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Enabling Environment Snapshot

Kazakhstan

February 2025

Summary
Kazakhstan's geopolitical position between Russia and China shapes its restrictive civic environment, where repressive tactics from its neighbours are often mirrored domestically. Despite constitutional guarantees and ratification of international human rights treaties, authorities continue to violate freedoms of assembly, expression, and association, most notably during the January 2022 protests, when over 10,000 were detained and 238 killed. Ongoing repression includes arrests of environmental and anti-nuclear activists and restrictive laws on peaceful assembly. While reforms such as the Concept for Civil Society Development (2020–2030) and faster CSO registration show progress, other measures—like the publication of a register of foreign-funded organisations and debates on a "foreign agents" law—threaten to stigmatise civil actors.

Although state funding for CSOs has grown, it mainly supports social projects, excluding human rights initiatives. The USAID funding freeze has further undermined financial sustainability. Dialogue mechanisms like the Public Councils, Civic Forums and National Kurultai exist, but public participation often lacks real influence. Marginalised groups, including women and people with disabilities, have gained some representation, yet advocacy for LGBTQI rights remains suppressed. The 2024 Mass Media Law has increased state control over journalism. Overall, civil society faces tightening state pressure, limited freedoms, and shrinking international support, despite pockets of progress.

Context

The geopolitical context is not very favourable for Kazakhstan because the country is located between Russia and China, two totalitarian superpowers that actively use their legislation, institutions and law enforcement practices against their political opponents, journalists, human rights advocates, civil society activists and organisations. This geographical location also affects the enabling environment in Kazakhstan as repressive tactics used in Russia and China may be replicated in the country context. Civic space is currently rated as repressed, with civil society organisations operating under restrictive legal frameworks and uneven enforcement of fundamental freedoms. The human rights fallout after the "January 2022 events" when authorities suppressed mass protests and unrest, is still felt, and the lack of accountability for human rights violations perpetrated in that context remains. Despite the existing mechanisms of dialogue between the state and civil society, the effects of the USAID funding freeze are expected to lead to inspections of civil society organisations by government agencies and stigmatisation of activists as "foreign agents".

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Despite constitutional guarantees of the freedoms of assembly, movement, expression of opinion, and free elections (see sections 5, 12, 20, 21, 32, 33 of the Constitution), and the fact that Kazakhstan has ratified most of the international treaties on human rights, the government of Kazakhstan is persecuting civil society representatives, including media, through violations of fundamental freedoms and illegal arrests. The most significant instance of government repression was seen during the January 2022 protests, triggered by an increase in gas prices,

that quickly escalated into large-scale protests and riots, which were violently suppressed by government forces. More than 10,000 people were detained and 238 people, including 19 security officers, were killed in clashes between the police and protesters. Following these events, there have been ongoing practices of repression against fundamental freedoms in the country - a trend that has also been reported by the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR), CIVICUS, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Country reports on human rights practices: Kazakhstan.

In September 2024, the police detained about 40 anti-Nuclear Power Plant activists, among others, on charges of failing to comply with police demands at public hearings. These actions took place in several cities, including Almaty, Almaty Region, and Semey, during and around public hearings and other civic events where citizens were expressing opposition to the proposed project. For example, in Almaty city and its region, 12 activists were detained on 29 September 2024, with five of them formally charged with preparing mass disturbances and others released under travel restrictions. Several were accused of organising unauthorised protests or conducting informal public opinion surveys.

The Law "On the Procedure for Organizing and Holding Peaceful Assemblies in the Republic of Kazakhstan" dated 25 May 2020, introduced legal definitions of public events such as "assembly", "rally", "march", "picket", and "demonstration" and requires prior notification and approval. In 2023, 2,204 notifications were submitted, and 242 of them were approved. The law regulating peaceful assembly is therefore unreasonably restrictive. Even for a single person-picket, prior permission is required, and holding or simply planning an 'unauthorized' meeting or picket is punishable by arrest for up to 15 days – a law which has been used against critical activists and artists.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

The government's Concept for Civil Society Development, 2020-2030 highlights the need to improve CSOs' regulation through positive reforms. The 2023 Law "On Public Oversight" and related laws enhance the role of CSOs in holding the government accountable. The institution of petitions was introduced, and the procedure for organising public oversight in various spheres was regulated. The registration period for all non-profit organisations was reduced from ten to five working days, and the required number of people to create a public association was reduced from ten to three.

Despite such positive steps, in 2023, the State Revenue Committee of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Finance published a register of persons and legal entities receiving money and (or) other property from foreign states, international and foreign organisations, foreigners, and stateless persons. A total of 240 legal entities and individuals, including foreign companies and Kazakhstani CSOs and journalists, were listed on the register, based on these CSOs' and individual experts' reporting to tax authorities. Some CSOs were targeted for additional financial checks by the bank based on this register, and the published list was criticised for adding to the stigma of organisations receiving foreign funding.

In addition, during the visit of Russia's President Putin to Kazakhstan in November 2024, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Ministries of Justice of the two countries, to exchange experience, including regarding legislation and law enforcement practice, such as the anti-NGO legislation already in effect in Russia. Therefore, it will be important to monitor the potential impact of draft laws on 'foreign agents' that restricts the activities of civil society.

In 2024, a draft Law "On the Introduction of Amendments and Supplements to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Charity" was discussed, which claims to increase transparency of the charity process and reduce fraudulent transactions involving individuals raising funds for the benefit of others. But the measures introduced may create excessive barriers for CSOs. For example, the introduction of mandatory accreditation for charitable organisations will create restrictions rather than provide incentives, and the administrative burden will increase reporting requirements.

On 12 February 2025 a Member of Parliament proposed to introduce a law on 'foreign agents' in Kazakhstan. The debate over "foreign agents" in Kazakhstan raises broader questions about the country's commitment to media freedom and civic engagement in an increasingly restrictive climate for civil society. Separately, the Ministry of Culture and Information initiated work on a general NGO law, with a working group tasked to prepare a draft by the end of 2025. These developments raised serious concerns that new provisions specifically targeting foreign-funded NGOs may be introduced, on top of existing legislation that already subjects such groups to discriminatory reporting requirements and stigmatising listing in a register.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for civil society organisations is relatively available in Kazakhstan with the support of the state, international donors, private foundations, and the possibility for CSOs to be service providers, i.e. to provide services on a contractual basis. In 2005, the Kazakhstan government, recognizing the importance of involving CSOs in addressing social issues, introduced a mechanism for state funding of CSOs on a tender basis (State Social Contracting Law (SSC). This CSO funding mechanism involves competitive selection of providers of social services and implementers of social projects among CSOs (within the framework of the public procurement system). State funding has become an increasingly important source of financial sustainability for many CSOs.

Since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, civil society initiatives have received more than 140 billion Kazakh tenge (ca. 243 million Euro) from state funding. In 2025, the Government of Kazakhstan allocated a total of 33.1 billion tenge (ca. 52.7 million Euro) for the implementation of 2,105 CSOs' social projects through the State Social Contracting system. To date, state funding of CSOs is provided not only in the form of SSC, but also in the form of state grants and state awards and, beginning in January 2023, it is also furnished in the form of SSCs for the implementation of strategic partnerships.

Although state-supported projects are mainly social-oriented, there is no adequate analysis of the social impact of project implementation in general, and human rights organisations and initiatives on human rights are not supported. At the same time, access to the resources of international organisations in Kazakhstan is very limited and currently only 200 organisations receive funding from international sources.

The USAID funding freeze has negatively impacted local CSOs, small and medium enterprises and even government, and has led to cancellation of activities which support the people, such as health, education and civil society projects.

4. State openness and responsiveness

In recent years, the state has demonstrated willingness to engage in dialogue, for example, through the National Kurultai to discuss reforms. However, the effectiveness of such interaction remains controversial, as critical voices may face repressions.

Despite citizens of Kazakhstan having the constitutional right to a healthy environment (Art. 31) and the right to information and decision-making in environmental matters, the 2024 referendum on the construction of a nuclear power plant (NPP) was accompanied by significant human rights violations. Independent anti-nuclear coalitions and the 'AES Kerek Emes' (No need for an NPP) platform that brings together environmentalists, experts and journalists, faced refusal to hold public consultations, and stigmatisation of activists as foreign agents. Public hearings were conducted in a way that promoted the government's pro-nuclear position, limiting discussions of alternatives and restraining critical opinions on nuclear power plants.

Environmental activists, CSOs and local communities thus face significant barriers to protecting their rights to a healthy environment and natural ecosystems. In Maraldy village, residents have struggled for two years to stop a gold mining project using cyanides, threatening mountain springs and rivers. Despite protests, public hearings and demands for independent environmental assessments, the government and local authorities prioritise investor interests, disregarding community concerns. Activists face mounting pressure, including police intimidation, court actions and fines, highlighting systemic violations of environmental and community rights in favour of resource exploitation.

Another example: Since 1 March 2024, Kazakhstan has been transferred to the single UTC+5 time zone. Most Kazakhstanis initially spoke out against time conversion. When voting on the government portal "Open regulatory legal acts", 92% opposed this decision. A survey on the Kazakhstan Today website shows over 60% of people were against switching to a single time zone, and that a single time zone had a negative impact on 11.5 million residents. Citizens launched a petition for the return of the previous time zone, which in a short time gained more than 50,000 votes. The activists collected more than 90,000 live signatures and sent them to the deputies. However, the issue has not been resolved.

In terms of mechanisms for civil society participation, it has been observed that while there are several opportunities for dialogue between civil society and government actors, these spaces rarely lead to civil society recommendations being taken on. The participation of civil society in parliamentary working groups and public councils under the government agencies is merely advisory in nature, and public opinion is not taken into account in decision-making. One of the mechanisms is the consultative and advisory body "Human Dimension Dialogue Platform", which takes place regularly at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The constructive nature of this platform, which contributed to the adoption of three human rights action plans and several legal acts, is related to a wide range of political

and social issues in the country. In contrast, the development of the Concept of Inclusive Policy until 2030 did not take into account proposals from civil society (request from the deputy dated 18 December 2024).

The Concept for Civil Society Development, 2020-2030, Civil Society Forums (held every two years) presents another promising avenue for civil society participation. However, the full implementation of many recommendations remains outstanding. Despite laws and concepts adopted at the national level, their implementation does not find a place in real life, nor does it lead to real changes. This is due to a combination of several problems: even with political will, many issues require significant financial resources to create infrastructure, train personnel, and change the judicial system. For example, the law on domestic violence (passed in 2024 with amendments to the social, labour, and criminal codes) requires police and social workers to adopt a completely new approach, one they have yet to be trained in. There is also a perception that the law is improved, but incomplete. That is, additional reforms are needed for the high-quality implementation of the law.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Marginalised groups, especially women and ethnic minorities, and people from remote areas have become more visible in civil society. For example, the 2024 campaign for women's rights was widely publicised. Despite this progress, barriers remain, and marginalised groups still struggle to be heard in political discussions. For example, the feminist CSO 'Feminita' has faced physical violence during assemblies with a lack of police action to protect them. Despite these forms of repression, civil society continues to play a vital role in promoting inclusiveness and democratic participation.

Constituting a leap forward in the interaction on issues of people with disabilities, the Senate ratified the Marrakesh Treaty in early 2025 to expand access to books, magazines and educational materials for people with visual disabilities and to provide access to the cultural and social life of society. Additionally, the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified in 2023. For the first time, organisations of people with disabilities prepared an alternative report and presented it to the UN Committee, with the Committee providing recommendations, including a separate section on women with disabilities. Today, there are seven people with disabilities in the Parliament and 71 deputies at the local level. Additionally, there is a law requiring a 30% quota for women, young people, and people with disabilities in the Parliament.

Public discourses are possible, but they depend on the topic. Environmental issues (which do not affect the interests of businesses and natural and subsoil users), social protection, inclusiveness and digitalisation are discussed relatively freely. However, political reforms, human rights, freedom of speech, electoral processes and LGBTI rights remain sensitive areas where restrictions, barriers and pressure are possible. As part of the push for a 'foreign agents' law and the compilation of a register of foreign-funded organisations, stigmatising narratives have been reignited, presenting foreign-funded NGOs as imposing alien values and corrupting the youth.

Today, Kazakhstan's media do not represent any real force for working in partnership with civil society and supporting public discourses. The media need training, as media representatives are either pro-government, or not adequately following standards of integrity in reporting, covering only scandals and copying material from each other. The few independent mass media outlets are weak and subject to repression, such as mass blocking of accounts.

In June 2024, the Law on Mass Media was adopted, which was discussed at length by journalists and media lawyers on various platforms. Issues related to selective journalist accreditation are expected to lead to a division of journalists into those loyal and disloyal to the government, denying many of them access to information and events. Additionally, there are issues relating to the allocation of public grants. Although an open competition is planned, the selection of competition winners will be carried out by an independent expert commission, the composition of which will be determined by the Ministry of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan, giving the state greater control and influence on media reporting.

Challenges and Opportunities

Civil society in Kazakhstan is expected to face tightened state control. Legal obstacles may threaten civil society representatives, especially those who advocate for marginalised groups such as LGBTQI and women's rights, as well as bloggers and media activists. Criticism continues to be suppressed through the persecution of journalists, activists, and human rights defenders and the use of reforms and legal measures to silence dissenting voices.

The effects of the USAID funding freeze continue to be felt and, apart from having led to the financial collapse of key CSOs, threaten a decrease in the intellectual and societal oversight functions over the authorities and long-term degradation of the "third sector" as a vital institution for the country's development.

Geopolitical issues and Kazakhstan's neighbourhood with China and Russia will continue to affect the development of the enabling environment, with concerns over the use of legislation, institutions and law enforcement practices against journalists, human rights defenders, civil activists and organisations.

Recently, there has been frequent discussion about the term "civil society" in Kazakhstan. Experts often agree that it is not simply a collection of CSOs, but a sphere, a space comprised of individuals (politically active citizens, civic activists, public initiatives, and a variety of formal and informal groups). In 2025, Kazakhstan is preparing plans to update the Concept for Civil Society Development until 2030. The Concept intends to renew its focus on the social sphere. CSO leaders believe it is particularly important to expand on issues of developing an enabling environment, their own vision of the civil sector, and their view of human rights opportunities, as well as to propose new strategies and solutions. The recommendations of the fourth Universal Periodic Review will also be considered. All this will help to develop discourses, and will help the public to participate in dialogues and opportunities to expand civic space.

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