv, 3 November 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-fledgling-democracy-bent-on-stability/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>111</sup> France24/AFP (2019), ‘Nazarbayev protégé wins Kazakhstan elections marred by protests’, 10 June 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190610-kazakhstan-presidential-election-tokayev-nazarbayev-protesters-arrested> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>112</sup> Lillis, J. (2011), ‘Democracy, Kazakh-Style’, Eurasianet, 5 July 2011, <https://eurasianet.org/democracy-kazakh-style> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>113</sup> Ó Beacháin, D. and Kevlihan, R. (2017), ‘Menus of Manipulation: Authoritarian Continuities in Central Asian Elections’, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 25(4): pp. 407–34, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/675781> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>114</sup> Vaal, T. and Gordeyeva, M. (2019), ‘Nazarbayev’s handpicked successor Tokayev elected Kazakh president’, Reuters, 10 June 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-election/nazarbayevs-handpicked-successor-tokayev-elected-kazakh-president-idUSKCN1TBOJA> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

elections' showed 'that democracy has taken root' in Kazakhstan.<sup>115</sup> This denial mode echoed the manner in which Nazarbayev has always batted away criticism by touting Potemkin political proceedings as proof of Kazakhstan's democratic credentials. 'We have open, free, alternative presidential elections; three political parties are present in our parliament; an opposition works in our country,' Nazarbayev once said.<sup>116</sup> The former president openly voices suspicions about Western-style democracy, which suggests that he has no intention of encouraging – or allowing – Kazakhstan to embrace it in his lifetime. In 2019, he spoke of his suspicion of 'people who follow the West and want to build a democracy'.<sup>117</sup>

There are also restrictions on popular participation in local governance. City mayors and regional governors are presidential appointees. In smaller towns and villages, Nur Otan-dominated local councils elect mayors.<sup>118</sup>

The ruling elite's monopolization of the political process and the reduction of the role of citizens to rubber-stamping the regime's choices violate the right to free participation in government, public affairs and free elections, as enshrined in the UDHR (Article 21), the ICCPR (Article 25), and Kazakhstan's constitution (Article 3) and electoral law (Articles 1, 3, 8). The government falls short of commitments in the OSCE Copenhagen Document 'to hold genuinely democratic elections in the broader context of respect for human rights that are free, fair, transparent, and accountable through the rule of law'.<sup>119</sup>

In 2017, Nazarbayev devolved powers from the presidency to the government and parliament to prepare the political system for his departure.<sup>120</sup> However, to become effective, these on-paper reforms must be backed up with real-world changes, including the election of a pluralistic parliament that will use its powers to hold government to account. Tokayev recognizes this: he used his first state-of-the-nation address to voice the slogan 'a strong president – an influential parliament – an accountable government', which he acknowledged is 'not a fait accompli, but a goal towards which we must move at an accelerated pace'.<sup>121</sup> He also pledged a 'political transformation', albeit a gradual one, because 'successful economic reforms are no longer possible without the modernization of the country's socio-political life'. He cited developing a multi-party system, political competition and pluralism of opinion as aims that will serve the long-term stability

<sup>115</sup> Tokayev, K. (2019), 'Kazakhstan will continue championing dialogue and cooperation', *The Hill*, 20 September 2019, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/462222-kazakhstan-will-continue-championing-dialogue-and> (accessed 23 Sep. 2019).

<sup>116</sup> Tengrinews (2013), 'Назарбаев пригласил британских журналистов остаться в Казахстане и поговорить с людьми' [Nazarbayev invited British journalists to remain in Kazakhstan and talk to people], 1 July 2013, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/nazarbaev-priglasil-britanskikh-jurnalistov-ostatsya-237171/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nazarbaev-priglasil-britanskikh-jurnalistov-ostatsya-237171/) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>117</sup> Bisenov, N. (2019), 'Former Kazakh strongman backs successor in presidential election', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 23 April 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Former-Kazakh-strongman-backs-successor-in-presidential-election> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>118</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2013), 'Обращение Президента Республики Казахстан Н.А.Назарбаева по итогам выборов акимов городов районного значения, сельских округов, поселков и сел, не входящих в состав сельского округа' [Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayev on the results of the elections of mayors of cities of district significance, rural districts, settlements and villages which are not part of a rural district], 10 August 2013, [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/speeches/internal\\_political\\_affairs/in\\_speeches\\_and\\_addresses/obrashchenie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-nanazarbaeva-po-itogam-vyborov-akimov-gorodov-raionnogo-znacheniya-selskih-okrugov-poselkov-i-sel-ne-vhodyashchih-v-sostav-selskogo-okruga](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/speeches/internal_political_affairs/in_speeches_and_addresses/obrashchenie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-nanazarbaeva-po-itogam-vyborov-akimov-gorodov-raionnogo-znacheniya-selskih-okrugov-poselkov-i-sel-ne-vhodyashchih-v-sostav-selskogo-okruga) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>119</sup> OSCE (2003), *Existing Commitments for Democratic Elections in OSCE Participating States*, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/13957?download=true> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>120</sup> Abdurasulov, A. (2017), 'Kazakhstan constitution: Will changes bring democracy?', BBC News, 6 March 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39177708> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>121</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), 'President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address, September 2, 2019', [http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019](http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019) (accessed 20 Sep. 2019).

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of the system. Clearly, decision-makers recognize the need for reform, but there is a risk that cautious top-down measures may fail to respond adequately to citizens' demands for accountability and participation during this transition period. There are signs of a slight expansion of the space for independent political activity: the campaign for democratic reform conducted by the Oyan, Qazaqstan ('Wake Up, Kazakhstan') movement, formed in April 2019, has proceeded broadly unimpeded, though its activists have reported surveillance and harassment and have been detained when monitoring protests.<sup>122</sup>

The ruling elite may perceive democratic reform as against its personal interests. However, as public demands for a political voice grow, Kazakhstan's leaders need to start accommodating them, or the protest mood will swell. Pluralistic politics could also generate fresh ideas for resolving political, economic and social challenges as Kazakhstan moves into the post-Nazarbayev future. Restrictions on political liberties inhibit political debate, which inhibits creative policymaking. When fresh ideas are not just frowned upon but ruled out, group-think prevails and policymaking stagnates.

## Freedom of expression

### Muzzled media

The media – once reasonably vibrant, albeit within the constraints of an authoritarian regime – has become a shadow of its former self. Independent outlets are frequently shut down. The press is saturated with pro-regime propaganda, although critical reporting is tolerated provided certain lines are not crossed, and citizens have access to some independent domestic and international news sources as well as social media. Outspoken reporters and media outlets are targeted with spurious criminal cases, and sometimes with violence and intimidation. Kazakhstan ranks among the world's worst countries for press freedom: 158th out of 180, according to Reporters Without Borders.<sup>123</sup> The government rejects such rankings as 'subjective'.<sup>124</sup>

After Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, private media mushroomed and the country experienced a brief period of plurality of the press. However, by the mid-1990s outspoken publishers and reporters were under pressure,<sup>125</sup> as rising political tension culminated with Nazarbayev dissolving parliament in 1995.<sup>126</sup> The early 2000s witnessed a series of political challenges to Nazarbayev: the founding of a reform movement, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK); and revelations of an oil-contracts-for-kickbacks scandal, 'Kazakhgate'.<sup>127</sup> The regime and its associates responded to media reporting on this with a wave of intimidation. In 2002, the *Respublika* newspaper

*The press is saturated with pro-regime propaganda, although critical reporting is tolerated provided certain lines are not crossed*

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<sup>122</sup> Lillis, J. (2019), 'Kazakhstan: Waking up to reform', Eurasianet, 11 June 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-waking-up-to-reform> (accessed 23 Sep. 2019).

<sup>123</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2019), '2019 World Press Freedom Index', <https://rsf.org/en/ranking#> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>124</sup> Tengrinews (2019), 'В Казахстане нет критической ситуации со свободой слова – Абаев' [There is no critical situation in Kazakhstan with regards to freedom of speech – Abayev], 25 June 2019, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/kazakhstan-kriticheskoy-situatsii-svobodoy-slova-abaev-372239/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kazakhstan-kriticheskoy-situatsii-svobodoy-slova-abaev-372239/) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>125</sup> Human Rights Watch (1999), 'Kazakhstan's Post-Soviet Political Process, 1992–1997', <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/kazakhstan/Kaz1099b-02.htm> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>126</sup> Reuters (1995), 'Kazakh parliament ended', 12 March 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/12/world/kazakh-parliament-ended.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>127</sup> Stodghill, R. (2006), 'Oil, Cash and Corruption', *New York Times*, 5 November 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/05/business/yourmoney/05giffen.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

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had a decapitated dog pinned to its wall and its offices firebombed.<sup>128</sup> An investigative reporter, Sergey Duvanov, was beaten up and stabbed, then later jailed on rape charges; claims abounded that he was framed.<sup>129</sup>

The regime's suspicions of independent media rose after 'colour revolutions' toppled authoritarian leaders in former Soviet republics in 2003–05, a fate that the region's remaining autocrats did not wish to see repeated. Another watershed came in 2012, with bans on 36 news sources (including *Respublika*) for allegedly fomenting fatal unrest in western Kazakhstan through incendiary coverage. International expressions of concern fell on deaf ears.<sup>130</sup> The authorities pursued *Respublika*-linked figures-in-exile through international courts after the publication of leaked government emails, and some figures employed dirty tricks that allegedly included infiltrating malware on to computers to spy on regime opponents.<sup>131</sup> An ex-*Respublika* reporter was imprisoned on charges of publishing false information.<sup>132</sup>

The campaign against *Respublika* was part of a wider feud between the administration and its nemesis, Mukhtar Ablyazov, a France-based oligarch. Courts in Kazakhstan have convicted Ablyazov of a litany of crimes – from embezzlement to contracting a killing – which he denies, characterizing the convictions as politically motivated.<sup>133</sup> The authorities rigorously pursue through the courts media outlets and social media commentators believed to be supportive of Ablyazov (who openly advocates regime change in Kazakhstan) or his DVK movement. The movement was labelled extremist and banned in Kazakhstan in 2018; the prohibition provides legal grounds for the prosecution of its supporters, who are frequently arrested and jailed or subjected to other legal sanctions.<sup>134</sup> Dozens of people have been prosecuted in 2019.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Blua, A. (2002), 'Kazakhstan: Nonstate Media Under Fire', RFE/RL, 29 May 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1099837.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>129</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2003), 'Sergei Duvanov sentenced, on appeal, to three and a half years in prison – Reporters without Borders denounces what it considers a parody of justice', 11 March 2003, <https://rsf.org/en/news/sergei-duvanov-sentenced-appeal-three-and-half-years-prison-reporters-without-borders-denounces-what> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Wines, M. (2002), 'Critic of Kazakh Leader Is Ailing in 6th Day of Hunger Strike', *New York Times*, 7 November 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/07/world/critic-of-kazakh-leader-is-ailing-in-6th-day-of-hunger-strike.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=052069E2A5E852B52663F97253FDF65A&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>130</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2012), 'Main opposition media silenced in space of a month', 28 December 2012, <https://rsf.org/en/news/main-opposition-media-silenced-space-month> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also US Mission to the OSCE (2012), 'Statement on Kazakhstan', 13 December 2012, [https://osce.usmission.gov/dec1312\\_kazakhstan/](https://osce.usmission.gov/dec1312_kazakhstan/) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>131</sup> Hunter, M. (2016), 'Operation Manul', Electronic Frontier Foundation, 4 August 2016, [www.eff.org/wp/operation-manul](http://www.eff.org/wp/operation-manul) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>132</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists (2016), 'Kazakhstan court sentences journalist to jail over reports on bank', 23 May 2016, <https://cpj.org/2016/05/kazakhstan-court-sentences-journalist-to-jail-over.php> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>133</sup> RFE/RL (2018), 'Fugitive Kazakh Banker, Nazarbaev Foe Sentenced To Life In Prison', 27 November 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/fugitive-kazakh-banker-nazarbaev-foe-sentenced-to-life-in-prison/29623588.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>134</sup> International Partnership for Human Rights (2018), 'Kazakhstan: State vilifies opposition movement and its alleged supporters as "extremists"', 3 April 2018, <https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-state-vilifies-opposition-movement-alleged-supporters-extremists.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>135</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019) 'Активистке Акмарал Керимбаевой ограничили свободу «за участие» в запрещенном движении' [Activist Akmaral Kerimbayeva has freedom restricted "for participation" in banned movement], 28 October 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30239929.html> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).



Outspoken media organizations with no conceivable connections to Ablyazov are also shuttered,<sup>136</sup> and journalists jailed on spurious charges.<sup>137</sup> Prohibiting reporters, civil society campaigners and trade unionists from pursuing professional activity is another tactic that the regime uses to muzzle critics.<sup>138</sup>

The transition has followed the pattern that prevailed during Nazarbayev's rule, with media crackdowns accompanying periods of political tension. In March 2019, the authorities took the unusual step of prosecuting two journalists from an international news organization, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). The pair – Saniya Toiken and Svetlana Glushkova – were arrested while covering protests, and convicted on charges they denied: failing to follow police orders (Toiken); and assault (Glushkova).<sup>139</sup> Other incidents in 2019 have included reporters being arrested when covering protests,<sup>140</sup> being obstructed by figures who appear to be agents provocateurs seeking to prevent filming,<sup>141</sup> and being assaulted at a press conference.<sup>142</sup> In July, press freedom watchdog 'Adil soz' expressed concern over an 'escalation in violence towards journalists'.<sup>143</sup> Generally, unlike in some other Central Asian states, the government issues accreditation to foreign journalists to report without restrictions. However, seven RFE/RL reporters were denied accreditation to cover the June presidential election.<sup>144</sup>

Restrictions on press freedoms and freedom of speech violate the right to freedom of expression and opinion enshrined in the UDHR (Article 19), the ICCPR (Article 19), and Kazakhstan's constitution (Article 20) and media law (Article 2).<sup>145</sup> The government denies infringing press freedoms. In 2018, Dauren Abayev, the information minister, gave Kazakhstan a score of 7–8 out of 10 for its performance,<sup>146</sup> while acknowledging room for improvement.

<sup>136</sup> Lillis, J. (2015), 'Kazakhstan: Court Closes Embattled Magazine', Eurasianet, 22 October 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-court-closes-embattled-magazine> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>137</sup> US Embassy and Consulate in Kazakhstan (2016), 'Statement on the Conviction of Kazakhstan Union of Journalists President Seitkazy Matayev', 6 October 2016, <https://kz.usembassy.gov/statement-conviction-kazakhstan-union-journalists-president-seitkazy-matayev/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Reuters (2016), 'Father and son jailed for embezzlement in Kazakhstan media trial', 3 October 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-press/father-and-son-jailed-for-embezzlement-in-kazakhstan-media-trial-idUSKCN1231HZ?il=0> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>138</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2017), 'Opposition newspaper editor freed, but banned from journalism', 7 September 2017, <https://rsf.org/en/news/opposition-newspaper-editor-freed-banned-journalism> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>139</sup> RFE/RL (2019), 'Current Time Reporter Fined In Kazakhstan, Vows To Appeal', 2 April 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/current-time-reporter-fined-in-kazakhstan-vows-to-appeal/29856950.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>140</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2019), 'Kazakh reporters arrested while covering protests', 28 March 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/news/kazakh-reporters-arrested-while-covering-protests> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>141</sup> RFE/RL (2019), 'Kazakhstan Targets Protesters, RFE/RL, And Other Media On Election Day', 9 June 2019, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-targets-protesters-rferl-other-media-on-election-day/29989767.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Radio Azattyk (2019), 'Воспрепятствование работе журналистов, «не замеченное» министрами' [The obstruction of the work of journalists 'unnoticed' by ministers], 9 July 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-abayev-turgumbayev-men-in-black/30045126.html> (accessed 31 Oct. 2019).

<sup>142</sup> RFE/RL (2019), 'Women Attack Journalists At Kazakh Press Conference', 22 July 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/gang-of-women-attack-journalists-at-press-conference-in-kazakhstan/30068865.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>143</sup> Adil soz (2019), 'ЗАЯВЛЕНИЕ Международного фонда защиты свободы слова «Әділ сөз» о недопустимости эскалации насилия в отношении журналистов' [Statement by the International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech 'Adil soz' on the inadmissibility of the escalation of violence against journalists], 23 July 2019, <http://www.adilsoz.kz/news/show/id/3015> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>144</sup> RFE/RL (2019), 'Seven RFE/RL Journalists Denied Accreditation To Cover Kazakh Presidential Vote', 8 June 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/seven-rfe-rl-journalists-denied-accreditation-for-kazakh-presidential-vote/29988536.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>145</sup> 'Закон Республики Казахстан от 23 июля 1999 года № 451-І О средствах массовой информации' [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 'On mass media' No. 451-І issued on 23 July 1999], [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=1013966](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=1013966) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>146</sup> Vaal, T. (2018), '«Вас же никто по рукам не бьет», – Абаев о свободе слова в Казахстане' [No one is beating your hands all the same' – Abayev on freedom of speech in Kazakhstan], *Vlast*, 3 April 2018, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/27458-vas-ze-nikto-po-rukam-ne-bet-abaev-o-svobode-slova-v-kazahstane.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

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## Digital dissent

The government restricts digital civil liberties. It vigorously pursues ‘netizens’ if they express dissent that crosses certain boundaries. As Amnesty International concluded in 2017, the regime is using ‘increasingly elaborate and aggressive methods to stamp out dissenting voices on the internet and social media’.<sup>147</sup> Amnesty further states that ‘[f]reely expressed opinions are becoming incriminating evidence in the courts’.<sup>148</sup> One 2018 study documented 30 cases over a six-month period of people targeted with legal measures for posting criticism on social media. Most had expressed support for Ablyazov or DVK, a red flag for the authorities.<sup>149</sup>

Social media debate is vibrant, however, and the authorities tolerate online dissent within certain limits. However, where criticism of the regime exceeds this tolerance, they have powerful tools at their disposal, ranging from prosecuting and jailing social media users<sup>150</sup> to blocking websites, messaging apps and networks.<sup>151</sup> Prosecutors have powers to block and close websites and communications networks without court orders.<sup>152</sup> Such blocking is widely employed,<sup>153</sup> often in relation to extremist or pornographic content but also to prevent politically sensitive material from reaching the public eye. Officials cite the legal ban on DVK as grounds to disrupt internet access.<sup>154</sup> During protests in 2019, tactics for disrupting communications included blocking websites, social media channels and messaging apps, and blocking 3G/4G cellular access around demonstrations.<sup>155</sup> In 2019, the security service also piloted the use of security certificates allowing internet service providers to monitor encrypted connections, a measure critics believe can be abused as a surveillance tool.<sup>156</sup> The authorities say these certificates may be applied in future in support of ‘national security’ interests.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Amnesty International (2017), ‘Kazakhstan: Social media crackdown suffocates freedom of expression online’, 9 February 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2017/02/kazakhstan-social-media-crackdown-suffocates-freedom-of-expression-online/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Savchenko, I. and Savchenko, K. (2018), ‘Коллективная жалоба: Молчи! Иначе будешь обвинен в «экстремизме» [Collective complaint: Be quiet! Otherwise, you will be accused of ‘extremism’], Otkryty Dialog, 5 November 2018, <https://ru.odfoundation.eu/a/8950,kollektivnaya-zhaloba-molchi-inache-budesh-obvinen-v-ekstremizme> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>150</sup> Human Rights Watch (2016), ‘Kazakhstan: Prison Time for Facebook Posts’, 22 January 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/22/kazakhstan-prison-time-facebook-posts> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Lillis, J. (2018), ‘Kazakhstan: Political Facebook posts land man with 4-year jail term’, Eurasianet, 1 December 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-political-facebook-posts-land-man-with-4-year-jail-term> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>151</sup> Netblocks (2018), ‘Internet and streaming services blocked in Kazakhstan on election day’, 9 June 2019, <https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-and-streaming-services-blocked-in-kazakhstan-on-election-day-dAmOP7y9> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>152</sup> Freedom House (2018), ‘Kazakhstan’, Freedom on the Net 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/kazakhstan> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Kumenov, A. (2018), ‘Kazakhstan’s security agencies given formal permission to block internet’, Eurasianet, 30 October 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-security-agencies-given-formal-permission-to-block-internet> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>153</sup> Mukanov, B. (2018), ‘Десять тысяч сайтов заблокировали в Казахстане в 2017 году – Абаев’ [Abaev: Nine thousand websites were blocked in Kazakhstan in 2017], Informburo, 16 February 2018, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/devyat-tysyach-saytov-zablokirovali-v-kazhastane-v-2017-godu-abaev.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>154</sup> Kumenov, A. (2018), ‘Kazakhstan Closes Spigot to Opposition Leader’s Information Channels’, Eurasianet, 21 March 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/kazakhstan-closes-spigot-to-opposition-leaders-information-channels> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>155</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2019), ‘Heavy Internet censorship in Kazakhstan’, 9 May 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/news/heavy-internet-censorship-kazakhstan> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>156</sup> Kumar, M. (2019), ‘Kazakhstan Begins Intercepting HTTPS Internet Traffic Of All Citizens Forcefully’, The Hacker News, 19 July 2019, <https://thehackernews.com/2019/07/kazakhstan-https-security-certificate.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>157</sup> National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), ‘В отношении сертификата безопасности’ [With regards to the security certificate], 6 August 2019, <http://knb.gov.kz/ru/news/v-otnoshenii-sertifikata-bezopasnosti> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

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#### The fourth estate

The authorities have bolstered their armoury of legal weapons to control the press, creating a restrictive environment that makes it difficult for the media to fulfil its watchdog role. In 2004, legal amendments expanded powers to shut media outlets on vaguely defined national security grounds.<sup>158</sup> In 2006, the government gained sweeping powers to deny registration of media organizations.<sup>159</sup> In 2010, the making of insulting remarks about Nazarbayev became a crime, carrying a prison term.<sup>160</sup> Libel is also a criminal offence.<sup>161</sup> In 2015, ‘dissemination of knowingly false information’ became a crime, carrying a prison term of up to 10 years; reporters can be, and are, jailed for publishing unsubstantiated reports<sup>162</sup> (as are members of the public for spreading rumours).<sup>163</sup> The government has a monopoly on information during states of emergency, when news reports require approval prior to publication or broadcast.<sup>164</sup> In 2018, reporters were required to obtain permission to publish banking and commercial data – giving the targets of corruption exposés carte blanche to veto publication of such data.<sup>165</sup>

The government views the media not as a watchdog but as a tool to shape public opinion in its favour. The amount spent on state subsidies for selected outlets to publish government-friendly coverage increased almost fivefold between 2005 and 2015; by 2018 annual subsidies had reached \$140 million.<sup>166</sup> This makes the press unhealthily dependent on the state, creating a conflict of interest with an independent media’s watchdog role. Government-friendly media have become tools in smear campaigns: to vilify peaceful protesters;<sup>167</sup> cast aspersions on civil society groups promoting democratic values;<sup>168</sup> and slur regime foes.<sup>169</sup>

A few independent outlets remain in precarious existence, operating in the narrow space tolerated for critical coverage. Self-censorship is rife, and the existence of no-go areas is a barrier to free speech and informed, robust public debate.

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<sup>158</sup> Freedom House (2005), ‘Kazakhstan’, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2005/kazakhstan> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Lillis, J. (2010), ‘A Modest “Leader of the Nation”’, Eurasianet, 16 June 2010, <https://eurasianet.org/a-modest-leader-of-the-nation> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>161</sup> Human Rights Watch (2018), ‘Kazakhstan: Criminal Probe of Media Outlets’, 6 April 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/06/kazakhstan-criminal-probe-media-outlets> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>162</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists (2016), ‘Kazakhstan court sentences journalist to jail over reports on bank’.

<sup>163</sup> *The Economist* (2018), ‘Citizens of Kazakhstan are just one click away from jail’, 20 October 2018, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/10/20/citizens-of-kazakhstan-are-just-one-click-away-from-jail> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>164</sup> Kumenov, A. (2018), ‘Kazakhstan’s security agencies given formal permission to block internet’, Eurasianet, 30 October 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-security-agencies-given-formal-permission-to-block-internet> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>165</sup> Putz, K. (2018), ‘With Media Law Amendments, Kazakhstan Deals a Blow to Press Freedom’, *The Diplomat*, 3 January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/with-media-law-amendments-kazakhstan-deals-a-blow-to-press-freedom/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>166</sup> Informburo.kz (2019), ‘Тоссаказ в СМИ победил доходы от рекламы’ [Government procurement higher than advertising revenue], 14 August 2019, <https://informburo.kz/stati/goszakaz-v-smi-pobedil-dohody-ot-reklamy.html> (accessed 15 Nov. 2019).

<sup>167</sup> Lillis, J. (2016), ‘Kazakhstan: Mud-Slinging at Protesters Highlights Apparent Media Double Standards’, Eurasianet, 1 June 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/s/kazakhstan-mud-slinging-at-protesters-highlights-apparent-media-double-standards> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>168</sup> Nur.kz (2016), ‘Сколько иностранные фонды тратят на подготовку активистов в Казахстане’ [How much money foreign foundations are spending on training activists in Kazakhstan], 11 July 2016, <https://www.nur.kz/1184969-skolko-inostrannye-fondy-tratyat-na-p.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>169</sup> Lillis, J. (2012), ‘Kazakhstan: State TV Slurs Opposition Leader Ahead of Appeal Hearing’, Eurasianet, 16 November 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-state-tv-slurs-opposition-leader-ahead-of-appeal-hearing> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Nur.kz (2018), ‘В Сети появилось видео “роскошной жизни” возможного сообщника Аблязова’ [A video of the ‘luxurious life’ led by Ablyazov’s possible accomplice appeared on the Web], 4 February 2018, <https://www.nur.kz/1715034-v-seti-poavilos-video-roskosnoj-zizni-vozmognogo-soobsnika-ablazova.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

*Under Nazarbayev, the authorities gradually adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards peaceful public protest*

### Freedom of assembly

Under Nazarbayev, the authorities gradually adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards peaceful public protest, viewing it not as a manifestation of legitimate dissent but as a sign of disloyalty (even treason), and a harbinger of revolution and chaos.<sup>170</sup> Since Nazarbayev's resignation, thousands of peaceful protesters have been detained, including – by Tokayev's admission<sup>171</sup> – people innocently walking past demonstrations.<sup>172</sup> Tokayev has signalled a willingness to ease restrictions on freedom of assembly. In June, the authorities allowed the first legal opposition rallies for nine years, suggesting that – under pressure – they may tolerate some demonstrations, provided these have no Ablyazov connection and obey official strictures on the right to free assembly.<sup>173</sup>

The legal tool wielded to justify suppression of the right to peaceful protest is the law governing public assembly, which requires organizers to obtain permission from local authorities. Any gathering held without permission – rarely granted, at least until the summer of 2019 – becomes *a priori* illegal, making anyone present liable to arrest. The penalty is a fine or custodial sentence of up to 15 days. Sometimes more serious charges are brought, carrying long jail terms. The regime has gone to extreme lengths to chase down dissenters: arresting those staging peaceful one-person protests;<sup>174</sup> detaining a person for holding a blank piece of paper;<sup>175</sup> and pre-emptively arresting people identified as possibly planning to protest.<sup>176</sup>

Restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly violate rights enshrined in the UDHR (Article 20), the ICCPR (Article 21) and Kazakhstan's constitution (Article 32).

The detention of peaceful protesters and passers-by violates the right to liberty and protection against arbitrary detention enshrined in the UDHR (Article 20), the ICCPR (Articles 9) and Kazakhstan's constitution (Article 16).

The government denies breaching the right to peaceful assembly: in 2016, it reported to the UN that 'the regulation for peaceful assemblies allowed citizens to take part in public gatherings without any impediment'.<sup>177</sup> One month earlier, more than 1,000 people had been arrested at rallies against land reforms.

In 2015, Kazakhstan invited Maina Kiai, a UN rapporteur, to study its adherence to the rights to freedom of assembly and association – this was to the government's credit, given that the findings were unlikely to be favourable. Kiai reported that the hyper-restrictive

<sup>170</sup> Ukraina.ru (2016), 'Назарбаев не позволит превратить Казахстан во вторую Украину' [Nazarbayev will not allow Kazakhstan to be turned into a second Ukraine], 6 May 2016, <http://ukraina.ru/news/20160506/1016300686.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Khabar.kz (2016), 'Совещание по актуальным вопросам текущей повестки дня под председательством Главы Государства' [Meeting on contemporary issues on the current agenda, chaired by the Head of State], 5 May 2016, <https://khabar.kz/ru/aktualno/item/54585-soveshchanie-po-aktualnym-voprosam-tekushchej-povestki-dnya-pod-rukovodstvom-glavy-gosudarstva> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>171</sup> Darkeyev, B. (2019), 'Президент Токаев высказался о недавних митингах' [President Tokayev commented on the recent protests], KTK TV, 14 June 2019, <https://www.ktk.kz/ru/news/video/2019/06/14/122085/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>172</sup> Tsotsenko, P. (2019), "'I Was Just Passing By!': A Second Day Of Detentions In Almaty", RFE/RL, 10 June 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-almaty-dozens-of-people-detained/29991569.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>173</sup> Khabar 24 TV (2019), 'Санкционированные митинги прошли в двух городах Казахстана' [Sanctioned rallies took place in two cities of Kazakhstan], 30 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gR1T5twd-N0> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>174</sup> Lillis, J. (2014), 'Kazakhstan: Arrest of Children Sparks One-Woman Protest', Eurasianet, 9 March 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-arrest-of-children-sparks-one-woman-protest> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>175</sup> *The Economist* (2019), 'Police in Kazakhstan inadvertently become conceptual artists', 16 May 2019, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/05/16/police-in-kazakhstan-inadvertently-become-conceptual-artists> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>176</sup> Zhanargul Bokayeva, news conference, Almaty, 23 May 2016.

<sup>177</sup> United Nations (2016), 'Human Rights Committee reviews the report of Kazakhstan', 23 June 2016, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20166&LangID=E> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

attitude to public assembly – treated ‘as a privilege or a favour rather than a right’ – effectively ‘renders that right meaningless’. He went on: ‘A web of policy, practice and perception contributes to a general environment where engaging in political activities is difficult, discouraging and sometimes dangerous. Dissent may be criminalized and critical political expression is often portrayed as threatening the stability of the State.’<sup>178</sup>

#### Box 2: Torture in Kazakhstan

In 2013, Amnesty International deemed torture in places of detention in Kazakhstan ‘entrenched’.<sup>179</sup> The government says it pursues a ‘zero-tolerance approach to the use of torture, cruel treatment and violence’, which is prohibited under the UDHR (Article 5), the ICCPR (Article 7) and Kazakhstan’s constitution (Article 17). It is taking measures to eradicate torture: in 2013, a National Preventive Mechanism against Torture was created; in 2015 it became a legal obligation to investigate torture claims as criminal offences; in 2016, the UN’s torture-prevention body paid its first visit to Kazakhstan.<sup>180</sup>

There are periodic prosecutions over the use of torture, usually in high-profile cases: in 2013, five prison officers were jailed over the death of a man crucified on a wall;<sup>181</sup> in 2016, a guard was jailed over a gang rape.<sup>182</sup> In 2019, Tokayev ordered an investigation after leaked video footage showed prison guards brutally torturing inmates.<sup>183</sup> Often, however, torture claims are dismissed as groundless, as in the case of the Zhanaozen detainees or jailed businessman Iskander Yerimbetov (discussed below). The UN Committee Against Torture has highlighted serious concerns; fewer than 2 per cent of torture complaints in Kazakhstan lead to prosecution.<sup>184</sup>

#### Zhanaozen unrest

One of the most notorious examples of state repression, emblematic of Kazakhstan’s authoritarian system and intolerance of public assembly, occurred in the town of Zhanaozen on 16 December 2011, when security forces shot at least 15 civilians dead while quelling unrest among oil workers dismissed for striking. The government assumed some responsibility for the deaths, acknowledging that it had mishandled the strike and botched the suppression of the unrest. Nazarbayev dismissed his son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev, from his position carrying responsibility for the oil sector. Jobs were created for the dismissed strikers.<sup>185</sup> Yet the authorities also placed the

<sup>178</sup> Former UN Special Rapporteur (2015), ‘Country Visit: Kazakhstan (A/HRC/29/25/Add.2)’, <http://freeassembly.net/reports/kazakhstan/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>179</sup> Amnesty International (2013), ‘Kazakhstan: No accountability for entrenched torture’, 11 July 2013, [www.amnesty.org/en/news/kazakhstan-no-accountability-entrenched-torture-2013-07-11](http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/kazakhstan-no-accountability-entrenched-torture-2013-07-11) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>180</sup> UN News (2016), ‘UN torture prevention body urges Kazakhstan to enhance prisoner rehabilitation’, 3 October 2016, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/10/541702-un-torture-prevention-body-urges-kazakhstan-enhance-prisoner-rehabilitation> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>181</sup> Nur.kz (2013), ‘В Жезказгане сотрудников колонии осудили за “распятие” заключенного’ [In Zhezkazgan colony staff convicted for “crucifixion” of prisoner], 29 August 2013, <https://www.nur.kz/279167-v-zhezkazgane-sotrudnikov-kolonii-osudili-za-raspyatie-zaklyuchennogo.html> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>182</sup> Today.kz (2016), ‘Я довольна приговором – изнасилованная тюремщиком в Алматы Наталья Слекишина’ [I am satisfied with the sentence – Natalya Slekishina, raped by a prison officer in Almaty], 30 September 2016, <http://today.kz/news/proisshestviya/2016-09-30/726974-ya-dovolna-prigovorom-iznasilovannaya-tyuremschikom-v-almaty-natalya-slekishina/> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>183</sup> Rickleton, C. (2019), ‘Kazakhstan: Tokayev remarks on torture may signal new policy direction’, Eurasianet, 1 August 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-tokayev-remarks-on-torture-may-signal-new-policy-direction> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>184</sup> OHCHR (2014), ‘Committee against Torture considers the report of Kazakhstan’, 18 November 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15309&LangID=E> (accessed 19 Sep. 2019).

<sup>185</sup> Lillis, J. (2016), ‘Kazakhstan: Zhanaozen Wounds Heal, but Sense of Injustice Remains’, Eurasianet, 14 December 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/s/kazakhstan-zhanaozen-wounds-heal-but-sense-of-injustice-remains> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

blame squarely on them, alleging a plot to overthrow Nazarbayev, bankrolled by Ablyazov and fomented by opposition leader Vladimir Kozlov, who was jailed in a trial which handed two other activists suspended sentences.<sup>186</sup> Five police officers were imprisoned over the shootings,<sup>187</sup> but no senior officers were tried and it was never revealed who had ordered the use of live ammunition. The head of a detention centre was jailed over the death of a man tortured in custody, but it was never discovered who had inflicted the injuries.<sup>188</sup> Forty-five townspeople were convicted over the violence,<sup>189</sup> some receiving lengthy prison terms. Domestic investigators rejected allegations that those convicted had been tortured,<sup>190</sup> and the government rebuffed a call from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for an international investigation.<sup>191</sup> In 2013 Amnesty International noted the lack of accountability, remarking that ‘the security forces in Kazakhstan still enjoy impunity for human rights violations’.<sup>192</sup>

#### Box 3: The decline of labour rights in Kazakhstan

During the Zhanaozen strike in 2011, ‘fundamental rights, including freedom of association, collective bargaining and expression, and the right to strike’ were violated, Human Rights Watch found.<sup>193</sup> Afterwards, the government cracked down on independent trade unionism and placed new restrictions on the right to strike. In 2005, Kazakhstan had vibrant trade unions;<sup>194</sup> now the government has corralled them into state-backed confederations, driving independent groups out of existence.<sup>195</sup> Independent unionists have been jailed on spurious charges or banned from union activity. In 2017, the International Trade Union Confederation criticized Kazakhstan for ‘trade union rights violations’ and ‘repression’,<sup>196</sup> while the International Labour Organization (ILO) urged implementation of its standards.<sup>197</sup> In 2019, the ILO noted ‘serious concern’ about ‘allegations of acts of anti-union violence’ and ‘persistent lack of progress’ on labour rights. Restrictions on trade union activity and freedom of association violate rights enshrined in the UDHR (Articles 20, 23), the ICCPR (Article 22), and Kazakhstan’s constitution (Article 23) and trade union law (Articles 4, 7).<sup>198</sup>

<sup>186</sup> Lillis, J. (2012) ‘Kazakhstan: Opposition Leader Jailed Over Zhanaozen Unrest’, Eurasianet, 8 October 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-opposition-leader-jailed-over-zhanaozen-unrest> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>187</sup> Solovyov, D. (2012), ‘Five Kazakh policemen jailed over oil town clashes’, Reuters, 28 May 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/kazakhstan-trial-idUSL5E8GS78P20120528> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>188</sup> Lillis, J. (2012), ‘Kazakhstan: 11 Convicted for Zhanaozen-Related Violence’, Eurasianet, 21 May 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-11-convicted-for-zhanaozen-related-violence> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>189</sup> Lillis, J. (2012), ‘Kazakhstan: New Zhanaozen Verdicts Cause Shoes to Fly’, Eurasianet, 4 June 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-new-zhanaozen-verdicts-cause-shoes-to-fly> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also Lillis (2012), ‘Kazakhstan: 11 Convicted for Zhanaozen-Related Violence’.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> UN News (2012), ‘UN human rights official calls for independent investigation into Kazakh clashes’, 12 July 2012, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/07/415362-un-human-rights-official-calls-independent-investigation-kazakh-clashes> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>192</sup> Amnesty International (2013), ‘Kazakhstan: No accountability for entrenched torture’.

<sup>193</sup> Human Rights Watch (2012), ‘Striking Oil, Striking Workers’, 10 September 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/09/10/striking-oil-striking-workers/violations-labor-rights-kazakhstan-oil-sector> (accessed 20 Sep. 2019).

<sup>194</sup> Freedom House (2005), ‘Kazakhstan’.

<sup>195</sup> Lillis, J. and Leonard, P. (2015), ‘Kazakhstan Passes New Labor Law Without Consulting Workers’, Eurasianet, 25 November 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-passes-new-labor-law-without-consulting-workers> (accessed 20 Sep. 2019).

<sup>196</sup> International Trade Union Confederation (2017), ‘Kazakhstan: Statement of the ITUC Pan-European Regional Council’, 24 April 2017, <https://www.ituc-csi.org/kazakhstan-statement-of-the-ituc> (accessed 20 Sep. 2019).

<sup>197</sup> International Labour Organization (2017), ‘Kazakhstan: ILO calls for implementation of Labour Standards’, 29 September 2017, [http://www.ilo.org/actrav/media-center/pr/WCMS\\_580892/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/actrav/media-center/pr/WCMS_580892/lang-en/index.htm) (accessed 20 Sep. 2019).

<sup>198</sup> Zakon.kz (2017), ‘Закон Республики Казахстан О профессиональных союзах’ [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on trade unions], [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=31571953](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=31571953) (accessed 20 Sep. 2019).

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#### Land protests

In 2016, protests against land reforms revealed continued intolerance of the right to peaceful protest. When a belated moratorium on the reforms, to allow public debate on changes to the law that had already been adopted, failed to defuse the protests, the government resorted to repressive measures: 40 activists were jailed pre-emptively, while a smear campaign dubbed protesters ‘traitors’.<sup>199</sup> On one day of protests, more than 1,000 people were detained, campaigners estimated (no official figures were published).<sup>200</sup> Most were released without charge; some were fined; some jailed for short periods. However, others faced serious charges.

The rationale of the subsequent trials echoed that of the government’s response to the Zhanaozen unrest: the protests were not expressions of public discontent but a bid to topple Nazarbayev, in this case allegedly hatched by a businessman, Tokhtar Tuleshov, who was jailed for 21 years.<sup>201</sup> Two civil society campaigners, Maks Bokayev and Talgat Ayan, were jailed on charges of incitement and seeking to overthrow the state, despite vocal international protestations.<sup>202</sup> Ayan was released on parole in 2018;<sup>203</sup> Bokayev remained in prison as of early November 2019. The land reforms that had sparked the protests were shelved.

#### Protests during the political transition

In 2019, the political transition became the catalyst for protests, with demonstrators voicing grievances over the top-down nature of political decision-making, allegedly rigged elections, the renaming of the capital ‘Nur-Sultan’, and socio-economic problems (which the government has in part moved to address). Heavy-handed, at times absurd, crackdowns ensued, such as the jailing for 15 days of two activists for displaying a banner calling for a fair presidential election.<sup>204</sup>

The authorities heavily suppressed small demonstrations (ranging in size from a handful of people to several hundred protesters) called by Ablyazov between March and October. In June, 4,000 people – including, by Tokayev’s admission, passers-by<sup>205</sup> – were detained over four days of election-related protests, prompting an expression of concern from Ryszard Komenda of the UN Human Rights Office for Central Asia.<sup>206</sup> Hundreds more

*In 2019, the political transition became the catalyst for protests, with demonstrators voicing grievances over the top-down nature of political decision-making, allegedly rigged elections, the renaming of the capital ‘Nur-Sultan’, and socio-economic problems*

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<sup>199</sup> Lillis (2016), ‘Kazakhstan: Mud-Slinging at Protesters Highlights Apparent Media Double Standards’.

<sup>200</sup> Shormanbayeva, A. (2017), ‘Kazakhstan: a showcase for shrinking civic space’, openDemocracy, 7 June 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/aina-shormanbayeva/kazakhstan-showcase-for-shrinking-civic-space> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>201</sup> Reuters (2016), ‘Kazakh beer tycoon jailed for 21 years on coup-plotting charges’, 7 November 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-coup-verdict/kazakh-beer-tycoon-jailed-for-21-years-on-coup-plotting-charges-idUSKBN1321I2> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>202</sup> European External Action Service (2016), ‘Statement by the Spokesperson on the sentencing of Max Bokayev and Talgat Ayan in Kazakhstan’, 30 November 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/sudan/16135/node/16135\\_nl](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/sudan/16135/node/16135_nl) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019). See also US Embassy and Consulate in Kazakhstan (2016), ‘Conviction of Kazakhstani Civil Society Activists Maks Bokayev and Talgat Ayan – Statement by the US diplomatic mission in Kazakhstan’, 30 November 2016, <https://kz.usembassy.gov/conviction-kazakhstani-civil-society-activists-maks-bokayev-talgat-ayan/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>203</sup> Human Rights Watch (2019), ‘World Report 2019’, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/kazakhstan> (accessed 31 Oct. 2019).

<sup>204</sup> Amnesty International (2019), ‘Kazakhstan: Imprisoned for unfurling a banner’, 24 April 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR5702602019ENGLISH.pdf> (accessed 15 Nov. 2019).

<sup>205</sup> Darkeyev (2019), ‘Президент Токаев высказался о недавних митингах’.

<sup>206</sup> United Nations (2019), ‘UN Human Rights Office calls on Kazakhstan to respect freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression and right to political participation’, Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 12 June 2019, [https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24691&LangID=E&fbclid=IwAR02v\\_SQZLq7okwniu68syD4zFsfBEOY\\_Dbly4gYck1J01zD-ancU\\_l18\\_g](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24691&LangID=E&fbclid=IwAR02v_SQZLq7okwniu68syD4zFsfBEOY_Dbly4gYck1J01zD-ancU_l18_g) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

demonstrators were arrested at protests before and after the election-related rallies: in March,<sup>207</sup> May,<sup>208</sup> July,<sup>209</sup> September<sup>210</sup> and October.<sup>211</sup> Some were jailed for short periods; some fined; some released without charge. In November, four people allegedly involved in a DVK-organized protest were convicted on charges of membership of a banned organization and sentenced to terms of ‘restricted freedom’, with bans on carrying out public activity.<sup>212</sup> Two of the women on trial had already spent months in pre-trial detention despite having dependent children.<sup>213</sup>

Nevertheless, 2019 has also seen a limited retreat from rigid intolerance of peaceful assembly. Tokayev used his state-of-the-nation address in September to pledge to permit peaceful protests,<sup>214</sup> and has promised to liberalize freedom-of-assembly legislation.<sup>215</sup> As mentioned, in June the government relaxed restrictions on opposition rallies;<sup>216</sup> in August<sup>217</sup> and November,<sup>218</sup> marches organized by Oyan, Qazaqstan calling for constitutional reforms proceeded without arrests although they did not have official permission.

Yet despite Tokayev’s promise, arrests of peaceful protesters continued in the autumn. Some 100 people were detained at protests called by Ablyazov against Chinese economic expansion on 21 September; nine were jailed for short periods.<sup>219</sup> Directly ahead of that protest, 36 activists who had participated in earlier anti-China rallies were prosecuted; 29 were jailed for up to 15 days.<sup>220</sup> In October there were more pre-emptive detentions before another rally called by Ablyazov, and more arrests at the protest itself.<sup>221</sup>

<sup>207</sup> RFE/RL (2019), ‘Kazakh Police Detain Protesters In Several Cities During Norouz Celebrations’, 22 March 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-police-detain-protesters-in-several-cities-during-norouz-celebration/29835901.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>208</sup> AFP (2019), ‘Kazakhstan arrests dozens of protesters ahead of vote’, 1 May 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190501-kazakhstan-arrests-dozens-protesters-ahead-vote> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>209</sup> RFE/RL (2019), ‘Kazakh Interior Minister Says Police Detained More Than 100 Protesters On July 6’, 9 July 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-interior-minister-says-police-detained-more-than-100-protesters-on-july-6/30045463.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>210</sup> Reuters (2019), ‘Dozens detained in Kazakhstan at anti-China protests’, 21 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-china-protests-detentions/dozens-detained-in-kazakhstan-at-anti-china-protests-idUSKBN1W60CS> (accessed 29 Oct. 2019).

<sup>211</sup> AFP (2019), ‘Police detain 26 at anti-government protests in Kazakhstan’, 26 October 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191026-police-detain-26-at-anti-government-protests-in-kazakhstan> (accessed 29 Oct. 2019).

<sup>212</sup> Toguzbayev, K. (2019), ‘Четверым обвиняемым в «участии» в ДВК вынесли приговор» [Four accused of “participation” in DVK handed sentences], Radio Azattyk, 19 November 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30280177.html> (accessed 20 Nov. 2019).

<sup>213</sup> Rickleton, C. (2019), ‘Kazakhstan jails mothers to be on the safe side’, Eurasianet, 4 July 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-jails-mothers-to-be-on-the-safe-side> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>214</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), ‘President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s State of the Nation Address, September 2, 2019’.

<sup>215</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), ‘Токаев обещает новый закон о митингах. Скепсис активистов’ [Tokayev promises new legislation on protests. Activists’ scepticism].

<sup>216</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), ‘Два разных митинга за политические перемены’ [Two different rallies for political change].

<sup>217</sup> Gordeyeva, M. (2019), ‘Adopting softer stance, Kazakhstan allows small-scale protests’, Reuters, 30 August 2019, <https://www.msn.com/en-xl/europe/top-stories/adopting-softer-stance-kazakhstan-allows-small-scale-protests/ar-AAgzqPi> (accessed 19 Sep. 2019).

<sup>218</sup> RFE/RL (2019), ‘Opposition demonstrates for change in Kazakhstan’, 9 November 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-opposition-protests-almaty-nursultan/30261709.html> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

<sup>219</sup> Vaal, T. (2019), ‘Около 100 человек задержаны в Казахстане во время несанкционированных митингов – МВД’ [Around 100 people detained in Kazakhstan at unsanctioned rallies – Interior Ministry], *Vlast*, 23 September 2019, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/35368-okolo-100-peoplek-zaderzany-v-kazakhstan-vo-vrema-nesankcionirovannyh-mitingov-mvd.html> (accessed 23 Sep. 2019).

<sup>220</sup> Sviridov, A. and Grishin, A. (2019), ‘Полиция уходит от закона’ [Police evade law], Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, 20 September 2019, [https://bureau.kz/novosti/sobstvennaya\\_informaciya/bezumnaya\\_pyatidnevka/](https://bureau.kz/novosti/sobstvennaya_informaciya/bezumnaya_pyatidnevka/) (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>221</sup> AFP (2019), ‘Police detain 26 at anti-government protests in Kazakhstan’, 26 October 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191026-police-detain-26-at-anti-government-protests-in-kazakhstan> (accessed 29 Oct. 2019).



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Tokayev continues to signal that there is room for liberalization as the authorities seek to defuse the protest mood. They will undoubtedly differentiate between Ablyazov-instigated rallies (which will be dispersed with arrests) and other protests (which may be permitted, with restrictions). Liberalization would, in fact, be beneficial for the government. Denying the existence of disaffection makes it impossible for the powers-that-be to grasp the nature and extent of public grievances; permitting protests is a step towards dialogue that would allow the regime to recognize and tackle grievances instead. As Komenda remarked, free speech and free assembly ‘are the building blocks of successful and vibrant societies’; unnecessary restrictions ‘constitute risks for stability and social cohesion’.<sup>222</sup>

### Freedom of association

Civil society was relatively vibrant until the early 2000s: there were no strict limitations on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which functioned from 2000 under a progressive tax-free status. Official suspicion of civil society grew in 2003–05, when authoritarian post-Soviet states (with Russia leading the way) began accusing Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs of fomenting ‘colour revolutions’.<sup>223</sup> To its credit, Kazakhstan – unlike Russia – has not expelled foreign non-profits pursuing human rights advocacy. Yet as the notion that ‘colour revolutions’ presented an existential threat to authoritarian regimes became common currency, the government began casting a closer eye on groups promoting democracy, civil liberties and the rule of law.

State-led attempts to control civil society intensified from 2004, when many independent NGOs were not invited to a new National Commission on Democracy and Civil Society.<sup>224</sup> The government now employs a combination of financial incentives and pressure to coerce NGOs into line. The legal environment has become more restrictive since 2015, with charitable funding obliged to pass through a state-run body. This allows the authorities to cherry-pick which groups are approved for financing. Nazarbayev ignored an appeal from 60 charities to veto this law.<sup>225</sup> In 2016, onerous regulations on the reporting of funding were imposed, greatly adding to the compliance burden on civil society.

The government promotes a top-down model of cooperation with civil society. This approach has developed into what is sometimes described as an ‘astro-turf’ model – i.e. involving simulated grassroots participation – in which GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) and super-GONGOs (affiliations of GONGOs) are incestuously intertwined with the government. Independent groups, especially those promoting pro-democracy agendas, are viewed with suspicion and face pressure in various forms, including unwarranted tax inspections and media smear campaigns.<sup>226</sup> In July 2019,

*The government’s top-down approach to cooperation with civil society has developed into what is sometimes described as an ‘astro-turf’ model – i.e. involving simulated grassroots participation*

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<sup>222</sup> United Nations (2019), ‘UN Human Rights Office calls on Kazakhstan to respect freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression and right to political participation’.

<sup>223</sup> Hinkle, K. T. (2017), *Russia’s Reactions to the Colour Revolutions*, PhD thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, [https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/52991/17Mar\\_Hinkle\\_Katherine.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/52991/17Mar_Hinkle_Katherine.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>224</sup> Freedom House (2005), ‘Kazakhstan’.

<sup>225</sup> Lillis, J. (2015), ‘Kazakhstan: Campaigners Urge Nazarbayev to Veto NGO Law’, Eurasianet, 7 October 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/node/75431> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>226</sup> Lillis, J. (2017), ‘Kazakhstan: Space for Civil Society Shrinking?’, Eurasianet, 20 July 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-space-for-civil-society-shrinking> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

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campaigners and journalists were assaulted at the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and Rule of Law, a well-known NGO, under circumstances that aroused suspicions of official collusion.<sup>227</sup>

The authorities treat civil society more as a vassal to further government policy than as an independent actor.<sup>228</sup> Under Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan retreated from any genuine commitment to developing a vibrant, grassroots-based civil society in favour of a model in which NGOs and other non-profits operate under not just government scrutiny but government control.

With Tokayev taking the reins, there is opportunity for change. He professes to see civil society as a problem-solving mechanism, and has promised that the state will be responsive to constructive demands.<sup>229</sup> In July, he created the National Council of Public Trust to build a consensus based on 'pluralism of opinion'.<sup>230</sup> Although critical voices are represented, most of the new council's members are government supporters, raising concerns about whether this will become an inclusive platform for genuine dialogue or a talking shop to create a veneer of discussion.<sup>231</sup>

### Freedom of conscience

The government positions Kazakhstan as a model of religious tolerance with a strong commitment to freedom of religious association and conscience. However, restrictions on religious practices have mirrored the tendency for the state to expand its grip on all aspects of public life.

The government posits that it treads a fine line between upholding freedom of conscience and ensuring national security, as Islamist extremism presents a mounting threat. This is genuine: Kazakhstan has been hit by fatal militant attacks,<sup>232</sup> and some citizens have taken up arms with jihadist groups in the Middle East.<sup>233</sup> But anti-extremism measures imposing legal restrictions on religious practices are also used to target minority faiths (including non-Islamic congregations) that present no conceivable radical threat. This suggests that legislation is sometimes wielded as a tool to corral religion into state-sanctioned boundaries rather than to quash extremism. Undue restrictions on religious activity violate the right to freedom of conscience enshrined in the UDHR (Article 18), the ICCPR (Article 18), and Kazakhstan's constitution (Article 22) and law on religious activity.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> RFE/RL (2019), 'Women Attack Journalists At Kazakh Press Conference'.

<sup>228</sup> Kazakhembus.com (2016), 'Kazakh NGOs support initiative to dissolve Mazhilis, hold early election', 14 January 2016, <https://www.kazakhembus.com/content/kazakh-ngos-support-initiative-dissolve-mazhilis-hold-early-election> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>229</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), 'President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address, September 2, 2019'.

<sup>230</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), 'Выступление Касым-Жомарта Токаева на официальной церемонии вступления в должность избранного Президента Республики Казахстан' [Statement from Kassym-Jomart Tokayev Official Inauguration Ceremony of the Elected President of Kazakhstan].

<sup>231</sup> Kumenov, A. (2019), 'Kazakhstan: Consensus-building council already generates grumbling', Eurasianet, 18 July 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-consensus-building-council-already-generates-grumbling> (accessed 19 Sep. 2019).

<sup>232</sup> BBC News (2016), 'Kazakhstan: Gunmen attack gun shops and army unit in Aktobe', 5 June 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36455744> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>233</sup> The Defense Post (2019), 'Kazakhstan repatriates 156 children of ISIS fighters from Syria', 10 May 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/05/10/kazakhstan-repatriates-156-isis-children/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>234</sup> 'Закон Республики Казахстан "О религиозной деятельности и религиозных объединениях"' [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 'On religious activities and religious associations'], [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=31067690#pos=3;-57](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=31067690#pos=3;-57) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

In 2011, a new law on religious activity set stringent restrictions that have since caught hundreds of people in the dragnet;<sup>235</sup> in 2018, 166 cases were prosecuted, with punishments including prison terms, fines and prohibitions on worshipping.<sup>236</sup> Nazarbayev used to take pride in Kazakhstan welcoming 40 faiths and 4,500 congregations.<sup>237</sup> By 2017, the authorities recognized only 18 faiths and 3,600 congregations.<sup>238</sup> Kazakhstan has been on the US Commission on International Religious Freedom's watchlist of countries 'of particular concern' since 2013.<sup>239</sup>

Some developments are more encouraging. The number of prosecutions under the religion law fell by 40 per cent in 2018,<sup>240</sup> and in 2019 the government abandoned plans for new restrictions.<sup>241</sup> Its programme to reintegrate militants from the Middle East<sup>242</sup> was commended in 2019 by a UN rapporteur.<sup>243</sup> However, the rapporteur also noted a number of concerns, including 'the use of counter-terrorism and extremism law and practice to target, marginalize and criminalize the work of civil society'.

### Political prisoners

According to the Tirek Alliance, a civil society project which publishes information about what it describes as 'political persecution', 16 people can be identified as 'political prisoners' as of late November 2019<sup>244</sup> (see Appendix), with 90 people subject to persecution because of their professional activities or political convictions.<sup>245</sup> These include rights activists, civil society campaigners, trade union leaders and journalists. Two men have been in prison for over a decade: Aron Atabek, imprisoned since 2006 over unrest in which a police officer died;<sup>246</sup> and Mukhtar Dzhakishiev, imprisoned

<sup>235</sup> Corley, F. (2011), 'Kazakhstan: President signs two laws restricting freedom of religion or belief', Forum 18 News Service, 13 October 2011, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1624](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1624) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>236</sup> Corley, F. (2019), 'Kazakhstan: 171 administrative prosecutions in 2018 – list', Forum 18 News Service, 1 February 2019, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2448](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2448) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>237</sup> Toguzbaev, K. (2012), 'Число религиозных объединений сократилось на одну треть' [The number of religious associations has decreased by one third], Radio Azattyk, 25 October 2012, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/religious-organisations-registration-kairat-lama-sharif/24750482.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>238</sup> Tengrinews (2017), 'Надо разобраться с вопросом религиозного экстремизма – Назарбаев' [We need to figure out the issue of religious extremism – Nazarbayev], 6 March 2017, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/razobratsya-voprosom-religioznogo-ekstremizma-nazarbaev-313611/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/razobratsya-voprosom-religioznogo-ekstremizma-nazarbaev-313611/) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>239</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2019), *Kazakhstan: Annual Report*, [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2\\_KAZAKHSTAN\\_2019.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_KAZAKHSTAN_2019.pdf) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Tengrinews (2019), 'Токаев: Еще 231 казахстанца эвакуировали из Сирии' [Tokayev: 231 more Kazakhstanis have been evacuated from Syria], 10 May 2019, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/tokayev-esche-231-kazahstantsa-evakuirovali-iz-sirii-368829/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/tokayev-esche-231-kazahstantsa-evakuirovali-iz-sirii-368829/) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>243</sup> United Nations (undated), 'Preliminary Findings of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on her visit to Kazakhstan', Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24637&LangID=E> (accessed 19 Sep. 2019).

<sup>244</sup> Tirek Alliance, [http://tirek.info/dir/wpbdp\\_category/list01/page/2/?fbclid=IwAR1pZaiSSa\\_kGqf83o075Im-OJ490pe3yblQ\\_NGFaklClepp1GTU06WqKI&wpbdp\\_sort=field-1](http://tirek.info/dir/wpbdp_category/list01/page/2/?fbclid=IwAR1pZaiSSa_kGqf83o075Im-OJ490pe3yblQ_NGFaklClepp1GTU06WqKI&wpbdp_sort=field-1) (accessed 18 Sep. 2019). This list identifies 20 people, four of whom have been released from custody since it was published. The list is recognized by the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and Rule of Law.

<sup>245</sup> Tirek Alliance, [http://tirek.info/dir/wpbdp\\_category/list02/page/18/](http://tirek.info/dir/wpbdp_category/list02/page/18/) (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>246</sup> Lillis, J. (2006), 'Rich-Poor Gap Fuels Tension in Kazakhstan's Commercial Capital', Eurasianet, 9 August 2006, <https://eurasianet.org/rich-poor-gap-fuels-tension-in-kazakhstans-commercial-capital> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

*The government's '100 concrete steps' programme, which promotes institutional reforms, includes positive measures to increase judicial accountability*

since 2009 on corruption charges<sup>247</sup> and refused parole in 2019.<sup>248</sup> Also on the list are Maks Bokayev, imprisoned over the land protests of 2016; and Iskander Yerimbetov, an entrepreneur and the brother of one of Ablyazov's lawyers. Yerimbetov was jailed in 2018<sup>249</sup> on fraud charges condemned by 17 US senators as politically motivated.<sup>250</sup> The authorities deny any abuse of the judicial system for political ends. In 2019, Tokayev provided amnesties to an investigative journalist and a trade union leader in whose cases political motivations were suspected,<sup>251</sup> although their convictions were not quashed and the union leader was sent back to prison for failing to pay a fine.<sup>252</sup>

On occasion, justice appears to be selective. The failings of the justice system were evident in the trials over the 2006 assassination of opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbayev. The second trial, in 2014, implicated Nazarbayev's former son-in-law, Rakhmat Aliyev, in the contracting of the killing,<sup>253</sup> after the General-Prosecutor's Office said it had belatedly found evidence of his responsibility.<sup>254</sup> This followed his fall from political grace. The first trial, in 2006, when Aliyev was still in favour, had covered up his role and delivered a miscarriage of justice.<sup>255</sup> Aliyev died in prison in Austria in 2015 while awaiting trial in relation to separate murder charges.<sup>256</sup>

The government's '100 concrete steps' programme, which promotes institutional reforms, includes positive measures to increase judicial accountability. Tokayev has promised to uphold the right to justice.<sup>257</sup> However, genuine safeguards of judicial independence are not in place, and the judiciary does not act as a check and balance on other branches of power.

<sup>247</sup> Freedom House (2019), 'Kazakhstan: Uphold Rights to Liberty and a Fair Trial and Free Mukhtar Dzhakishhe[v]', 9 September 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/kazakhstan-uphold-rights-liberty-and-fair-trial-and-free-mukhtar-dzhakishhe> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>248</sup> Lillis, J. (2010), 'Kazakhstan: Ex-Nuclear Boss Sentenced Amid Claims of Political Reprisals', Eurasianet, 17 March 2010, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-ex-nuclear-boss-sentenced-amid-claims-of-political-reprisals> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>249</sup> Lillis, J. (2018), 'Kazakhstan: In Politicized Case, Businessman Jailed For Turning A Profit', Eurasianet, 24 October 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-in-politicized-case-businessman-jailed-for-turning-a-profit> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>250</sup> Rubio.senate.gov (2019), 'Rubio, Menendez, Colleagues Call on Kazakh President to Release Political Prisoner', 29 July 2019, <https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2019/7/rubio-menendez-colleagues-call-on-kazakh-president-to-release-political-prisoner> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>251</sup> Smirnov, V. (2019), 'Журналиста и председателя профсоюза в канун Курбан-Айта помиловал Токаев' [Tokayev pardons journalist and trade union leader on the eve of Kurban-Ait], Total.kz, 10 August 2019, [https://total.kz/ru/news/obshchestvo\\_sobitiya/zhurnalista\\_i\\_predsedatelya\\_profsoyuza\\_v\\_kanun\\_kurbanaita\\_pomiloval\\_tokaev\\_date\\_2019\\_08\\_10\\_13\\_30\\_53](https://total.kz/ru/news/obshchestvo_sobitiya/zhurnalista_i_predsedatelya_profsoyuza_v_kanun_kurbanaita_pomiloval_tokaev_date_2019_08_10_13_30_53) (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>252</sup> Otyrar.kz (2019), 'Профсоюзного активиста осудили за неуплату штрафа' [Trade union activist convicted for non-payment of fine], 16 October 2019, <https://otyyar.kz/2019/10/profsoyuznogo-aktivista-osudili-za-neuplatu-shtrafa/> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>253</sup> Lillis, J. (2014), 'Kazakhstan: Retrial Fails to Put Political Killing to Rest', Eurasianet, 11 February 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-retrial-fails-to-put-political-killing-to-rest> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>254</sup> General-Prosecutor's Office (2013), 'Официальное Заявление Генеральной Прокуратуры Республики Казахстан' [Official statement by General-Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan], 20 December 2013, <http://prokuror.gov.kz/ru/novosti/press-releasy/oficialnoe-zayavlenie-generalnoy-prokuratury-respubliki-kazahstan> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>255</sup> Lillis, J. (2006), 'Kazakhstani Assassination Trial Concludes With Guilty Verdicts, Questions Continue', Eurasianet, 5 September 2006, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstani-assassination-trial-concludes-with-guilty-verdicts-questions-continue> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>256</sup> Reuters (2015), 'Kazakh ex-diplomat Aliyev found hanged in Austrian jail', 24 February 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-aliyev/kazakh-ex-diplomat-aliyev-found-hanged-in-austrian-jail-idUSKBN0LSOLB20150224> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>257</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), 'President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address, September 2, 2019'.

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## The power of spin

The government is intensely image-conscious, and has spent millions of dollars on contracts with leading international public relations companies to lobby in Western capitals and buff the prestige and credentials of Kazakhstan and Nazarbayev.<sup>258</sup> Western firms have advised on mitigating negative coverage over human rights: from BGR Gabara's offer (which the government declined) to run a sock-puppet campaign to counteract negative coverage of the Zhanaozen oil strike;<sup>259</sup> to former UK prime minister Tony Blair's tips to Nazarbayev on putting political spin on the Zhanaozen shootings.<sup>260</sup>

The regime's public communications strategy involves shaping counter-narratives to dispel reports of rigged elections and rights abuses. Criticism is brushed off with the suggestion that Kazakhstan is a 'young country' that is learning the ropes of democracy and is a willing pupil.<sup>261</sup> Flak is also deflected by focusing on Kazakhstan's positive international diplomatic performance. In a number of respects, the country can justifiably hold itself up as a force for good: a responsible global player, a reliable Western security and energy ally in a volatile region, a bridge between East and West and the Muslim and Christian worlds, an anti-nuclear proliferation lobbyist, a model for multi-ethnic states. All these factors are true, but should not mask the reality of human rights abuses in Kazakhstan.

The muted tone of international criticism fuels the government's sense of impunity over human rights and encourages a style-over-substance approach to improving its record. The contrast with Russia is striking – it is difficult to imagine Moscow gunning down oil workers without an international outcry occurring, but Western partners give Kazakhstan an easier ride. Instead of attracting censure over abuses, the government gains international plaudits for its achievements in other areas.<sup>262</sup> Western partners favour 'constructive engagement' rather than public condemnation, which they believe – with some justification – is interpreted as patronizing and is counterproductive: it would alienate a cooperative ally and push Kazakhstan closer to illiberal partners such as Moscow and Beijing. Public censure is certainly unwelcome: when the visiting British prime minister, David Cameron, told reporters he had raised the issue of human rights in 2013,<sup>263</sup> Nazarbayev sat 'stone-faced' and then responded sharply to a question about Kazakhstan's record. Kazakhstan may look to some like a mediaeval country where people 'ride around on camels instead of in cars', Nazarbayev snapped, but 'as far as human rights and freedoms are concerned, I believe Kazakhstan assures fundamental rights'.<sup>264</sup>

*The muted tone of international criticism fuels the government's sense of impunity over human rights and encourages a style-over-substance approach to improving its record*

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<sup>258</sup> Tynan, D. (2012), 'Kazakhstan: Top-Notch PR Firm Help Brighten Astana's Image', Eurasianet, 18 January 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/s/kazakhstan-top-notch-pr-firms-help-brighten-astanas-image> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>259</sup> Newman, M. (2011), 'PR company proposed campaign against Sting', The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 1 December 2011, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2011-12-01/pr-company-proposed-campaign-against-sting> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>260</sup> Mendick, R. (2014), 'Tony Blair Gives Kazakhstan's Autocratic President Tips on How To Defend a Massacre', *The Telegraph*, 24 August 2014, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/tony-blair/11052965/Tony-Blair-gives-Kazakhstan-autocratic-president-tips-on-how-to-defend-a-massacre.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/tony-blair/11052965/Tony-Blair-gives-Kazakhstan-autocratic-president-tips-on-how-to-defend-a-massacre.html) (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>261</sup> Gotev (2017), 'Kazakhstan, a fledgling democracy bent on "stability"'.  
<sup>262</sup> US Embassy and Consulate in Kazakhstan (2017), 'Secretary of State Rex Tillerson remarks for Astana EXPO-2017', 22 June 2017, <https://kz.usembassy.gov/secretary-of-state-message-for-expo/> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>263</sup> Watt, N. (2013), 'Kazakhstan's autocratic president tells David Cameron: I would vote for you', *Guardian*, 1 July 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/01/kazakhstan-president-david-cameron-vote> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>264</sup> Tengrinews (2013), 'Назарбаев пригласил британских журналистов остаться в Казахстане и поговорить с людьми'.

The risk of muting criticism is that the embattled human rights community in Kazakhstan feels cast adrift, questioning Western credibility since the West appears unwilling to defend its own values publicly. This encourages a belief that Western countries are turning a blind eye to abuses for geopolitical or commercial gains. It fosters public cynicism about Western intentions in Central Asia, which the Kremlin in turn is eager to stoke for its own ends.

Since constructive engagement, as currently construed, has not yielded perceptible improvements in the country's human rights record, campaigners would prefer that international policymakers make outcomes that Kazakhstan's government desires conditional on tangible improvements. Human Rights Watch condemned 'a squandered opportunity' in 2015, when the EU signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Kazakhstan without securing reform commitments.<sup>265</sup>

### Reform incentives

The suppression of political and civil liberties reveals deep-seated insecurities inside the regime. On the one hand, the authorities nurture the impression that there remains rock-solid public support for Nazarbayev, now presented as the guarantor of stability during the leadership transition. On the other hand, the authorities seem so insecure that they clamp down on trifling manifestations of dissent. Since they are reluctant to acknowledge popular disillusionment – however insignificant – with their rule, they seek scapegoats when dissent emerges from the shadows. Without profound changes to this mentality, the government will remain unable to deal with expressions of dissent without riding roughshod over civil liberties.

The transition offers an opportunity to effect changes in policy and practice. There are several reasons why it is in the ruling elite's interests to reform, and to uphold its commitments to political and civil liberties.

Firstly, as neighbouring Uzbekistan's transition experience has demonstrated, a country can boost its economic competitiveness and attractiveness to investment through improvements to its human rights record. Uzbekistan has garnered positive international media coverage with its political thaw,<sup>266</sup> while Kazakhstan has reaped a slew of negative headlines during its transition because of the arrests of thousands of peaceful protesters.<sup>267</sup> For Kazakhstan's government, reform and liberalization can serve economic goals as well as political ones by generating positive media coverage that makes the country more attractive to investors, who may otherwise be wary of the reputational risks associated with doing business there.

Secondly, decision-makers would benefit from loosening controls on political freedoms and freedom of expression, because intolerance of alternative views hampers the development of accountable governance and rational policymaking. Under Nazarbayev, the social contract broadly endured in the sense that citizens tolerated restrictions on

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<sup>265</sup> Rittman, M. (2016), 'Will the EU be called to task on Kazakhstan?', Human Rights Watch, 4 January 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/04/will-eu-be-called-task-kazakhstan> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>266</sup> Higgins, A. (2018), 'As Authoritarianism Spreads, Uzbekistan Goes the Other Way', *New York Times*, 1 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/01/world/asia/uzbekistan-reform.html> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

<sup>267</sup> *The Economist* (2019), 'Kazakhstan's choreographed election goes off script', 10 June 2019, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/06/10/kazakhstan-choreographed-election-goes-off-script> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

political and civil liberties in exchange for oil-fuelled economic growth and improvements in social well-being. Kazakhstan's oil boom is long since over, however, and it faces enormous hurdles to meet growth targets and deliver prosperity in a challenging geopolitical and economic environment. To overcome these hurdles, Kazakhstan needs to inject dynamism into policymaking and elicit input from voices that have hitherto been excluded.

Thirdly, reform and liberalization can boost social stability. To a government that views dissent as a threat to stability, this is perhaps counter-intuitive. In 2019, citizens have braved arrest to protest for political freedoms and the right to free assembly. They are testing the boundaries of restrictions on political and civil liberties, finding these wanting, and refusing to respect them any longer. If the administration does not respond with dialogue and reform, it risks deepening the rift between the ruling classes and the public. Protests so far in 2019 have exposed profound problems with the rigid, top-down approach to governance, revealing alarming disconnects between the government and the governed. The lack of dialogue between the powers-that-be and grassroots actors has several causes: (1) the authorities have a patrician ruling style that precludes genuine consultation; (2) opposition parties do not exist to channel political debate; (3) the government supports GONGOs instead of independent civil society groups that could facilitate dialogue; and (4) little in the way of free media exists to air alternative opinions.

Rampant violations of political and civil liberties ring alarm bells for the future: if the government continues suppressing dissent, popular rancour will continue to boil over. At a time of political upheaval, if dissent is not tackled through dialogue rather than repression, the consequences will be unpredictable, and potentially detrimental to Kazakhstan.

UN rapporteur Maina Kiai eloquently encapsulated this in 2015:

Although it may seem paradoxical, the true measure of a country's stability is its tolerance of peaceful questioning of the established order, that is, allowing outlets for peaceful dissent and political pluralism. Failure to create such outlets does not make the dissent go away; it only bottles it up in such a way that it may fester and explode as something much more violent than a street protest or reports of non-governmental organizations criticizing government policy.<sup>268</sup>

It is to be hoped that, to mitigate this risk, Tokayev and his administration will take genuine measures to uphold political and civil liberties, and make reality on the ground in Kazakhstan match his lofty rhetoric about a reforming state that is ready to engage in constructive dialogue with its citizens.

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<sup>268</sup> UN Human Rights Council (2015), 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, Maina Kiai', 11 September 2015, <http://www.adilet.gov.kz/en/node/103169> (accessed 13 Aug. 2019).

# 5. Identity Politics

*Dosym Satpayev*

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*Kazakhstan's political transition is complicated by identity questions. A resurgent ethnic Kazakh identity (long suppressed under Soviet rule) and rising religiosity are colliding with the state's civic-based definition of nationhood.*

Kazakhstan's transition of power is unfolding amid rising tensions over various competing forms of national and societal identity. In broad terms, a strengthened ethnic 'Kazakh' identity is being pitted against the prevailing civic 'Kazakhstani' identity, the resulting pressures fuelled by factors such as expanding use of the Kazakh language instead of Russian. The picture is complicated by tribal affiliations that still hold sway in some sectors, and by suggestions that religion could increasingly have an important influence on individual identity.

## Defining national identity

Following the collapse of the USSR, Kazakhstan was forced to address whether, as a new state, its identity should be predominantly ethnic or civic-national in nature. As a concept, civic-national identity usually involves an individual's recognition of being part of a nation, and acceptance of a social pact whereby loyalty to the state is exchanged for various benefits. A citizen is willing to take on certain responsibilities such as obeying the law, paying taxes and performing national service in exchange for the protection of rights and freedoms and the creation of favourable socio-economic conditions.

However, as shown by numerous opposition protests during the presidential election in 2019 – in which Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was in effect anointed as successor to Nursultan Nazarbayev – such a pact does not entirely work in Kazakhstan. This is due to the country's ineffective public administration, its failure to adequately uphold citizens' rights and freedoms (see Chapter 4, in particular), an unfair judicial system, a lack of political opposition, poor education, and the absence of a sufficiently large middle class.

Leshek Baltserovich, a Polish economist, has suggested that if a society wants to be competitive, sustain development and have 'something to look forward to', it must be founded on three pillars: private ownership rights and a market economy; a framework of rules and institutions, including taxation and justice systems; and democratic government.<sup>269</sup> In the case of Kazakhstan, only a half-pillar exists – its semi-market economy in which private ownership rights, unless they are linked to the elite, go unprotected. Add to these structural and institutional shortcomings a context of unfavourable socio-economic factors, increasingly provocative public protests and a crisis of confidence in the government, and it is hardly surprising that many Kazakhstani citizens – rather than embracing civic identity – are seeking to emigrate.

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<sup>269</sup> Razumov, Y. (2018), 'Какие последствия может иметь эрозия среднего класса в современных обществах' [What are the consequences of the erosion of the middle class in modern societies], *Forbes Kazakhstan*, 29 April 2018, [https://forbes.kz/life/view/sredniy\\_samyiy\\_vajnyiy\\_1524906570/](https://forbes.kz/life/view/sredniy_samyiy_vajnyiy_1524906570/) (accessed 04 Nov 2019).



People of all backgrounds and ages are opting to leave Kazakhstan. According to Finprom, a Kazakhstan-based analytical organization, 37,700 people left the country in 2017. This was 25.3 per cent more than in 2015.<sup>270</sup> The majority of those leaving were specialists in engineering, economics and education. In 2018, the number of emigrants reached 40,000, according to official data.

If the decision for many is largely an economic calculation, for others it reflects broader concerns over their future in the country, with the transition of power from Nazarbayev to Tokayev seen as a threat rather than an opportunity. Debates increasingly frame identity in terms of ethnicity or nationality, which is unnerving for many in a multi-ethnic state such as Kazakhstan.

### ‘Kazakh’ or ‘Kazakhstani’?

The American historian Sarah Cameron talks about the rivalry between ethnic and civic identities, rooted in the country’s Soviet history, in *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*. She writes: ‘[Kazakhs] became an ethnic minority in their own Republic. During the Soviet era the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan had a peculiar position: they were simultaneously a titular nation and an ethnic minority.’<sup>271</sup>

Kazakhstan differs from other post-Soviet countries in its ethnic diversity. It counts nearly 130 different ethnicities among its population of more than 18 million.<sup>272</sup> Its demographic make-up was drastically changed by Soviet rule, which focused on building the civic identity of the Soviet ‘people’ and pushing ethnic and nationality-based identity criteria into the background. Kazakhstan suffered some of the worst consequences of the heavy-handed imposition of the Soviet identity, economic model and political structure on Central Asia. For example, the number of ethnic Kazakhs occupying their traditional territory declined catastrophically in the 1920s and 1930s.

This was a far cry from the pre-Soviet position. Around the end of the 19th century, there had been more than 4 million ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan (according to the results of the first general census of the Russian empire in 1897, cited by Mukhamedzhan Tynyshbayev, a Kazakh social activist at the time and a member of the pro-autonomy Alash Ordy Party).<sup>273</sup> This made Kazakhs the sixth-largest population within the empire (though Tynyshbayev believed that the actual Kazakh population was considerably bigger). By 1914, according to Alikhan Bukeikhanov, the head of the Alash Ordy government (1917–20), the number of Kazakhs had reached 6 million. However, these

<sup>270</sup> Kapital (2018), ‘Казахстан покидает все больше специалистов’ [More and more specialists are leaving Kazakhstan], 20 February 2018, <https://kapital.kz/economic/67059/kazakhstan-pokidayet-vse-bol-she-spetsialistov.html> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>271</sup> Cameron, S. (2018), *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 2. The term ‘titular nation’ was first used by Maurice Barrès, a French poet and politician, in the late 19th century. The titular nation is the dominant ethnic group whose language and culture become foundations for the state educational system.

<sup>272</sup> Abuyov, N. (2013), ‘Ethnocultural processes in Kazakhstan: history and present’, 18 September 2013, <https://e-history.kz/ru/contents/view/1472> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

<sup>273</sup> Iqibaev, S. K. (2009), ‘Казахи в составе России в конце XIX века: их численность, размещение, занятия и образовательный уровень’ [Kazakhs as part of Russia at the end of the 19th century: their numbers, placement, occupations and educational level], Сборник материалов с конференции «Вклад молодых исследователей в индустриально-инновационное развитие Казахстана» [Collection of materials from the conference on ‘Contribution of young researchers to the industrial and innovative development of Kazakhstan’], <https://articlekz.com/article/6768> (accessed 18 Sep. 2019).

*Kazakhstan suffered some of the worst consequences of the heavy-handed imposition of the Soviet identity, economic model and political structure on Central Asia*

numbers appear to fall dramatically in the two following decades: two Soviet censuses show that the number of Kazakhs in Kazakhstan dropped from 3.96 million in 1926 to just 2.18 million in 1937.

Civil war, devastation, illnesses and famine in the 1920s and 1930s gravely depleted the Kazakhs as an ethnic group. Unlike the infamous Ukrainian ‘Holodomor’, the Kazakhstan famines are not widely known. Forced collectivization resulted in the procurement of animal herds from the nomads, the breakdown of the traditional Kazakh way of life and the destruction of people’s means of survival. Millions perished, and hundreds of thousands left their native steppe for good. Today about 6 million Kazakhs live outside Kazakhstan.

According to Cameron:

... the cause of the 1930–1933 famine in Kazakhstan was the result of Moscow’s radical attempt to transform the nomadic Turkic speaking Muslim people who were known as Kazakhs and a particular territory, Soviet Kazakhstan, into a modern Soviet nation ... through the most violent means the Kazakh famine created Soviet Kazakhstan as stable territory with clearly delineated boundaries that was an integral part of the Soviet economic system. It has also created a new Kazakh national identity that largely supplanted Kazakhs’ previous identification with the system of pastoral nomadism.<sup>274</sup>

Murat Auezov, a Kazakh writer and social activist, calls this tragic period in the history of the Kazakh people a loss of nomadic civilization.<sup>275</sup> Its traditional value system and indigenous form of identity – encompassing language, culture, customs and family ties – became a victim of Soviet industrialization, collectivization and Russification. In the 1930s, the Soviet authorities ordered the Kazakh alphabet to be transcribed into Cyrillic after representatives of the Kazakh intellectual elite began to advocate the use of Latin as the basis for the Kazakh alphabet.

The Kazakh language was one of the most important symbols of the ethnic Kazakh identity. It succumbed to Soviet policies on several levels. First, it suffered through the extermination of the ethnic intellectual elite and the creation of the Soviet intelligentsia, who used Russian as their main tool in professional or creative work. Long-term discrimination against the use of Kazakh led to the emergence of Russian-speaking Kazakhs. This would later create another fault-line in post-Soviet Kazakhstan’s society: between Kazakh-speaking *nagyз* (‘true’) Kazakhs and *shala*-Kazakhs (those who do not speak their mother tongue).

Second, there was a drastic decline in the number of native speakers of Kazakh during the Soviet era. Ethnic Kazakhs in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) finally overtook the Russian population by a small margin in 1989, when the census recorded Kazakhs and Russians respectively accounting for 39.7 per cent and 37.8 per cent of the general population. The rest of the population (22.5 per cent) was made up of a mixture of other ethnic groups, who had come to Kazakhstan from other regions of the Soviet Union either for work or through forced deportation ordered by Stalin, thus forming a multi-ethnic society on the territory of the Kazakh SSR. In this context it was hardly

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<sup>274</sup> Cameron (2018), *The Hungry Steppe*, p. 3.

<sup>275</sup> Brusilovskaya, E. (2019), ‘Колодцы времени’ [Wells of time], *Kazakhstanskay Pravda*, 17 May 2019, <https://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/kolodtsi-vremeni> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

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surprising that Alma-Ata (now Almaty) – the capital of the Kazakh SSR, and subsequently the capital of independent Kazakhstan until 1997 – had just one school teaching in the Kazakh language in 1989.

Professor Rustem Kadyrzhanov of the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies in Almaty believes that Soviet national policy imposed its own hierarchy of identities on the Kazakhs, with the Soviet identity and its internationalist slogans at the top. This was followed by the civic-national ‘Kazakhstani’ identity, which artificially blended Kazakhs and other nationalities into one Kazakhstani community. As for the ethnic ‘Kazakh’ identity, the Soviet authorities mostly associated this with Kazakh folklore and popular culture in the context of the ‘Peoples’ Friendship Laboratory’ (one of the synonyms for the Soviet Union that the Soviet authorities used to emphasize the multinational composition of the USSR).<sup>276</sup>

Despite this hierarchy, by the late 1980s Kazakh nationalism had begun to grow. In December 1986, young Kazakhs, mostly students, protested on the central square in what was then Alma-Ata in response to Mikhail Gorbachev’s dismissal of Dinmukhamed Kunaev as leader of the Kazakh SSR, and the replacement of Kunaev with Gennady Kolbin, who had never worked in Kazakhstan. On 17–18 December, protesters demanded the appointment of an ethnic Kazakh leader; however, the protests ended in armed confrontation and the deaths of many of the young demonstrators. The events of 1986, remembered as the Zheltoqsan (‘December’) protests, were akin to earlier national uprisings in the Soviet Union against central power. Similar protests by young Kazakhs followed in other regions of Kazakhstan.

Since the fall of the USSR and Kazakhstan’s independence, Kazakh nationalism has grown rapidly. Kazakhstan has also experienced a big demographic shift in terms of the number of ethnic Kazakhs in the country. Since the early 1990s, nearly 1 million ethnic Kazakhs living in other countries have returned to Kazakhstan. According to the online magazine *Vlast*, by the end of the 1990s ethnic Kazakhs accounted for more than half the population of Kazakhstan for the first time since the 1920s. By 2016, they had become the fastest-growing ethnic group, accounting for two-thirds of the population. In some regions, the number of Kazakhs has exceeded 95 per cent of the population.<sup>277</sup> In 2019, the total proportion of ethnic Kazakhs in the country was nearly 68 per cent.

The decision to change the Kazakh alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin was taken many years ago; yet the development of the new alphabet did not start until 2018. This reflects demographic trends and the public mood. What was unachievable in the 1990s is now becoming viable thanks to the majority of the population being ethnic Kazakh, the emergence of an entire post-independence generation, and the expanding use of the Kazakh language.

*Since the early 1990s, nearly 1 million ethnic Kazakhs living in other countries have returned to Kazakhstan*

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<sup>276</sup> Kadyrzhanov, R. (2012), ‘Национальная идентичность Казахстана и этнокультурный символизм’ [National identity and ethno-cultural symbolism of Kazakhstan], *Республиканский общественно-политический журнал ‘Мысль’*, 13 October 2012, <http://mysl.kazgazeta.kz/?p=266> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>277</sup> *Vlast* (2016), ‘Как изменилась этническая карта Казахстана за 25 лет’ [How the ethnic configuration of Kazakhstan has changed over 25 years], 17 October 2016, <https://vlast.kz/obshchestvo/19747-kak-izmenilas-etniceskaa-karta-kazahstana-za-25-let.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

These demographic trends are likely to affect future political preferences. The strengthening of national-patriotic moods and movements is occurring organically, and suggests that supporters of ethnic or tribal identities will continue to increase in number while the use of the Russian language will decline further. A similar phenomenon is already in evidence in most countries in Central Asia.

At the same time, there remains active support for the idea of civic identity among certain ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan, including some Russian-speaking Kazakhs. Kadyrzhanov argues that ‘those on the side of the Kazakhstani identity, first of all Russian and other non-native peoples of Kazakhstan’ do not want to see the Russian language and other symbols ‘pushed to the periphery of the new society from the central positions they once held in Soviet society’. He adds: ‘Naturally, there is resistance to determination of the Kazakh language and other Kazakh symbols to dominate the symbols hierarchy in the new Kazakhstan society.’<sup>278</sup>

### ‘Ideological separatism’

Demographers estimate that the Russian population in Kazakhstan has fallen sharply since independence, to just 19.8 per cent of the total in 2018.<sup>279</sup> Many members of other ethnic groups have emigrated to their countries of origin, including Germans, Ukrainians and Poles. These same ethnic groups, long-term supporters of President Nazarbayev, perceived him as the chief guarantor of inter-ethnic stability in the country. Some felt that the impending end of his political career and the transition of power presented a threat to their futures.

For non-Kazakh groups living in Kazakhstan, the disappearance of the concept of the ‘Soviet citizen’ following the collapse of the USSR continues to affect their notions of identity. Some members of Russian-speaking minorities and some Russian-speaking Kazakhs feel ‘trapped’ – they live physically in Kazakhstan but mainly identify with the ideas and discourses of the Russian political, ideological and media spheres. This sensibility is amplified by the influence of Russian media generally in Kazakhstan, and by reporting on Russian social media sites, such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, where pro-Russian separatist ideas have been published.<sup>280</sup>

The events associated with Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 illustrate the potential consequences for Kazakhstan of Russian media dominating weaker domestic media. The conflict in Ukraine, although not directly related to Kazakhstan, drastically split Kazakhstan’s society into those opposing and those supporting the Russian intervention. The conflict raised alarm about how far the Russian mass media was influencing public opinion in Kazakhstan. Russian media influence was evident from the results of a 2015

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<sup>278</sup> Kadyrzhanov (2012), ‘Национальная идентичность Казахстана и этнокультурный символизм’.

<sup>279</sup> Ibraeva, A. (2018), ‘Миграция как угроза экономической безопасности: почему казахстанцы уезжают за границу’ [Migration as a threat to economic security: why Kazakhstanis go abroad], 29 August 2018, <https://kursiv.kz/news/tendencii-issledovaniya/2018-08/migraciya-kak-ugroza-ekonomicheskoy-bezopasnosti-pochemu> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>280</sup> For example: ‘Kazakhstanis expressed anger and indignation at two VKontakte groups using the popular Russian social media site to call for the return of the Northern territories of Kazakhstan to the Russian Federation’, in Zakon.kz (2014), ‘Казахстанке удалось заблокировать пропагандирующие аннексию СКО группы «ВКонтакте»’ [Kazakhstani woman managed to block a VKontakte group which spread propaganda on the annexation of the North Kazakhstan region to the Russian Federation], 13 August 2014, <https://www.zakon.kz/4646296-kazakhstanke-udalos-zablokirovat.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

Gallup survey in which Kazakhstan ranked fourth among post-Soviet states in terms of support for the Russian president, Vladimir Putin: some 72 per cent of respondents backed his policies.<sup>281</sup>

Kazakhstan's authorities must take note of this: it shows how many citizens could see their loyalties divided between their own state and Russia were a conflict or tensions to arise in the future. Beyond the popularity (or otherwise) of the government and its policies, political stability is partly determined by the number of people willing to defend the state against internal and external threats. Kazakhstan's security in the context of hybrid conflict, in particular, does not simply depend on the army and international treaties. To a great extent, the country's fate depends on how its citizens identify with their own country.

As the new president, Tokayev has inherited this conflict of identities. Moreover, aside from the tension between the Kazakh and Kazakhstani national identities, society is fractured along many other lines: ethnic, tribal, urban versus rural (including the capital's relationship to the provinces), secular versus religious. These complex divisions overlap, presenting new challenges to political development during the transition of power.

### Tribal identity

Kazakhs have traditionally been divided into three *zhuz*, which can be understood as alliances or clans aggregating multiple tribes. The famous Kazakh historian Nurbolat Masanov argued that each *zhuz* had its own system of tribal divisions. The Kazakhs of the 'Senior Zhuz' were divided into 11 tribal groups, those of the 'Middle Zhuz' into seven, and those of the 'Junior Zhuz' into three intermediate and 25 main groups.<sup>282</sup>

Tribal forms of identity among the Kazakhs, partially preserved during the Soviet period, properly re-established themselves with the fall of the USSR. The development of ethnic Kazakh identity accompanied that of tribal and *zhuz* identity. This gained new impetus during the period of socio-economic hardship after the collapse of the USSR, when people's tribal and *zhuz* membership provided a form of collective defence and support.

For many Kazakhs, knowledge of one's tribe or *zhuz* is important. Research in 2016 into the values and sociopolitical views of the country's Kazakhs, conducted by the Institute of World Economics and Politics under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, showed that only 6.9 per cent were unaware of which tribes had historically occupied their places of birth. In answer to the question, 'How important is it to you to know your clanship?', 24.9 per cent of respondents

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<sup>281</sup> Nur.kz (2015), 'Политологи увидели опасность в популярности Путина в Казахстане' [Political scientists see danger in Putin's popularity in Kazakhstan], 25 June 2015, <https://www.nur.kz/800198-politologi-uvide-li-opasnost-v-popul.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>282</sup> Tulegenov, A. (undated), 'Без этого Казахстан не понять: карта расселения казахских племен – «жузов»' [Kazakhstan cannot be understood without this: Map of the settlement of the Kazakh tribes "zhuz"], <https://www.brif.kz/blog/?p=1122> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

*The aim for political leaders was to use the zhuz system to create checks and balances, and to keep potential rivals out of positions of influence*

indicated interest in their clanship, perceiving it as important to their approach to life; 21.2 per cent felt it was a part of their family history. In total, 46.1 per cent of respondents considered their clanship an important part of their identity.<sup>283</sup>

*Zhuz* membership was a determining factor in government appointments in Soviet Kazakhstan. The regime kept the *zhuz* system in check by appointing members of other ethnic groups to posts within the elite. According to Nurbulat Masanov, ‘during the Soviet period ... the Kazakhs *a priori* evaluated the degree of influence and authority of their own or others’ *zhuz*-tribe according to how well it was represented within the ruling establishment’. The aim for political leaders was to use the *zhuz* system to create checks and balances, and to keep potential rivals out of positions of influence. This exerted a ‘psychological effect’ on political life by determining appointees’ scope of power, their susceptibility to manipulation and the length of their tenure.<sup>284</sup>

Since independence, and as demographics have changed, tribal influences have grown stronger. More ethnic Kazakhs have been appointed to government positions. Particularly in middle and lower levels of government, such as in the regions, loyalty to tribes is seen as important. In wider society, young Kazakhs migrating in growing numbers from the countryside have brought tribal and *zhuz* identities into the cities.

In the context of efforts to sustain a ‘super-presidency’, Nazarbayev and his government regarded the *zhuz* system and tribes both as a potential destabilizing factor and as a means to play off members of the elite against each other. Control relied on the regime’s ability to manage conflict between different forms of political loyalty or identification, so that loyalty was directed not towards an individual’s *zhuz* but towards the head of state personally. In what was in effect a personality cult, any excessive loyalty to a tribal group was considered undesirable by the regime.

Nazarbayev used several methods to neutralize tribal/*zhuz* loyalties within government, and thus concentrate his power. He formed a new bureaucracy, filling posts with younger officials, some Western-educated and cosmopolitan in worldview. He created favourable conditions for the emergence of financial-industrial groups, closely linked to the government, that relied on presidential patronage and approval for access to resources and property. These businesses operated in the pursuit of economic gain rather than tribal interests. This may explain why the *Forbes* list of billionaires for Kazakhstan includes not just members of the presidential family and ethnic Kazakhs, but also figures from other ethnic groups. The emergence of a Kazakh business elite – mostly identifying as part of the international business community, and subject to its rules, networks and values – has gradually weakened the influence of *zhuz* and tribes in the financial-industrial sector.

<sup>283</sup> See Institute of World Economics and Politics under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – The Leader of the Nation (2016), *Valuable and socio-political attitudes of Kazakhs in Kazakhstan*, report on the results of a sociological study, p. 45. The survey took place in 2016 in all regions of Kazakhstan and covered 1,500 respondents.

<sup>284</sup> Masanov, N. (2006), ‘Реноме кочевников (Последняя статья Нурбулата Масанова)’ [Reputation of the nomads: Nurbulata Masanov’s last article], zakon.kz, 6 October 2006, <https://www.zakon.kz/76838-renome-kochevnikov-poslednjaja-statja.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

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The effects of such tactics have been limited, nonetheless. Group identity still comes before national identity. *Zhuz* identity has not been pushed to the sidelines, and indeed may be revived more widely during the political transition. At the same time, *zhuz* and tribe identity may also encounter increasing competition from a religious renaissance that is occurring in Kazakhstan, especially among young people.

## Religious identity

According to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, around 70 per cent of the population consider themselves Muslim. This is consistent with data in the Pew Research Center's *Global Religious Landscape* report, which indicates that 70.4 per cent of Kazakhstan's population are Muslim (although not all are observant).<sup>285</sup> The second-largest religion in the country is Christianity (mostly Orthodox), accounting for 24.8 per cent of the population.

The very high percentage of Muslims recorded in statistics in Kazakhstan can be explained by the fact that the authorities used to automatically link religion and ethnicity. All Kazakhs – as well as members of numerous other ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Uighurs, Dungans and Tatars – were classified as Muslim. Among these groups, ethnic Kazakhs are generally Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school, although other Islamic denominations and identities exist within the country.

A representative survey of 1,400 people in 2012 found that people ranked religious identity third in importance after civic and ethnic identities.<sup>286</sup> However, Timur Kozyrev, from the International Turkic Academy, has observed significant religious changes in Kazakhstan – particularly in respect of Islam – as society has become more urbanized. New religious traditions are replacing those previously rooted in rural life.<sup>287</sup>

The Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan published a report in 2013 which showed that 72.3 per cent of migrants arriving in Almaty were young people aged 14–29, and that these people were finding it hard to adapt to their new lives.<sup>288</sup> Their confidence in the authorities and civil society institutions – such as trade unions, political parties and the police – was low. The report noted that 57.9 per cent of respondents in this age group trusted religious institutions the most.<sup>289</sup> Mosques in the cities are increasingly being used as a means for communication and group identification.

The rising prominence of religious identity presents a number of concerns for the government. First, there is increasing evidence of a power struggle between religious factions – ranging from adherents of Sufism to those of Wahhabism – over the control

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<sup>285</sup> Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2017), 'Kazakhstan', [http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/kazakhstan/#/?affiliations\\_religion\\_id=0&affiliations\\_year=2010&region\\_name=All%20Countries&restrictions\\_year=2016](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/kazakhstan/#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&region_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2016) (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

<sup>286</sup> It included a sociological survey of 1,400 respondents from the South Kazakhstan, Aktobe, Eastern Kazakhstan, Karaganda and North Kazakhstan regions, as well as the cities of Almaty and Astana, taking into consideration nationality, gender, age and rural/urban location of the respondents. See Kazakhstan Institute for Socio-Economic Information and Forecasting (2012), *Levels of religiosity in Kazakhstan Society*, p. 51.

<sup>287</sup> Nurseitova, T. (2012), 'Тимур Козырев: Устанавливать правила в своей стране мы будем сами' [Timur Kozyrev: We will set the rules in our country ourselves], *zakon.kz*, 24 October 2012, <https://www.zakon.kz/4520521-timur-kozyrev-ustanavlivat-pravila-v.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>288</sup> Makhmutova, M. (2013), *Internal Migration of Young People in Kazakhstan: case-study of Almaty*, Public Policy Research Center and Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan, [https://www.soros.kz/en/internal\\_migration\\_of\\_young\\_people\\_in\\_kazakhstan/](https://www.soros.kz/en/internal_migration_of_young_people_in_kazakhstan/) (accessed 19 Oct. 2019).

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

of official information channels. Second, there are fears about the rise of radicalism. In 2014, the Abai.kz web portal reported that Dossay Kenzhetayev, a professor at the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in the capital, had written to Nazarbayev expressing concerns about religious extremists:

Professor Kenzhetayev said that despite a ban on Wahhabism or “takfir” in Kazakhstan its ideas were spreading and finding new recruits among young people. Some young men were radicalised to become jihadists in Syria. He raised the alarm that the followers of the “pure Islam” were inciting vandalism and could destroy the religious peace and stability in Kazakhstan ...<sup>290</sup>

Tensions also exist between secular actors (as represented by the state) and religious groups. During the country’s current political transition, religious groups could escalate their struggle for power against supporters of the secular state, as well against each other and national-patriotic movements. Some political players could try to consolidate their positions by mobilizing protest factions associated with national-patriotic or religious movements, possibly igniting confrontation. Some observers believe that a conflict between ‘radical religious devotees’ and advocates of ‘secular radicalism’ remains likely, and that ‘[this] would risk destabilizing the country and exacerbating the national identity crisis, with severe long-term consequences’.<sup>291</sup>

The growth of religious self-identification in Kazakhstan also has potential regional implications. Kazakhstan is perhaps best described currently as a ‘hybrid society’, reflecting beliefs that are a mixture of Western cosmopolitanism, nomadic paganism and various interpretations of Islam. Yet over time, the rise of religious identity politics could produce a cultural shift towards Islam. Growth in religious identity in other parts of Central Asia will further create challenges for geopolitical actors with interests in the region. For instance, the relationship between China and Central Asia may worsen as state pressure on Muslims in China’s Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region continues.

### Destructive urbanization

The effects of ongoing urbanization are also fuelling identity conflict. Around 58 per cent of the population now lives in cities. According to official data recorded since 2009, about 60,000 people migrate from rural areas to cities each year. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Kazakhstan estimates that by 2030 about 66 per cent of the population will be living in cities. In June 2018 the population of Shymkent officially reached 1 million, prompting the government to bestow special status on the city, alongside the capital, Nur-Sultan, and the city of Almaty.

This means that cities, and not rural areas, have become the principle locations where many young people come into contact with society and form their ideas and values. The historical context is also relevant here, as the collapse of the USSR also prompted the collision of rural (more traditional) and urban identities in Kazakhstan. For example, tribal

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<sup>290</sup> Mumirov, A. (2014), ‘Прямая и явная угроза. Назарбаева просят спасти мавзолей Яссауи от ваххабитов’ [Direct and clear threat. Nazarbayev is being asked to save the Yassawi mausoleum from Wahhabis], InoZpress, 17 November 2014, <http://www.inozpress.kg/news/view/id/42942> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).

<sup>291</sup> Kozuyev, T. (2013), ‘Национальная идентичность: казах и/или мусульманин’ [National identity: Kazakh and/or Muslim], Expert Kazakhstan, 1 April 2013, <http://expertonline.kz/a10566/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2019).



identity was less pronounced among urban Kazakhs, many of whom began to identify with the ideas of cosmopolitanism and became divorced from their traditional roots – and often from their native language.

Many young people leave rural areas for the cities due to poor socio-economic development in the regions, most of which are classed as depressed. Out of 14 regions and three major cities, the largest contributors to the national budget are the oil- and gas-producing Atyrau and Mangistaus regions and the city of Almaty.

The marginalization of migrants has an effect on identity. Young people arriving in cities are often unable to find formal employment. They take up low-paid, low-skilled informal work, are often self-employed, and lack access to social benefits or pensions. They settle in micro-districts on the outskirts of cities and remain outsiders. In the context of debates over identity, this ghettoization can result in migrants prioritizing ethnic, tribal or religious identities, which are often more conservative and traditional than those of pre-existing urban communities. Communal tensions can also be inflamed by the fact that, whereas non-Kazakhs from various ethnic groups have traditionally lived in cities since Soviet times, the majority of recent migrants from rural areas are Kazakhs from socially vulnerable and poorer sections of society.

### Nation-building and the failure of government policy

When members of Kazakhstan's ruling elite came to power after independence, they saw the rise of nationalism not only as a threat to inter-ethnic stability but also as a rival to their political dominance. In the early 1990s, the authorities sought to neutralize the surge in popularity of national-patriotic movements. This caused consternation among many Kazakhs, who viewed such movements as a legitimate attempt to rebuild a national Kazakh identity after its suppression during Soviet rule. What the ruling elite failed to realize, however, was that 'ideological separatism' – whereby people feel allegiance to a different state to the one in which they live – within the non-Kazakh population would be a much bigger problem than Kazakh nationalism. Nation-building was also set back by the fact that many government officials themselves did not genuinely believe in the multiple state-led initiatives to develop some kind of national idea or definition of a 'Kazakhstani' identity.

One such initiative, in 2009, involved a 'Doctrine of National Unity' developed by the authorities in close collaboration with the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan (an advisory body on issues of inter-ethnic relations, created in 1995 and overseen by the president). The doctrine quickly caused great division, as there was a strong negative reaction to its position that national unity was only possible if based on a civic, rather than ethnic, identity. In the end the authorities had to remove the emphasis on civic identity, although this did not help to produce a working document and the doctrine was eventually shelved.

A new attempt to address the identity issue, in 2015, introduced the 'Concept of strengthening and development of Kazakhstan's identity and unity 2015–2025'. This was partially a recreation of the Doctrine of National Unity. One of the concept's key policies was to place civic principles at the core of the Kazakhstani identity. The same document emphasized the role of the middle class as the backbone of this identity, and its growth as central to national unity.

*Young people arriving in cities are often unable to find formal employment. They take up low-paid, low-skilled informal work, are often self-employed, and lack access to social benefits or pensions*

However, the prospects for achieving this goal are complicated by the economic challenges disproportionately affecting the middle class, notably weak growth among small and medium-sized enterprises. So long as members of the middle class remain outnumbered by the poor, it will be impossible to develop a civic identity in Kazakhstan, as development of the universal values (e.g. political loyalty in exchange for an effective state) through which the regime hopes to guarantee its long-term stability will be impaired.

Overall, one of the chief risks to stability in Kazakhstan is that the transition of political power will be accompanied by identity conflict. For some national-patriotic groups, there is no Kazakhstani identity as such, just a Kazakh identity based on ethnicity. Among various religious movements, there is a view that a person must identify with the religion to which he/she belongs, then with his/her ethnic group. Equally, there remain some who believe that tribal identity should come first. Finally, for the authorities and many ethnic minorities, civic self-identification takes precedence, meaning that people should identify as citizens of Kazakhstan regardless of their ethnicity or background.

These differences in outlook and nation-building philosophy are not easily resolved. As this chapter has illustrated, the conflict between identities in Kazakhstan is only likely to deepen while different social, political, demographic, ethnic, religious and other groups maintain their often confrontational views on Kazakhstan's future and their place within society.

# 6. Relations with Other Central Asian States

Annette Bohr

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*As Kazakhstan seeks a new economic model, and with a partially reforming Uzbekistan acting as an important driver, it is increasingly looking for opportunities to boost hitherto weak cooperation with its Central Asian neighbours.*

For much of the post-independence period, relations between the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been marked by low levels of cooperation and regular disputes, including trade wars, border feuds and disagreements over the management and use of water and energy. In 2015 Kazakhstan's combined trade with Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan accounted for a mere 3.7 per cent of its total volume of foreign trade,<sup>292</sup> this share having increased by less than 1 percentage point in 14 years.<sup>293</sup> Non-tariff trade barriers among the states remain notoriously high, and no organization exists to formulate a specifically Central Asian response to urgent issues.

Within this context of non-cooperation, Kazakhstan has long shaped its identity as a Eurasian state that provides the ideal proving ground for the elaboration of regional ideas, while remaining comfortable in its position as an outlier between Russia and the rest of Central Asia. As late as 2014, Kazakhstan's then president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, proposed renaming the country from Kazakhstan to Kazakh Eli (the 'Land of Kazakhs'). This was in order to bolster its status as a Eurasian bridging state, as well as to distance itself from the other '-stans' – i.e. Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan etc. – many of which are notorious for their authoritarian practices and unwelcoming investment climates.<sup>294</sup>

In recent years, however, Kazakhstan's leadership has begun to view itself more clearly as an integral part of the Central Asian region. A confluence of factors has underpinned the state's identity shift and the palpable and growing trend towards greater cooperation with its Central Asian neighbours, notably:

- An upsurge in an ethnic Kazakh identity, to the detriment of the long-prevailing, civic-based Kazakhstani identity. This has been a result of demographic and educational shifts, and a growing ethno-nationalist narrative.
- A perceptible disentangling and distancing of Kazakhstan from Russia, and from the Kremlin's policy directions.
- The focus on increasing connectivity, which has been provided with impetus from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as a key component of Kazakhstan's search for a strategy to fuel national development. The infrastructure investments associated with the BRI mesh with Kazakhstan's goal of becoming a main transport and financial hub connecting East and West, while facilitating its potential integration with the rest of the Central Asian region.

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<sup>292</sup> Sultangalieva, A. (2016), *Kazakhstan and Its Neighbours: Opportunities and Limitations*, The Institute of World Economics and Politics (IWEP) under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan–The Leader of the Nation, working paper, p. 14 (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>293</sup> Kazakhstan's trade with the other Central Asian states amounted to less than 3 per cent of its total trade turnover in 2001. Bohr, A. (2004), 'Regionalism in Central Asia: new geopolitics, old regional order', *International Affairs*, 80(3): p. 493.

<sup>294</sup> Diener, A. C. (2016), 'Imagining Kazakhstani-stan', in Laruelle, M. (ed.) (2016), *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols and Social Changes*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, p. 131.

- The liberalization of Uzbekistan's economy following the death in 2016 of that country's long-serving authoritarian ruler, Islam Karimov.
- A growing recognition among the Central Asian states that deepening regional trade is both mutually beneficial and preferable to spending scarce resources on developing import-substitution strategies, especially given the constraints associated with Russia's economic problems.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part considers the contribution of each of the five factors listed above to Kazakhstan's increasing identification of itself as an integral part of the Central Asian region. The second discusses the major trends in Kazakhstan's bilateral relations with each Central Asian state.

## Part one: Drawing closer to Central Asian neighbours

### The new 'Kazakhness' and the Central Asian common heritage

Although Kazakhstan's post-Soviet transition period will not end until former president Nazarbayev fully leaves the scene, the country has nonetheless entered a new era that is characterized by an increasing sense of 'Kazakhness' (see also Chapter 5).<sup>295</sup> The ascendancy of an ethnic Kazakh identity is a result of two primary developments: changing demographics that favour Kazakhstan's titular nation, and a concomitant growing ethno-nationalist narrative. Marlène Laruelle has argued that the net result of these demographic, educational and cultural shifts is that 'everything Kazakhstani is on the decline and everything Kazakh is on the rise'.<sup>296</sup> This new 'Kazakhness' has inevitably created tension between, on the one hand, the more nationalist and Kazakh-centric segments of society and, on the other, more urban segments that tend to seek greater connections with a globalized world.

A notable parallel can be drawn between current trends and those in the mid-1980s, when, at the outset of Mikhail Gorbachev's twin policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, a rising nationalist discourse gained momentum in Kazakhstan. It followed riots in what is now Almaty (then known as Alma-Ata) in December 1986 that were triggered by the appointment of an ethnic Russian from outside Kazakhstan to replace an ethnic Kazakh in the post of Communist Party first secretary. The nationalist discourse had been precipitated by a demographic shift that in 1989 saw the Kazakhs become the largest ethnic group in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), accounting for 39.7 per cent of the population and outnumbering Russians for the first time since the 1920s.<sup>297</sup> In addition, the urban share of Kazakhstan's population had passed the 50 per cent

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<sup>295</sup> Laruelle, M. (2014), 'The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan: Kazakhness, Kazakhstanness, and Transnationalism', in Omelicheva, M. (ed.) (2014), *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics and Directions*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, pp. 1–20; and Laruelle, M. (2018), 'Kazakhstan's Nationhood: Politics and Society on the Move', *VoicesOnCentralAsia.org*, 16 February 2018, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/kazakhstans-nationhood-politics-and-society-on-the-move/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>296</sup> Laruelle (2018), 'Kazakhstan's Nationhood', p. 9.

<sup>297</sup> Государственный Комитет СССР по Статистике [USSR State Committee for Statistics] (1990), *Национальный Состав Населения СССР По Данным Всесоюзной Переписи Населения 1989 г.* [The National Composition of the Population of the USSR According to the All-Union Population Census 1989], "Финансы и Статистики" [Finance and Statistics], Moscow.

mark a decade earlier, reaching 54 per cent in 1979.<sup>298</sup> Educational attainment for Kazakhs was growing, as Russian-language schools were increasingly converted to Kazakh-language schools and as more ethnic Kazakhs entered higher education.<sup>299</sup>

These same demographic and cultural evolutions are recurring today. First, ethnic Russians currently comprise less than a fifth of Kazakhstan's total population (19.8 per cent in 2018) and represent a minority in every oblast (region) in the country, including the northern oblasts that have traditionally been dominated by ethnic Russians. The ethnic Kazakh share of the state's population passed 50 per cent in the 1990s, and Kazakhs are projected to account for 80 per cent of the population in the upcoming decade.

Second, the number of Kazakhs living in cities has quintupled since the 1970s, and half of ethnic Kazakhs are now urban dwellers.

Third, the role of the Kazakh language in education has continued to grow. At the beginning of the 1990s, only 30 per cent of schools conducted classes in Kazakh, but by 2016 that figure had jumped to 70 per cent.<sup>300</sup> About half of university students and a majority of schools follow a Kazakh-language curriculum. At the same time, Kazakh-language media – including social media – is growing in importance, underscored by the government's decision to undertake a phased transition from the Cyrillic alphabet to a Latin-based alphabet for the Kazakh language by 2025.<sup>301</sup> Significantly, the expanding Kazakh-language information space is largely dissociated from the Russian-language one.<sup>302</sup> Following Nazarbayev's resignation as president in March 2019, and the rapid renaming of Astana, the capital, as Nur-Sultan in his honour, there have been reports that ethnic Russians and Russian speakers have emigrated from Kazakhstan in increasing number.<sup>303</sup>

The emphasis on an increasingly dominant ethnic Kazakh identity at the expense of a civic Kazakhstani one allows the state's leadership to identify more closely with Kazakhstan's common Central Asian heritage and, by extension, a common Central Asian region, although it remains eager to demonstrate that the country is not 'just another "-stan"'. From 2017 onwards, in particular, following the enactment of reforms by Uzbekistan (see section on 'the Uzbekistan factor', below), President Nazarbayev demonstrated a marked shift in approach towards his Central Asian neighbours. He made ever more frequent references to the common heritage of Central Asians, and to their shared cultural and scientific achievements during a supposed golden age a millennium ago.<sup>304</sup> Addressing participants at the Astana Club in November 2017,

<sup>298</sup> For more information, see Brown, B. (1980), 'Kazakhstan and the Kazakhs in the USSR: Data from the Census of 1979', Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, RL 195/80, 2 June 1980, Munich: Germany.

<sup>299</sup> Kaiser, R. and Chinn, J. (1995), 'Russian-Kazakh relations in Kazakhstan', *Post-Soviet Geography*, 36(5): pp. 263–64, doi: 10.1080/10605851.1995.10640992 (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>300</sup> Primeminister.kz (2016), 'Number of Kazakh language schools reached 70% for the years of independence-MES', 12 August 2016, <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/705/page/549> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>301</sup> Altysarina, E. (2018), 'Kazakhstan Adopts A New Version of Latin-based Kazakh Alphabet', *The Astana Times*, 26 February 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/02/kazakhstan-adopts-new-version-of-latin-based-kazakh-alphabet/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>302</sup> Laruelle (2018), 'Kazakhstan's Nationhood', p. 7.

<sup>303</sup> Goble, P. (2019), 'Nazarbayev's departure triggering new Russian exodus from Kazakhstan', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 11 April 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/nazarbayevs-departure-triggering-new-russian-exodus-from-kazakhstan/> (accessed 24 Aug 2019).

<sup>304</sup> Hashimova, U. (2018), 'Central Asian reset', *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, 21 March 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asian-reset/> (accessed 24 Aug 2019). See also BBC Monitoring Central Asia (2017), 19 September 2017; and Kausikan, B., Starr, S. F. and Cheng, Y. (2017), 'Central Asia: All Together Now', *The American Interest*, 16 June 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/06/16/central-asia-all-together-now/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

*The ethnic Kazakh share of the population passed 50 per cent in the 1990s, and Kazakhs are projected to account for 80 per cent of the population in the upcoming decade*

he declared: 'I think, after a quarter of a century, everyone realizes that it is the will of God that we, the [Central Asian] states, which have a common history, religion, culture and mentality, should be together, help each other and jointly ensure security in this region.'<sup>305</sup> Particularly during Kazakhstan's tenure in 2017–18 as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, the leadership emphasized that one of its primary goals was to promote the interests of Central Asian states and advance issues important to the region.<sup>306</sup>

### Moving away from Russia

By the late 1990s, the epicentre of regionalism in Central Asia had already decisively drifted from a shaky Astana–Tashkent axis to a more stable Astana–Moscow one. This gravitation was in large part a reaction to Uzbekistan's propensity to use strong-arm tactics with its neighbours. But it was also facilitated by Russian-led efforts to include Kazakhstan in certain regional bodies – such as the ill-fated Single Economic Space – from which other Central Asian states were excluded.<sup>307</sup> Consequently, throughout most of the post-independence period, Kazakhstan has considered Russia to be a constitutive part of any region or sub-region to which it belonged.<sup>308</sup>

In recent years, however, Kazakhstan has come to view Russia's foreign policy as increasingly neo-colonial. It has sought to distance itself slightly from Moscow in order to limit Russian leverage in its affairs, with the result that Astana has more readily shown itself to be open to Central Asian regional initiatives.

Scepticism towards Moscow-led regional structures has increased as Russia has failed to deliver on the benefits promised to Kazakhstan through membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Indeed Kazakhstan has been openly dismissive of the political agenda of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, in respect of the EAEU and has sought a number of safeguards to avoid being locked into the EAEU's economic orbit.

In addition, though not least, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Moscow's hybrid war in Ukraine have boosted anti-Russian sentiment among Kazakh 'national-patriots' in particular.<sup>309</sup> Anti-Russian articles have become more commonplace in the Kazakh media,<sup>310</sup> and there is growing resentment at Kazakhstan being drawn into information wars conducted by Russia.<sup>311</sup>

*Anti-Russian articles have become more commonplace in the Kazakh media, and there is growing resentment at Kazakhstan being drawn into information wars conducted by Russia*

<sup>305</sup> BBC Monitoring Central Asia (2017), 'Kazakh leader urges Central Asian unity for common good', 16 November 2017. The Astana Club describes itself as 'an international discussion platform that annually gathers prominent political figures, diplomats and experts from leading analytical centres in the West, Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East and Asia'. See [astanaclub.kz](http://astanaclub.kz).

<sup>306</sup> Orazgaliyeva, M. (2019), 'Kazakh Deputy FM Says Country Committed to Deeper Cooperation in Central Asia', *The Astana Times*, 8 April 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2019/04/kazakh-deputy-fm-says-country-committed-to-deeper-cooperation-in-central-asia/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>307</sup> Established in Yalta in September 2003 by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus.

<sup>308</sup> Bohr (2004), 'Regionalism in Central Asia', pp. 492–93.

<sup>309</sup> Sharip, F. (2018), 'Revival of pan-Turkism in Kazakhstan threatens pillars of Eurasian Union', *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, 12 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/revival-of-pan-turkism-in-kazakhstan-threatens-pillars-of-eurasian-union/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>310</sup> Goble, P. (2018), 'Kazakhs increasingly hostile to both Russians and Chinese', *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, 24 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/kazakhs-increasingly-hostile-to-both-russians-and-chinese/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>311</sup> See Chapter 5 and Chapter 7.

*Kazakhstan's economic model, based on years of over-reliance on oil and raw-material exports, has exhausted itself*

#### The search for a new economic model

Kazakhstan's economic model, based on years of over-reliance on oil and raw-material exports, has exhausted itself. The economy remains poorly industrialized and undiversified, requiring the government to search for new national development strategies. As part of the leadership's plan to offset oil dependence, Kazakhstan aspires to become the transport, telecommunications and investment hub for Eurasian integration.

To this end, Nur-Sultan is focusing on the development of logistical and transport arteries, both within Kazakhstan and linking to outside markets, through its Nurly Zhol ('Bright Path') programme, launched in 2014. This programme, highly synchronized with China's BRI, is behind significant construction works.<sup>312</sup> Between 2003 and 2016, the length of roads in public use in Kazakhstan increased by more than 7,000 km, and the length of railways by more than 1,450 km. In addition, major port developments were undertaken in Khorgos, Aktau and Kuryk.<sup>313</sup> One consequence of the push by both Kazakhstan and China for greater connectivity has been an improvement in intra-Central Asian linkages and infrastructure. The installation of fibre-optic cable along railways and pipelines for the China–Europe transport corridor, for example, also facilitates Kazakhstan's agenda of becoming a telecommunications hub for Central Asia.<sup>314</sup>

The creation of logistical hubs in the region could have the knock-on effect of boosting intra-regional Central Asian trade and, crucially, reducing transit times for exports and imports. Kazakhstan takes the official position that the BRI will accelerate trade by helping to address the underdeveloped state of infrastructure in the region, often cited as a major reason for the high cost of transporting goods both within Central Asia and between Central Asia and other regions. In 2014, the times required for the export and import of goods across the region were two to four times greater than for similar operations in South Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>315</sup> The World Bank's director for Central Asia recently noted that it is faster to send cargo from Poland to Shanghai than from one Central Asian country to another.<sup>316</sup>

However, it is important to note that poor connectivity is not the sole cause of the low levels of Central Asian intra-regional trade recorded in the post-Soviet period. Consequently, the introduction of new transport infrastructure does not in and of itself presage a diminution in the multitude of barriers that currently impede cross-border commerce. Not least of these are the informal payments that are a ubiquitous feature of the region's border regimes. As Alexander Cooley has argued, the development of externally backed logistical networks – such as the Northern Distribution Network, used to transport non-lethal military supplies to US troops in Afghanistan via Central Asia – not only failed to stimulate improvements in cross-border efficiency but led

<sup>312</sup> Ordabaev, A. (2016), *Transport Corridors of South Asia and Caucasus*, The Institute of World Economics and Politics (IWEPP) under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan–The Leader of the Nation, working paper, September 2016, p. 7.

<sup>313</sup> Voices On Central Asia (2018), 'How Kazakhstan Is Trying to Reform Itself to Become A Regional Economic Hub', 16 April 2018, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/how-kazakhstan-is-trying-to-reform-itself-to-become-a-regional-economic-hub/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>314</sup> Sultangalieva (2016), *Kazakhstan and Its Neighbours*, p. 21.

<sup>315</sup> Cooley, A. (2016), *The Emerging Political Economy of OBOR*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, pp. 11–12, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161021\\_Cooley\\_OBOR\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161021_Cooley_OBOR_Web.pdf) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>316</sup> Astrasheuskaya, N. (2019), 'Central Asian states plan 'silk visa' in bid to revive trade', *Financial Times*, 6 May 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/23a16e02-553a-11e9-a3db-1fe89bedc16e> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

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to state-sponsored hikes in transit rates. Cooley has posited that the BRI could end up increasing cross-border transaction costs if Central Asian customs officials – who depend on the informal revenues accrued at border crossings – use the expected rise in traffic as an opportunity to hike road and rail rates.<sup>317</sup>

China's BRI has given rise to a number of other concerns. These include the prospects of increased Chinese leverage over BRI partner countries, rising debt associated with investment financing, heightened anti-China sentiment, greater opportunities for graft, and the potential utilization of Central Asian states as resource extraction bases. Despite the many pitfalls, however, the authorities in Nur-Sultan have maintained that the BRI, which places Central Asia and Xinjiang at the centre of its land corridors, stands to solidify Kazakhstan's status as a major transportation hub linking East and West. This would allow the economy to benefit from transit trade and easier access to goods in neighbouring countries.

#### The 'Uzbekistan factor' and enhanced prospects for intra-regional cooperation

*The liberalization of Uzbekistan's large market helps to smooth the way for the development of major transport, communications and energy projects in the region that fall under the BRI umbrella*

Following the death in 2016 of Uzbekistan's long-serving authoritarian ruler, Islam Karimov, the country's new leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, began his presidency by declaring a thaw in relations with Uzbekistan's immediate neighbours, resolving many border disputes, resuming inter-regional flights and easing restrictions at border crossings. Mirziyoyev broke with Karimov's protectionist policies by abolishing import duties on more than 30 product groups, in an effort to depoliticize and 'de-ideologize' relations with neighbouring countries and increase their access to Uzbekistan's market.

The liberalization of Uzbekistan's large market not only helps to smooth the way for the development of major transport, communications and energy projects in the region that fall under the BRI umbrella; it has also boosted Central Asian intra-regional cooperation as a whole. In April 2019, officials from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a memorandum of understanding on the establishment of an international centre for trade and economic cooperation on their shared border, for the purpose of streamlining cross-border trade and creating a large trade and logistics hub for Central Asia. The new facility is expected to centralize trade interactions with the other Central Asian countries, consolidate and regulate trade flows, and improve transport logistics.<sup>318</sup>

Tashkent's reforms also have the potential to further Nur-Sultan's aspiration to become not only a leading Asian financial axis but also Central Asia's main financial hub. Kazakhstan has been pushing hard to promote this goal, and on 5 July 2018 the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC) was launched. The AIFC has been conceived as part of a plan to wean Kazakhstan's economy from its dependence on oil and gas revenues, although it has yet to deliver significant results in this respect. Given that one of Kazakhstan's goals is to stimulate investment and develop regional capital markets, its aim to become the chief banker for the entire region is closely linked to Uzbekistan's economic prosperity.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Cooley (2016), *The Emerging Political Economy of OBOR*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>318</sup> Yergaliyeva, A. (2019), 'Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan Hope Planned Border Trading Centre Will Boost Trade to \$5 Billion by End of 2020', *The Astana Times*, 26 April 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2019/04/kazakhstan-uzbekistan-hope-planned-border-trading-centre-will-boost-trade-to-5-billion-by-end-of-2020/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>319</sup> Lillis, J. (2018), 'Will Astana's financial gamble pay off?', *Eurasianet*, 7 August 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-will-astanas-financial-gamble-pay-off> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).



The strengthening of Kazakhstan's ties with Uzbekistan, involving frequent talks between the two countries' leaderships, has slowly kick-started regional cooperation as a whole. The shift in Uzbekistan's regional policy, while still in the early stages, has improved dialogue among the Central Asian states and could gradually lead to a consensus regarding the benefits of increased trade and cooperation in key spheres. Such cooperation would potentially allow the states to formulate joint solutions to regional problems, such as water and energy issues, security concerns and drug-trafficking; to elaborate common positions on the policies of external powers, especially China and Russia; and, not least, to avoid being pushed ever further into the 'raw materials peripheral zone of global economic processes'.<sup>320</sup>

In March 2018, in a clear manifestation of the strengthening of regional relations, leaders from the five Central Asian countries convened at the same table in Kazakhstan's capital to discuss regional issues (Turkmenistan was represented by its parliamentary chair).<sup>321</sup> The Astana summit marked the first time since 2009 that all five states had met to discuss greater cooperation as a region. Notably, no external hegemon was present. President Mirziyoyev had previously proposed the idea of an all-Central Asian summit in September 2017, although it was Nazarbayev who offered to host the first gathering in Astana on the eve of the Nowruz festival (celebrated on the vernal equinox), in part to avoid speculation that Uzbekistan might be attempting to regain its former status as regional hegemon.<sup>322</sup>

*Previous attempts at regional cooperation have been overtaken by Russia, leaving Central Asia without its own coordinating body*

Given that Russia has little interest in seeing successful intra-regional cooperation in Central Asia, the leaderships of both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were keen to stress at the outset of the summit that there would be no discussion of integration or institutionalization. Previous attempts at regional cooperation have been overtaken by Russia, leaving Central Asia without its own coordinating body: in 1994, a regional cooperation structure with an exclusively Central Asian membership, the Central Asian Union (CAU), was set up by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for the purpose of forming a common economic area. Tajikistan joined in 1998, while Turkmenistan consistently declined invitations to join. In 1998 the CAU was renamed the Central Asian Economic Union, and in 2001 it was rechristened again as the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO).<sup>323</sup> The CACO ceased to exist in 2005 after merging with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (which later became the EAEU).

Some long-time observers of Central Asia have claimed that 'so successful was the CAEU [sic] that Vladimir Putin asked to be admitted as an observer and then demanded that Russia be included as a member ... Putin promptly dismissed the group and merged its members into what later became the Eurasian Economic Union'.<sup>324</sup> While it is true that

<sup>320</sup> Satpayev, D. (2017), 'Казахстан и Узбекистан: партнеры или конкуренты?' [Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: partners or competitors?], Forbes.kz, 27 March 2017, [https://forbes.kz/process/expertise/kazakhstan\\_i\\_uzbekistan\\_partneryi\\_ili\\_konkurentyi/](https://forbes.kz/process/expertise/kazakhstan_i_uzbekistan_partneryi_ili_konkurentyi/) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>321</sup> Owing to his tour of the Gulf states, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow was the only head of state not to attend the Astana meeting; instead, the speaker of Turkmenistan's parliament, Akja Nurberdiyeva, led her country's delegation. Perhaps the most interesting meeting, between Nazarbayev and Serdar Berdimuhamedow, the son of the current president of Turkmenistan and unofficial heir apparent, went mostly unnoticed. See Bohr, A. (2018), 'Making dynastic rule fashionable again: the case of Turkmenistan', Eurasianet, 27 June 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-making-dynastic-rule-fashionable-again-the-case-of-turkmenistan> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>322</sup> Author's interviews in Astana with Dr Sanat Kushkumbayev, Deputy Director, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, February 2018; and in Almaty with Andrey Chebotarev, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Research 'Alternativa', February 2018.

<sup>323</sup> Bohr (2004), 'Regionalism in Central Asia', pp. 486–87.

<sup>324</sup> Kausikan, Starr and Cheng (2017), 'Central Asia: All Together Now'.

Russian designs for the CACO hastened its demise, it is far from the case that the Central Asian states actively resisted integration into the Eurasian Economic Community; rather, they allowed external powers to ‘divide and conquer’ the CACO, in part through their own inability to articulate common positions on the vast majority of issues. Not a single joint regional project, such as a common economic space or a long-discussed water and energy consortium, was successfully set in motion by the CACO. Indeed, the only concrete result of Central Asian cooperation throughout the entire period was the creation of a nuclear non-proliferation zone.

A major factor behind the ultimate demise of the CACO was Uzbekistan’s ‘beggar thy neighbour’ policies. Since 1999 Tashkent had enforced a rigorous visa regime, mined its border regions, expelled residents from border areas, unilaterally demarcated certain border territories and regularly cut off energy supplies to its neighbours. As a consequence, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan viewed regional groupings containing external actors – which provided a built-in counterweight to Uzbekistan – as more promising options to contain Uzbekistan. Since Karimov’s death in 2016, Uzbekistan’s volte-face towards its neighbours has changed that regional dynamic, potentially allowing the five states to elaborate policies for the region without the presence of an external actor.

At the end of the March 2018 summit, no communiqué or declaration was announced, primarily to avoid excessive attention from Russia.<sup>325</sup> However, the five leaders did announce their intention to meet on an annual basis and to create a five-sided working commission at the level of deputy prime minister to support regional trade and agreements on water/energy issues.<sup>326</sup> Since the landmark meeting in 2018, Kazakhstan has worked to introduce a Schengen-like single tourist visa for the region – known as the Silk Road Visa – to facilitate cross-border tourism. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are set to launch this common visa before the end of 2019, and authorities in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have expressed interest in joining the project.

In an additional development, the inaugural session of the Central Asian Economic Forum was held in Tashkent in March 2019, at which it was declared that closer cooperation among Central Asian countries had resulted in increased trade turnover. Volumes remain modest: in 2018 Kazakhstan’s volume of annual trade with its Central Asian neighbours increased by 18.4 per cent over 2017 levels to \$4.3 billion.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Author’s interviews in Astana with Dr Sanat Kushkumbayev, Deputy Director, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, February 2018; and in Almaty with Andrey Chebotarev, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Research ‘Alternativa’, February 2018.

<sup>326</sup> RFE/RL (2018), ‘Rare Central Asian summit signals regional thaw’, 15 March 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asian-summit-astana-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-turkmenistan/29101686.html> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

Kazakhstan has welcomed Uzbekistan’s move to restore the all-Central Asian electrical network, which is a significant step towards furthering cooperation on water and energy issues.

<sup>327</sup> In 2018, trade with Uzbekistan increased by 25.3 per cent (to \$2.5 billion), with Kyrgyzstan by 13.1 per cent (to \$865.3 million) and with Tajikistan by more than 8 per cent (to \$845.9 million). See Fergana (2019), ‘Внешнеторговый оборот Казахстана за год вырос почти на 20%’ [Kazakhstan’s foreign trade turnover grew by almost 20% over the year], 13 February 2019, <https://fergana.agency/news/105161/> (accessed 1 Nov. 2019).

**Table 3: Kazakhstan's trade with the Central Asian states, Russia and China as a percentage of its total foreign trade turnover (\$)**

	2000		2005		2010		2015		2018	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
<b>World total (\$ million)</b>	<b>5,040</b>	<b>8,812</b>	<b>17,353</b>	<b>27,849</b>	<b>31,127</b>	<b>60,271</b>	<b>30,568</b>	<b>45,956</b>	<b>33,659</b>	<b>61,111</b>
China	3.00%	7.65%	7.20%	8.70%	12.73%	16.79%	16.64%	11.92%	16.00%	10.32%
Kyrgyz Republic	0.60%	0.66%	0.68%	0.81%	0.53%	0.70%	0.60%	1.13%	0.72%	1.07%
Russian Federation	48.40%	19.87%	37.98%	10.51%	39.38%	9.48%	34.45%	9.90%	39.33%	8.64%
Tajikistan	0.09%	0.60%	0.10%	0.54%	0.05%	0.43%	0.54%	0.91%	0.94%	0.86%
Turkmenistan	0.86%	0.08%	0.04%	0.09%	0.03%	0.15%	0.21%	0.25%	0.03%	0.14%
Uzbekistan	1.40%	1.51%	1.50%	0.85%	1.52%	1.82%	2.37%	2.05%	3.43%	2.68%

Sources: Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Committee on Statistics (2019), *Внешняя торговля Республики Казахстан 2014–2018* [Foreign Trade of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2014–2018]; Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Committee on Statistics (2015), *Foreign Trade of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2010–2014*: Statistical collection; Агентство Республики Казахстан по Статистике [Statistical Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan] (2006), *Социально-экономическое Развитие Республики Казахстан* [Socio-economic Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan]; Агентство Республики Казахстан по Статистике [Statistical Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan] (2006), *Взаимная торговля стран-членов ЕврАзЭС в 2005 году* [Mutual trade of EurAsEC member countries in 2005]; Агентство Республики Казахстан по Статистике [Statistical Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan] (2002), *Внешняя торговля и совместное предпринимательство Республики Казахстан* [Foreign trade and joint ventures of the Republic of Kazakhstan]. All documents available at <http://stat.gov.kz/edition/publication/month> (accessed 7 Nov. 2019). See also Nadyrov, Sh. M. (2015), *Торгово-экономические аспекты сотрудничества Казахстана и Узбекистана* [Trade and economic aspects of the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan cooperation], Sauran Information and Analytical Centre, 17 November 2015, <http://cc-sauran.kz/rubriki/economika/141-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-invest.html#a> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019); and Государственный комитет Туркменистана по статистике [Turkmenistan National Committee on Statistics] (2011), *Внешняя торговля Туркменистана со странами мира в 2010 году* [Turkmenistan's external trade with other countries in 2010], cited in Jumaev, I. (2012), *Внешняя торговля Туркменистана: тенденции, проблемы и перспективы* [Turkmenistan's external trade: trends, problems and perspectives], Report No. 11/2012, Bishkek: University of Central Asia, <https://www.ucentralasia.org/Content/downloads/UCA-IPPA-WP11-Turkmenistan-Rus.pdf> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

Kazakhstan used the Economic Forum to initiate the creation of the Council for the Development of Transport and Transit Corridors of Central and South Asia, an inter-state advisory and coordinating body that is also to include representatives from Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. During Kazakhstan's membership of the UN Security Council in 2017–18, it organized the first visit in seven years by Security Council members to Afghanistan. Yet while Kazakhstan's official establishment regards support for Afghanistan as an important investment in regional stability, it does not regard that state as an integral part of the Central Asian region. The deputy director of the Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Dr Sanat Kushkumbayev, has stated: 'Although we view Afghanistan as an important participant and observer in all regional political and economic processes, we speak with caution about Afghanistan as a part of our region, given that it has not evolved in step with us and has been heavily influenced by the South Asian model of development.'<sup>328</sup>

<sup>328</sup> Author's interviews in Astana, February 2018.

**Table 4: Population figures for the Central Asian states, '000s**

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2018
Kazakhstan	14,884	15,147	16,322	17,543	18,276
Kyrgyz Republic	4,898	5,163	5,448	5,957	6,316
Tajikistan	6,216	6,789	7,527	8,454	9,101
Turkmenistan	4,516	4,755	5,087	5,565	5,851
Uzbekistan	24,650	26,167	28,562	31,299	32,955
<b>Total</b>	<b>55,165</b>	<b>58,021</b>	<b>62,947</b>	<b>68,818</b>	<b>72,499</b>

Source: World Bank (undated), 'Population, total – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=KZ-KG-TJ-TM-UZ> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

**Table 5: GDP per capita for the Central Asian states, \$**

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2018
Kazakhstan	1,229	3,771	9,070	10,511	9,331
Kyrgyz Republic	280	477	880	1,121	1,281
Tajikistan	138	341	750	929	827
Turkmenistan	643	1,704	4,439	6,433	6,967
Uzbekistan	558	547	1,377	2,615	1,532

Source: World Bank (undated), 'GDP per capita (current US\$) – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?end=2018&locations=KZ-KG-TJ-UZ-TM&start=2000> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

## Part two: The state of bilateral relations

### Relations with Uzbekistan

Given Uzbekistan's large consumer market and Kazakhstan's own economic size, relations between the two countries are key to prospects for the region's long-term growth and, indeed, determine the regional climate. By virtue of its position as Central Asia's strategic heartland, its historic standing and its large population (accounting for more than 45 per cent of the five-country total), Uzbekistan was recognized during Soviet rule as Central Asia's regional power. By many accounts it should have overtaken Kazakhstan in the post-Soviet era to become the region's biggest economic success story. Under Karimov's rule, however, Uzbekistan stuck to price supports long after Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had abandoned them – with disastrous consequences for entrepreneurial activity. As things stand, Kazakhstan is the region's undisputed economic leader: its nominal GDP is over three times greater than that of Uzbekistan, and accounts for almost two-thirds of the region's total.<sup>329</sup>

<sup>329</sup> World Bank (2019), 'GDP (current US\$) – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?contextual=default&locations=KZ-KG-TJ-TM-UZ> (accessed 28 Oct. 2019).

Officials in Kazakhstan have stressed that Uzbekistan's recent partial opening will foster healthy competition between the two states, particularly in developing the manufacturing sectors of the two countries.<sup>330</sup> Rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan exists, even if reports of such rivalry are often exaggerated. It is conceivable that sustained liberalization of Uzbekistan's economy and a concomitant improvement in its business and investment climate could result in the diversion of some investments and market activity from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan (despite Kazakhstan's long-standing status as the region's economic powerhouse). Moreover, Uzbekistan has the advantage of already having undergone a change of executive, while Kazakhstan's power transition is only in the incipient stages; it remains unclear which developments await Kazakhstan once Nazarbayev – who still wields power as 'Leader of the Nation' (*Elbasy*) and lifelong chair of the government's Security Council – leaves the scene permanently.

Especially at the time of the collapse of the USSR, the economies of the Central Asian states were more competitive than complementary, given that the five countries exported a relatively limited range of commodities and that there was substantial overlap between each state's principal export commodities (gold, cotton, energy, etc.). However, the economic patterns are somewhat more diversified today. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have certain market complementarities: Kazakhstan supplies its southern neighbour with oil, flour and wheat; Uzbekistan supplies Kazakhstan with fertilizers, fruits and vegetables. Although Kazakhstan's manufacturing base has slowly shrunk since the early 2000s, Uzbekistan's has grown relative to the size of its economy during the same period.<sup>331</sup> Kazakhstan could therefore be a key export market for Uzbekistan's manufactured goods, which include agricultural and electronic equipment and automobiles.<sup>332</sup>

The two economies are also potentially complementary in terms of labour supply and demand: Kazakhstan has insufficient labour resources in particular regions and sectors, such as seasonal labour in agriculture; at the same time, workers from regions in Uzbekistan with labour surpluses are willing to travel abroad for temporary work.<sup>333</sup> Uzbekistan has a far greater labour force at its disposal than does Kazakhstan: 19.4 million persons of working age in the former compared to 10.8 million in the latter, as of 1 January 2017. However, as a percentage of the total, the working-age population is virtually identical in each country: 60.0 per cent in Kazakhstan and 60.5 per cent in Uzbekistan; that said, Kazakhstan has a larger pension-age cohort in percentage

<sup>330</sup> Author's interviews in Astana with Ruslan Izimov and Jumabek Sarabekov, The Institute of World Economics and Politics (IWEPP) under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan–The Leader of the Nation, February 2018; and with Dr Sanat Kushkumbayev, Deputy Director, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, February 2018. See also BBC Monitoring Central Asia (2018), 'Putin's visit triggers Kazakh-Uzbek competition' (KazTAG news agency, 23 October 2018), 26 October 2018.

<sup>331</sup> From 2000 to 2011, manufacturing as a share of GDP in Kazakhstan dropped from 18 to 12 per cent, while during the same period manufacturing as a share of Uzbekistan's GDP rose from 13 to 22 per cent. United Nations (2019), 'National Accounts – Analysis of Main Aggregates (AMA)', <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnllist.asp>, quoted in Kourmanova, A. (2013), *Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Nurturing from the Ground Up*, George Washington University, Central Asia Program, p. 8, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CAF-papers-Kourmanova.pdf> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>332</sup> It should be noted, however, that Kazakhstan holds the ambition to build on some of its joint ventures and move away from an imports-for-assembly model, which would go some way towards eroding complementarities between the two markets. The author is indebted to an anonymous peer reviewer for this observation.

<sup>333</sup> Sadovskaya, E. (2017), 'Миграция между Казахстаном и Узбекистаном в XXI в.: демографическое, экономическое, политическое измерени' [Migration between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the XXI century: demographic, economic, political dimensions], *Kazakhstan Spektr*, 4(82): p. 79, <http://kisi.kz/uploads/33/files/8kJZd5Sf.pdf> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

terms.<sup>334</sup> At present, migrants from Uzbekistan account for only 7.8 per cent of Kazakhstan's officially registered labour force; however, as only 10–25 per cent of citizens from Uzbekistan coming to work in Kazakhstan are registered, the actual figure is much higher.<sup>335</sup> By and large, labour migrants in Kazakhstan from Uzbekistan work in agriculture, construction and trade, and as domestic labourers, e.g. as nannies, cooks and cleaners.

The official visits of President Mirziyoyev to Kazakhstan in March and April 2017 and of President Nazarbayev to Uzbekistan in September of the same year opened new possibilities for cooperation. In May 2017, South Kazakhstan Province,<sup>336</sup> which contains a large Uzbek diaspora<sup>337</sup> and accounts for 30 per cent of bilateral trade, established 11 industrial zones for joint projects.<sup>338</sup> Uzbekistan's leadership, in particular, hopes to increase cooperation in the oil and gas sector. To this end, the two countries have agreed to build and commission by 2021 an oil pipeline between the cities of Shymkent in southern Kazakhstan and Jizzakh in central Uzbekistan; the pipeline is due to have an annual capacity of 5 million tonnes.<sup>339</sup> In 2018, bilateral trade rose by more than 25 per cent to \$2.5 billion; the Joint Inter-governmental Commission on bilateral cooperation has been tasked with increasing this to \$5 billion by 2020.

### Relations with Kyrgyzstan

Kazakhstan is Kyrgyzstan's second-largest export market after Switzerland (where Kyrgyzstan sends its gold), and money from Kazakhstan has traditionally played a major role in Kyrgyzstan's economy. In 2007, Kazakhstan-based bankers controlled up to 50 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's banking sector, and Kazakhstan was Kyrgyzstan's largest foreign direct investor.<sup>340</sup> Despite these economic realities, Kyrgyzstan is sceptical about the prospects for Central Asian cooperation. It views neither Kazakhstan nor Uzbekistan as suitable candidates for regional leader, given that both economies are insufficiently diversified and remain reliant on natural resources.<sup>341</sup> Moreover, a political clash in 2017 between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan damaged the former's image among citizens of Kyrgyzstan. Popular opinion in Kyrgyzstan has since turned towards favouring increased economic and cultural cooperation with Uzbekistan.<sup>342</sup>

The political clash was a result of events in September 2017, during the run-up to Kyrgyzstan's presidential election, when Nazarbayev met in Astana with Omurbek Babanov, one of the leading candidates in the presidential race. Nazarbayev remarked:

<sup>334</sup> Overall, Uzbekistan's demographics are slightly more favourable in so far as the gap in life expectancy between men and women is only 4.8 years in Uzbekistan, while it is 9.4 years in Kazakhstan. Sadovskaya (2017), 'Миграция между Казахстаном и Узбекистаном в XXI в.', p. 66.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., pp. 72–73.

<sup>336</sup> Renamed Turkistan in 2019.

<sup>337</sup> As of 1 January 2017, there were 803,400 ethnic Kazakhs in Uzbekistan (2.5 per cent of the population), residing primarily in Karakalpakstan and the Tashkent region. As of 1 January 2016, there were 548,800 ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan (3.1 per cent of the population), of whom 480,000 lived in South Kazakhstan Province, bordering Uzbekistan. Sadovskaya (2017), 'Миграция между Казахстаном и Узбекистаном в XXI в.', p. 67.

<sup>338</sup> Yeniseyev, M. (2017), 'New era of co-operation between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan bringing benefits', Central Asia News, 23 May 2017, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2017/05/23/feature-01](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/05/23/feature-01) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>339</sup> Eurasianet (2019), 'Kazakhstan to send 2 million tons of oil to Uzbekistan', 3 April 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-to-send-2-million-tons-of-oil-to-uzbekistan> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>340</sup> Kourmanova (2013), *Regional Cooperation in Central Asia*, p. 8.

<sup>341</sup> Musabaeva, A. (2018), 'Центральноазиатская интеграция тогда и сейчас: взгляд из Кыргызстана' [Central Asian Integration Then and Now: The View from Kyrgyzstan], Central Asia Analytical Network, 15 February 2018, <https://caa-network.org/archives/12391> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

'I am not going to meddle in these matters ... but I think that Kyrgyzstan needs a competent, young and experienced man like you.'<sup>343</sup> Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev, who openly supported his own candidate, Sooronbay Zheenbekov, reacted with a personal lambasting of Nazarbayev and his policies, noting the latter's advanced age and criticizing Kazakhstan's meagre state pensions and high tariffs (despite relatively high GDP).<sup>344</sup> Officials in Astana called Atambayev's inflammatory remarks 'irresponsible and provocative in their essence', while their counterparts in Bishkek accused Kazakhstan of attempting to influence the 'choice of the people of Kyrgyzstan and interfering in the internal affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic'.<sup>345</sup> Not long afterwards, Kazakhstan's border authorities strengthened controls over flows of people and goods from Kyrgyzstan, creating bottlenecks of large numbers of cargo trucks, cars and travellers.

Two months later, in November 2017, Kyrgyzstan's prime minister accused Kazakhstan of failing to implement the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) free-trade agreement. This prompted Kazakhstan's prime minister to confirm his country's obligations within the EAEU, noting that the increased inspection of vehicles at the border was intended to foil the smuggling of contraband from China and to avert the import of goods that did not meet regulations.<sup>346</sup> Kyrgyzstan registered complaints with the World Trade Organization and the EAEU, but withdrew these in December 2017 after the signature by both sides of a 50-point roadmap regulating bilateral cooperation in transport, veterinary control, and customs and tax administration. This marked the formal end of the two-month mini-trade war.<sup>347</sup>

The closure of a border that was supposed to have been open by virtue of both states' EAEU commitments merely underscored the ambiguous benefits of membership of that organization. Having joined the EAEU to avoid economic isolation, Kazakhstan then proceeded to demonstrate to its neighbour, via the temporary border controls, that membership provided no guarantees against an economic blockade. A rise in mutual trade had been anticipated following Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EAEU; in the event, bilateral trade levels decreased, in part owing to the disruption of Kyrgyzstan's trade with China and the concomitant loss of revenues from the re-export of Chinese goods. Prior to 2015, thousands of Central Asian households had received income from shuttle trade centred on the huge Kara Suu market in southern Kyrgyzstan and the Bishkek-based Dordoy market in the north (which served Kazakhstan), but both markets were wiped out by Kyrgyzstan's entry into the EAEU.

The feud between the two states caught Kazakhstan's leadership by surprise. It also served as a lesson, prompting Kazakhstan to review its 'little brother' policy towards Kyrgyzstan. Given the loss of Kyrgyzstan's re-export market, in particular, officials in

<sup>343</sup> See Sharip, F. (2017), 'Nazarbayev's gambit on the Kyrgyz election chessboard: reasons for courting Omurbek Babanov', Eurasian Daily Monitor, 27 September 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/nazarbayevs-gambit-on-the-kyrgyz-election-chessboard-reasons-for-courting-omurbek-babanov/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>344</sup> Central Asia Analytical Network (2017), 'Почему поссорились два президента, или что действительно мешает региональной интеграции?' [Why two presidents argued, or what is actually hindering regional integration?], 14 October 2017, <https://caa-network.org/archives/10495> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> BBC Monitoring Central Asia (2017), 'Kazakh, Kyrgyz premiers trade accusations at CIS session', 3 November 2017.

<sup>347</sup> Putz, C. (2017), 'Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan Make Up, Move Forward', *The Diplomat*, 5 December 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/kyrgyzstan-and-kazakhstan-make-up-move-forward/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019); and Putz, C. (2017), 'Are Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan on the Path Back to Brotherly Relations?', *The Diplomat*, 2 December 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/are-kazakhstan-and-kyrgyzstan-on-the-path-back-to-brotherly-relations/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

Kazakhstan have expressed regret at not having taken measures earlier to address Bishkek's concerns, particularly to ensure goods access to the common market.<sup>348</sup> Nonetheless, reports of problems at the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border, including bans and counter-bans, continued throughout 2019.<sup>349</sup>

### Relations with Turkmenistan

In recent years Turkmenistan has stepped up its efforts to develop transport and energy projects with its Central Asian neighbours, appearing to understand that greater connectivity has the potential to ease its economic crisis without necessarily undermining its sovereignty.<sup>350</sup> This in turn has benefited Kazakhstan. For example, the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran railway, inaugurated in 2014, increases Kazakhstan's attractiveness as a transit link along the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor, which connects China and Europe via Kazakhstan and Russia. Kazakhstan's border with Turkmenistan now provides a direct route to the Gulf region, and thus presents the authorities in Nur-Sultan with several new opportunities for economic diversification. The Turkmenistan–China gas pipeline has also enabled Kazakhstan to foster its ties with Turkmenistan, as the pipeline traverses both countries' territory. Plans are also under way to route electricity from Turkmenistan via Uzbekistan's power system to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

During the state visit of Turkmenistan's president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, to Kazakhstan in April 2017, the two countries signed a strategic partnership treaty and an agreement on border demarcation.<sup>351</sup> However, since commodities dominate both countries' exports, trade levels are low: Turkmenistan's share of Kazakhstan's foreign trade was a mere 0.1 per cent in 2018 (see Table 3).

### Relations with Tajikistan

As with the other Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has declared its intention to increase its trade with Tajikistan.<sup>352</sup> Economics aside, both countries have increasingly turned to repressive measures in recent years for the stated aim of fighting religious radicalism. In the case of Tajikistan, in 2015 authorities outlawed the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which for years had acted as the principle force of political opposition to the regime of Emomali Rahmon, president of Tajikistan since 1992. The IRPT was declared a terrorist group in 2015, and its leaders were tried and imprisoned. In January 2018, Kazakhstan's leadership proposed a bill that would give law enforcement and security bodies powers to monitor 'suspicious' citizens, proposing visual guidelines for

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<sup>348</sup> Author's interviews in Astana with Dr Sanat Kushkumbayev, Deputy Director, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, February 2018; and Ruslan Izimov and Jumabek Sarabekov, The Institute of World Economics and Politics (IWEP) under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan–The Leader of the Nation, February 2018.

<sup>349</sup> Eurasianet.org (2019), 'Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan trade hiccups force questions on EAEU', 29 July 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-trade-hiccups-force-questions-on-eaeu> (accessed 20 Sep. 2019).

<sup>350</sup> Bohr, A. (2016), *Turkmenistan: Power, Politics and Petro-Authoritarianism*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 66–68, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/turkmenistan-power-politics-and-petro-authoritarianism>.

<sup>351</sup> Orazgaliyeva, M. (2017), 'Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan Sign Strategic Partnership Agreement, Border Accord', *The Astana Times*, 20 April 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/04/kazakhstan-turkmenistan-sign-strategic-partnership-agreement-border-accord/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>352</sup> Azernews (2018), 'Kazakhstan, Tajikistan set to increase trade turnover', 14 March 2018, <https://www.azernews.az/region/128768.html> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).



the identification of radicals, such as beard styles or clothing that conceals the face. The draft law also sets out strict regulations for attaining a religious education abroad, tightens control over religious organizations' finances and puts forward a definition of 'destructive religious teaching'.<sup>353</sup> Consequently, it came as no great surprise when Kazakhstan's minister of religious affairs met with the chairman of Tajikistan's religious affairs committee on the sidelines of the Astana summit in March 2018 to sign a memorandum on cooperation in countering religious extremism, citing the threat of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants returning to the region.<sup>354</sup>

## Conclusion

*Although still modest in relative terms, trade turnover between the Central Asian states in 2018 grew by 35 per cent on the previous year to \$12.2 billion*

Owing to the confluence of factors set out in this chapter, Kazakhstan has begun to identify itself more clearly as an integral part of Central Asia rather than as a mere intermediary between the other Central Asian states and Russia. The result has been a palpable and growing trend towards cooperation within the Central Asian region itself. Although still modest in relative terms, trade turnover between the Central Asian states in 2018 grew by 35 per cent on the previous year to \$12.2 billion.<sup>355</sup> At the outset of the historic five-state consultative meeting in Astana in March 2018 – the first to bring together the leaderships of all five Central Asian states in nearly a decade – President Nazarbayev declared: 'In order to solve the problems of Central Asia, we do not need any third persons. We ourselves can resolve all questions, and that is why we are meeting.'<sup>356</sup> With regard to the question of regional leadership, while Nazarbayev was seen as the undisputed elder statesman until his resignation in March 2019, Kazakhstan's new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, will certainly not have the same gravitas as that enjoyed by the country's First President and official 'Leader of the Nation'. In addition, it remains unclear to what extent Uzbekistan's own relatively new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, will manage to raise his regional stature in the coming years.

As the need for more efficient mechanisms to improve intra-regional trade becomes increasingly evident, the Central Asian leaderships would benefit from adopting measures to boost border efficiency, in particular by tackling informal payments and other non-tariff barriers. Such policies could reinforce the potential gains to be achieved from projects such as the planned international centre for trade and economic cooperation on the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border. At the same time, if interactions between independent business and social networks in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were to develop significantly over a sustained period, informal regional cooperation could deepen from the ground up. It is precisely this form of informal or 'soft' regionalism – akin to the model adopted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – that is being advocated by a group of Kazakhstan's leading political analysts. In particular, they argue that a focus on consensus-seeking and continuous consultation, rather than on formal

<sup>353</sup> BBC Monitoring Central Asia (2018), 'Kazakhstan to tighten laws to fight religious radicalism', 30 January 2018.

<sup>354</sup> Sharip, F. (2018), 'Kazakhstan and Tajikistan renew joint efforts to curb Islamic extremism', Eurasian Daily Monitor, 22 March 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/kazakhstan-tajikistan-renew-joint-efforts-curb-islamic-extremism/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>355</sup> *The Tashkent Times* (2019), 'Maiden Central Asian economic forum held in Tashkent', 19 March 2019, <http://tashkenttimes.uz/economy/3668-maiden-central-asian-economic-forum-held-in-tashkent> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>356</sup> Goble, P. (2018), 'Central Asia Ready to Move on Without Russia', Eurasian Daily Monitor, 20 March 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asia-ready-move-without-russia/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

integration and the creation of the structures associated with it, would allow Kazakhstan to develop Central Asian intra-regional cooperation, while at the same time continuing its participation in the process of Eurasian integration.<sup>357</sup>

Yet while Kazakhstan's leadership welcomes increased trade prospects with the other Central Asian states, it is fully cognizant that its trade with those countries cannot begin to equal that with Russia, China and Europe. This automatically makes any development of trading links with Central Asia a far lesser priority. In addition, Kazakhstan continues to give greater importance to positioning itself as a global player than as a regional leader. Not least, the leadership transition following Nazarbayev's resignation means that the country's governing establishment will invariably remain preoccupied for the immediate future with domestic politics, social stability and the domestic economy.

Russia does not view the potential establishment of a regional cooperation entity with an exclusively Central Asian membership as in its own interests. Rather, it regards Central Asian unity as subordinate to greater Eurasian cooperation, as embodied in the Russian-led EAEU. Consequently, at present, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan aim to keep cooperation within Central Asia low-key and informal, lest any efforts be hijacked or thwarted by Russia. Moreover, if the Central Asian states were to enter into an exclusive, formal cooperation structure, Russia would be likely to ramp up the pressure on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to join the EAEU (and, in the case of Uzbekistan, possibly the CSTO). This reflects Moscow's long-running quest to cement the creation of its military, political and economic bloc with a 'full set' of Central Asian actors – isolationist Turkmenistan excepted. China, on the other hand, would likely only gain from closer cooperation among the Central Asian states, as this would facilitate the realization of its own infrastructure and investment projects under the BRI.

In three decades of waxing and waning relationships with the world's largest powers, Kazakhstan's leadership has witnessed efforts by China on an unprecedented scale to connect its own regions with Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East and South Asia; by Russia to spearhead new regional organizations in order to counter Western structures; and by the US to link Central Asia and South Asia along a 'New Silk Road'. To varying degrees, each of these three external hegemon has promoted its own integration plan for Central Asia. As Kazakhstan begins its transition to a post-Nazarbayev era, the country is at last set to cooperate on a stronger footing with its Central Asian neighbours, even as its relations with major powers will remain its chief priority.

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<sup>357</sup> Qoraboyev, I. (2019) 'Центральноазиатский регионализм в контексте глобализации и регионализации' [Central Asian Regionalism in the Context of Globalization and Regionalization] in *Регионализация в Центральной Азии: Стратегия Казахстана* [Regionalization in Central Asia: Kazakhstan's Strategy], Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, pp. 85–93, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332604966\\_CENTRALNOAZIATSKIJ\\_REGIONALIZM\\_V\\_KONTEKSTE\\_GLOBALIZACII\\_I\\_REGIONALIZACII\\_Central\\_Asian\\_Regionalism\\_in\\_the\\_context\\_of\\_regionalization\\_and\\_globalization](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332604966_CENTRALNOAZIATSKIJ_REGIONALIZM_V_KONTEKSTE_GLOBALIZACII_I_REGIONALIZACII_Central_Asian_Regionalism_in_the_context_of_regionalization_and_globalization) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

# 7. Relations with Russia and China

*Nargis Kassenova*

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*Kazakhstan's two giant neighbours inevitably loom large over foreign policy. Contemporary concerns include Russian 'soft power', China's treatment of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, and the compatibility of regional integration projects.*

Since independence in 1991, fostering good relations with Russia and China has been at the core of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. This tradition looks set to continue: the foreign policy framework for 2014–20 prioritizes an alliance with Russia as well as a comprehensive strategic partnership with China.<sup>358</sup> All parties involved seem content with this triangular arrangement. They talk about mutually beneficial cooperation and purport to link their development and integration projects.

However, behind the façade of strategic good-neighbourliness, there are tensions and potential cracks. In assessing the implications for Kazakhstan, this chapter analyses three levels of foreign policy interaction: bilateral relations, regional dynamics in Eurasia, and the global system. As far as bilateral-level policies are concerned, the analysis focuses on the challenges around ethnic minorities and nation-building – in particular, issues concerning the Russian minority in Kazakhstan, the effects of Russian 'soft power' in the country, and the treatment of the ethnic Kazakh minority in China. At the regional level, developments in economic integration are considered – namely, the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Finally, at the systemic level, the chapter analyses and compares how China, Russia and Kazakhstan relate in different ways to the global order and its norms and institutions. Developments at all three levels are likely to affect – and be affected by – the unfolding and unpredictable power transition in Kazakhstan.

## The evolving challenge of the Russian minority

To varying degrees, the Russian minority in Kazakhstan has always been an important issue for the government. In the period around independence, the existence of this minority in Kazakhstan was perceived as an existential challenge. According to the 1989 census, ethnic Russians numbered 6.2 million and accounted for 37.8 per cent of the population (almost equal to the 39.7 per cent share accounted for by ethnic Kazakhs).<sup>359</sup> Ethnic Russians constituted a predominant group in the northern regions of Kazakhstan, and this stoked strong fears of separatism.

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<sup>358</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2014), 'Foreign Policy Concept for 2014–2020 Republic of Kazakhstan', <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/kontseptsiya-vneshnoj-politiki-rk-na-2014-2020-gg> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019). In September 2019, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev visited China and signed a joint statement on a China–Kazakhstan 'long-term, comprehensive, strategic partnership'. Interestingly, the Chinese media reported this as an agreement on 'permanent, comprehensive, strategic partnership'. Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), 'President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping', 11 September 2019, [http://www.akorda.kz/en/events/international\\_community/foreign\\_visits/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayev-held-talks-with-chinese-president-xi-jinping](http://www.akorda.kz/en/events/international_community/foreign_visits/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayev-held-talks-with-chinese-president-xi-jinping) (accessed 12 Sep. 2019); and Xinhuanet (2019), 'China Focus: China, Kazakhstan agree to develop permanent comprehensive strategic partnership', 12 September 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/12/c\\_138384816.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/12/c_138384816.htm) (accessed 12 Sep. 2019).

<sup>359</sup> Государственный Комитет СССР по статистике [USSR State Committee for Statistics] (1990), *Всероссийная перепись населения 1989* [All-Union Census of 1989], Moscow: 1990.

Fuelling such concerns were nationalist voices in Russia. These ranged from the venerated writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who called for the return of 'southern Siberia' and the 'southern Urals' to Russia, to the less respectable but highly popular proponent of the 'renewed Russian empire', Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who led his Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia to victory in the 1993 Duma elections in Russia.<sup>360</sup>

Under these complex circumstances, Kazakhstan's leadership adopted a carefully calibrated approach. It embraced Russia as its closest ally and partner, and tried hard to retain common economic space. Although Kazakhstan was painfully kicked out of the rouble zone in 1993, President Nursultan Nazarbayev remained committed to the economic relationship and in 1994 proposed the creation of a Eurasian Union. Thereafter he consistently continued to support Eurasian integration. His positioning on this issue removed incentives for Moscow to take a hostile approach towards Kazakhstan, and created a more comfortable environment for the country's large Russian minority.

*To accommodate rising Kazakh nationalism the government embarked on a 'Kazakh-ization' of public life. Ethnic Kazakhs received better access to positions of power and authority both in politics and the civil service*

At the same time, domestically the government stressed the importance of inter-ethnic accord. This required a nuanced policy. On the one hand, to accommodate rising Kazakh nationalism the government embarked on a 'Kazakh-ization' of public life. Ethnic Kazakhs received better access to positions of power and authority both in politics and the civil service. On the other hand, the government enshrined the principle of non-discrimination in its legislation and strictly prohibited the 'incitement of inter-ethnic discord' (an offence interpreted very broadly by the law-enforcement authorities). To accommodate the non-Kazakh and 'Russified' Kazakh population, the 1995 constitution made Russian the official language for inter-ethnic communication, stipulating that it be 'used on the basis equal with that of the Kazakh language in state bodies and bodies of local self-administration'.<sup>361</sup>

The same constitution banned dual citizenship, forcing members of the Russian minority to choose between Kazakhstan and Russia. Kazakhstan's leadership also suppressed political movements across the board, including popular and capable Russian, Slavic and Cossack ones, in order to ensure political consolidation. Importantly, both the Russian Orthodox church and the Russian government supported the diffusion and co-opting of these movements by the Kazakh government.<sup>362</sup>

Gradually, the fear receded that Moscow would use ethnic Russians to fragment Kazakhstan or as leverage for its own politics and policies. This gave way to patient expectation of the emerging 'demographic superiority' of ethnic Kazakhs in the country.<sup>363</sup> This lull was interrupted in 2008 when war broke out between Russia and Georgia, with Russia officially recognizing the independence of the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. An even bigger shock followed in 2014 with the annexation of

<sup>360</sup> Solzhenitsyn, A. (1991), 'Как нам обустроить Россию' [How to rebuild Russia], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 18 September 1990, <https://www.msk.kp.ru/daily/24141/359116/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>361</sup> See Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995), Article 7, [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=1005029](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=1005029) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>362</sup> Oka, N. (2004), 'The "Triadic Nexus" in Kazakhstan: A comparative Study of Russians, Uighurs and Koreans', in Ieda, O. (ed.) (2004), *Beyond Sovereignty: From Status Law to Transnational Citizenship?*, Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, pp. 359–80, [http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no9\\_ses/19\\_oka.pdf](http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no9_ses/19_oka.pdf) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>363</sup> Jaksylykov, S. (2016), *Отношение жителей северных регионов Казахстана к перспективе глубокой интеграции в Евразийский экономический союз: фактор гражданской и этнокультурной идентичности* [Attitude of residents of northern regions of Kazakhstan to the prospect of deep integration into the Eurasian Economic Union: factor of civic and ethno-cultural identity], Program for Young Researchers in the Sphere of Public Policy, Soros Foundation, p. 23, [https://www.soros.kz/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/relation\\_of\\_inhabitants\\_of\\_northern\\_regions.pdf](https://www.soros.kz/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/relation_of_inhabitants_of_northern_regions.pdf) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

*Kazakhstan's government has become highly worried about Moscow's capacity and possible intention to employ electronic media and internet resources to manipulate political processes or destabilize the country*

Crimea and the 'hybrid war' that Russia pursued in Ukraine. Although Russian actions in Georgia had rung alarm bells, the Ukrainian crisis was particularly disturbing to Kazakhstan due to the considerable parallels between the Russia–Ukraine relationship and the Russia–Kazakhstan one. For example, Kazakhstan had the same set of treaties on good-neighbourly relations with Russia as did Ukraine.

These developments revived fears among both Kazakhs and Kazakhstani Russians. The former were afraid that ethnic Russians would operate as 'fifth columnists', as occurred in eastern Ukraine; the latter were worried that they would be perceived as the agents and infiltrators of a hostile foreign power. This seems to have contributed to rising migration: 25,000 ethnic Russians left the country in 2016, while 27,000 did so in 2017.<sup>364</sup> As well as being motivated by fears over the geopolitical situation, some Russian families have chosen to move because of worsening problems with the secondary education system, following policy changes that have included the hasty introduction of education in three languages.<sup>365</sup>

Nazarbayev's resignation on 19 March 2019 appeared to mark the beginning of a new period in Kazakhstan's history. The new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has pledged to continue all of the government's existing policies. However, the configuration of power will inevitably change, since the system that was centred on Nazarbayev cannot be sustained without him as president. This may result in more competitive public politics and the rise of nationalist populism, and may be unsettling both for minorities and for the country as a whole.

### Concerns over Russia's 'soft power'

Over the past few years, concerns about the Russian minority have been superseded by those about Russia's 'soft power' – that is, its cultural and ideational influence. Kazakhstan's high level of 'Russification' was seen as a challenge to full sovereignty right from independence in 1991. At the same time, there was appreciation of the role of the Russian language as the conduit of modernity, science and knowledge of the world; and also recognition of its indispensability as the language of governance (on an equal basis to Kazakh) for the newly independent Kazakhstan, as stipulated in the constitution of the country.

However, over the past decade Russia's use of 'information war' techniques has added an ominous twist to traditional concerns about identity. Kazakhstan's government has become highly worried about Moscow's capacity and possible intention to employ electronic media and internet resources to manipulate political processes in Kazakhstan or even to destabilize the country altogether. Dmitry Gorenburg, an expert on Russia's military policy, echoes these fears. He believes that if an anti-Russian government comes to power in Kazakhstan, Russia's likely response would be subversive: it would

<sup>364</sup> Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Statistics (2017), *Демографический ежегодник Казахстана* [Kazakhstan's Demographic Annual Report], Astana, p. 337; and Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Statistics (2018), *Миграция населения в Республике Казахстан за 2017 год* [Migration of the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the year 2017], Vol. 21, p. 5.

<sup>365</sup> Sadyk, S. (2017), 'Вторая волна эмиграции казахстанцев в Россию: что случилось?' [The second wave of emigration of Kazakhstanis to Russia: What happened?], *Central Asia Monitor*, 15 May 2017, <https://camonitor.kz/26741-vtoraya-volna-emigracii-kazahstancsev-v-rossiyu-chto-sluchilos.html> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

seek to bring down the new leaders and replace them with more amenable ones. This response would involve the use of information warfare, including cyberattacks and a media and disinformation campaign.<sup>366</sup>

In 2009 Kazakhstan's then prime minister, Karim Massimov, expressed concern that 55 per cent of the population lived inside the Russian information space.<sup>367</sup> In 2011 a new (second) Information Security Concept was adopted. It acknowledged that the openness of the national information space, the popularity of foreign mass media (including television and the internet) and the low competitiveness of local media create a real threat that foreign information could influence and manipulate public consciousness in Kazakhstan.<sup>368</sup>

To address the situation, the government has tried to upgrade the national TV channels. Thus, in 2017 the state-owned Qazakhstan TV and Radio Company changed its management and upgraded its style and content, allowing for more vibrancy of opinion in its programmes. However, the independent media have seen no such relaxation; they are subject to even more rigid control, and face constant threats of suspension and closure.

The Kazakhstan government is also uncomfortable with the rampant anti-Western propaganda on Russian TV. This does not sit well with Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy and its deep interest in maintaining close links with the West. A programme on the Channel One Eurasia TV channel covering land protests in 2016, which showed a faked video of people receiving US dollars for taking part, outraged domestic public opinion. Interestingly, in an unexpected chain of events, the security services accused a businessman, Tokhtar Tuleshov, of having sponsored the protests and attempting a coup.<sup>369</sup> Tuleshov had a strong affinity for Russia and claimed to hold positions as an adviser to Russia's State Duma on economic cooperation, as an adviser to the chief *ataman* of the Cossack associations of Kazakhstan on strengthening allied relations with Russia, and as adviser and full representative of the *Russkaya obschina* ('Russian community') of Kazakhstan.<sup>370</sup>

Fears about Russian influence may have contributed to the administration's determination to introduce a three-language education system – with classes in Kazakh, Russian and English – and to Latinize the Kazakh alphabet. Neither policy was new. In 2007 Nazarbayev, in his annual presidential address, had proposed a cultural programme known as 'Trinity of Languages' that would oblige the people of Kazakhstan to speak Kazakh as the official language, Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication, and English as the language of integration into the global economy.<sup>371</sup>

<sup>366</sup> Gorenburg, D. (2018), 'Russian Military Intervention in Kazakhstan', American Enterprise Institute, 17 January 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/russian-military-intervention-in-kazakhstan/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>367</sup> Quoted in Sabitov, D. (2016), *Информационная Безопасность Казахстана: Защита Данных и Смыслов* [Information security in Kazakhstan: protection of data and meanings], Institute of World Economics and Politics under the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Leader of the Nation, p. 49, [http://iwep.kz/files/attachments/article/2016-04-07/doklad\\_-\\_informacionnaya\\_bezопасnost\\_daniyar\\_sabitov.pdf](http://iwep.kz/files/attachments/article/2016-04-07/doklad_-_informacionnaya_bezопасnost_daniyar_sabitov.pdf) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>369</sup> Zakon.kz (2016), 'КНБ: Тулешов планировал возглавить Казахстан' [KNB: Tuleshov was planning to be the leader of Kazakhstan], 11 July 2016, <https://www.zakon.kz/4804710-knb-biznesmen-tuleshov-planiroval.html> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>370</sup> Ivanov, A. (2016), 'Кто такой Тохтар Тулешов. Интересные факты из жизни бизнесмена' [Who is Tokhtar Tuleshov. Interesting facts from the businessman's life], *Informburo.kz*, 2 February 2016, <https://informburo.kz/stati/kto-takoy-tohtar-tuleshov-interesnye-fakty-iz-zhizni-biznesmena.html> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>371</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2007), 'Послание Президента Республики Казахстан Н.Назарбаева народу Казахстана. 28 февраля 2007 г.' [Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbaev to the people of Kazakhstan, 28 February 2007], 28 February 2007, [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-nnazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-28-fevralya-2007-g](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses_of_president/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-nnazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-28-fevralya-2007-g) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

The decision to switch the alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin had also had a long gestation. The idea was first raised in 1989 during a discussion of the law ‘On Language’, but only became policy in 2012 with the announcement of ‘Strategy Kazakhstan-2050’.<sup>372</sup> In this document, Nazarbayev set 2025 as the year to complete the transition to the Latin alphabet, noting that its use would better enable Kazakhstan to integrate with the rest of the world.

### Russia shows signs of irritation

Understandably, Russian commentators did not welcome the plan to abandon the Cyrillic script. While there is little Russian interest generally in what happens in Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia, Nazarbayev’s announcement on this matter ruffled feathers in Moscow and received substantial media coverage. With Nazarbayev’s visit to the US and meeting with Donald Trump in January 2018, and Kazakhstan’s abstention on 14 April of the same year in a UN Security Council vote on a Russian-sponsored resolution denouncing US, British and French airstrikes on Syria, it seemed that Russia’s ally was finally drifting away.<sup>373</sup>

Irritation with Kazakhstan also started to show itself in Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s critical statements towards the country, now increasingly common. In March 2018, Lavrov expressed surprise that Kazakhstan had implemented a visa-free regime for US citizens without consulting Russia. Kazakhstani diplomats retorted that the scheme had been introduced long ago and that Kazakhstan did not have to consult anyone on the issue. In June 2018, at a meeting of the foreign ministers of members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Lavrov also aired his dissatisfaction at Kazakhstan’s agreement to allow the US to use the Caspian Sea ports of Aktau and Kuryk for transporting goods to Afghanistan, and at the presence of a US biolab in Almaty.<sup>374</sup>

As with the visa-free regime, the accusations were out of date. The criticized pact was a protocol to a 2010 agreement between Kazakhstan and the US facilitating the commercial rail transit of special cargo. The protocol adding Aktau and Kuryk to the list of transit points (previously, the only transit points were in Russia and Uzbekistan) was signed in September 2017 and ratified in May 2018.<sup>375</sup> The biolab in question was the Central Reference Laboratory, built with the support of the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) programme and launched in 2016. It is the only biosafety laboratory in Central Asia focusing on the most dangerous pathogens.

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<sup>372</sup> Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2012), ‘Strategy “Kazakhstan-2050”: new political course of the established state’, state-of-the-nation address, 14 December 2012, [http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-annarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state](http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-annarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state) (accessed 28 Oct. 2019).

<sup>373</sup> Kumenov, A. (2018), ‘Kazakhstan gets Russian flak over UN Syria vote’, Eurasianet, 17 April 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-gets-russian-flak-over-un-syria-vote> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>374</sup> Polovinko, V. (2018), ‘МИД мыслит штаммами’ [MFA thinks with strains], *Novaya Gazeta*, 13 June 2018, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/06/13/76795-mid-myslit-shtammami> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>375</sup> Закон Республики Казахстан от 4 мая 2018 года №. 152-VI ЗРК [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No.152-VI], 4 May 2018, [https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/parlament\\_respubliki\\_kazahstan/mejdunapodnyie\\_otnosheniya\\_respubliki\\_kazahstan/id-Z1800000152/](https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/parlament_respubliki_kazahstan/mejdunapodnyie_otnosheniya_respubliki_kazahstan/id-Z1800000152/) (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

## Treatment of Kazakhs in China and anti-Chinese sentiment

Until recently the Kazakh minority in China – around 1.5 million people living mostly in Xinjiang – was not a problematic issue for relations between Kazakhstan and China.<sup>376</sup> On the former's independence in 1991, an agreement was reached that those who wanted to emigrate to Kazakhstan would be allowed to do so by the Chinese authorities. *Oralman* (ethnic Kazakhs) from China greatly contributed to creating links between the two countries in the areas of trade, education, media and culture.<sup>377</sup>

However, this benign state of affairs – at least in most aspects of two-way relations – changed in 2016 when Chen Quanguo was appointed by China as the new Communist Party secretary of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). He immediately stepped up the already harsh security measures in place against the Uighur population, thus confirming a reputation as an enforcer acquired during his posting in Tibet (2011–16). Chen hired thousands more security personnel, introduced high-tech surveillance methods, and forced residents of Xinjiang to surrender their passports to the police.<sup>378</sup> As a result, ethnic Kazakhs and members of other minorities who had family and business ties in neighbouring Kazakhstan could not travel there anymore without the permission of the authorities.

It was also reported that thousands of people, ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz included, were sent to so-called 're-education' centres, where they were required to 'recite Chinese and Xinjiang laws and policies', watch pro-government propaganda videos, and renounce their ethnic and religious identities; the latter requirement included reciting slogans such as 'religion is harmful' and 'learning Chinese is part of patriotism'. The fact that the Chinese government's 'strike hard' policy, which had previously focused on the Uighurs, was now also being applied to ethnic Kazakhs came as a shock in Kazakhstan. Media outlets reported that some Xinjiang Kazakhs had been detained for having travelled abroad or for having 'spoken about Kazakhstan a lot'. Information also emerged that some people who had recently become Kazakhstani citizens (*oralman* from China) were being recalled by the Chinese authorities to China and detained.<sup>379</sup>

The effect on public opinion in Kazakhstan, hitherto largely indifferent to the travails of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, led to increasing calls for an official response to this mistreatment. As supporting the Kazakh diaspora is also among the four policy goals in the government's 'foreign policy concept', this added to the pressure to act.

The issue was raised in parliament in October 2017, when Senator Nurlan Kylyshbayev made an official request to the government to confirm whether reports that ethnic Kazakhs were being persecuted in China were true. The following month, foreign ministry representatives held talks with their Chinese counterparts in both Beijing and Astana to discuss the 'frequent complaints by ethnic Kazakhs about problems they face in the People's Republic of China'. China's ambassador to Kazakhstan, Zhang Hanhui,

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<sup>376</sup> Uatkhonov, Y. (2016), 'One and a-Half Million Ethnic Kazakhs Live in China', *The Astana Times*, 30 September 2016, <https://astanatimes.com/2016/09/one-and-a-half-million-ethnic-kazakhs-live-in-china/> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>377</sup> *Oralman* are ethnic Kazakhs who have immigrated to Kazakhstan since it became independent.

<sup>378</sup> Zuenko, I. (2018), 'Перегибы Шелкового пути: как Китай решает уйгурский вопрос' [Excesses of the Silk Road: How China is solving the Uighur question], Carnegie Moscow Center, 18 April 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76013> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019).

<sup>379</sup> Human Rights Watch (2017), 'China: Free Xinjiang 'Political Education' Detainees', 10 September 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/10/china-free-xinjiang-political-education-detainees> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).



*China's mistreatment of ethnic Kazakhs, and the consequent rise in anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan, risks undermining the development of bilateral economic ties*

replied that heightened security measures such as surveillance and vetting procedures were in place for all citizens around the 19th Party Congress due to reports of possible planned disruption.<sup>380</sup>

Nevertheless, in 2018 the Kazakhstani government continued to raise the issue. In May, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that talks on consular matters had also involved the two sides discussing the 'protection of the rights and interests of the citizens of the two countries, and also mutual trips of residents of Kazakhstan and China'. The next day, Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov said that he had information on some 170 ethnic Kazakhs 'experiencing difficulties' in China.<sup>381</sup> In August, he told journalists that his first deputy had held negotiations with the leadership of the XUAR, and that the latter was considering lifting the emigration ban for 675 ethnic Kazakhs.<sup>382</sup> In January 2019, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs had received permission to leave Xinjiang and move to Kazakhstan.<sup>383</sup>

At the international level, Kazakhstan's government also finds itself walking a tightrope. In July 2019 it abstained from signing either of the two letters prepared by different coalitions of countries and sent to the UN Human Rights Council, one denouncing China's policies in Xinjiang, the other supporting them; the letter of support was signed by Russia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, among others.<sup>384</sup>

Social media networks have continued to circulate information about so-called 're-education centres'. The information has come from various sources, including Western newspapers, and has further fuelled long-standing anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan. In 2019 public attention focused on Serikzhan Bilash, the leader of the Atazhurt Eriktileri ('Volunteers of the Fatherland') movement, which campaigns for the release of ethnic Kazakhs from China's camps. Bilash was arrested by the Kazakhstan authorities and put on trial for inciting ethnic tensions. In August, agreement was reached between him and the Chinese authorities and he was released after paying a fine.<sup>385</sup>

China's mistreatment of ethnic Kazakhs, and the consequent rise in anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan, risks undermining the development of bilateral economic ties. Negative public opinion has already hindered cooperation in the agricultural sector, one of the most potentially promising areas for joint action. In 2016, following amendments to land regulations, protests flared up across Kazakhstan against allowing the long-term leasing of land to foreigners. The protests were triggered by various fears, including that Chinese companies would contaminate the land and that China would in effect seize Kazakhstani territory. The government suppressed the protests,

<sup>380</sup> Imanbai, I. and Grishin, A. (2018), 'What's behind China's anti-Chinese campaign?', openDemocracy, 23 May 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/inga-imanbai-andrey-grishin/whats-behind-chinas-anti-kazakh-campaign%20> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>381</sup> Pannier, B. (2018), 'Kazakhstan confronts China over disappearances', RFE/RL, 1 June 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-kazakhstan-confronts-china-over-disappearances/29266456.html> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>382</sup> Vaal, T. (2018), 'В Китае рассматривают вопрос о снятии запрета на выезд в Казахстан с 675 этнических казахов' [China considers lifting ban on leaving for Kazakhstan for 675 ethnic Kazakhs], *Vlast*, 7 August 2018, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/28953-v-kitae-rassmatrivavut-vopros-o-snatii-zapreta-na-vyezd-v-kazahstan-675-etniceskih-kazahov.html> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>383</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), 'Астана: двум тысячам этнических казахов разрешено покинуть Синьцзян' [Astana: Two thousand ethnic Kazakhs are allowed to leave Xinjiang], 10 January 2019, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/29700839.html> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>384</sup> Putz, C. (2019), 'Which countries are for or against China's Xinjiang policies?', *The Diplomat*, 15 July 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>385</sup> RFE/RL (2019), 'Kazakh court fines top activist charged with "inciting ethnic tensions"', 16 August 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-court-fines-top-activist-charged-with-inciting-ethnic-tensions/30113912.html> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

but at the same time imposed a moratorium (until December 2021) on amendments to the Land Code allowing foreigners and legal entities with 50 per cent or more foreign participation to lease agricultural land for up to 25 years.<sup>386</sup>

During the presidential election campaign in 2019, the political group Halyk Kurultayi ('People's Assembly') demanded a comprehensive ban on the sale or leasing of land to foreigners, a solution to prevent the persecution of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, and an end to borrowing from China.<sup>387</sup> Similar demands are becoming a staple of anti-government protests now occurring regularly in Kazakhstan's biggest cities. These developments signal more difficult times ahead for bilateral relations just as Kazakhstan itself begins a new political chapter.

### At the nexus of Russian and Chinese integration projects

Kazakhstan, Russia and China actively engage in seeking to shape Eurasian and Central Asian affairs. They address security issues through organizations such as the CSTO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). While there are differences in the approaches and goals of each country in these forums, overall there are no significant tensions affecting their participation.

Economic cooperation and integration are more problematic. It is in these areas of policy that trilateral relations have the potential to become more unsettled, due to the political and geopolitical complications involved. As mentioned, the two major economic integration projects currently under way in the region are the EAEU and the BRI. Kazakhstan is a founding member of the Russian-led EAEU, but also an enthusiastic participant in China's BRI. It is the biggest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment among members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>388</sup> This makes Kazakhstan strategically dependent on how the two integration projects develop in relation to each other, and in particular whether – notwithstanding official rhetoric and announcements on planned coordination – they actually unfold in a competitive or complementary manner. Will the EAEU and BRI intermesh to accommodate large-scale co-developments supported by both Russia and China, in other words, or will Kazakhstan find itself caught between having to support one sponsor in preference to the other?

The progress of Eurasian economic integration has been mixed. Development was initially rapid, with major milestones passed in just a few years. The project started with the Customs Union, launched by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus in 2010. It morphed into the Single Economic Space in 2012 and was superseded by the EAEU in 2015, when Kyrgyzstan and Armenia were also added as members.

*As a founding member of the Russian-led EAEU but also an enthusiastic participant in China's BRI, Kazakhstan is strategically dependent on how the two integration projects develop in relation to each other*

<sup>386</sup> Zakon.kz (2019), 'Земельный кодекс Республики Казахстан (с изменениями и дополнениями на 3 апр. 2019)' [Land Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan (with amendments as of 3 Apr. 2019)], [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=1040583#pos=6;-155](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=1040583#pos=6;-155) (accessed 5 Nov. 2019).

<sup>387</sup> Radio Azattyk (2019), 'Назарбаев, бойкот выборам, земельный вопрос. Что обсуждали на «курултае»? [Nazarbaev, boycotting elections, land question. What was discussed at the 'kurultay?'], 1 June 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-nur-sultan-kurultay/29976007.html> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>388</sup> Eurasian Development Bank (2017), 'EAEU and Eurasia: Monitoring and analysis of direct investments 2017', 21 December 2017, <https://eabr.org/en/analytics/integration-research/cii-reports/eaau-and-eurasia-monitoring-and-analysis-of-direct-investments-2017-/> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

However, once the EAEU had been established, policymaking slowed down and deadlines were missed. A customs code, which was supposed to have been in force from 1 January 2016, was not launched until 1 January 2018. A common market for medicine and medical equipment, originally scheduled to become operational in January 2016, is now expected to be fully in force only from 2026.<sup>389</sup> The launch of a common electric power market, planned for 2019, has been postponed.<sup>390</sup> The slow pace of development of EAEU instruments reflects the complexity of the task of unifying regulations and frameworks in different economies. There are limits to what political will can do.

Apart from these impediments, Eurasian integration was also set back by the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2014. As such, a project that had been designed to foster prosperity in the post-Soviet space ended up dividing Ukraine, creating a geopolitical flashpoint and damaging the European security architecture. Without Ukraine as a member, the whole concept of the EAEU as an integrated economic space between Europe and Asia made less sense to potential investors. The military conflict also raised levels of caution among both member states and potential member states. It reinforced several governments' determination to pursue multi-vector foreign policies in parallel to any engagement with the EAEU, and certainly in preference to relying on a Russia-dominated integration model alone. Further proof that Russia does not consider its Eurasian neighbours and near-neighbours to be equal partners came when Moscow introduced counter-sanctions against the West without consulting other EAEU member states.

While Russia is openly at odds with the US and the EU, it has to take a more nuanced approach towards China, given the latter's growing influence in Central Asia and Eurasia. The growing imbalance between its own economic power and that of China worries Russia, but there is little it can do to change the situation. It has chosen a policy of accommodation. In 2015, President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping made a joint declaration on cooperation in aligning the EAEU and the SREB – the latter of which constitutes the land-based 'Belt' element of the BRI – and confirmed their support for each other's mega-projects.<sup>391</sup>

In 2017 the Eurasian Economic Commission announced that it had developed criteria for selecting priority projects for linking the EAEU and the SREB. The Commission reported a list of 39 infrastructure projects, encompassing road construction, road modernization, the creation of transport logistics centres and the development of transport hubs. These projects included: a motorway from western China to western Europe, connecting Lianyungang on the Yellow Sea to St Petersburg on the Baltic Sea; the Moscow–Kazan high-speed train; the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway; and the Armenia–Iran railway.<sup>392</sup> The completion of the western China–western Europe motorway depends on Russia building its section of the road (China and Kazakhstan completed their parts in 2014 and 2016 respectively). After years of uncertainty,

<sup>389</sup> Vinokurov, E. (ed.) (2017), 'Евразийский экономический союз' [Eurasian Economic Union], Eurasian Development Bank, <https://eabr.org/analytics/integration-research/cii-reports/evraziyskiy-ekonomicheskii-soyuz/> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>390</sup> Sapozhkov, O. (2019), 'Киловатт у границ' [Kilowatt at the border], *Kommersant*, 30 May 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3984211> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>391</sup> President of the Russian Federation (2015), 'Press Statements following Russian-Chinese Talks', 8 May 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49433> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>392</sup> Eurasian Economic Commission (2017), 'Сопряжение ЕАЭС и ЭППП приобретает реальные очертания: согласован список инфраструктурных проектов' [The pairing of the EAEU and the SREB takes on a real shape: agreement has been reached on a list of infrastructure projects], 1 March 2017, <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/nae/news/Pages/2-03-2017-1.aspx> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

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the motorway was mentioned in Putin's 2018 Decree on National Goals and Tasks of Strategic Development Until 2024.<sup>393</sup> However, in 2019 the Russian government greenlighted the construction of a privately funded 'Meridian' motorway connecting China, Kazakhstan and the Russia–Belarus border.<sup>394</sup> The other three projects continue to experience difficulties. There is no clarity about the economic feasibility of the Moscow–Kazan high-speed rail link, and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway and Armenia–Iran railway projects are currently delayed in negotiations. In the case of the latter, one of the problems is Moscow's support for an alternative railway project linking Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran.<sup>395</sup>

Russia claims to be interested in co-developing the EAEU and the BRI. Yet it feels challenged by China's rising power and economic expansion. As such, Moscow is trying to shape an arrangement that would softly counterbalance China through engagement with other big players, particularly in Asia. In 2016, at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Putin proposed the formation of a Greater Eurasia region that would expand on the EAEU's core network of countries by establishing free-trade agreements with more than 40 states and international organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Initially, such agreements would aim to simplify and unify regulations (such as on investments, intellectual property, and technical, phytosanitary and customs requirements). Later, they would involve lowering tariffs, which could ultimately lead to the creation of a much larger free-trade zone.

However, while Russia claims to want to shape regulations in Greater Eurasia, the recent agreement on trade and economic cooperation between the EAEU and China – signed in May 2018 at the Astana Economic Forum – shows no progress in this regard. This non-preferential agreement has the relatively modest aims of increasing transparency and improving mutual understanding of trade policies, with an eventual aspiration to gradually harmonize standards, technical regulations and compliance assessment procedures.<sup>396</sup>

In contrast, Kazakhstan is fully on board with the concept of wider economic integration. Even before the announcement of the SREB in 2013 (not by chance, in Astana), it had been investing heavily in building and modernizing transport infrastructure intended to help it become a bridge between East and West. In 2015, Nazarbayev and Xi announced plans to link the SREB and Kazakhstan's Nurlı Zhol ('Bright Path') economic programme. Launched in 2014, Nurlı Zhol is a five-year plan focusing in particular on domestic transportation, industry and energy infrastructure.

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<sup>393</sup> President of the Russian Federation (2018), 'Президент подписал Указ «О национальных целях и стратегических задачах развития Российской Федерации на период до 2024 года»' [The president has signed the decree 'On national goals and tasks for the strategic development of the Russian Federation up until 2024'], 7 May 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57425> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>394</sup> Skorlygina, N., Vedeneeva, A. and Sofronov, I. (2019), 'ВСМ до Казани не получила одобрения президента' [High-speed railway to Kazan did not receive the approval of the president], *Kommersant*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3925711> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>395</sup> Dolaberidze, D. (2018), 'The Armenia-Iran railway', *Georgia Today*, 15 March 2018, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/9499/The-Armenia-Iran-Railway> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>396</sup> Eurasian Economic Commission (2018), 'Agreement signed on trade and economic cooperation between EAEU and PRC', 17 May 2018, <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/nae/news/Pages/17-05-2018-5.aspx> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

The governments of Kazakhstan and China also compiled a list of 51 projects, estimated at around \$26 billion in value, that would involve industrial capacity being transferred from China to Kazakhstan.<sup>397</sup> In 2019, Kazakhstan borrowed RMB 2 billion (\$283 million)<sup>398</sup> from the Export-Import Bank of China. Apart from being the country's first loan in renminbi, the deal is notable for its purpose: to finance the modernization of 10 checkpoints on the border of EAEU countries. This makes it an interesting case of an effort to physically link the EAEU and China without direct EAEU participation.<sup>399</sup>

However, the burgeoning cooperation between China and Kazakhstan also brings its problems. As with Russia–China relations, it is mired in a lack of trust. Kazakhstan welcomes Chinese investments with one hand, and keeps up barriers to China's presence in the country with the other. Unlike citizens of European countries, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the US and Canada, Chinese citizens are not covered by the visa-free regime. The procedure for a Chinese national to get a visa for Kazakhstan is complicated and requires the permission of the Migration Police in Kazakhstan. Chinese investors have complained about the difficulty of acquiring visas for themselves and labour migrants. The Chinese ambassador to Kazakhstan has raised the issue. Since 2016, it has also become more difficult for Kazakhstani citizens to obtain Chinese visas.

In short, while Kazakhstan positions itself as an eager participant in regional economic integration projects, it does not appreciate Moscow's politicized approach to the process, and is fearful of Russia's ability to cause problems. At the same time, the government is worried about China's overwhelming size and appetite for commercial expansion.

## Russia, China and Kazakhstan in the global order

Russia, China and Kazakhstan share a number of important similarities in terms of how they position themselves in the international system. Using David Kerr's term, all three can be defined as 'sovereign globalizers', in the sense that they 'welcome globalization, but in a selective manner that rejects cosmopolitanism and embraces globalization only to advance and affirm sovereignty in principle and practice'.<sup>400</sup>

All three emphasize the importance of the international rule of law and the UN Security Council as the supreme authority in international security. Yet as authoritarian states, they oppose the universality of liberal values and the liberal-democratic political order, and promote regimes reinforcing the right of the state against internal and external challenges. Kazakhstan, together with China, Russia and other members of the SCO, co-sponsored a code of conduct for information security that was submitted to the UN General Assembly in 2015. The code underlines states' rights to 'independent control

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<sup>397</sup> Kassenova, N. (2017), 'China's Silk Road and Kazakhstan's bright path: linking dreams of prosperity', *Asia Policy*, 24: pp. 103–09, doi:10.1353/asp.2017.0028 (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>398</sup> At an exchange rate of RMB 1:US\$0.1414 on 24 October 2019. Source: Reuters (2019), 'Currencies', <https://uk.reuters.com/markets/currencies> (accessed 24 Oct. 2019).

<sup>399</sup> Vaal', T. (2019), 'Парламент ратифицировал соглашение с Китаем о займе в 2 млрд юаней' [Parliament ratified agreement with China on 2 billion yuan loan], *Vlast*, 11 April 2019, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/32656-parlament-ratificiroval-soglasenie-s-kitaem-o-zajme-v-2-mlrd-uanej.html> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>400</sup> Kerr, D. (2017), 'Central Asian and Russian perspectives on China's emergence', *International Affairs*, 86(1): p. 131, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00872.x (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

of information and communications technologies' and the role of the state in 'encouraging a deeper understanding by all elements in society, including the private sector and civil-society institutions, of their responsibility to ensure information security'.<sup>401</sup>

At the same time, Russia, China and Kazakhstan diverge in their approaches to global order and governance. Russia is a former superpower trying to retain this status. It is not comfortable in the current order, finding itself in a position of offering token support for the 'rise of the rest' while itself being a declining power. Its praise for the 'democratization' of international affairs is thus half-hearted at best. Having failed to adapt to geopolitical and geo-economic change and develop genuine strategic alliances, it has turned into a 'stand-alone power' which seeks to take pride in its 'geopolitical solitude' and refusal to play by the Western rules.<sup>402</sup>

Russia's approach to global economic governance reflects the weakness of an insufficiently modernized economy overly dependent on natural resources. As Bobo Lo points out, it is 'predominantly a taker rather than setter of trends', realizing that changes in the current system might not be to its advantage. Russia also shows little interest in providing public goods or actively contributing to tackling global challenges such as climate change, poverty in Africa and water scarcity – issues that 'barely feature in Russian elite (or public) discourse'.<sup>403</sup>

While Russia's power has been shrinking and becoming more destructive than constructive, China has enjoyed the opposite trend. It has accumulated the resources and political will to expand, and is now becoming the second superpower. Beijing takes preparation for this role seriously. It increasingly preoccupies itself with matters of global governance, trying to decide which role China should play, which elements of the international system need to be maintained and which need to be changed. It has also started positioning itself as a supplier of public goods, with the BRI's role in facilitating transcontinental connectivity presented as China's major contribution to regional and global development and security.

Kazakhstan is obviously in a different league to Russia and China. It is a small power, squeezed in between those two giants, in a moderately problematic neighbourhood. It is a young state that greatly benefited from the world order into which it emerged in the early 1990s. That order, and the governance institutions associated with it, allowed the newly independent Kazakhstan to build up its sovereignty – perhaps not a complete form of sovereignty, in the eyes of Russian elites, but still one providing a status recognized by the international community. To support its independence, Kazakhstan pursued a multi-vector foreign policy that involved fostering good relations and interdependencies with all external powers. The leadership also sought international recognition for Kazakhstan as a progressive, responsible and active stakeholder in global and regional affairs. The authorities initiated a plethora of initiatives,

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<sup>401</sup> United Nations (2015), 'Letter dated 9 January 2015 from the Permanent Representatives of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General', <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/786846> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>402</sup> Trenin, D. (2017), 'Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?', Carnegie Moscow Center, 20 July 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/2017/07/20/russia-s-evolving-grand-eurasia-strategy-will-it-work-pub-71588> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019). See also Surkov, V. (2018), 'The Loneliness of the Half-Breed', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 28 May 2018, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/The-Loneliness-of-the-Half-Breed-19575> (accessed 25 Aug. 2019).

<sup>403</sup> Lo, B. (2015), *Russia and the New World Disorder*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs and Baltimore: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 71–99.

in such wide-ranging areas as the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, global inter-confessional dialogue, Eurasian integration and efforts to resolve the conflict in Syria (the latter attempted via the 'Astana talks').

Kazakhstan wants to be firmly embedded in a global order that fosters its sovereignty and allows it to enhance its recognition and reputation. Driven by this interest, it can occasionally find itself in a different camp to Russia, despite the normally close relations between the two countries. For example, on 12 April 2017 members of the UN Security Council voted on a draft resolution condemning the reported chemical weapons attack on the Syrian town of Khan Shaykhun, and demanding immediate and unfettered access to any and all sites associated with the incident. Kazakhstan and China abstained from the vote, while Russia voted against the resolution. Also, as mentioned, Astana's abstention in an April 2018 vote on a UN Security Council resolution, proposed by Russia, condemning Western airstrikes against Syria caused considerable displeasure in Moscow.

In a similar instance of discord a decade earlier, both Kazakhstan and China aligned themselves against Russia in refusing to recognize the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At the SCO summit in August 2008, they resisted Russia's lobbying for diplomatic recognition of its clients. China and Kazakhstan take consistently negative positions on separatism. They did not recognize Kosovo, and had deep reservations about Crimea's 2014 referendum on seceding from Ukraine and joining the Russian Federation. In March 2014, both China and Kazakhstan abstained during the UN General Assembly vote on the resolution that declared the secession referendum invalid.

Overall, Kazakhstani policymakers seem to appreciate China's respectability and gravitas in global affairs. Unlike Russia, China projects the image of a forward-looking and rapidly modernizing state, comfortably embedded in global markets. This is exactly what Kazakhstan itself aspires to be. However, this does not mean that it would be comfortable in a China-dominated order.

## Conclusion

*As Kazakhstan nears the end of its third decade of independence, it continues to find the interaction with its two giant neighbours highly challenging*

As Kazakhstan nears the end of its third decade of independence, it continues to find the interaction with its two giant neighbours highly challenging. The leadership rightly congratulates itself on having established good-neighbourly relations with Russia and China. However, both the so-called 'strategic alliance' with Russia and the 'strategic partnership' with China are stymied by a shortage of trust on each side.

Kazakhstan is worried, as it was in the early 1990s, about imperial trends and ambitions in Russian foreign policy. The challenge of having a considerable Russian minority is deemed by the government to be less acute of a problem than before, due to the consolidating majority of Kazakhs in the country, and their growing share of the population in Kazakhstan's northern regions. At the same time, however, there is a concern about Moscow's increasingly sophisticated 'information war' capabilities, which have accentuated weaknesses in the domestic information space and local-content production. The success of Russia's efforts to control the information and media agenda has also, more generally, highlighted the incompleteness of Kazakhstan's nation-building project. The continuing outward migration of ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan is a sign of this.

The sense of vulnerability to external forces has grown more acute since Nazarbayev's resignation in March 2019. He retains considerable powers, and his successor pledges continuity. Yet while the government tries to assure everybody of the smooth continuation of key policies during and after the domestic political transition, the eventual unravelling of the system of power built around Nazarbayev seems inevitable.

The Georgian and Ukrainian crises, in 2008 and 2014 respectively, also exposed weaknesses in the external support structures on which Kazakhstan's sovereignty and independence rely – including international treaties, memoranda and assurances that previously were taken for granted. Because Russia is less predictable and less concerned with its reputation in the eyes of the Western community, it remains potentially ready to challenge Kazakhstan's freedom of manoeuvre or create trouble in the region.

Kazakhstan–China cooperation, meanwhile, has increased substantially but is currently clouded by the problem of the treatment of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang. The Kazakhstani authorities understand that the XUAR and developments there are a highly sensitive issue for China, but they cannot afford to ignore a situation that is a source of considerable negative public opinion. The rise in anti-Chinese sentiment has already resulted in a ban on the foreign acquisition of land.

Regional economic integration is among the tools that Kazakhstan has used to improve the viability of its economy – and thus to protect its own sovereignty. It was initially enthusiastic about Eurasian economic integration, and later about the Chinese-led SREB/BRI. However, progress on the former has been undermined by the Russia–Ukraine crises and consequent exchange of sanctions and counter-sanctions between Russia and the West. Meanwhile, development of Kazakhstan's involvement in SREB/BRI projects remains hampered by fears of China's overwhelming strength and hidden intentions. Moreover, there is no certainty about the compatibility of these two mega-projects or the ability of Moscow and Beijing to accommodate each other's interests, despite the official rhetoric of 'alignment' (*sopryazheniye*) and co-development. Russia also clearly lacks enthusiasm to surrender ambitions for Eurasian integration to a separate development agenda.

Finally, at the global level, Russia, China and Kazakhstan present both similarities and differences in terms of their international positioning, approaches and goals. All three are authoritarian states, adamant about the priority of state interests both domestically and internationally. As such, they offer a united front in terms of seeking to shape international regimes that would protect their sovereignty. At the same time, there are important differences in how each of the three countries relates to the global order. Russia is a disenchanted former superpower with a largely parochial outlook on global governance. Importantly, and worryingly for Kazakhstan and its other neighbours, Russia has a flexible approach to the principle of 'territorial integrity' and 'non-interference in internal affairs'. This makes it an ally and regional power that cannot be fully trusted.

Kazakhstan recognizes China's growing role in the regional and global order, and tries to benefit from this rise. However, there are concerns and fears over what a China-dominated order would bring for Kazakhstan and its citizens. These concerns are becoming more pronounced as Kazakhstan enters a new phase of political development in the aftermath of Nazarbayev's resignation.



## 8. Relations with the West

*Birgit Brauer*

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*Kazakhstan has leveraged its cultivation of Western institutions and governments – in particular the US – to establish a strategically valuable reputation as a reliable international partner. But it still struggles to be seen as more than a niche player.*

For many years, under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan zealously aspired to a greater international role and increased recognition. Whenever an opportunity arose to shine on the world stage, Kazakhstani officials seized it with enthusiasm. Aiming to boost the country's regional and international standing is a part of Kazakhstan's foreign policy 'concept' for 2014–20, which lists the achievement of a 'sustainable international position and positive global image of Kazakhstan' as one of the country's main goals.<sup>404</sup>

One way Kazakhstan has sought to accomplish this has been to volunteer as a multi-purpose host for high-level events, which has proved quite effective. The country has been the venue for Syrian peace talks, the EXPO-2017 and the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, to name just a few. It was also a finalist among the contenders to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, but narrowly lost out to Beijing.

While these events were aimed at a global audience, acceptance and validation from the West are what Kazakhstan has primarily sought – and still seeks. This may be a consequence of Moscow's latent, long-standing low regard for Kazakhstan and its people (mostly due to Russian memory of the Kazakhs' generally low level of literacy when Kazakhstan became part of the Soviet Union). But the West has not reciprocated Kazakhstan's overtures to the extent desired by the country's leadership.

As with other former Soviet republics, the West welcomed Kazakhstan's emergence as a newly independent state in 1991. The country also initially attracted special attention because of the inherited cache of Soviet nuclear weapons on its territory and its significant, but mostly untapped, oil reserves. However, the nuclear weapons were quickly disposed of, while the geopolitics of oil had largely played out by the end of the 2000s, leaving Kazakhstan with reduced leverage with which to boost its international standing. Notwithstanding the country's continuing role as a transit route for goods shipped to Afghanistan by the US and its allies, Western interest in Kazakhstan since the 1990s has ebbed and flowed.

Over the same period, Kazakhstan's own interest in the West has also evolved. There was a period during the early post-independence years when it aspired to Western values, or at least did not object much to being nudged in that direction by the countless Western democracy advisers who had descended on Kazakhstan.

The geopolitical developments following the attacks of 9/11 changed the dynamics. Kazakhstan's active support for the US-led campaign in Afghanistan prompted Western governments and policymakers to de-emphasize criticisms of Kazakhstan's democratic

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<sup>404</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2014), 'Foreign Policy Concept for 2014–2020 Republic of Kazakhstan', <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/kontseptsiya-vneshnoj-politiki-rk-na-2014-2020-gg> (accessed 4 Nov. 2019).

shortcomings. Today, Kazakhstan largely pays lip service to democratic values when it makes pronouncements on political governance, instead focusing on using its partnerships with Western countries as a counterweight to Russia.

### The early days and the American embrace

Kazakhstan declared independence on 16 December 1991. The following day, US Secretary of State James Baker was in Almaty, then Kazakhstan's capital and still called Alma-Ata, to meet with President Nazarbayev. The US wanted to avoid the creation of any new nuclear-armed states in the region. Baker sought assurances that Kazakhstan's nuclear weapons would remain under a single authority, namely Russia's, and that measures would be taken to prevent their proliferation.<sup>405</sup>

Baker later recounted in great detail this trip, and his discussions with Nazarbayev on this and other occasions, in his memoir *The Politics of Diplomacy*. It was a time of uncertainty, and the stakes for the US were high. But what stands out is his vivid description of how the two men built their relationship when they first met in Kazakhstan a few months earlier. After the formal part of their meeting, Nazarbayev invited Baker to an 'eastern-style' sauna in the presidential *banya* (bath house), where they drank vodka and relaxed.<sup>406</sup> These official and unofficial encounters helped cement the ties between the US and Kazakhstan in the early days. They were also a first indicator of how Kazakhstan likes to develop and maintain relations with other states – i.e. on a bilateral basis combined with hospitality and a personal touch. On 25 December 1991, the US became the first nation to recognize Kazakhstan's independence.

With independence, Kazakhstan became the world's fourth-largest nuclear power, with 1,410 (former Soviet) strategic nuclear warheads, an undisclosed number of tactical nuclear weapons and secret production facilities. It had one of the world's largest nuclear weapons testing sites in Semipalatinsk in the northeast, also known as the Polygon, where at least 456 nuclear tests, both above and below ground, had taken place over a 40-year period. Near Semipalatinsk (now called Semey), in the city of Ust-Kamenogorsk (now Oskemen), a metallurgical plant held sufficient quantities of highly enriched uranium to fabricate about two dozen nuclear weapons. In the town of Stepnogorsk, also in the north, there was a biological weapons construction facility.

Nazarbayev shut down the Semipalatinsk test site in August 1991, as the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. Shortly after independence, Kazakhstan voluntarily renounced its nuclear arsenal.

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<sup>405</sup> Devroy, A. (1991), 'Kazakhstan Keeping Nuclear Arms, Republic's President Tells Baker', *Washington Post*, 18 December 1991, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NunnLugar/2015/03.%201991-12-18%20Washington%20Post%20Article%20by%20David%20Hoffman,%20Kazakhstan%20Keeping%20Nuclear%20Arms,%20Republic's%20President%20Tells%20Baker.pdf> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>406</sup> Present at this gathering was Bob Strauss, the US's last ambassador to the Soviet Union and its first ambassador to the Russian Federation. When Nazarbayev took a bundle of eucalyptus branches and proceeded, as is customary, to beat Baker's back and legs with it, Strauss said he had had enough and left. Outside, he told the security detail jokingly: 'Get me the President of the United States on the phone. His Secretary of State is buck naked, and he's being beaten by the President of Kazakhstan.' Baker, J. A. (1995), *The Politics of Diplomacy*, New York: Putnam Adult, pp. 538–39.

In his authorized biography on Nazarbayev, Jonathan Aitken describes the Kazakh president as wanting the following:

... international recognition, respectability, investment and security. These objectives were incompatible with keeping the nuclear arsenal in place, a move which would have swiftly resulted in Kazakhstan's isolation as a pariah state. So, for reasons of political realism as well as moral idealism, Nazarbayev was determined to lead his country to nuclear disarmament.<sup>407</sup>

In return, the US announced in 1994 that it would substantially increase its aid to Kazakhstan.

In the US fiscal years 1992 to 2010, \$2.05 billion in US aid was budgeted for Kazakhstan, putting it in fifth position for aid among 12 Soviet successor states.<sup>408</sup> A large part of this assistance was used for the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) programme, through which the US helped Kazakhstan to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction and associated infrastructure. For example, the US helped Kazakhstan seal 13 boreholes and 181 tunnels at the nuclear test site between 1995 and 2001.<sup>409</sup> The last of the nuclear warheads left Kazakhstani territory for Russia in 1995.

One of the success stories of the programme was Project Sapphire, a covert operation in November 1994 between the US and Kazakhstan to transport 600 kg of highly enriched uranium from the plant in Ust-Kamenogorsk to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee for safekeeping. This was also one of the first occasions on which Kazakhstan received broad news coverage in the US media.

On the 20th anniversary of the project in 2014, Kazakhstan was again widely praised by US politicians and experts for its courage in trusting its new relationship with the US to help prevent the proliferation of dangerous material in countries seeking to build nuclear weapons. Former secretary of state Baker was also credited for having engaged Nazarbayev early on over denuclearization and energy cooperation.<sup>410</sup> Nazarbayev then used Kazakhstan's newly gained reputation for having acted safely and responsibly to its advantage, turning his country into a vocal advocate of global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. He said that Kazakhstan had a moral right to do so.<sup>411</sup> The country's initiatives in this sphere included, for example, the establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Central Asia in 2006. It also led to the 2012 launch by Kazakhstan of the ATOM (Abolish Testing. Our Mission) Project, an initiative to mobilize global public opinion in support of a permanent end to nuclear weapons testing and the total abolition of nuclear weapons.

In 2017, Nazarbayev and Karipbek Kuyukov, the honorary ambassador to the ATOM Project and a victim of nuclear radiation, were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts for nuclear abolition.

*In 2014, Kazakhstan was again widely praised by US politicians and experts for its courage in trusting its new relationship with the US to help prevent the proliferation of dangerous material in countries seeking to build nuclear weapons*

<sup>407</sup> Aitken, J. (2009), *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan*, London/New York: Continuum, pp. 140–41.

<sup>408</sup> Nichol, J. (2013), *Kazakhstan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 22 July 2013, p. 23, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/97-1058.pdf> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>409</sup> Nuclear Threat Initiative (2019), 'Nuclear Disarmament Kazakhstan', 2 January 2019, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/kazakhstan-nuclear-disarmament/> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>410</sup> Courtney, W., Koch, S. and Starr, J. (2014), 'Celebrating the Success of Project Sapphire', *The National Interest*, 21 November 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/celebrating-the-success-project-sapphire-11709> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>411</sup> Pillalamarri, A. (2016), 'Does Kazakhstan Get Nuclear Proliferation?', *The Diplomat*, 2 April 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/does-kazakhstan-get-nuclear-nonproliferation/> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

#### The reticent European partner

Several European states were also quick to recognize Kazakhstan's independence and establish diplomatic relations. Germany was the first in Europe to recognize the country's independence, on 31 December 1991; this would later pay diplomatic dividends, since Kazakhstani officials kept a close eye on which countries were eager to support Kazakhstan's sovereignty and which were sluggish in doing so. The UK, for example, established diplomatic relations on 19 January 1992, France on 25 January 1992, and Spain on 11 February 1992. For years, the Central State Museum in Almaty has proudly displayed a long list of countries with the dates on which they recognized Kazakhstan.<sup>412</sup>

Unlike the US, the European states and the EU had more modest agendas and largely continued to view Kazakhstan as a remote actor best handled via embassies in Moscow and Ankara. The UK and France were exceptions, as they had a growing interest in Kazakhstan's oil and gas reserves. Germany was also committed to Kazakhstan and the region. It was the only European country to have an embassy in all five Central Asian republics in the 1990s, its special ties to Kazakhstan reflecting the fact that nearly 1 million ethnic Germans were living in the country. In the years that followed, the great majority of these people would leave Kazakhstan to return to their historic homeland, with financial and logistical support from the German state.

All the while, Kazakhstan's leadership felt culturally and geographically drawn to Europe in a way it was not to the US. Perhaps in part because Kazakhstan had been so thoroughly Russified under Soviet rule, to the detriment of its own culture and traditions, many Kazakhstanis viewed European culture as the gold standard to be emulated – at least during the first post-Soviet decade. Moreover, a small part of Kazakhstan's vast territory in the far western corner is considered to be a part of Europe, a fact often pointed out by officials.<sup>413</sup> Being a transcontinental country has allowed Kazakhstan to position itself as a bridge between East and West, and has been used as a selling point for various international initiatives and events.

Kazakhstan's relations with the EU were defined by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), signed on 23 January 1995, which entered into force on 1 July 1999. This agreement provided a framework for relations based on supporting Kazakhstan's efforts to consolidate its democracy through political dialogue, and on assisting the country in developing its economy and moving towards a market economy. Several other joint agreements followed.

The EU was one of the largest single donors to Central Asia at the time. Between 1991 and 2003, it provided more than €1 billion to the region, of which €465 million was disbursed through the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) programme.

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<sup>412</sup> Qazaqstan Tarihy (2014), 'Recognition of Kazakhstan's Independence by International Community', 15 December 2014, <https://e-history.kz/en/publications/view/879> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>413</sup> This was one of the main arguments used by Kazakhstan to support its application for membership of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), which was granted in 2002. After independence, Kazakhstan initially joined the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) together with the other four Central Asian states.

Yet people in Kazakhstan had limited awareness of the EU in the early 1990s. The EU was hardly noticed in the public discourse. Local newspapers focused on bilateral relations with individual European countries, and neglected cooperation with the EU.<sup>414</sup> Initially, the media mainly covered domestic politics, and publications on Kazakhstan's foreign policy were scarce. Those publications that did write about foreign affairs concentrated on the country's bilateral relations with foreign partners, its interaction within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), or the experiences and challenges of ethnic Kazakhs living abroad. Pro-government newspapers were the main source of information about the EU in Kazakhstan. The opposition media generally concentrated on domestic politics.<sup>415</sup>

Over time, a split emerged in terms of how the local media wrote about the EU. Official newspapers looked at the EU's cooperation with Kazakhstan or Central Asia overall. For example, they reported on the regular bilateral EU–Kazakhstan meetings and talks between the EU institutions and delegations of Central Asian republics. Opposition newspapers, on the other hand, published news reports on EU politics and economics, including domestic EU issues such as the eurozone crisis and elections in certain member states.<sup>416</sup>

The EU, in turn, only started to pay closer attention to Central Asia after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US. This later culminated in the adoption of the EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia (commonly referred to as the 'Central Asia Strategy') in June 2007, when Germany held the rotating presidency of the EU.

### The focus of Western oil and security interests

Kazakhstan has the world's 12th-largest oil reserves, which have attracted international oil companies, particularly US and British ones. US oil major Chevron took the lead when it signed an agreement with Kazakhstan to develop the giant Tengiz oil field in April 1993. This was often referred to as the 'deal of the century', and was considered a bellwether for foreign investments in Kazakhstan and throughout the former Soviet Union.

Other contracts with Western oil companies followed. Their technology, expertise and financial means were superior to Russia's. Kazakhstan needed these companies to rebuild and grow its economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In turn, the Western oil companies were hopeful of an exploration bonanza: they needed Kazakhstan to meet their constant demand for new acreage to replenish their oil reserves.

Oil production in Kazakhstan has more than quadrupled since the mid-1990s: the country is currently the 13th-largest producer in the world, with output at 1.9 million barrels a day (91.2 million tonnes) in 2018.<sup>417</sup> But once contracts for the largest oil prospects – i.e. Tengiz, Karachaganak and Kashagan – had been signed and the decade-long US–Russian rivalry over building new pipelines from Kazakhstan and

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<sup>414</sup> Ospanova, B., Sadri, H. A. and Yelmurzaeva, R. (2017), 'Assessing EU perception in Kazakhstan's mass media', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8(1): p. 75, doi: 10.1016/j.euras.2016.08.002 (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>417</sup> BP (2019), *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, 68th edition, London: BP, pp. 16–17, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-full-report.pdf> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

Azerbaijan resolved,<sup>418</sup> the attention of the Western oil companies shifted elsewhere. So did the focus of the US government. For example, the position of a US special envoy for Eurasian energy security, especially created to bolster Washington's Caspian Sea pipeline diplomacy, was no longer needed. The opening of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline in 2006, the Western pipeline route for which the US had fought so hard, effectively ended the years of hype over Caspian Sea hydrocarbon exploration that had started in the mid- to late 1990s. Since then, China has made significant inroads in Kazakhstan's oil industry.

The US-led war in Afghanistan following 9/11 drew worldwide attention to Central Asia. Kazakhstan, being the furthest from the war zone and, unlike Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, not chosen as a site for a Western military base, initially appeared to be on the margin of the US-led coalition's response. But years after the closure of these bases, Kazakhstan continues to make a substantial contribution by allowing the coalition to ship cargo across its territory to Uzbekistan and from there into Afghanistan. For this role Kazakhstan has been praised by US President Donald Trump.

In January 2018, Nazarbayev flew to Washington for his first meeting with Trump. Nazarbayev has met every US president since George H. W. Bush. The two men discussed an 'enhanced strategic partnership' between the US and Kazakhstan for the 21st century, and were complimentary about each other. So far relations have been comparatively smooth with Trump, who – unlike other US presidents – is not known to have made any demands on Kazakhstan over its democratic failings and human rights abuses. At the time of their encounter, Kazakhstan held a rotating seat at the UN Security Council, an achievement hailed as a foreign policy success in Kazakhstan.

Two months after the presidents' encounter, Kazakhstan's lawmakers allowed the US to use two of its Caspian Sea ports, Aktau and Kuryk, as transit points for shipping non-military materiel to Afghanistan. This gave the US additional options in steering clear of Russia, which previously offered transit routes for supplies to Afghanistan. Peace has not yet returned to Afghanistan, but the international spotlight on it has greatly diminished. Attention has shifted to other locations such as Iran, North Korea and Syria. In recent times Kazakhstan has drawn global coverage only for rocket and satellite launches at the Baikonur cosmodrome; for cases of corruption; for events such as its presidential election in 2019; and occasionally for reports on the Syria talks in Astana (recently renamed Nur-Sultan), which have been ongoing for more than two years.

*So far relations have been comparatively smooth with Trump, who – unlike other US presidents – is not known to have made any demands on Kazakhstan over its democratic failings and human rights abuses*

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<sup>418</sup> When Kazakhstan became independent, it had no oil export pipelines, except for a low-capacity pipeline to Samara in Russia. Being a landlocked country, this was a problem. As oil production grew, new ways to get crude oil to the market had to be found, leading foreign oil companies and governments to vigorously compete for a slice of Kazakhstan's energy pie. A breakthrough for Kazakhstan was the opening of the pipeline of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) in 2001. This pipeline runs from Atyrau in the west of the country to Novorossiisk on the Russian Black Sea. Intent on breaking Russia's monopoly, Europe and particularly the US went to great lengths to lobby for the construction of another pipeline that would run west towards Europe instead of north through Russian territory. The CPC pipeline exports nearly 60 per cent of Kazakhstan's annual oil production. Reuters (2019), 'CPC pipeline exports 61.1 mln T of oil in 2018, sees 11 pct rise in 2019', 10 January 2019, <https://ru.reuters.com/article/companyNews/idUKL8N1ZA2EZ> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

## The European upgrade of relations to Kazakhstan

Following 9/11, the EU passed a new strategy for TACIS assistance to the region and doubled its assistance budget. Its three objectives were to promote security and conflict prevention, to eliminate sources of political and social tension, and to improve the climate for trade and investment.<sup>419</sup> However, the announcement of the funding increase was misleading in terms of the EU's absolute commitment, as the doubled amount still came to just €50 million.

A few years later, on 22 June 2007, the EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia was adopted. For the first time, this gave the EU a comprehensive framework for its policy on Central Asia. It marked an 'upgrade in relations', according to the EU,<sup>420</sup> and defined the priorities for EU development aid and diplomatic activity in the region. These priorities included responding to security threats, protecting human rights, promoting economic development, developing transport and energy links, and ensuring environmental protection. The new strategy also provided for an increase in aid to Central Asia to €750 million for the period 2007–13.

The strategy's success has been debatable. In January 2019, almost a dozen years later, the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) said that 'progress in these (priority) areas has been uneven', but that the issues identified back then are still highly relevant today. It cites as success the intensification of diplomatic contacts with the region.<sup>421</sup> That said, among the many criticisms of the strategy has been the EU's failure to provide an action plan or to set benchmarks,<sup>422</sup> as well as the fact that the strategy has sought to cover far too much ground.

The EPRS also noted that, in areas such as human rights, anti-corruption efforts and economic diversification, there had been little change for the better over the years. But these aspects for the most part are outside the EU's control, and the lack of results should not be blamed on the strategy. Modest improvements, such as Kazakhstan's judicial reforms and renewable energy programme, were hailed as indicators that EU engagement is gradually bringing about a change of mindset on some questions.<sup>423</sup> This latter assessment is probably more wishful thinking than based in reality, however. For example, while EU-backed reforms have sought to improve Kazakhstan's criminal justice system, the rule of law remains weak.

The EU's Central Asia Strategy certainly deepened and strengthened relations with Kazakhstan in some respects. But in spite of the positive rhetoric, it also showed that the EU has continued to see the region – or, rather, the countries east of the Caspian Sea – as a backwater. The funding and attention dedicated to the strategy were far less than for the EU's Eastern Partnership states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

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<sup>419</sup> European Commission (2003), 'Commission approves EUR 50 million package to support Central Asian countries in regional co-operation and transition to a market economy', Brussels: European Commission Press Release Database, 5 September 2003, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-03-1209\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-03-1209_en.htm) (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>420</sup> European External Action Service (2009), *The EU and Central Asia: The New Partnership in Action*, Brussels: EEAS, p. 7, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/the\\_european\\_union\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_the\\_new\\_partnership\\_in\\_action.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/the_european_union_and_central_asia_the_new_partnership_in_action.pdf) (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>421</sup> Russell, M. (2019), *The EU's new Central Asia strategy*, Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, p. 1, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)633162\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162_EN.pdf) (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>422</sup> Boonstra, J. (2018), 'Towards a new EU Strategy for Central Asia', *EUCAM Watch*, Issue 18, p. 2, <https://eucamwatch.eu/2018/02/towards-a-new-eu-strategy-for-central-asia/> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>423</sup> Russell (2019), *The EU's new Central Asia strategy*, p. 10.

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For 2014–20, the EU has allocated €1.1 billion to development cooperation with Central Asia, including more than €454 million for regional programmes.<sup>424</sup> In December 2015, Astana and Brussels signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) to further strengthen ties, but at the time of writing the European Council had yet to confirm completion of the EPCA's ratification by all EU member states.

It should also be noted that Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev was inclined to give preference to bilateral and personal relations over multilateral relations. A typical example was the creation in 2012 of the Berlin Eurasian Club, which has so far held 27 meetings, instead of a club that would include all the EU countries. This tendency may continue under the new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. In his memoirs about his time as foreign minister, Tokayev delights in telling how Nazarbayev offered a hunter's set as a gift to George H. W. Bush, who by then was out of office.<sup>425</sup> After all, cultivating personal ties matters more in Central Asian society than developing and maintaining institutionalized contacts.

On 15 May 2019, the European Commission and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted a revised and updated strategy called 'The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership'. The process of developing a new strategy was launched in 2017. There was a realization that Central Asia had become more important for the EU, that the dynamics in the region had changed, and that Central Asia could help to stabilize Afghanistan. Uzbekistan had begun to open up under a new president, and China's Belt and Road Initiative was reviving traditional Silk Road trade routes connecting the Far East with Europe. Moreover, Russia does not seem to resent European influence in Central Asia as much as in Eastern Europe. The region has therefore not become subject to geopolitical confrontation.<sup>426</sup> Kazakhstan has welcomed the EU's new Central Asia strategy, describing it as 'visionary'. The authorities are clearly happy that Kazakhstan was consulted and could make contributions to the proposed document.<sup>427</sup>

According to the EPRS, the EU has become the main economic player in the region, ahead of Russia and China. EU trade with and investment in Central Asia are overwhelmingly concentrated on Kazakhstan, notably the country's oil sector. The sector accounted for 85 per cent of Kazakhstan's exports to the EU and the bulk of EU direct investment in Kazakhstan in 2017. The importance of the economic relationship to Kazakhstan is evident in the fact that almost 40 per cent of the country's external trade is now with the EU,<sup>428</sup> and almost 60 per cent of foreign direct investment

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<sup>424</sup> European External Action Service (2019), 'EU Builds A Strong and Modern Partnership with Central Asia', Brussels: EEAS, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet\\_centralasia\\_2019.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_centralasia_2019.pdf) (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>425</sup> Apparently, Bush was stunned when Nazarbayev threw a bearskin on the floor and said that the bear had been killed in eastern Kazakhstan. Bush responded by saying he really wanted to go there to hunt. Tokayev, K. (2004), *Meeting the Challenge. Memoirs by Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister*, New York: Global Scholarly Publications, p. 213.

<sup>426</sup> Russell (2019), *The EU's new Central Asia strategy*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>427</sup> Gotev, G. (2019), 'Kazakhstan calls EU's new Central Asia strategy "visionary"', *Euractiv*, 29 May 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/interview/kazakhstan-calls-eus-new-central-asia-strategy-visionary/> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>428</sup> Kazakhstan's merchandise exports to the EU amounted to €20.8 billion in 2018, while imports from the EU totalled €5.8 billion. European Commission (2019), 'Countries and regions: Kazakhstan', <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/kazakhstan/> (accessed 8 Nov. 2019).



*Compared to the other four Central Asian states, Kazakhstan is in by far better economic shape*

comes from the bloc.<sup>429</sup> In contrast, Central Asia as a whole accounts for only a minute share – less than 1 per cent – of the EU's total foreign trade and investment.<sup>430</sup>

Compared to the other four Central Asian states, Kazakhstan is in by far better economic shape. It is better integrated with the global economy and its regional neighbours. Kazakhstan became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2015, its accession bid aided – according to the EPRS – by EU expertise.

Much could be said about the strengths and weaknesses of the EU's old and the new Central Asia strategies. On balance, a useful side-effect of EU policy and engagement for Kazakhstan's leadership has been the added opportunity to network with European leaders and to maintain links with them once they have left office. International events in Kazakhstan, such as the annual Astana Economic Forum, are known for hosting former presidents and prime ministers from Europe, some of whom also act as advisers to the Kazakhstani government. Among them have been, for example, Italy's former prime minister, Romano Prodi, Poland's former president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, and Germany's former chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder. All of these figures are presumably still well connected and carry some political weight in their home countries, which could be to Kazakhstan's advantage.

Best known has been former UK prime minister Tony Blair's association with Kazakhstan. Blair was named an adviser to Astana in 2011. In the course of his five-year tenure in the role, Kazakhstan became even more authoritarian, which suggests that, whatever advice Blair gave, he had no impact on the regime's anti-democratic leanings. Blair also reportedly received millions of dollars annually for providing public relations guidance, and became one of Kazakhstan's most outspoken defenders in the West.<sup>431</sup>

In addition, a number of European public relations firms have been hired by Kazakhstan to help polish the country's image and raise its visibility. Among them have been Bell Pottinger in London, BGR Gabara in Brussels and Consultum Communications in Berlin.<sup>432</sup> More public relations companies were hired in the US.

These firms, as well as the former European heads of government, were all clearly drawn to Kazakhstan because of the money that could be made there. Thanks to its oil, Kazakhstan has had the funds to pay for this.

## Conclusion

Kazakhstan has been the main local partner for the EU, and a key partner for the US, in Central Asia for many years. Yet beyond issues narrowly affecting the region, Kazakhstan is not especially important to either the EU or the US. This is unlikely to change given the political, economic and geographic realities.

<sup>429</sup> Jeune, P. (2019), 'Business environment in #Kazakhstan continues to attract EU investment', Eureporter, 28 February 2019, <https://www.eureporter.co/economy/2019/02/28/business-environment-in-kazakhstan-continues-to-attract-eu-investment/> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>430</sup> Russell (2019), *The EU's new Central Asia strategy*, p. 3.

<sup>431</sup> Michel, C. (2016), 'Good Riddance? Tony Blair Parts Ways with Kazakhstan', *The Diplomat*, 7 October 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/good-riddance-tony-blair-parts-ways-with-kazakhstan/> (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

<sup>432</sup> Corporate Europe Observatory (2015), *Spin Doctors to the Autocrats: How European PR Firms Whitewash Repressive Regimes*, Brussels: Corporate Europe Observatory, pp. 39–42, [https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/20150120\\_spindoctors\\_mr.pdf](https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/20150120_spindoctors_mr.pdf) (accessed 27 Aug. 2019).

The country has acquired a reputation for being a reliable international player – based, for example, on its performance as chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010 and when holding a rotating seat at the UN Security Council in 2017 and 2018. Yet it is still a long way from being treated on an equal footing by Western countries. One of the reasons for this is its reputation for being undemocratic and corrupt, and for violating human rights. As a result, Kazakhstan usually ranks in the lower third of most indexes for assessing the state of a country.<sup>433</sup>

Of particular note has been a series of information leaks over the past few years, such as those published in the Panama Papers showing the extent of corruption among Kazakhstan's elite. Government officials and their families, including Nazarbayev's family members, were shown to be users of offshore havens, where they have registered – among other things – luxury real estate, a yacht, other possessions and interests in offshore companies. It seems that Kazakhstan's officials have attentively studied everything the West has had to offer, but have not come to the conclusions favoured by Western politicians. Instead of adopting and adhering to democratic standards and observing the rule of law, their choice has been to utilize shady Western financial services instead.

Western engagement has not equalled democratization in Kazakhstan, contrary to post-independence hopes, in particular on the part of the US. This has not prevented the US and Europe from maintaining good relations, largely based on oil and energy trade, with Kazakhstan. But the relationships could have long been enhanced – not only in name, but in reality – were it not for Kazakhstan's lack of progress in human rights and the rule of law.

This offers Tokayev an opportunity to further relations with the West. Although he remains beholden to ex-president Nazarbayev, who stepped down in March and then made sure to restrict his successor's powers a few months later, Tokayev can try to make his mark if he so chooses. He is a seasoned diplomat, speaks several languages and knows the world. A few small or token improvements would be a start. Better treatment of dissenters and activists, for example, or the swift punishment of corrupt officials who try to conceal illicit wealth in offshore accounts could earn him respect both at home and abroad. It would indeed change how the country is perceived, especially in the West, and would bring Kazakhstan closer to where the country's leadership would like it to be.

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<sup>433</sup> Not counting the indexes for economic performance and healthcare. On democracy, see, for example, The Economist Intelligence Unit (2019), *Democracy Index 2018: Me too?*.

## 9. Recommendations

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### For Western governments and institutions

- Western countries and institutions need to be more involved in Kazakhstan than they have been in recent times. They should not be fooled by Kazakhstan's past stability. Systemic vulnerabilities are growing. Economic challenges and the transition process have exposed and intensified such vulnerabilities. Powers seeking to maintain their geopolitical footholds, such as Russia, and rising powers, such as China, have proven themselves more than willing and able to fill geopolitical vacuums as these appear. The more the West retreats from engagement with Kazakhstan, the more others will fill the gap – and potentially clash. **Kazakhstan needs to rise among the West's priorities now.**
- Constraints on his power notwithstanding, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev should be cultivated as a respected interlocutor. As one of the architects of Kazakhstan's successful multi-vector foreign policy, the new president should be welcomed in Western capitals, which constitute one such vector. Kazakhstan should not, however, benefit from unqualified Western support. **Subtle pressure aimed at addressing deficiencies in domestic governance will help foster a culture of change in Kazakhstan.** Western interlocutors should impress upon the government that reform is in its own interests to prevent greater upheavals later. This reform needs to be carefully managed, but not micromanaged to the extent that it excludes independent voices.
- Western policymakers should proactively **counteract the Kremlin's propaganda machine**, which seeks to discredit Western values in the eyes of Russian-speaking TV viewers in Kazakhstan. This means undertaking a more targeted, creative and diversified strategy of public information, including opening opportunities for Western news and entertainment.
- Recognizing the ongoing changes in global governance, Western governments and institutions should **frame their policies towards Kazakhstan in such a way that there are incentives and engagement formats/arrangements** for Kazakhstan to value a genuine partnership with the West. The UK and other European countries should enhance their diplomatic presences in Kazakhstan with foreign ministry officials who are less focused on narrow economic engagement and more on better governance. In addition to commerce, Western officials should offer the Kazakhstani leadership assistance with the country's energy transition, for example via the EU's connectivity initiative.

### For the government of Kazakhstan

- Kazakhstan's authorities need to **introduce more transparent and inclusive governance** to reduce the disconnection between the population and the ruling elite, respond better to the needs of citizens, and ultimately restore faith in government.
- The government needs to **give more clarity over its intentions for the political transition and the disbursement of power** (especially considering the decree published on 21 October 2019 giving former president Nursultan Nazarbayev extra powers over ministerial and security appointments). The abiding influence of the

'First President' as the official 'Leader of the Nation' (*Elbasy*), as the head of the ruling Nur Otan party, and particularly as the chair of the Security Council creates ambiguity, diluting the ability of the new president to spearhead reforms.

- President Tokayev should create conditions that would **foster a more open political environment**. The introduction of parliamentary checks and balances instead of a rubber-stamp legislature would yield significant benefits for the robustness of political institutions and governance. Introducing elections for regional governors and the mayors of large cities would also boost accountability.
- To deliver the more responsive state that he has promised Kazakhstan's citizens, President Tokayev needs to **ensure that his National Council of Public Trust becomes not only a genuine platform for dialogue but also an engine of reform** by rapidly enacting some of its proposals. The authorities need to make the platform more inclusive by encouraging the attendance of constructive civil society groups or actors that have hitherto been excluded or have declined to join.
- The government should **halt detentions of peaceful protesters and should amend legislation governing the right to free assembly**, replacing the requirement to obtain permission for public gatherings with a requirement to inform local authorities of such events. The leadership should also halt prosecutions of dissenters for freely expressing their opinions, and should establish genuine dialogue with the public. The cases of citizens deemed 'political prisoners' should be reviewed, and the judiciary should not be abused for political ends.
- The government needs to **take credible action to strengthen the rule of law**, through comprehensive reform of the judicial and criminal justice systems. Such reform needs to eradicate practices rooted in the Soviet system, and foster instead an 'innocent until proven guilty' mentality to deliver on President Tokayev's promise of delivering justice for all.
- The government needs to **take meaningful action to combat corruption**, not only by following through with high-profile trials but by establishing genuine zero-tolerance policies at all levels of the public sector, the civil service, the criminal justice system and the judiciary. Reform should be modelled on international best practice for transition economies, in particular on Georgia as the most relevant post-Soviet example.
- **A wide programme of financial and commercial reforms is vital** if Kazakhstan is to be a major economic player. These should include, but not be limited to: reform of state-owned enterprises through more effective regulation and management, and orderly divestment of their public-sector stakes; policy support for SME development, especially in combating predatory practices of corporate raiding; transparency and reform of the financial sector to root out conflicts of interest; and more consistent and supportive policies for smaller foreign investors and minority shareholders.
- In addition to the planned creation of an international centre for trade and economic cooperation on the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border, Kazakhstan would benefit from adopting **measures to boost border efficiency by tackling informal payments and other non-tariff barriers**. Given the limited size of its domestic market, Kazakhstan should seek to coordinate its industrialization strategy with

Uzbekistan in order to increase complementarities, rather than compete with its neighbour by diversifying into the same activities, such as the manufacture of automobiles and agricultural and electronic equipment.

- The leadership should continue to **pursue the informal or ‘soft’ regionalism** advocated by a group of Kazakhstan’s leading political analysts. A focus on consensus-seeking and continuous consultation, rather than on integration and the creation of formal structures, would allow Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states to avert potential Russian efforts to hijack or thwart intra-regional cooperation.
- The dominance of various forms of religious and tribal group identity is often a reaction to the socio-economic environment. Thus, the government should strive to create conditions that will **ensure the emergence of a stronger middle class and develop a corresponding civic identity**. Improving the quality of Kazakhstani education (secular and religious), and a better appreciation of Kazakhstan’s culture, will reduce the risk of archaic or aggressive forms of identity becoming popularized.
- More of an effort needs to be made to **reduce the ability of external players to shape public opinion and manipulate information channels**. This must be done by supporting and increasing the competitiveness of independent media, both traditional and digital, particularly Kazakh-language media. The undue influence of foreign media, at times purveying fake news, creates risks for the government in terms of its own ability to foster a civic identity and encourages divisions in society.
- The government should **live up to its international commitments on the granting of asylum to refugees**, and ensure Kazakhstani citizens fleeing persecution – particularly from China – are not subject to forcible return.
- The government should **recognize the growing link between domestic public opinion and its foreign policy**, develop better channels of communication to explain international policy, and provide more transparency over its plans – such as, for example, accepting BRI money – in order to foster greater public trust in its actions.

# Appendix: Facts and Figures

**Population:** 18.4 million (Statistics Committee, 2019)

**Table A1: List of Kazakhstan's ethnic and religious groups, 2019**

Group	% of population
Kazakhs	67.98
Russians	19.32
Uzbeks	3.21
Ukrainians	1.47
Uighurs	1.47
Tatars	1.10
Germans	0.97
Turks	0.61
Azerbaijanis	0.60
Koreans	0.59
Dungans	0.39
Belarusians	0.30
Tajiks	0.27
Kurds	0.25
Chechens	0.18
Poles	0.17
Bashkirs	0.09
Other ethnic groups	1.04

Source: Statistics Committee of the Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), 'Численность населения Республики Казахстан по отдельным этносам на начало 2019 года' [Population size of Republic of Kazakhstan by individual ethnic groups at beginning of 2019], <http://old.stat.gov.kz/getimg?id=ESTAT306055> (accessed 29 Oct. 2019).

**Table A2: Religious groups in Kazakhstan (2009 census data)**

Religion	% of population
Muslim	70.20
Christian	26.32
Jewish	0.03
Buddhist	0.09
Other	0.02
Non-believers	2.82
Did not say	0.51

Source: Statistical Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2010), *Национальный состав, вероисповедание и владения языками в Республике Казахстан* [National composition, religion and language skills in the Republic of Kazakhstan], Astana, <http://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=WC16200032705> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

**Table A3: Age structure and life expectancy in Kazakhstan****Age structure (2018)**

Age group	Percentage	Male	Female	Total
0–14 years	28.46	2,675,695	2,525,881	5,201,576
15–64 years	64.15	5,706,919	6,017,015	11,723,934
65 years and over	7.39	479,389	871,600	1,350,989

Sources: World Bank (all undated): 'Population ages 0–14 (% of total population) – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.TO.ZS?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 15–64 (% of total population) – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.1564.TO.ZS?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 65 and above (% of total population)', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.TO.ZS>; 'Population ages 0–14, total – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.TO?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 15–64, total – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.1564.TO?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 65 and above, total – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.TO?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 65 and above, male – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.MA.IN?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 65 and above, female – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.FE.IN?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 15–64, male – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.1564.MA.IN?locations=KZ>; 'Population ages 15–64, female – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.1564.FE.IN?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.1564.FE.IN?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false); 'Population ages 0–14, male – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.MA.IN?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.MA.IN?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false); and 'Population ages 0–14, female – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.FE.IN?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.FE.IN?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false) (all sources accessed 11 Nov. 2019)

**Life expectancy (2017)**

<b>Total population</b>	<b>72.95 years</b>
Male	68.72 years
Female	76.92 years

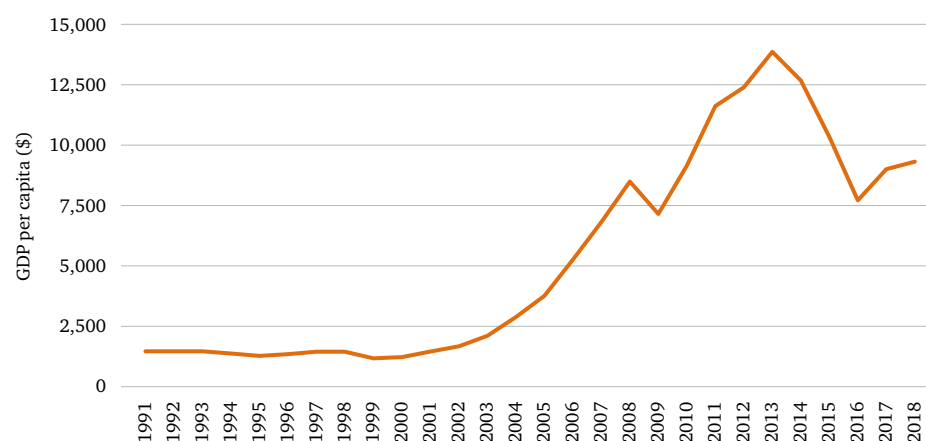
Sources: World Bank (all undated): 'Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false); 'Life expectancy at birth, male (years) – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.MA.IN?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.MA.IN?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false); and 'Life expectancy at birth, female (years) – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.FE.IN?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.FE.IN?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false) (all sources accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

**Table A4: Kazakhstan's regions**

Region	Population	Major city (population)
		Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana, capital; 1,078,384)
Akmola	738,587	Kokshetau (145,161)
Aktobe	869,637	Aktobe (487,994)
Almaty	2,038,934	Taldykorgan (145,403) Almaty (status city; 1,854,656)
Atyrau	633,791	Atyrau (269,720)
West Kazakhstan	652,325	Oral (234,184)
Zhambyl	1,125,442	Taraz (357,791)
Karaganda	1,378,533	Karaganda (497,712)
Kostanay	872,795	Kostanay (243,031)
Kyzylorda	794,334	Kyzylorda (239,070)
Mangistau	678,199	Aktau (183,097)
Pavlodar	753,853	Pavlodar (333,989)
Turkistan	1,983,967	Turkistan (164,746) Shymkent (status city; 1,009,086)
East Kazakhstan	1,378,527	Oskemen (331,614)
North Kazakhstan	554,517	Petropavl (218,956)

Source: Statistics Committee of the Ministry of the National Economic of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019), *Численность населения Республики Казахстан по полу в разрезе областей, городов, районов и районных центров и поселков на начало 2019 года* [The population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by gender by region, city, district and district centre and village at the beginning of 2019], Astana, <http://old.stat.gov.kz/getImg?id=ESTAT305821> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

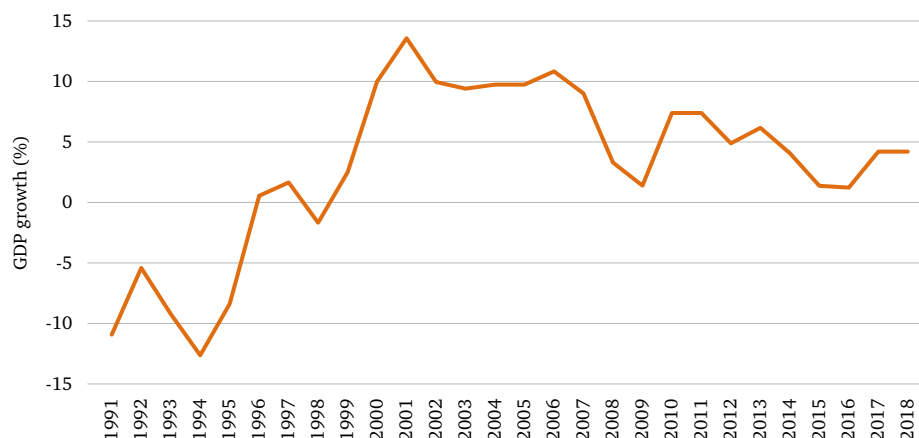
**Figure A1: Kazakhstan's GDP per capita, US\$, 1991–2018**



Source: World Bank (undated), 'GDP per capita (current US\$) – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false) (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).



Figure A2: Kazakhstan's annual real GDP growth, %, 1991–2018



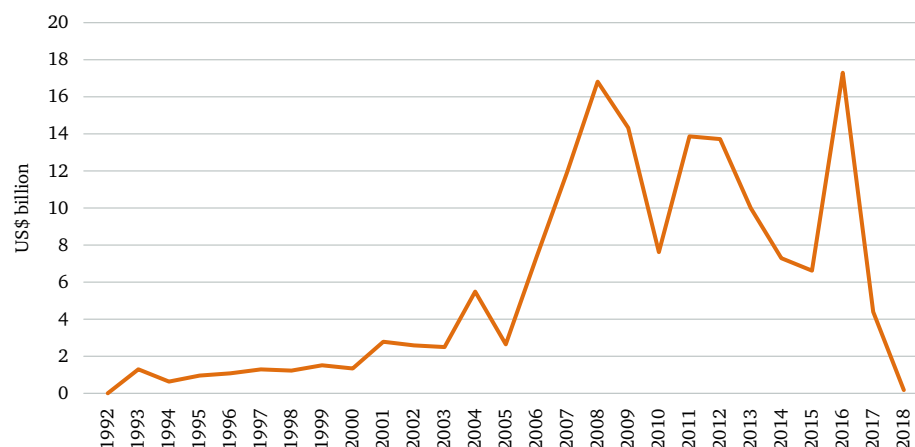
Source: World Bank (undated), 'GDP growth (annual %) – Kazakhstan', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=KZ> (accessed 25 Oct. 2019).

Table A5: Kazakhstan's top trade partners by annual value, 2017

Exports	Value, \$'000s	Imports	Value, \$'000s
Italy	8,669,344	Russia	11,472,924
China	5,777,684	China	4,692,242
Netherlands	4,748,206	Germany	1,484,116
Russia	4,515,165	United States	1,253,451
Switzerland	3,100,689	Italy	945,266

Sources: World Bank (undated), 'Kazakhstan Exports By Country and Region 2017', <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KAZ/Year/2017/TradeFlow/Export> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019); World Bank (undated), 'Kazakhstan Imports, Tariff By Country and Region 2017', <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KAZ/Year/2017/TradeFlow/Import> (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

Figure A3: Foreign direct investment net inflows into Kazakhstan, US\$ billion



Source: World Bank (undated), 'Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US\$) – Kazakhstan', [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?locations=KZ&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?locations=KZ&most_recent_year_desc=false) (accessed 11 Nov. 2019).

Table A6: Elections in Kazakhstan since independence

<b>Presidential elections</b>		
Candidates	Date	Share of vote, %
Nursultan Nazarbayev	1 December 1991	98.80
Nursultan Nazarbayev	10 January 1999	81.00
Serikbolsyn Abdildin		11.90
Nursultan Nazarbayev	4 December 2005	91.15
Zharmakhan Tuyakbai		6.61
Nursultan Nazarbayev	3 April 2011	95.55
Nursultan Nazarbayev	26 April 2015	97.75
Kassym-Jomart Tokayev	9 June 2019	70.96
Amirzhan Kosanov		16.23
Daniya Yespayeva		5.05
<b>Parliamentary</b>		
Party	Date	Seats
Union of People's Unity of Kazakhstan	7 March 1994 (annulled)	33
Trades Union Federation		11
People's Congress of Kazakhstan		9
Socialist Party		8
Peasants' Union		4
Lad (Harmony) Movement		4
Other parties and groups		7
Independents		59
State list		42
<b>Total</b>		<b>177</b>
Kazakhstan National Unity Party	9 December 1995– 4 February 1996	11
Democratic Party		7
Communist Party		2
Socialist Party		1
National Co-operative Party of Kazakhstan		1
National Congress Party of Kazakhstan		1
Independents		44
<b>Total</b>		<b>67</b>
Fatherland (Otan)	10 and 24 October 1999	24
Communist Party of Kazakhstan		3
Agrarian Party of Kazakhstan		3
Civic Party of Kazakhstan		11
National Cooperative Party of Kazakhstan		1
Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan		1
Government-associated		20
Business		10
Other		4
<b>Total</b>		<b>77</b>

## Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition

### Appendix: Facts and Figures

Party	Date	Seats
OTAN	19 September and 3 October 2004	42
Ak Zhol		1
The Democratic Party of Kazakhstan		1
Asar		4
AIST bloc of the Agrarian and Civil Parties (Agrarian Industrial Union of Workers)		11
Independent		18
<b>Total</b>		<b>77</b>
People's Democratic Party (Nur Otan)	18 August 2007	98
Candidates selected by the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan		9
<b>Total</b>		<b>107</b>
People's Democratic Party (Nur Otan)	15 January 2012	83
Ak Zhol		8
Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan		7
Candidates selected by the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan		9
<b>Total</b>		<b>107</b>
People's Democratic Party (Nur Otan)	20 March 2016	84
Ak Zhol		7
Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan		7
Candidates selected by the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan		9
<b>Total</b>		<b>107</b>

Sources: Nohlen, D., Grotz, F. and Hartmann, C. (2001), *Elections in Asia: A data handbook, Volume I*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; OSCE ODIHR (2006), 'Republic of Kazakhstan Presidential Election 4 December 2005: Final Report', 21 February 2006, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/18152?download=true> (accessed 19 Nov. 2019); OSCE ODIHR (2011), 'Republic of Kazakhstan Early Presidential Election 3 April 2011: Final Report', 16 June 2011, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/78714?download=true> (accessed 19 Nov. 2019); OSCE ODIHR (2015), 'Republic of Kazakhstan Early Presidential Election 26 April 2015: Final Report', 29 July 2015, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/174811?download=true> (accessed 19 Nov. 2019); OSCE ODIHR (2019), 'Republic of Kazakhstan Early Presidential Election 9 June 2019: Final Report', 4 October 2019, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/434459?download=true> (accessed 19 Nov. 2019); Inter-Parliamentary Union (undated), 'Kazakhstan Mazhilis (House of Representatives): Historical Archive Of Parliamentary Election Results', [http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2165\\_arc.htm](http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2165_arc.htm) (accessed 13 Nov. 2019); OSCE ODIHR (2000), 'Republic of Kazakhstan Parliamentary Elections 10 and 24 October 1999: Final Report', 20 January 2000, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/14790?download=true> (accessed 19 Nov. 2019); OSCE ODIHR (2004), 'Republic of Kazakhstan Parliamentary Elections: 19 September and 3 October 2004. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report', 15 December 2004, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/38916?download=true> (accessed 13 Nov. 2019); and OSCE ODIHR (2016), 'Republic of Kazakhstan Early Parliamentary Elections: 20 March 2016. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report', 27 June 2016, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/248781?download=true> (accessed 13 Nov. 2019).



**Table A8: Prisoners of conscience in Kazakhstan, November 2019**

Aset Abishev	Mukhtar Dzhakishev	Iskander Yerimbetov
Kenzhebek Abishev	Ruslan Ginatullin	Serik Zhakhin
Aron Atabek	Kayyrlı Omar	Almat Zhumagulov
Maks Bokayev	Igor Sychev	Bolatkhan Zhunusov
Sanat Bukenov	Saken Tulbayev	
Igor Chuprina	Yerzhan Yelshibayev	

Source: Tirek Alliance (2019), 'Актуальный список политзаключённых' [An up-to-date list of political prisoners], [http://tirek.info/dir/wpbdp\\_category/list01/?fbclid=IwAR1pZaiSSa\\_kGqf83o075lm-OJ490pe3y-lbIQ\\_NGFaklClepp1GTU06WqKI&wpbdp\\_sort=field-1](http://tirek.info/dir/wpbdp_category/list01/?fbclid=IwAR1pZaiSSa_kGqf83o075lm-OJ490pe3y-lbIQ_NGFaklClepp1GTU06WqKI&wpbdp_sort=field-1) (accessed 14 Nov. 2019). Please note that the list contains 20 names, but that four have been released from custody since its publication.

Kazakhstan is a member of the following international organizations:

- Asian Development Bank
- Asian Disaster Reduction Center
- Association of Central and Eastern Europe Election Officials
- Bureau International des Expositions
- Central Asian Foundation for Management Development
- Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre
- Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
- Economic Cooperation Organization
- Energy Regulators Regional Association
- European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- Global Environment Fund
- Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- Group of States against Corruption
- International Association for the Promotion of Cooperation with Scientists from the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union
- International Atomic Energy Agency
- International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
- International Civil Aviation Organization
- International Civil Defence Organisation
- International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage
- International Committee of the Red Cross
- International Council of Environmental Law

- International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol)
- International Development Association
- International Electrotechnical Commission
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
- International Finance Corporation
- International Fund for Agricultural Development
- International Labour Organization
- International Maritime Organization
- International Military Sports Council
- International Olympic Committee
- International Organization for Migration
- International Organization for Standardization
- International Organization of Legal Metrology
- International Renewable Energy Agency
- International Science and Technology Center
- International Social Security Association
- International Statistical Institute
- International Telecommunication Union
- International Trade Centre
- Inter-Parliamentary Union
- Islamic Development Bank
- Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
- Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency
- Non-Aligned Movement
- Organisation for Cooperation between Railways
- Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- Organization of Islamic Cooperation
- Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization
- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
- United Nations
- United Nations Children's Fund

- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
- United Nations Development Programme
- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
- United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
- United Nations Environment Programme
- United Nations Human Settlement Programme
- United Nations Industrial Development Organization
- United Nations Population Fund
- United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament for Asia and the Pacific
- Universal Postal Union
- World Food Programme
- World Health Organization
- World Intellectual Property Organization
- World Meteorological Organization
- World Organization for Animal Health
- World Tourism Organization
- World Trade Organization
- World Wildlife Fund

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