



# KAZAKHSTAN IN BRIEF

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Kazakhstan is an ethnically diverse republic which gained independence from the former Soviet Union on December 16, 1991. Roughly the size of Western Europe, Kazakhstan is surrounded by Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea in the west. Kazakhstan has been at the crossroads of trade and empires for centuries along the ancient Silk Road. By 2015, Kazakhstan expects to be one of the top ten oil producers and exporters in the world, with reserves comparable to Kuwait's. The economy is being diversified beyond dependence on these vast reserves.

In the first few years after independence, Kazakhstan successfully rid itself of the fourth largest nuclear arsenal in the world and closed the world's largest nuclear test site at Semipalatinsk, an unwanted legacy from the USSR, and continues to be a model for the global community. In 2005, the U.S. Senate unanimously adopted a resolution congratulating Kazakhstan on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the removal of all nuclear weapons from the country and commended Kazakhstan-U.S. cooperation in this sphere as a "model".

Kazakhstan plays an important role in securing the stability of the volatile Central Asian region and beyond. Kazakhstan initiated the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), whose members are 17 Asian nations, such as Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, and Russia, with the primary goal of establishing a comprehensive security system in Eurasia. Such a system never existed before. In June 2002, at the peak of Indo-Pakistani and Israeli-Palestinian tensions, the leaders of these countries met in Almaty for the first summit of CICA. These meetings contributed to the reduction of tensions.

Kazakhstan condemned terrorist attacks against the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001 and has been a staunch supporter of the U.S. led international coalition against global terrorism since. Kazakhstan provides free overflight rights and a major international airport for U.S. and coalition aircraft for operations in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan works with the international community to bring peace and stability to Iraq following the U.S. led campaign to end Saddam Hussein's regime. Kazakh military engineers in that country have destroyed more than four million pieces of ordnance since 2003.

During his 2001 visit to Washington President Nazarbayev and President George W. Bush signed a Joint Statement declaring their "commitment to strengthen the long-term, strategic partnership and cooperation between our nations, seeking to advance a shared vision of a peaceful, prosperous and sovereign Kazakhstan in the 21st Century".

On a visit to Astana in 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "Today, Kazakhstan is poised and ready to break a path for a new Silk Road, a great corridor of reform... A strong and prosperous and democratic Kazakhstan will once again energize the global transmission of learning, and trade and freedom across the steppes of Central Asia. This nation has a glorious past and it is destined for a hopeful future. Kazakhstan's greatest days lie ahead of it. And the United States wants to be your partner."

## **Economy**

- During the first dozen years of independence, the Government has made strong strides toward stability and the institution of free market democratic processes. Kazakhstan's macroeconomic picture is positive with a stabilized and fast growing economy, low inflation, strong banking institutions and low unemployment.
- In March 2002, Kazakhstan became the first country in the Commonwealth of Independent States to be granted market economy status by the United States. The same status was given to Kazakhstan by the European Union in 2000.
- Private enterprises in Kazakhstan employ almost 5 million people, more than 77 percent of total employment. Almost a half million small and medium sized businesses employ about one million people, a situation a world away from the command economy of Soviet times.
- The Government of Kazakhstan is providing for future generations through creation of a National Fund, now at US\$5.7 billion. It is intended to help promote development across the broad spectrum of social and economic life in the country and a cushion against economic shocks.
- In September 2002, Moody's Investors Service upgraded Kazakhstan's foreign currency rating to Baa3, which allows significant reductions in the cost of borrowing internationally. Kazakhstan was the first CIS nation to get this investment grade rating.
- Kazakhstan has been enjoying a 10 percent annual growth in GDP on average since 2000. This is attributed both to favorable international market conditions and results of earlier innovative economic reforms. In 2005, the GDP grew by 9.4 percent.
- In May 2003, the Government approved a new Strategy of Industrial and Innovation Development aimed at leapfrogging several stages of development and quickly building a post-industrial, high-tech, English speaking economy with capabilities in aerospace, biotechnology, software technologies, peaceful uses of atomic energy and other industrial sectors. The Government seeks to triple GDP by 2015, using 2000 as a benchmark.
- American companies account for the largest share of more than US\$45 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) in Kazakhstan. Corporations such as AES, Access Industries, Bechtel, Chevron, Citibank, Chase, ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips, John Deere, and others are active in Kazakhstan.
- More than 100 American companies are members of the American Chamber of Commerce in Kazakhstan. On a visit to Astana, former Secretary of State Colin Powell was told by the American companies about prospects of investing in Kazakhstan "in the range of \$200 billion over the next 5 to 10 years".
- In the fall of 2002, Kazakhstan and the U.S. launched the Houston Initiative, first agreed upon by Presidents Nazarbayev and Bush in December 2001. The initiative, aimed at drawing the private sectors of the two countries closer by developing small and medium sized businesses in Kazakhstan, has grown. The governments of Kazakhstan and the United States seek to diversify Kazakhstan's economy and strengthen its middle class.

## **Political Development**

- During its first dozen years of independence, Kazakhstan introduced a system of phased political reforms. This led to the establishment of many political parties and more than 5,000 international and domestic NGOs. Today, there are twelve political parties, including Agrarian, Ak Zhol (Bright Path), Asar (All Together), Auyl (Village) Social Democratic Party, Civic, Communist Party, Communist People's Party, Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, Naghyz Ak Zhol (True Bright Path), Otan (Motherland), Party of Patriots, and Rukhaniyat (Spirituality).
- A bi-cameral parliament and independent court system function as part of the process of incremental reform, which is expected to include the introduction of jury trials.
- In April 2004, President Nazarbayev signed into law a bill introducing major reforms in the way elections are held. This followed years of discussions sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This legislation specifically changed the way election commissions are

structured, ensuring transparency and impartiality. The law also introduced transparent ballot boxes to prevent ballot stuffing and several other key innovations including electronic voting at a later stage. The law governed parliamentary elections held in September 2004.

- The election system is being updated at the local level. June 2001 saw the President signing into law a decree delegating executive powers and providing for popular elections of regional and local authorities for the first time. In October 2001, the first such elections were held in all 14 regions of the country. This is unprecedented in the region and a definite improvement over historic patterns of central control throughout Eurasia.
- Kazakhstan is committed to fighting corruption, the legacy of the Soviet past and common during the transitional period. In 1998, Kazakhstan became the first post-Soviet nation to adopt a specific law supporting the fight against corruption. In the spring of 2005, Kazakhstan began implementing the national program on the fight against corruption.
- In September 2002, President Nazarbayev issued a decree creating an Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman in Kazakhstan to complement the existing system of human rights protection. The new Ombudsman, approved by the Parliament, began receiving complaints of human rights violations and acting on them.
- In December 2005, President Nazarbayev was reelected with a landslide in a presidential election which, with five candidates running, was the most competitive, open and fair in Kazakhstan's history.
- In the spring of 2006, the State Commission on Democratization was established. The commission is chaired by the President, and includes representatives of the Government, the Parliament, political parties and movements, and nongovernmental organizations. The Commission holds regular sessions. Its agenda includes developing the final version of the National Program of Political Reforms including laws on elections, media, local self-government and other issues.
- President Nursultan Nazarbayev has called for a massive transformation of Kazakhstan's political life and strengthening the country's move to democracy in a March 2006 speech to the first session of the State Commission. The priorities include significant strengthening of the role of the national Parliament, increasing the numbers of deputies in both houses of Parliament; continuing the introduction of elections of akims (mayors) at district levels, and the introduction of a bill on local self-government. "Democracy is the choice of civilized people, and it is our choice too," President Nazarbayev said.

## **The News Media**

- Kazakhstan is far ahead of the majority of post-Soviet countries in terms of the development of free mass media.
- After independence, Kazakhstan abolished the former Soviet practice of state censorship which contributed to a sharp increase in the number of news media outlets. As of January 1, 2006, there were 2,000 news media outlets, more than 80 percent of which were privately owned, impossible during Soviet times. There are 1,200 newspapers, 500 magazines, 160 radio and television stations and 14 news agencies. Public groups own 192 outlets, political parties and movements own 9, and religious associations own 39. Kazakhstan's news media speaks 13 languages, including Kazakh, Russian, Uzbek, Ukrainian, Polish, English, German, Korean, Uighur, Turkish, and Farsi.
- Kazakhstan is committed to the development of a regional information space employing the latest information technology. In 2001 and 2002 Kazakhstan officially opened two Internet Data Centers (IDC), one in Astana and one in Pavlodar, each accommodating 10,000 users. The IDCs are a cooperative venture between Kazakhtelekom and Lockheed Martin Telecommunications, and are the first of their kind in the former Soviet Union. More than half a million Kazakhstan citizens today have access to the web. In April 2004, IBM and the Economist magazine listed Kazakhstan among the world's most e-ready countries.
- Political and other groups are using news media channels to critique the Government and express their opinions. Democratic debate is becoming a common feature of Kazakhstan's televised, print and online media.

- Pornography, propaganda of war, violence, cult of cruelty, incitement of interethnic and interfaith hatred and threats to national security are the only banned topics in the world of Kazakhstan's news media.
- In April 2005, the 4<sup>th</sup> annual Eurasian Media Forum was held in Almaty, bringing more than 300 journalists and experts from around the world to discuss the role of the news media in today's world.

### **Freedom of Religion and Interethnic Accord**

- Freedom of religion is one of first priorities addressed in the Kazakhstan Constitution. In practice, this has contributed to interethnic and inter-religious harmony among the many established faiths in Kazakhstan. These include ethnic Kazakhs, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims, to Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, many Protestant denominations and Kazakhstan's long-standing Jewish community, as well as small groups from other faiths.
- People of more than 100 ethnicities peacefully coexist in the republic. The country has had no religious or ethnic conflicts within its territory since independence, an exception in the region. The number of religious congregations has grown to 3,500 today, about half of which are non-Muslim. These religious communities represent 46 faiths and peacefully co-exist.
- Kazakhstan's tradition of religious tolerance and diversity is part of a historical fabric. The country has been a safe harbor for many established religious communities. President Nazarbayev has been vocal and public in embracing religious plurality since independence.
- Kazakhstan welcomed the visit of the late Pope John Paul II in September 2001. In Astana, he said, "Kazakhstan has inherited a history enriched with various traditions by complex and often sorrowful events. These events transformed your country into a sort of an example of polyethnic, multicultural and multi-confessional society."
- On a 2002 visit, U.S. Congressman Robert Wexler (D-FL) laid the cornerstone of a new synagogue in the capital of Astana, continuing the strong and welcome trend of expanding the life of the Jewish community. In 2004, President Nazarbayev participated in the dedication of this synagogue, the largest in Central Asia. Almost a dozen other synagogues function throughout predominantly Muslim society.
- More than 250 religious missionaries are active in Kazakhstan. Missionary work, while foreign to Kazakhstan's and Turkic cultures generally, is permitted by law. The only requirement of the missionaries is to respect the laws of the country and to conduct their activity in a transparent and reasonable respectful manner.
- In February 2003, Kazakhstan hosted the first International Conference on Peace and Harmony which brought together secular and religious leaders from throughout Muslim majority countries of Central Asia and more than 70 leaders of major Jewish organizations from the United States, Israel and elsewhere. The idea of the conference was to highlight freedom of religion in Kazakhstan, and to emphasize common values and similarities among religions while denouncing terrorism and extremism.
- In September 2003, the first Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions took place in Astana. More than 120 leaders and senior representatives from 17 religions including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shinto attended from 12 countries. They jointly condemned extremism, terrorism and other forms of violence in the name of religion. They proclaimed that no religion condones terror and pledged to continue the dialogue on a permanent basis and oppose calls for violence. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress is due to take place in September 2006.

# The Republic of Kazakhstan



- Location:** Central Asia, south of Russia, northwest of China, east of the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea
- Total Area:** 2,717,300 square kilometers (1,049,149.53 square miles)  
Ninth largest country in the world, about four times the size of Texas
- Population:** 15,146,800
- Statehood:** Regained independence on December 16, 1991
- Form of government:** A unitary state with a Presidential form of government