

Democratic Reform in Kazakhstan: A Model for Transitional States?



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Democratic Reform in Kazakhstan: A Model for Transitional States?

“As former EU Commissioner for External Relations I have witnessed the development of Kazakhstan on the economic and democratic front from 1991 onwards, and I think that this country has progressed step by step in the right direction. I hope that Kazakhstan will continue on this positive path.”

Dr. Benita Ferrero-Waldner,
Chair of the ECFA Advisory Council
Foreign Minister of Austria (2000 – 2004)
EU Commissioner for External Relations (2004 – 2009)
March 2015

“Kazakhstan's policies in recent years have very rightly focused on economic development, the reduction of poverty, equality among citizens and their rights, and the growing of a middle class. Presidential guidance and broad support from political, economic, social classes have allowed Kazakhstan to succeed and reach significant improvement first of all in the quality of its citizens' lives. So I think it is important that this year's early presidential elections present the President with a fresh mandate, made stronger by a renewed popular support in light of the difficult global economic and geopolitical challenges of today's world”

On. Franco Frattini
Member of the ECFA Advisory Council
Foreign Minister of Italy (2008 – 2011)
March 2015

Introduction

When Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991 it confronted the twin challenge of developing both a market economy and democracy from scratch. That Kazakhstan's economy lay in ruins following the collapse of the USSR compounded these challenges. Living standards deteriorated during the first decade of independence, resulting in major upheavals in society and wide income disparities.

Such income inequalities have important implications for democratisation, since a high level of income equality has been observed to be an important precondition for democratic government. In other words, the processes surrounding the formation of a market economy in Kazakhstan in some ways opposed a simultaneous democratisation of the political system.

Although seldom acknowledged, this contradiction has among other factors compelled Kazakhstan to focus on economic development, the formation of a market economy, and reduction of income inequalities prior to experimenting with sweeping democratic reforms. Kazakhstan has now successfully completed the transition to a market economy, achieved a

high rate of economic growth and, starting in the early 2000s, embarked on substantive democratic reforms.

Yet economic development and income equality are not the only factors which historically have proven to be in correlation with democratic government. Added to this should be the corollaries of a strong and sizeable middle class, high levels of literacy and education, social pluralism and strong intermediate groups in society (or “civil society”), low levels of civil violence, political polarisation and extremism, as well as a tradition of toleration and compromise – all of which are needed, to varying degrees, for successful democratic transitions.¹

This paper examines Kazakhstan’s progress in each of these areas and their impact on democratic reforms. It also touches on the imperative of political leadership, President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s popularity in this respect, and the Feb. 14 call by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK) for an early presidential election which has since been supported by a wide spectrum of political forces resulting in the president’s decision to set an early election for April 26th. The paper concludes by asking to what extent Kazakhstan’s democratisation and nation-building could serve as a model for other countries in transition.

Kazakhstan’s Economic Development, Income Equality, and Growing Middle Class

The correlation between economic development and democratic government is well established. Economic development empowers citizens and promotes changes in social structure and values that favour democratisation. A higher level of economic well-being fosters life satisfaction, increases the overall level of education in society, and makes greater resources available for distribution among social groups, which facilitates accommodation and compromise. Moreover, expansion of the middle class reduces concentrated inequalities which, in turn, facilitates majority rule.²

Western transitions to democracy were evolutionary, gradual and preceded by market economies. Recognising this, the Kazakh leadership has chosen to sequence democratisation by adhering to a formula of “economics first, then politics”, stating that “every step of Kazakhstan’s political reforms is closely tied to economic progress.”³

However, Kazakhstan - like other former Soviet states - suffered negative economic growth for several years after the dissolution of the USSR.⁴ In 1997, President Nursultan Nazarbayev set out a bold vision in the Kazakhstan 2030 Strategy to overcome these post-communist difficulties by emulating the growth miracles of the Asian “tiger economies”.⁵

The declared ambitions in the 2030 Strategy - to attain high and steady growth rates, reduce poverty, attract foreign investments, transition to a modern market economy, and liberalise the trade regime - have been fulfilled and far outstripped the expectations of most observers. Kazakhstan was the third fastest growing economy in the world between 2000 and 2010, and economic growth has averaged 8 percent since the turn of the millennium.⁶ In 2013, per capita income stood at \$13,000⁷ and was anticipated to reach \$14,600 in 2014.⁸ Once an

¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), pp. 37-38.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

³ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

⁴ http://www.akorda.kz/en/category/gos_programmi_razvitiya

⁵ http://www.akorda.kz/en/category/gos_programmi_razvitiya

⁶ <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr14243.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kazakhstan/overview>

underdeveloped province of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan is today an upper middle-income country.⁹ Kazakhstan's rate of democratic progress is in lockstep with its income level, since historically "transitions to democracy occur primarily in countries at the middle levels of economic development."¹⁰

A market economy has formed with the privatisation of state assets. In 1991, Kazakh industries were completely state-owned and with no entrepreneurial class to speak of. In 2011, small and medium-sized businesses numbered more than 700,000.¹¹ Small and medium-sized businesses are the engine of economic growth and the main source of job creation in developed economies, which is why Kazakhstan has invested considerable effort into further improving its business climate. In 2013, Kazakhstan was ranked 49th out of 185 countries in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index, behind only Georgia and Armenia among CIS states.¹²

Kazakhstan's rapid economic growth has lifted millions out of poverty. In 2001, 47% of Kazakhstan's population fell below the World Bank's established poverty line; in 2012 they amounted to only 4%. The income rise is particularly pronounced in rural areas; rural poverty rates have been cut from 59% to 6% in this time period.¹³ From 2001 to 2010, average monthly wages grew more than 500% and unemployment was halved. According to some assessments, Kazakhstan's middle class today makes up approximately 25% of the population.¹⁴ Most importantly, Kazakhstan's income gap is today among the world's lowest. In 2011, Kazakhstan was the ninth most equal country worldwide based on the Gini index – the only non-European country in the world top-10 – and ahead of such European welfare states as Finland and Germany.¹⁵ Kazakhstan's economic prosperity, equality, and growing middle class will serve to promote a democratic political culture and demands for accountable government.¹⁶ While this does not happen overnight, new political parties have formed today representing different strata of the population and the government itself has begun to vie for middle class support.

Democracy requires gender equality to be truly democratic, and empowerment of women is progressing steadily in Kazakhstan. For example, the majority of Bolashak graduates are women, as are the majority of doctors of science, while 61 percent of citizens with higher education are women. Likewise, the number of women in government is growing. In 1999 only one female member of government could be found; today there are two female Ministers out of 16 members of Government while a former female deputy Prime Minister was appointed Secretary of State, the fifth highest office in the country. Every fourth member of local representative bodies is female. Women make up 25.2 percent of elected deputies in parliament,¹⁷ which is higher than in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the USA, and the third highest in the post-Soviet space after Belarus and Turkmenistan.¹⁸

⁸ <http://strategy2050.kz/en/news/675/>

⁹ <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2014/01/weodata/index.aspx>

¹⁰ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 60.

¹¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kazakhstans-steady-progress-toward-democracy/2011/03/28/AF1XPKCC_story.html

¹² <http://www.doingbusiness.org/~media/GIAWB/Doing%20Business/Documents/Annual-Reports/English/DB13-full-report.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr14243.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

¹⁵ <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-11-most-equal-countries-in-the-world-2011-10?op=1&IR=T>

¹⁶ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kazakhstans-steady-progress-toward-democracy/2011/03/28/AF1XPKCC_story.html

¹⁷ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/04/undp-helps-promote-gender-equality-kazakhstan/>

¹⁸ <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

Even with these impressive numbers, gender equality in government is - as in many other advanced societies - lagging behind society as a whole. Kazakhstan ranked 32nd out of 136 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2013 Global Gender Gap report, having climbed from 49th place in 2011. Ranked highest in the CIS area, Kazakhstan is more gender equal than European countries such as France and Portugal, the fifth highest worldwide in its income group (upper-middle income), and the world's most gender equal Muslim-majority society. In terms of female "economic participation and opportunity" Kazakhstan is ranked 20th in the world and it shares the first place on female "health and survival". Kazakhstan ranks 65th in the "political empowerment of women", which is on par with that of the USA, and highest among CIS countries.¹⁹

Kazakhstan's education system has equally benefited from economic growth and welfare-oriented policies. Over the past 15 years, education expenditures have risen almost tenfold and education has been modernised at all levels, from pre-school to higher education.²⁰ In UNESCO's Education for All Index, which measures overall progress of national education systems – focusing on universal primary education, literacy, gender equality, and quality of education – Kazakhstan was ranked 8th worldwide in 2010. Only Japan, Sweden, Norway, United Kingdom, Iceland, and Switzerland scored better.²¹

In sum, Kazakhstan's economic growth has been paralleled with targeted policies reducing income inequality and promoting the "health, well-being, and education" of all Kazakhs – as set out in the Kazakhstan 2030 Strategy. This has served as the foundation of the country's democratisation. The democratic reforms embarked upon since the early 2000s should be seen in context of this, even if history suggests that democratisation is typically an arduous and lengthy process.

Kazakhstan's Democratic Transformation

Kazakhstan's first decade of independence was defined by the consolidation of its statehood and sovereignty, the delimitation of its borders, the privatisation and adoption of a market economy, and the promotion of a nationally integrated economic space. Far-reaching democratisation was not among Kazakhstan's most urgent priorities in the 1990s. This is understandable since some of the key preconditions for democratic government – a market economy, economic prosperity, and income equality – were not yet in place.

In 1992, Kazakhstan became a member of the OSCE, an organisation with 57 participating states that sets democratic standards for its members. Unsurprisingly, these high standards are easier for Western democracies to meet than for the twelve post-Soviet countries which had been under Soviet totalitarian rule almost throughout the 20th century. Thus, the OSCE has concluded that most Kazakh elections held to date have fallen short of the OSCE commitments.

The 1999 parliamentary and presidential elections were no exception.²² However, democratisation intensified in the early 2000s when economic growth took off. Improvements have also been observed in each election held since, with every subsequent election being considered by the OSCE and other observers a "step forward".

¹⁹ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf

²⁰ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

²¹ <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/gmr2012-report-edi.pdf>

²² <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/14790?download=true>

One of the key documents which initiated and guided Kazakhstan's democratic transition was the 2004 Election Law. The OSCE considered the law to have provided "for increased transparency to the overall election process"²³ and marked "significant progress" compared to earlier legislation.²⁴ Progress were also noted by the OSCE that year in the parliamentary elections, which were considered to "represent improvement over past parliamentary elections".²⁵ Most of the shortcomings, according to the OSCE, related to election administration and election legislation.²⁶

The OSCE likewise judged the 2005 presidential election, which President Nazarbayev won with 91 percent of the vote, to have been "a process which was mostly inclusive and provided voters with an opportunity for choice," even if some restrictions on campaigning and a few other shortcomings were observed.²⁷ Still, election observers assessed voting positively in 92 per cent of polling stations visited.²⁸ The publication of election results broken down by polling station was a step forward towards transparency, allowing observers to verify that the results from each station matched the vote totals reported by the Central Election Commission (CEC).²⁹

Adam Ereli, USA State Department deputy spokesman, said the presidential election "showed significant improvements over previous voting" and that the "election reflected the will of Kazakhstan's voters" even if it still did not meet international standards.³⁰ Frederick Starr, chairman of the Central Asia Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University, reached a similar conclusion, saying that the landslide election "gave President Nazarbayev an overwhelming mandate."³¹

The 2004 and 2005 elections set Kazakhstan on a path of further political reform. In 2005, a National Commission on Democratisation was created which called for a strengthened parliament, new political parties, enhanced media freedoms, and a more transparent judiciary.³² In March 2006, President Nazarbayev proposed the introduction of elections for akims (mayors) at district levels and bringing forward a bill on local self-government – both of which are now in effect.³³

The constitutional amendments enacted in 2007 served to further strengthen the checks and balances of Kazakhstan's political system: the presidential term was reduced from seven to five years; proportional representation was adopted in the lower chamber of Kazakhstan's parliament (Majlis); the number of Majlis deputies were increased to 107; the funding for political parties was enhanced; the government was to be held accountable not only to the President but also to parliament; and the composition of the government was now to be determined by the Prime Minister.

As with previous elections in Kazakhstan, OSCE found flaws in the 2007 parliamentary elections but nonetheless concluded that the seven registered political parties contested the

²³ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/38915?download=true>

²⁴ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/18153?download=true>

²⁵ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/38915?download=true>

²⁶ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/38915?download=true>

²⁷ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/18153?download=true>

²⁸ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/18153?download=true>

²⁹ <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/10519-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2005-12-14-art-10519.html>

³⁰ <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2005/12/20051207161243mvyelwarc0.2214014.html#ixzz3OKmJuC00>

³¹ <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2005/12/20051207161243mvyelwarc0.2214014.html#ixzz3OKmJuC00>

³² <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/156739-kazakhstan-makes-real-progress-toward-democracy#ixzz38HuCBpE7>

³³ http://prosites-kazakhembus.homestead.com/Kazakhstan_in_Brief.html

election in an “overall inclusive and transparent manner”.³⁴ Seeking to address shortcomings, Kazakhstan in 2009 passed further legislation on mass media, elections, political parties, and local government. The results were viewed positively and, in the opinion of the Chargé d’Affaires of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE, “marked a step forward on Kazakhstan’s path to democracy”.³⁵

For example, the 2009 Law on Elections now ensures representation of a minimum of two parties in Parliament, even if one of them does not win enough votes to pass the 7% threshold. The Law on Political Parties, enacted in the same year, significantly reduced the bureaucratic burden for registering a political party, provided public financing of political parties to strengthen their role in public life, and simplified the party registration process.³⁶

Results of these efforts were seen in the most recent 2012 parliamentary elections. For example, OSCE considered the legal changes to have constituted an “improvement”; the CEC “ran an extensive voter education campaign”; the “OSCE/ODIHR EOM positively assessed the quality of the voter lists”; it “received no reports of major impediments to the campaigns”; and “election officials were observed to be largely knowledgeable and experienced”.³⁷ That 75% of registered voters turned out at the polls and nearly a quarter of the parliamentary seats were decided by runoffs suggest that the elections were genuinely competitive.

Most recently, on September 2nd 2014, President Nazarbayev pledged to further decentralise the Kazakh political system by transferring additional functions and powers to local government bodies, especially in agriculture and the provision of public services. The President also instructed government agencies to continue the transfer of some government functions to the private sector and expand the functions carried out by non-governmental organisations.³⁸

Other recent democracy promoting initiatives include the government’s allocation of \$14 million in funding over the next three and a half years to support a Regional Civil Service Hub.³⁹ Kazakhstan’s civil service reform has drawn on the best international practices. For example, in June last year representatives of Kazakhstan’s Agency for Civil Service Affairs and the Presidential Administration visited Brussels and Paris on a study visit as part of the EU project “Civil Service Reform and Modernisation of the Government of Kazakhstan”.⁴⁰

While further efforts are needed to create a professional state – many of which are detailed in the Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy unveiled in December 2012 – progress has undoubtedly been seen in civil service reforms. Chester Newland, a Professor of Public Administration of the University of Southern California, even went as far as stating that “the current system of civil service in Kazakhstan is one of the best in the world, even in comparison to the United States.”⁴¹

Legal and Judicial Reforms

³⁴ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/28438?download=true>

³⁵ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

³⁶ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

³⁷ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/89401?download=true>

³⁸ http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Nazarbayev-on-decentralization-of-powers-in-Kazakhstan-255870/

³⁹ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/10/kazakhstan-increases-funding-un-managed-civil-service-hub/>

⁴⁰ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/07/eu-civil-service-reform-project-brings-kazakh-civil-servants-journalists-european-public-media-institutions/>

⁴¹ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/05/astana-hosts-conference-civil-service-organised-eu-support/>

Legal and judicial reforms are important components in Kazakhstan's transition to a fully democratic system of government. One of the major tasks confronting the Kazakh leadership following independence has been to uproot old Soviet practices in the judiciary. This is easier said than done since Soviet political culture, including in the area of rule of law, has proven to be resilient throughout the post-Soviet space. In Soviet times, political decisions and administrative regulations, as a rule, took precedence over law. Even so, already in 2004 the American Bar Association observed in its *Judicial Reform Index* that:

*“Kazakhstan has taken some important steps away from its Soviet past. It has, for example, de-criminalised many offenses, and has introduced probation and community service as alternative forms of punishment. It has also imposed a moratorium on the death penalty and is currently debating the introduction of a jury system. In terms of the judiciary, Kazakhstan stands in notable contrast to its neighbors in allocating significant amounts of resources to improving work conditions for judges”.*⁴²

Over the past decade, Kazakhstan has lived up to its promises and taken these and other steps to improve rule of law and protection of human rights. In 2002, Kazakhstan established a Human Rights Ombudsman and moved the penitentiary system from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Justice (it has since been moved back to the Ministry of Interior after several years of efforts by the civilians to deal with the complicated issues of running the prisons). The Human Rights Ombudsman is since 2011 guided by the Paris Principles, which is a set of internationally established criteria for the independent operation of human rights institutions. To conform to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Kazakhstan introduced trial by jury in January 2008, and since 2010 these trials are used for all “serious crimes”. Later in 2008, a law was enacted stipulating that any arrest in Kazakhstan must be authorised by a court, thereby strengthening the constitutional rights of citizens.⁴³

A National Action Plan for Human Rights was adopted in 2009, formulated by the Kazakh government in collaboration with domestic and international NGOs, UNDP, and the OSCE Centre in Astana. A Concept of Legal Policy for 2010-2020 was approved in August the same year, setting out a forward-looking agenda for the development of legislation.

In December 2009, the Kazakh Supreme Court adopted a resolution creating a legal basis for criminal liability in cases of torture and abuse of official powers. The same month Kazakhstan passed the “Law on Amending the Criminal Code, Criminal Procedure and the Code of Civil Procedure of the Republic of Kazakhstan with Regard to Improvement of the Judicial System”, which among other things introduced a three-tiered court system.

Other examples of judicial reform over the past few years include an expanded use of non-custodial sentences and conciliation.⁴⁴ New versions of the Kazakh Criminal Code, Criminal Executive Code and new Criminal Procedure Code were adopted in late 2014, with a view to providing greater humanisation of justice, exploring alternative measures of correction, strengthening the judiciary and fighting such challenges as corruption, medical crimes and attacks on motherhood and childhood⁴⁵.

Corruption is a problem in Kazakhstan, including in the judiciary and law enforcement. A recent OECD review, published in October 2014, nonetheless concluded that: “Fighting

⁴² <http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/directories/roli/kazakhstan/kazakhstan-jri-2004.authcheckdam.pdf>

⁴³ http://www.kazakhstan-bern.ch/en/?page_id=355

⁴⁴ http://www.kazakhstan-bern.ch/en/?page_id=355

⁴⁵ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/12/kazakhstan-works-improve-protection-human-rights-ombudsman-says/>

corruption remains an important public policy priority in Kazakhstan” and the report “welcomed the development of a new anti-corruption strategy”. The review also noted a “positive change” in the “legal regulation of the civil service” and gave “a positive assessment of the active work of Kazakhstan authorities to foster intolerance of corruption among population and cover its anti-corruption activities in the media.” Further, it noted that “Kazakhstan has conducted a substantial reform of its criminal law by adopting new Criminal Procedure and Administrative Offences Codes and also by aligning with them the Law on the Fight against Corruption.”⁴⁶

Civil Society

Upon independence, Kazakhstan inherited a flattened post-totalitarian Soviet society whose citizens had little experience of associating with each other. A vibrant civil society, autonomous from the state, had never existed in the Soviet Union which resolutely suppressed such activities. It is not an exaggeration to say that civil society in Kazakhstan was nearly non-existent in 1991, except perhaps for the most famous example of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk international anti-nuclear weapons movement.⁴⁷ In partnership with Europe and the United States, Kazakhstan has invested considerable efforts in creating a legal environment for NGO growth and development.⁴⁸

Results have already begun to register. In USAID’s 2009 NGO Sustainability Index, Kazakhstan ranked higher than most and had achieved one of the highest levels of NGO sector development in Central Asia. The number of Kazakh NGOs was also expected to grow even further due to the “stable domestic policy climate laws that are favourable to NGOs.”⁴⁹ Between 1994 and 1997, roughly 1,600 NGOs were registered in Kazakhstan. Today, around 25,000 non-profit organisations are active, involving about 550,000 people.⁵⁰ In 2013 Kazakhstan spent more than \$39 million on implementing joint government-NGO projects and in developing the NGO sector.⁵¹

Moreover, in 2013 Kazakhstan launched a “Dialogue Platform on Human Dimension”, a Consultative and Advisory Body initiated by the Foreign Ministry. More than 150 recommendations have been developed on NGOs and civil society since then, 40 of which have been approved by state bodies and fed into the process of adopting a new NGO law. A draft bill is presently being prepared aimed to build a more efficient and sustainable civil society in Kazakhstan and to strengthen the dialogue between authorities and civil society organisations, promoting civil society initiatives, increase the role of NGOs in the provision of public services, strengthen NGO participation in the legislative process, and to fulfil the recommendations given to Kazakhstan under the United Nations’ Universal Periodic Review.

Proposed by the Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan, the bill is also set to introduce public grants and awards for funding of NGOs – including the possibility for foreign donors to provide funds and organise grant financing of Kazakh NGOs. The bill was unveiled by the

⁴⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/corruption/anti-bribery/Kazakhstan-3rd-Round-Monitoring-Report-ENG.pdf>

⁴⁷

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:20101499~menuPK:244752~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html>

⁴⁸ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

⁴⁹ <http://www.kazconsulny.org/en/page.php?id=6c>

⁵⁰ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

⁵¹ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2013/11/sixth-civil-forum-examines-methods-increased-government-civil-society-cooperation/>

government in early 2013 and is presently in the final stages of public consultation. It is due to be submitted to parliament early this year.⁵²

Another example of greater NGO participation in governing bodies is the inclusion of civil society representatives onto the Commission on the Fight Against Corruption. Recently, the chair of the Board of Transparency International Kazakhstan, the President of the Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan, and Chairman of the Nur Otan Anti-Corruption Council were appointed members of the commission. NGOs will thus be an integral part of the new Programme for the Prevention of Corruption for 2015-2025, which was adopted on November 11th of last year.⁵³

Media freedoms are critical for civil society development and today as much as 85 percent of Kazakhstan's more than 2,000 media outlets are privately owned.⁵⁴ In a Gallup/IRI poll in 2011, Kazakh citizens considered Kazakhstan's media the institution of which they held the most favourable view, after the President.⁵⁵ The IT revolution has further enhanced citizen access to media outlets. The number of mobile phone subscriptions per person in Kazakhstan today surpasses even Finland, the highest-ranked country in Western Europe.⁵⁶

The increased connectivity of Kazakh citizens, among themselves and with authorities, has done much to break the "vertical communication" that prevailed during the Soviet era. Kazakh authorities have not sought to limit the rapid advance of modern communications; to the contrary, they have fostered them and expanded the "horizontal" communication channels of citizens, which is critical to the development of a civil society and civic state.

Promoting Tolerance

Promoting tolerance has been key to Kazakhstan's ambitions of nation-building and political reform. The reason is evident: Kazakhstan is among the most ethnically and culturally diverse states worldwide, hosting nearly 130 different ethnic groups and 17 different religious confessions. A Muslim-majority and secular state, Kazakhstan has aimed since independence to be a civic (as opposed to ethnic) nation where minorities are empowered and, indeed, encouraged to retain both their own identities while also embracing a civic Kazakhstan identity.

A poll conducted in 2013 by the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies of the Kazakhstan Ministry of Education and Science found that a majority "believe that the language policy is balanced and promotes interethnic harmony," and the responses of the two major ethnic groups – Kazakhs and Russians – on this matter were "practically identical." This suggests that Kazakh authorities have found a balance among ethnic groups.⁵⁷

Ethnic or religious strife is nearly absent as a result of these efforts. As noted by Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief, in 2014: "Interreligious relations have been very peaceful in this country. There have been no violent

⁵² <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/12/kazakh-government-civil-society-discuss-new-bill-ngos/>

⁵³ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/11/kazakhstan-enlists-civil-society-fight-corruption/>

⁵⁴ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

⁵⁵ <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/Full%20English%20Version%20Kazakhstan%20IRI%20Poll%20Feb%202011.pdf>

⁵⁶ http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc

⁵⁷ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/01/recent-study-reveals-sense-national-unity/>

pressures to this day, which is an accomplishment achieved by the people of Kazakhstan.”⁵⁸ In 2006, the State Department of the USA considered Kazakhstan “a leader among former Soviet Union republics in advancing religious tolerance and respect for the rights of religious minorities.”⁵⁹ Between 2000 and 2010, the World Bank consistently ranked Kazakhstan among the top 40% of countries in the world considered most politically stable and free of violence.⁶⁰

The creation of an Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK), launched in 1995, is a symbol of Kazakhstan’s promotion of tolerance. Headed by President Nazarbayev, the Assembly provides all ethnic groups a voice in the political system, ensures the protection of rights and freedoms of citizens regardless of their nationality, supports national cultural centres throughout the country to preserve and revive ethnic minority cultures, and provides facilities for forums such as cultural festivals and Houses of Friendship. The Assembly was further empowered following the adoption of several constitutional amendments in 2007. For instance, the number of deputies in the national parliament was increased to 107, of whom 9 are elected by the APK, increasing representation for ethnic groups (Interestingly, one of the key features of Kazakhstan’s political discourse is an unwritten rule forbidding the use of the word “minority”).⁶¹ Similar provisions were made for the councils at lower levels of government, whose structures mirror that of the national Assembly.

The Imperative of Political Leadership

It has been said that “economic development makes democracy possible; political leadership makes it real.”⁶² Kazakhstan has parted ways with the Soviet political and economic system, achieved a high rate of economic growth, and created a new state. Political leadership and long-term thinking have been imperative to succeed in these efforts.

In his October 1997 Address to the nation, President Nazarbayev outlined strategic milestones in Kazakhstan’s path of development up to 2030. The 2030 Strategy was followed up with the Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy, adopted in 2012, which underscored the importance of democratisation.

The Kazakh leadership has fulfilled its promises. In a 2011 survey conducted by Gallup for the Washington-based International Republican Institute, 84 percent of those polled believed Kazakhstan was heading “in the right direction”. A majority were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the “government’s efforts to protect citizens’ political rights” and 69 percent believed democracy “exists” or “mostly exists” in Kazakhstan. Only 4 percent responded that it “does not exist at all”. Among twelve Kazakh institutions (the President, media, government, parliament, army, governors, police, religious associations, courts, political parties, NGOs, and the opposition), the President was ranked the most popular. 90 percent supported the way President Nazarbayev is “handling his job” and only 3 percent

⁵⁸ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/04/un-special-rapporteur-gives-recommendations-religious-affairs-kazakhstan/>

⁵⁹ US Department of State for Religious Freedom – International Religious Freedom Report for 2006.

⁶⁰ <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#countryReports>

⁶¹ Dinara K. Rustembekova and Saule K. Amandykova, “Assembly of People of Kazakhstan is a New Institution of International Consent in Republic of Kazakhstan,” *Education and Science Without Borders*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010), p. 37.

⁶² Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 316.

opposed it.⁶³ Few can doubt that President Nazarbayev has an overwhelming mandate for his policies, and that this mandate is based on the impressive advances since independence.

At the same time, the global economic downturn, falling oil prices, and sanctions against Russia have all combined to negatively affect the Kazakh economy in recent months. In response, President Nazarbayev launched a far-reaching counter-cyclical state economic programme (Nurly Zhol – Path to the Future). On February 14th of this year, the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan called for an early presidential election, citing the need “to give President Nursultan Nazarbayev a new mandate of national trust to successfully steer the country in this period of global trials”.⁶⁴ The call, which originated in petitions from citizens to the APK, is evidence of an accountable leadership in need of popular support for its policies. President Nazarbayev has heeded the call and on February 25th announced his constitutionally-provided decision to set the early presidential election for April 26th, two months from the announcement.

President Nazarbayev’s leadership has also been seen on the international stage. In 2010, for instance, Kazakhstan was entrusted with the chairmanship of the OSCE: the first Muslim-majority country and the first country from Central Asia to hold such a position. The strengthening of democratic institutions, rule of law, gender balance and tolerance all ranked highly during Kazakhstan’s chairmanship.⁶⁵ As noted by Peter Fraser, Chairman of the British Kazakh Society and member of the House of Lords: “U.S. and European Union support for Kazakhstan’s bid to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, in 2010 proved justified. Kazakhstan did the job responsibly and effectively.”⁶⁶

Conclusion: A Model for Transitional States?

Kazakhstan’s sequenced model of democratisation and societal reform has proven successful in view of its difficult circumstances and could, in many ways, serve as a model for other transitioning countries. Kazakhstan has recorded one of the fastest rates of economic growth worldwide in the past 15 years, and this wealth has trickled down to all layers of society. Kazakhstan’s level of income inequality is one of the world’s lowest, which is an important precondition for democratisation. A functioning market economy is in place and a middle class has formed. Kazakhstan is today one of the most gender equal societies in the world and the most gender equal among Muslim-majority societies. The country has modernised its education system across the board and is now ranked in the world Top Ten on educational quality and access (while it clearly continues with efforts to improve the education system further).

Home to one of the most multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies in the world, Kazakhstan has transformed this diversity into an asset. As a result, it is largely free of violence, among the most stable countries worldwide, and relatively free of extremism. Civil society and media freedoms are developing. All told, Kazakhstan has, through strenuous effort, put in place all the most important components and preconditions for a democratic system of government.

In parallel to this, the Kazakh leadership has gradually democratised the political system by strengthening parliament and decentralising the political system, by investing into political

⁶³ <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/Full%20English%20Version%20Kazakhstan%20IRI%20Poll%20Feb%202011.pdf>

⁶⁴ <http://www.astanatimes.com/2015/02/kazakhstans-ethnic-assembly-calls-early-presidential-election/>

⁶⁵ http://www.kazakhembus.com/sites/default/files/documents/Kazakhstan_OSCE_Chairmanship_Priorities.pdf

⁶⁶ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/kazakhstans-path-toward-democracy/430918.html>

party development and introducing election of local akims (mayors), and by improving checks and balances between the three branches of government among other reforms. The 2011 Gallup/IRI poll attests to firm support for President Nazarbayev's general course and pace of reforms.

Had sweeping democratic reforms been implemented immediately upon independence, it is by no means certain that Kazakhstan would have accomplished what it has, and the legacy of troublesome post-Soviet development in some of the other former constituent republics of the USSR attest to this conclusion. The income inequality, poverty, and societal tensions prevailing during the first years of independence were not conducive to democratisation since they were a breeding ground for political polarisation, extremism, and conflict. By focusing on economic development first, Kazakhstan has raised the level of life satisfaction, interpersonal trust, fostered an educated citizenry, made greater resources available for distribution among social groups, and formed a solid middle class that could "anchor" democratic reforms. In that respect, Kazakhstan's sequenced economic and political reforms could, perhaps, be described in terms of a "success story" that gainfully could be emulated by others.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/how-kazakhstan-can-continue-its-success-story/450953.html>

ABOUT THE ECFA

Central Asia is a region larger than Western Europe and contains five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Blessed with some of the richest and most diverse resources anywhere in the world, over the last twenty years the region has shown its commitment to become a reliable, long-term partner of the West.

Kazakhstan is Central Asia's engine for economic growth, and the Government of Kazakhstan has taken the lead in developing relations with the European Union. In its commitment to the process of deepening political and economic relations with the European Union, Kazakhstan is participating in the establishment of the **Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs (ECFA)**, which is a new and dynamic think tank working at the heart of the European Union.

The first Honorary President of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs is H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs has been modelled on the Council on Foreign Relations in the US, the United Kingdom's Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House and the EU's own European Council on Foreign Relations. It is envisaged that over time, the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs will become a valuable and independent source of high-quality research, publications and information that will keep Europe fully abreast of the fast-changing development of the Central Asian region. This is a work-in-progress, and it will require dedication and commitment from the ECFA's team of researchers and writers.

The grant for the establishment costs of the ECFA has been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The ECFA and its staff are grateful for this generous donation and thank the MFA. It is envisaged that, as with similar institutions in other countries, governments in the region as well as corporate sponsors and private individuals will over the longer-term join the funding base of the ECFA.

A list of upcoming publications can be [found here](#). The formal launch of the ECFA took place in November 2014, attended by distinguished members of its [Advisory Council](#). The ECFA's first Director, Rauan Kenzhekhanuly, provided regular news updates on the region in his [Blog](#), while the new Director, Zhanbolat Ussenov, has come on board in early 2015 to continue steer the new organization and he has begun providing his views too. You can [subscribe here](#) to receive all news updates as well as the ECFA's regular newsletters and bulletins.

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