



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# **Enabling Environment**

## **Snapshot**

**Kazakhstan**

**November 2025**

## Context

**Period covered by the report:** March 2025 – November 2025

The enabling environment in Kazakhstan is affected by a systematic expansion of state control. The authorities continue to narrow the space for free expression, assembly and association by using vaguely worded legislation to pressure independent media and activists.

Domestic politics is characterised by varying levels of trust between the government and pro-government organisations on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the government's strained relationship with human rights, independent media, open-minded experts, bloggers, or think tanks. Public funding is often directed to loyal NGOs engaged in social projects to the detriment of human rights-based organisations and think tanks. These state-supported structures (GONGOs) actively promote authoritarian principles, both domestically and internationally, while independent organisations encounter additional burdensome requirements and reduced foreign funding.

Notwithstanding the existing restrictions, Kazakhstan's independent civil society is demonstrating a growth in professionalism, and its position is becoming increasingly strong in the framework of international dialogue.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

A key trend in Kazakhstan's enabling environment in 2025 has been the systematic expansion of control over civic space. This is reflected in pressure on independent mass media and journalists. International organisations ([Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), and [Committee to Protect Journalists](#)) document systemic pressure on journalists and civic activists.

Civil society representatives face pressure and attempts to restrict their activities, especially when they become involved in issues that are sensitive to the authorities. According to [monitoring data from the NGO "Kadir-Kasiet"](#), at least 342 individuals and organisations were threatened in the first seven months of 2025 alone. [Activists and protest organisers are often subject to detention](#), arrest and fines, even for participating in small or solo pickets.

Kazakhstan's authorities regularly use excessively vague legislative articles to persecute critics of the government and others. In July 2025, [Bakhytzhana Toregozhina](#), a prominent human rights defender, was fined for allegedly spreading "false" information in social media posts expressing concern about the health of imprisoned activist Marat Zhylanbaev.

With regard to freedom of assembly, restrictive procedures for holding peaceful assemblies remain in place. Any attempt to hold unauthorised gatherings has been suppressed by law enforcement agencies. Since the fall of 2023, [not a single rally](#) has been held in Almaty. Instead, all applications for rally permits have been rejected by the akimat and attempts to appeal the rejections have been dismissed by the courts. For example, in September 2025, an attempt by a group of Almaty residents to hold a peaceful picket against the demolition of a historic building was denied approval, referring to the "lack of free dates" in the schedule, although the law provides for a notification procedure. According to information received by Argo, the activists appealed the refusal and conducted the peaceful march, which was interrupted by mass detentions. The participants were fined large sums or arrested for 10-15 days.

In the context of resistance to the construction of nuclear power plants, the ['Case of the Five' \(Almaty\)](#) activists who had been detained for organising anti-nuclear power plant protests in

2024, was [reported](#) on by human rights organisations. On 28 August 2025, the activists were [sentenced](#) to up to four years of custodial restraint. Well-known figures and anti-nuclear power plant movements continue to make public appearances and hold memorial campaigns (including regarding the former nuclear testing site in Semipalatinsk). Although the field for protest activity is narrowed, the [civil discourse on nuclear power](#) continues.

Thus, the trend of narrowing the civic space in Kazakhstan has continued in 2025. Despite statements about modernisation, the state continues its policy of systematically restricting freedom of expression, association and assembly in practice.

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

A draft law on non-government organisations has been developed by a [working group](#) established by the authorised body, a process which has been criticized as non-transparent. Civil society has not received complete information about the process of drafting the new law. In fact, instead of a new law, experts have pointed out that it is necessary to bring the current legislation in line with international standards. Civil society organisations have repeatedly recommended this, [including to the UN Human Rights Committee](#).

Currently, Kazakh law mandates state registration for all public associations, prohibiting the establishment and operation of unregistered groups. This requirement [poses challenges](#) for informal collectives and movements like ‘Let’s Protect Kok-Zhailau’ and ‘For Interior Ministry Reforms’.

The current legal regulation, specifically [Order No. 685](#) of the Minister of Finance, further establishes additional reporting obligations for non-profit organisations that go beyond the standard requirements applicable to all legal entities. In addition to submitting tax and statistical reports, NGOs are required to submit information annually to the NGO database at the authorised body in the Government by 31 March.

NGOs receiving international funds are additionally required to send a notification of receipt of funds and an expenditure report to the tax authorities, while information about such NGOs is entered into a separate public register available on the website of government agencies. This Register of Recipients of Foreign Aid is a step towards applying the negative Russia experience of introducing the term ‘foreign agent’, which has become a stigma for NGOs in Russia and has actually paralysed civil society. In July 2025, a [working group was formed](#) to prepare a [draft law](#) on ‘foreign agents’ by August 2025, which was later extended to spring 2026.

Thus, in 2025, the legal framework for Kazakhstan's civil society has predominantly been defined by the strengthening of control in the financial sector.

## 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

In 2025, civil society institutions in Kazakhstan were primarily funded through the implementation of social projects under [state social contracting](#) (SCC) that totalled 33 billion tenge (approximately 57 million euros). The [most funded areas](#) of state social contracting are:

- support for socially vulnerable segments of the population – 45.6% of the total budget;
- projects in education, science, information, physical culture and sports – 18.1%;
- support for youth policy and children's initiatives – 9%;
- assistance to a person (family) in a difficult life situation – 6.4%;

- other socially significant areas – 4.4%.

Along with social contracting, an important tool for supporting civic initiatives is grant financing. The state [allocated](#) 1.8 billion tenge for 101 grants in 2025, an amount that is less than in previous years. In addition, civil society organisations received funds from other sources, including donations from private charity funds (for example, ['Ayala'](#)) and international grants.

The reduction in international aid (for example, USAID closure) increases the sector's vulnerability and exposes dependence on external financing. Global trends indicate that budgets are shifting priorities and away from humanitarian support. Therefore, the main risks for NGOs include a general decline in interest in the civil society sector, staffing shortages, weak coordination and transparency, as well as problems with sustainable funding and dependence on government procurement.

As is seen from these statistics, the state mainly supports organisations providing social services to the population, while human rights organisations, think tank and expert centres of NGOs are not supported.

## 4. State openness and responsiveness

The fight against corruption is a strategic priority for the government of Kazakhstan. Given the diversity of forms and dynamics of corruption in various sectors of the country, Kazakhstan could benefit from a more systematic, national and community-wide approach to combating corruption. However, [measures are needed](#) to increase civil society participation in order to ensure the sustainable impact of anti-corruption reforms after the implementation of the [Anti-Corruption Policy Concept for 2022-2026](#). These include strengthening coordination among actors dealing with integrity issues, strengthening a strategic approach to combating corruption, improving the effectiveness of internal control, risk management and external oversight, and increasing transparency and integrity in the decision-making process.

Improvements in the engagement between state and civil society were won through court intervention and reforms to local government. In May 2025, the Coalition of environmental NGOs won a case in the Constitutional Court that recognised the provision of the [Forest Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan](#) (No. 477 dated 8 July 2003), which limited public access to information about sanitary logging, as not complying with the Constitution of Kazakhstan. This has opened up public access to real-time monitoring of deforestation.

In the context of empowering local governments, direct elections of akims of cities of regional subordination and rural districts that were held in early 2025 created new 'entry points' for influence. In October, in Sarkand, [public association 'Zelenaya Solidarnost' \(Green Solidarity\)](#) successfully lobbied through the newly elected akimat for the decision to [create a public park](#), presenting a children's project that collected more than 1,000 signatures from residents and passed an expert review.

Additionally, the [new rules of procedure](#) for the work of public councils under government bodies adopted in March 2025 obliged them to hold at least 50% of meetings in open mode with online broadcasting, which increased the transparency of their work.

Kazakhstan civil society has also interacted with government actors in international fora and through international platforms. For example, while preparing the Voluntary National Review, civil society's opinion on achieving the SDGs was assessed using the [People Scorecard](#), and the results were presented at the HLPF. By making the voice of Kazakhstan's NGOs more visible in international settings, civil society actors are also able to present results from international fora domestically and strengthen their engagement with ministries and other decision makers.

However, engagement in international fora also revealed discrepancies in how civil society and government present the situation in Kazakhstan. For example, the speeches of Kazakhstani delegates at [the OSCE Human Dimension Conference in Warsaw on 6-17 October 2025](#) reported positive changes in the country, both in the economy and in respect for gender equality and human rights in general. At the same time, human rights defenders and [civil society activists from Kazakhstan](#) spoke out about political persecution, curtailment of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as government persecution of journalists and bloggers. These differing perspectives offer opportunities for civil society to engage with government officials through international fora.

## 5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Official discourses increasingly classify civil society as distinctly either “useful”, referring to service delivery organisations, or as political activism. State discourse, especially in the context of the implementation of [the Civil Society Development Concept \(2026–2030\)](#), focuses on social partnership, positioning CSOs as professional service providers (social protection, ecology, inclusion). Emphasis is placed on “constructiveness” and expertise. Civil society is presented as assisting the state in implementing social reforms. State media actively cover the activities of volunteers and environmental organisations, creating the image of a “creative” society. At the same time, human rights and political activism are often ignored or framed as “destructive” or “inspired from outside.”

Secondly, among the general population there is a shift away from the perception of CSOs as “foreign agents” or “armchair experts”. Instead, people have become more likely to trust local groups that address specific everyday problems such as condominium association, local environmental initiatives, and volunteers. This strengthens the perception of civil society as a tool for self-organisation “in their own backyard.”

The main recent shift is the replacement of the concept of “civic space” with the concept of “comfortable environment.” Discourse on human rights and freedom of assembly is being replaced by discourse on citizen participation in landscaping, monitoring road repairs, and allocating local budgets. This makes activism safer and more understandable for the masses, but it relegates citizens’ political agency to the margins. The result is that only those who agree with the state are considered active and “respected.” This discourse leaves almost no room for those who wish to criticize the government or defend political rights, which narrows the real civic space.

Additionally, [the influence of GONGOs](#) created with the financial support of the state is increasing. They do not support the diversity of opinions and public discourses but serve as a tool for influence and to legitimise undemocratic principles. Such organisations are active both within the country and at OSCE meetings and other global platforms. Thus, the government successfully imposes a narrative in which civil society is a tool for improving quality of life, rather than an instrument of political control or human rights protection.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

Access to a secure digital environment is recognised as important in Kazakhstan. Regulatory legal acts such as the Kazakhstan [Cyber Shield Security Concept](#) have been adopted to protect citizens in the digital environment. In addition, Kazakhstan has the [Law](#)

[on Personal Data and its Protection](#) that guarantees the right to information self-determination in relation to automated personal data processing. This implies that the government is taking measures to ensure secure access to information and digital services.

However, since February 2025, [access to a safe digital environment in Kazakhstan has been characterised by increased government control and new legislative restrictions](#), despite the official commitment to digitalisation. There are examples of cyberattacks, technical pressure, and DDoS attacks. The Respublika.kz.news website was blocked in November 2025 based on an old court ruling from 2012, which the authorities applied to the new domain. In November 2025, human rights activists reported that their Instagram accounts had been temporarily deleted due to widespread complaints about “violating community rules.”

Access to telecommunications and the Internet is regulated by the [Law "On Communications"](#), [Law "On Informatisation"](#) and other regulatory acts such as the Rules for the provision of communication services. At the beginning of 2025, [92.9% of the population](#) in Kazakhstan had Internet access. At the same time, the government [announced plans](#) to provide 100% of the population with Internet access by 2027. In terms of affordability, the Internet in Kazakhstan was [among the top ten countries](#) in the world, ranking 9th with a low cost of \$0.59 per 1 GB of traffic. From 4 October 2025, Internet in public places is available only after authorisation via SMS or electronic digital signature (EDS). This is used in public places that offer free Wi-Fi (cafes, parks, shopping malls). While these measures are taken to ensure cybersecurity, combat cybercrime, and protect data, they also prevent free connection to open networks.

The digital environment in Kazakhstan remains limited. According to the [2025 Freedom on the Net](#) research, the country scored 37 out of 100, ranking it "not free." Experts identify persistent problems, including frequent blocking of websites and social media, restrictions on access to information during protests, criminal prosecution for online publications, and the strengthening of technical tools for state surveillance of the internet. This results in a digital climate that significantly lags behind global standards for free speech online.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Civil society has a significant impact on the country's life, but its activities are often limited to social projects and services. Fundamental aspects of civil liberties – human rights, civic space expansion, strengthening trust between society and the state – remain a priority against the background of increased state control. Legislative initiatives are perceived as direct threats to civic engagement. New draft laws will serve as a tool to strengthen control, not development.

The reduction in international aid increases civil society's vulnerability and exposes dependence on external funding. In addition, financial control by the state, which has led to increased auditing and excessive administrative burden, may result in the closure of key civil society organisations.

Key barriers to development are also the lack of broad public support and insufficient resource mobilisation. The civil sector needs digitalisation, professional renewal, and new communication and fundraising formats to increase its effectiveness and sustainability.

Kazakhstan's civil society is undergoing a transformation, facing external threats such as geopolitical conditions and the reduction of international financing as well as internal challenges, such as a narrowing of civic space, legislative pressure and trust gaps between the government, media and society. Based on this context, the current state of civil society is characterised as legitimate, well-established, developing and facing a difficult period. At this stage, a transformational strategy is needed, focused on the modernisation of civil society as a whole.

## **Challenges and Opportunities**

1. Geopolitical challenge: The Central Asian region is influenced by the authoritarian governance models of Russia and China, which poses risks to democratic processes and requires strengthening trust between civil society and the state. Individual attempts by Kazakhstani CSOs to resist authoritarian trends are vulnerable. Supporting the creation/development of sub-regional civil society networks in Central Asia is recommended. This will allow for the development of common standards for human rights protection that will be more difficult to ignore under the pretext of "national specifics" or external pressure.

2. Economic vulnerability: CSOs need to actively develop resource diversification strategies and engage businesses and development banks (as an example) in partnerships with civil society and human rights issues. Funding systems need to be reviewed. Independent endowment fund mechanisms and tax breaks for private donations should be introduced. This will reduce NGOs' total dependence on government procurement and allow them to maintain autonomy. Procedures for receiving foreign grants should be simplified without stigmatisation, that is, the "register of persons receiving foreign funding" should be abolished or radically reformed.

3. Legislative pressure: New draft laws ([for example, on NGOs](#)) are perceived as strengthening control, but not development. The second stage of the Concept of Civil Society Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan (2026-2030) suggests focusing only on the social sphere. To counter the narrowing of the concept of "civic engagement" to charity, the 2026–2030 Concept Implementation Plan should include indicators that measure not only the number of meals distributed or trees planted, but also the level of citizen influence on decision-making (through petitions, rallies, and public oversight).

4. The current legislation contributes to the narrowing of civic space. Civil society representatives should strive to advocate for changes in the legislative environment, participate in working groups and public councils, demonstrate international best practices, raise the issue of legislative adoption at expert forums, and proactively highlight the potential risks if laws restrict civil society activities. It is important that the Law on Public Associations enshrines the status of NGOs as entities entitled to political advocacy and human rights protection without the risk of liquidation. There should be mandatory inclusion of independent experts in working groups drafting any laws affecting civil liberties

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