

Kazakhstan steps up reform efforts but says Europe still keeping distance

By Zoran Radosavljevic

Originally published by Euractiv, 1st September 2017



Kazakhstan's futuristic new capital, Astana, hosts this year's EXPO, as the country moves to modernise and attract foreign investment.

Ask the average European what the world's biggest landlocked country is, or was the last to leave the Soviet Union, and chances are they will not know it's Kazakhstan.

But Kazakhstan's intense efforts to reform its economy and society and attract foreign investment still go largely unnoticed in Europe, even though the country – the motor of Central Asia's economy – is increasingly becoming a relevant international player.

This year it became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, while its capital Astana hosts the international exhibition [EXPO 2017](#), dedicated to 'Future Energy'.

As of Tuesday (29 August), Kazakhstan is also the seat of the world's [low enriched uranium bank](#), owned by the International Atomic Energy Agency. And it was Kazakhstan that initiated a UN resolution which proclaimed 29 August the International Day against Nuclear Tests.

Modernisation in full swing

Beyond the modernisation efforts is a bold claim: Kazakhstan aims to join the world's top 30 most developed countries by 2050.

Kazakhstan has been criticised by the West for its human rights record, the media situation and the Soviet-style functioning of the judiciary. In the meantime, the country's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has initiated a devolution of powers from the presidential institution to the parliament and the government.

A constitutional reform took place in March, but there are still several laws to be amended, before the constitutional changes take effect.

For the reform of the judiciary system, the independence of the judges will be strengthened by making sure that they cannot be removed from office. EURACTIV.com has been told Kazakhstan is fully aware of the need to overhaul its judiciary system if it wants more investment, beyond oil and gas.

A second branch of the modernisation concerns the economy – to invest in human capital and to develop new industries, without forgetting the traditional ones.

National identity

The third branch of the modernisation concerns national identity. A symbolic move is the plan to abandon the Cyrillic script and replace it with the Latin alphabet to facilitate contact with the rest of the world. This, however, will be done gradually.

Unlike the Slavic nations, for which Cyrillic has been a natural choice, Kazakhstan is a Turkic nation. Arabic had been used, until Latin alphabet was introduced in 1929. In 1940 Stalin imposed the Cyrillic, a second change of the script in a very short time.

Right now, the Kazakh alphabet, still based on the Cyrillic script, has 42 letters, as opposed to 26 in Latin. A special commission has been put in charge of finding a solution.

Nazarbayev first raised the idea of a switch to Latin in 2012. This year he formulated it more clearly, stressing that this would be a gradual process. The switch has nothing to do with the place of Russian in the Kazakh society, which is effectively the second official language.

What Kazakhstan aims to achieve is to become a nation with three languages: Kazakh, Russian, and English, as the language of international business. A program called "Trilingual education" is implemented from the kindergarten age.

EU moving slowly on Kazakh market

And yet, for all the recent reform efforts, the EU has been slow to take the cue and therefore risks seeing the Kazakh market of 18 million people won by others, its ambassador to Belgium told EURACTIV.

“We are interested in European presence in our countries, markets, society... but we are not a priority for the EU. The niches that we are saving for Europe are filled with other countries, Japan, Korea, China, Russia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey. Europe is very slow in establishing its presence on new markets in Central Asia,” Ambassador Almaz Khamzayev said.

“Relations [with the EU] are improving but not fast enough. Businesswise, the European private sector, companies are losing a lot. The train is going fast and they lag behind,” he told EURACTIV on the sidelines of a conference named [Kazakhstan: Entering a New Era of Modernisation](#), held in Brussels on Tuesday (29 August).

Iveta Grigule, the head of the European Parliament’s Kazakhstan Delegation, praised the country’s role in regional stability and security. She said Kazakhstan’s relations with the EU’s diplomatic service (EEEAS) were excellent, but less so with the Parliament, which has urged Kazakhstan to improve its human rights, religious and media freedoms.

“Sometimes I feel that two main bodies of the EU are going in different directions in relations with third countries... Some of my colleagues don’t even know where Kazakhstan is but they have an opinion of this country,” she told the conference.

“Not a publicity stunt”

Pierre Borgoltz, a former EU diplomat for Central Asia, said Kazakhstan’s new modernisation wave, including business and judicial reforms initiated by long-reigning president Nursultan Nazarbayev, was “not a publicity stunt”.

“All this engagement is not pure posture, it is real engagement. The domestic reforms are going hand in hand with increasing international engagement,” Borgoltz told the conference.

Human rights watchdogs have for years highlighted Kazakhstan’s patchy human rights record. Amnesty International said in its latest report that rights to freedom of expression, of peaceful assembly and association, remained restricted. “The authorities used criminal prosecution to target social media users and independent journalists.”

Ambassador Khamzayev said it was a matter of misperception drawing on previous decades and not taking into account the latest democratic efforts.

“The perception is lagging behind reality and we understand that. We are keeping every institution in Brussels informed of all the changes, explaining our approaches in changing our democratic society, creating new institutions, NGOs. But today, everything is on the net – push the button and you will see about our human rights,” he concluded.