

World Watch Research

Kazakhstan: Background Information

September 2024



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Contents

Copyright and sources	1
Map of country	2
Recent history	2
Political and legal landscape	3
Religious landscape.....	8
Economic landscape.....	10
Social and cultural landscape.....	12
Technological landscape	13
Security situation	15
Christian origins	16
Church spectrum today.....	17
Further useful reports.....	17
External Links	18

Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Kazakhstan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
19,828,000	5,031,000	25.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Like all other countries in the Central Asia region, Kazakhstan came into existence as an independent country in 1991. It was the last former Soviet republic to do so - at the end of August 1991. Of all the former Soviet Union states, Kazakhstan has managed the economic transition best. Contrary to all other Central Asian countries, the country's leaders have participated in the international community and are eager to cooperate and host international conventions. In March 2017, an international meeting was held in the Kazakh capital of Astana on the war in Syria. A highlight for Kazakhstan was to be honored with the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010.

However, since 2010, the regime under President Nursultan Nazarbayev took on a more authoritarian character, bringing the country more in line with the other countries of Central Asia. Repressive policies, strict media control and legislative restrictions (also in religious affairs) were introduced and implemented – the purpose being to maintain the government's hold on power. A significant change occurred when President Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was elected president on 9 June 2019 (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). However, for Christians the change in leadership has brought no real improvement to their situation.

On 20 November 2022, early presidential elections were held in Kazakhstan. As expected, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev easily won. International observers said the elections lacked "competitiveness" while highlighting the need for reforms in the Central Asian nation. (Source: [RFE/RL, 21 November 2022](#)) On 19 March 2023 parliamentary elections were held in Kazakhstan which became another victory for President Tokayev. (Source: [Asia News, 23 March 2023](#))

Violent protests

- **January 2022:** According to [HRW 2023 Kazakhstan country chapter](#): "Kazakhstan was rocked in early January 2022 by nationwide anti-government protests and violence in Almaty, the country's largest city. As of January 11, official and media reports indicate that dozens of people had been killed, including two children, thousands injured, and approximately 10,000 people had been detained. Protests started on January 2 2022 in Zhanaozen, western Kazakhstan, in response to energy price rises, and quickly spread to other cities, with demands growing to include economic and political issues. On January 5, law enforcement used tear gas and stun grenades to break up protests, while unknown people in civilian clothes in Almaty started attacking police officers and public buildings and looting shops. President Kasym-Jomart Tokaev replaced his government, disrupted internet access, declared a state of emergency, and requested military help from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a six-country regional military alliance including Russia. On January 7 he ordered troops to 'shoot to kill without warning'."
- **October 2022:** The government of Kazakhstan proclaimed a large amnesty for the protestors. (Source: [RFE/RL, 27 October 2022](#))
- **October 2023:** Having survived the country's bloodiest independence-era unrest in January 2022, the Kazakh regime seems more terrified than ever at the prospect of protests. Kazakhstan's police state leaves nothing to chance, even parking its patrol cars outside the houses of suspected troublemakers on politically important dates. (Source: [RFE/RL, 21 October 2023](#))

The Ukraine conflict

Kazakhstan is a close Russian ally and when war broke out between Russia and Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Kazakhstan's government held back from making any comment. This changed, however, in early April 2022 when the Kazakh Foreign Minister said his country - unlike Russia - did not recognize districts in Ukraine's eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk controlled by Russia-backed separatists as being independent. (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 April 2022](#)) This was [confirmed](#) by President Tokayev (RFE/RL, 6 April 2022). One of the consequences of Kazakhstan staying out of the war was that, in October 2022, 200,000 Russians left their homeland for Kazakhstan. (Source: [RFE/RL, 4 October 2022](#)) On 19 October 2023 Kazakh Deputy Trade Minister Kairat Torebaev said that the export to Russia of 106 goods "related to the war" had been banned by the government, including items such as drone components, electronics, and computer chips manufactured abroad. (Source: [RFE/RL, 19 October 2023](#))

Political and legal landscape

Kazakhstan is officially a democratic, secular, unitary, constitutional republic with a diverse cultural heritage. From 1991 to 2019 its first and only president was Nursultan Nazarbayev. The president may veto legislation that has been passed by parliament and is also the commander in chief of the armed forces. The prime minister chairs the Cabinet of Ministers and serves as Kazakhstan's head of government. Although four parties are represented in the Kazakh parliament (Majilis), there is no real

political opposition. This was particularly apparent during the presidential elections on 26 April 2015 when President Nazarbayev had no real opponents and won the elections with 97.7% of the votes, which enabled him to start his fifth five-year term as the country's president.

The question of who would succeed President Nazarbayev was answered by the 78 year old president himself. On 19 March 2019, he publicly announced out of the blue that he was resigning ([RFE/RL, 19 March 2019](#)). In a televised address to the nation he indicated that the speaker of the upper parliament chamber, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, would be acting president for the remainder of what would have been his term, in accordance with the Constitution. [Unsurprisingly](#), Tokayev was re-elected as president in the snap elections on 9 June 2019 with 70.76% of the vote (Asia News, 10 June 2019).

In May 2020, President Tokayev announced that he had removed Dariga Nursultanovna Nazarbayeva (i.e. the daughter of the former president) from her position as Senate speaker. This was totally unexpected as everyone believed Nazarbayeva would follow in her father's steps to govern Kazakhstan. (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 9 July 2020](#)) The growing gap between the government of Tokayev and his predecessor became visible in January 2023 when Kazakh lawmakers approved a move annulling the Law on the First President-Leader of the Nation (Elbasy), depriving immediate family members of the Central Asian nation's former authoritarian President Nursultan Nazarbaev of legal immunity. (Source: [RFE/RL, 13 January 2023](#))

In politics and economy Kazakhstan is increasingly linking up with Russia (and China). This is partly due to the large number of ethnic Russian citizens in the northern part of Kazakhstan. At the same time, Kazakhstan announced its plans to change from using the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet by 2025.

Parliamentary elections were held on 11 January 2021 and the Central Election Commission declared the overwhelming victory (with 71% of the vote) of the Nur Otan party, led by President Tokayev, who described the election as "a further step in the country's democratic development". (Source: [Agenzia Fides, 12 January 2021](#)) In November 2022 presidential elections were held, which were won by President Tokayev (see above: *Recent history*).

On 23 December 2021, the upper chamber of Kazakh's parliament approved a bill on abolishing the death penalty in the Central Asian nation. The Senate's approval of the bill came almost a year after President Tokayev signed off a parliamentary ratification of a UN human rights protocol aimed at abolishing the death penalty worldwide. (Source: [RFE/RL, 23 December 2021](#))

Kazakhstan held a [referendum](#) on 5 June 2022 on constitutional changes aimed at decentralizing decision-making. Encouraged by the clear majority approving the changes, the president intends to make progress with the democratic reforms. (Source: Reuters, 6 June 2022).

The Constitution

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Kazakhstan](#)):

- “The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion and belief as well as the freedom to decline religious affiliation. These rights may be limited only by laws and only to the extent necessary for protection of the constitutional system, public order, human rights and freedoms, and the health and morality of the population. Under the constitution, all persons have the right to follow their religious or other convictions, take part in

religious activities, and disseminate their beliefs. These rights, however, are in practice limited to registered religious groups, especially those considered "traditional" to Kazakh society. 'Traditional' is not defined by law but typically refers to Hanafi Sunni Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, Greek and Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Judaism."

The 2011 Religion Law and its impact on Christian life

2011: The September 2011 legislation regulating religious affairs was [signed into law in October 2011](#) and contained the following restrictions (Forum 18, 13 October 2011):

- All religious communities need re-registration. This is a highly bureaucratic procedure which may result in only a fraction of all current communities passing the hurdle.
- Unregistered religious activity is banned. Leading, participating in or financing unregistered groups is punished. This has great effects for those Christian groups that refuse to register (like the Council of Baptist Churches), or those who do not pass the requirements of the new registration procedure.
- Compulsory religious censorship on religious materials is imposed. While the law states that everyone may acquire or own religious literature, importation and distribution of literature can only be done by registered communities. In-country production requires the full official name of the religious organization which produced it.
- New places of worship need approval from both local and central government.
- All founders or religious communities must be Kazakh citizens.
- Professional educational programs to prepare priests can only be done by organizations that are registered regionally or nationally. For Christians this means, in practice, that this can only be done by the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Religious organizations should take steps to prevent underage youth from taking part in their activities if one of the child's parents or legal guardians objects to this. Religious activities on children's holidays, sports and camps etc. are prohibited. Work among children and youth thus became more difficult.
- Foreign citizens working as missionaries need to have an invitation from a registered community in Kazakhstan; they also need to have a personal registration as a missionary. Any granted permission has to be renewed annually.
- Social activities (such as work in hospitals, prisons or old people's homes) can only be done by registered communities.

2019: In January 2019, the government temporarily abandoned its plan to update the country's 2011 Religion Law. The legal amendments under consideration were more restrictive.

2021/2022: On 29 December 2021, President Tokayev signed into law amendments to the Religion Law to make holding religious events away from state-registered places of worship more difficult. (Source: [Forum 18, 5 January 2022](#)) The amendments came into force on 9 January 2022.

2023: The State Revenue Committee of Kazakhstan's Finance Ministry published a 'Foreign Funding Register' on 21 September 2023. Organizations and individuals that receive foreign funding for certain types of activities, including providing legal assistance, conducting surveys, and carrying out data collection, analysis, and dissemination, have since 2016 been required to report the receipt and use of

such funding to the tax authorities. In March 2022, the authorities adopted legislative amendments requiring that this information be made public. (Source: [Human Rights Watch, 20 October 2023](#))

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Kazakhstan](#)):

- “The MCI [Ministry of Culture and Information], which assumed the responsibilities of the former Ministry of Information and Social Development (MISD) on September 1 [2023], regulates the practice of religion in the country. By law, the MCI is responsible for the formulation and implementation of state policy on religion as well as for facilitating government and civil society engagement. It also considers potential violations of the laws on religious activity and extremism. The MCI drafts legislation and regulations, conducts analysis of religious materials, and makes decisions on censorship. Religious groups are required to submit religious materials for approval before dissemination. The MCI cooperates with law enforcement bodies to ban religious groups and sanction individuals who violate the religion law, coordinates actions of local governments to regulate religious practices, and provides the official interpretation of the religion law.”
- “The law prohibits efforts to force a person to convert to any religion or to force a person's participation in a religious group's activities or in religious rites. The law further bans activities of religious organizations that involve violence against citizens or otherwise harm the health or morality of citizens and residents, force them to end marriages or family relations, or violate human rights and freedoms. The law also bans activities that force citizens to evade the performance of 'duties specified in the constitution and legislation', but the definition of these duties is subject to broad interpretation by the government. The law prohibits methods of proselytizing that exploit a potential convert's dependence on charity. The law also prohibits blackmail, violence or the threat of violence or the use of material threats to coerce participation in religious activities.”

Forum 18's Religious Freedom Survey

On 23 June 2022 Forum 18 released its [Religious Freedom Survey](#). The most important issues documented for Kazakhstan were:

- Religion Law changes to widen state religious censorship and to make holding religious meetings away from state-registered places of worship more difficult came into force on 9 January 2022, as nationwide protests against the regime and its policies broke out;
- An interlocking web of laws, including the Religion Law and the Criminal and Administrative Codes making the exercise of freedom of religion and belief illegal without state permission;
- All religious communities being required to have to state permission to exist in the form of state registration. State permission is also required for the places people meet for worship, as well as for activities such as sharing beliefs with others;
- The use of unclear allegations of "extremism" to jail people exercising their freedom of religion and belief and other fundamental freedoms;
- All public expressions of Islam being under the state-controlled Muslim Board, with a ban on all expressions of Islam that are not Sunni Hanafi. This control extends to controlling how people pray by prosecuting and fining Muslims for saying the word "Amen" aloud in mosques;

- Prisoners of conscience being jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief, these prisoners being tortured with the use of techniques such as being banned from praying, physical violence, denials of medical care, refusals to allow them to visit dying close relatives or attend their funerals (such as the funeral of a prisoner's wife or father), and solitary confinement;
- Banning former prisoners of conscience from a wide and often unspecified "social activity", which can include activities including visiting a place of worship, driving a car, going to a restaurant, or being involved in any group or association;
- Adding those convicted for exercising freedom of religion or belief are added to the Financial Monitoring Agency List of individuals "connected with the financing of terrorism or extremism". Any bank accounts an individual may have are blocked, their families often finding out about the blocking of accounts only when they go to the bank. Individuals remain on the Financial Monitoring Agency List for six or eight years after their sentence has expired as they are deemed still to have a criminal record;
- A strict state censorship regime, imposing censorship of all religious literature (including in electronic form) and objects, strict restrictions on where such texts and objects may be sold or distributed, who may sell or distribute them, and court-ordered destruction - including book burning - of confiscated texts. This includes the use of state "expert analyses" to convict, fine, and jail people in unfair trials;
- State surveillance of all religious communities, one official claiming of surveillance including videoing of a Baptist Church and its congregation: "This isn't spying, this is monitoring, nothing more";
- The regime's use of claims aimed at foreigners of "religious tolerance" and "religious dialogue" to camouflage its serious violations of the freedom of religion and belief and other fundamental freedoms;
- The regime's election to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, despite ignoring multiple recommendations from the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Special Rapporteur on the rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, the UN Special Rapporteur for Protecting Human Rights while Countering Terrorism, and the UN Human Rights Committee, among others.

Christians in Kazakhstan play no role in the country's politics. There is no Christian political party.

Gender perspective

A 2019 CEDAW periodic report noted that Kazakhstan has introduced several positive laws and policies to combat gender inequality. It observed several ongoing issues however, such as: harmful gender norms and stereotypes, son-preference, child and/or forced marriage, and violence against women ([CEDAW, 2019](#)). Under Kazakh law, men and women have equal rights to enter marriage, must enter it freely, and be 18 years of age. Many continue to marry through religious or traditional marriages however, which offer individuals no legal protection. The practice of bride-kidnapping and forced marriages is reportedly on the rise, primarily in rural areas ([Kennan Institute, May 2020](#)). Legislation on domestic violence has tightened, but fails to criminalize it as a [stand-alone offence](#) (HRW Dispatches, 9 March 2022). It remains prevalent and underreported, and rose in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic ([HRW Dispatches, 9 April 2020](#)).

Military service is mandatory for all men between the age of 18 and 27 in Kazakhstan, although there are several circumstances whereby individuals can be exempted ([eGov, August 2022](#)). Christian men have reportedly experienced pressure due to their faith within this predominately Muslim context.

Religious landscape

Kazakhstan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	5,031,000	25.4
Muslim	13,935,000	70.3
Hindu	970	0.0
Buddhist	23,100	0.1
Ethnic religionist	31,900	0.2
Jewish	5,500	0.0
Bahai	9,900	0.0
Atheist	92,200	0.5
Agnostic	684,000	3.4
Other	14,970	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) 70.3% of the population of Kazakhstan is (predominantly Sunni) Muslim. However, it would be wrong to call Kazakhstan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence; the government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and seeks to keep Islam under control, while the overwhelming majority of the population merely follows Islamic traditions rather than strict Muslim teachings. Nevertheless, “to be a Kazakh is to be a Muslim” is the belief of many Kazakhs. As a result, converts to Christianity experience much pressure from family, friends and local community. This pressure is much stronger in rural areas than in the major cities. Relatives will oppress converts to Christianity, sometimes using physical abuse, in attempts to make them turn back to Islam. Sometimes this is also done by the local police.

Kazakhstan has by far the biggest Christian presence in Central Asia. According to WCD, 25.4% of the population are Christians. The reason for this is not that Kazakhs have converted on a large scale to Christianity, but is due to the presence of a large Russian minority in the country’s northern provinces. As a result, almost 93% of all Christians in Kazakhstan belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. In contrast to other countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has not experienced a mass emigration of ethnic Russians.

Although the regime has imposed many restrictions on the production, importation and distribution of religious materials, the very long and open border with Russia means that access is less problematic than into other Central Asian countries.

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Kazakhstan](#)):

- “According to multiple sources, while members of many registered religious organizations were able to practice religion without harassment or legal barriers within registered places of worship and private homes, authorities continued to fine, arrest, detain, or imprison individuals on account of their religious beliefs or affiliation. International religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported eight Sunni Muslims were serving sentences connected to their religious activities or beliefs as of September.”
- “Representatives of religious groups continued to report that in some regions, individual venues refused to rent space to them, possibly under pressure from local authorities. Jehovah's Witnesses stated that on three occasions, authorities interrupted religious meetings held in rented facilities. Authorities continued to use the religion law to harass and restrict minority religious groups with fines and limitations on their activities. Forum 18 reported 143 administrative prosecutions for violations of the religion law in 2022 and 110 in the first half of 2023, compared with 130 in 2021. Authorities reported the most common violations were posting religious materials online without permission, offering for free or selling religious items or materials without permission, and attending worship meetings not approved by the state.”
- “According to observers and members of minority religious groups, religious groups regarded as 'nontraditional', including Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and other evangelical Protestants, and Muslims who chose to wear headscarves or other identifying attire, continued to face greater societal scrutiny and discrimination. Nongovernmental sources reported generally peaceful interfaith relations, but also reported many cases of negative social attitudes within specific ethnic groups toward individuals who converted from that ethnic group's dominant religion. The Association of Religious Organizations of Kazakhstan represented minority religious groups' concerns to the government and provided a forum for consultations among religious groups.”

According to [USCIRF 2024 Kazakhstan Chapter](#):

- USCIRF classified Kazakhstan as ‘recommended for Special Watch List’.
- “In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan did not improve as the government continued to enforce a religion law that restricted the activities of all religious groups and penalized individuals from groups considered "nontraditional."
- “In May, a USCIRF delegation visited Kazakhstan to assess the religious freedom situation and meet with government officials, religious communities, human rights defenders, and other members of civil society. The visit confirmed that the Kazakh government continued to violate Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as Kazakhs tried to exercise their faith. For example, authorities continued to penalize unauthorized but peaceful religious activities - such as leading prayers, maintaining prayer rooms, and distributing religious materials - through prison sentences, fines, and the imposition of exit bans. As in years past, Muslims faced restrictions on practices such as studying religion abroad or wearing religious clothing in schools. Government surveillance and intimidation of all religious groups created fear of arbitrary punishment for religious activity and led some unregistered groups not to seek official registra-

- tion, as mandated by law, for concern of further unwanted government attention. In addition, members of the media reported they felt pressured to self-censor their journalism related to religious freedom issues.”
- “While the constitution characterizes Kazakhstan as a secular state, it also recognizes certain religions - such as Hanafi Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity - as traditional to Kazakhstan. The government considers other religious groups and those who subscribe to a different interpretation of 'traditional' religions, particularly Islam, to be nontraditional. Authorities are more likely to target members of these groups related to their religious activity.”
- “According to the 2011 religion law, only registered religious associations may request to hold religious activities outside of their registered place of worship. Individuals and groups that have attempted to engage in unregistered religious activities, like maintaining an unregistered prayer room, have faced fines.”

Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Kazakhstan data](#) (accessed 25 April 2024):

- **GDP (current US\$):** 225.5 billion (in 2022)
- **GDP annual growth:** 3.2% (in 2022)

Kazakhstan has vast resources of oil, gas and various minerals. The current regime has promoted market reforms and has transformed Kazakhstan into the second largest economy of the former Soviet empire (after Russia). Despite the fact that the country was hit hard by the financial crisis that started in 2008 (and later by the economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia after it had annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of the Crimea in early 2014), Kazakhstan remains the wealthiest country in the region. As a result, Kazakhstan is the only country in the region that has few labor migrants abroad, but hosts many labor migrants from other Central Asia countries (such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). This offers opportunities for Christian outreach among these people. When the COVID-19 crisis struck, thousands of these migrant were stranded in Kazakhstan's southern region of Turkistan because they were unable to travel back home due to restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 July 2020](#))

A key challenge for Kazakhstan is to diversify its economy while overcoming the geographic constraints of being a landlocked country. The difficulties of diversifying an oil-dependent economy are many. As was seen in Kazakhstan's negotiations to join the World Trade organization, the country's leaders are also acutely aware of the "distance tax" (i.e. the extra costs involved in being a landlocked country) which creates a markup on its export goods that make them more difficult to market. Kazakhstan's strategies for economic reform should be seen against this background. The development of agriculture, an economy of "simple things" and a major emphasis on digitalization are all economic strategies congruent with Kazakhstan's geographical constraints. Their success will depend, in part, on whether Kazakhstan's political reforms gain traction. Most importantly, the efforts to combat corruption will be key to make Kazakhstan attractive for foreign investment, and to reduce the burden on Kazakh entrepreneurs trying to compete in foreign markets. (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 14 December 2021](#))

Kazakhstan holds a strategic position in the East-West connection between China and the West. A new version of the Silk Road is under construction, which is being pushed by both China and Turkey. This means that there are large-scale construction activities underway to build highways for trucks and tracks for trains. China has also been particularly active in Kazakh oil and gas exploration.

The COVID-19 crisis hit the Kazakh economy badly. Oil, gas and copper prices went down. A suspension of work at any of the major oil fields or major copper mines meant an additional loss of revenue the state could ill afford. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 June 2020](#))

In October 2022, Kazakh officials reported that more than 50 international companies had relocated from Russia to Kazakhstan since Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. (Source: [RFE/RL, 19 October 2022](#))

According to the [World Bank Macro-Poverty Outlook Kazakhstan](#) (April 2024):

- “Economic growth is projected to slow to 3.4 percent in 2024 before regaining momentum in subsequent years, driven by new oil production coming online. Inflation is expected to decrease but remain above the central bank target. Downside risks include weakening global demand and prices for oil, and potential disruptions to exports. Global decarbonization efforts pose a long-term challenge, necessitating a transition towards a new, sustainable growth model.”
- “Kazakhstan's growth has slowed from 10 percent over 2000-2007 to below 4 percent over the last 10 years, highlighting the vulnerabilities of an economy still dependent on hydrocarbons and with stagnant productivity growth. Looking ahead, adjusting to the global green transition presents significant challenges for Kazakhstan. Revitalizing economic growth and productivity will require bolder steps to enable the private sector to thrive and drive economic diversification by reducing the state's footprint and boosting competition across the economy, complemented with strengthening human capital and policies to support decarbonization.”

Substantial and progressive economic growth is expected in Kazakhstan in the next two years, despite the compulsive factors of the global geopolitical situation. The negative effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have however slowed down this growth, which is expected to reach +3.4% of GDP in 2024, essentially due to the lowering of oil extraction levels. Despite these factors, the real GDP of the republic will grow by up to 4.5-5% by 2025, thanks to the expansion of production capacities in the places of oil extraction, which will stimulate the export of derivatives and the increase in oil processing. the petrochemical industry. (Source: [AsiaNews, 1 March 2024](#))

Gender perspective

Just like the rest of the population, Christians are also suffering from the deteriorating economy. Women are, broadly speaking, more economically vulnerable in Kazakhstan as they are more likely to assume traditional domestic responsibilities in the home. Whilst education rates and participation rates in the labor force are both relatively high, more men act as the primary breadwinners and financial decision-makers, and fewer high-responsibility jobs (such as parliamentary positions) are available for women ([UNDP 2020](#), *The Next Frontier*, p.361). Under inheritance laws, men and women have equal rights, and failure to access inheritance is not understood to be a widespread issue of concern. Christian men may face economic discrimination on the grounds of their faith, often through state fines and imprisonment, job loss, or being forced to pay bribes to operate their business.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Kazakhstan](#) (accessed 25 April 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kazakh (Qazaq) 69.6%, Russian 17.9%, Uzbek 3.3%, Uyghur 1.5%, Ukrainian 1.3%, Tatar 1%, other 5.3% (2022 est.)
- **Main languages:** Kazakh (official, Qazaq) 83.1% (understand spoken language) and trilingual (Kazakh, Russian, English) 22.3% (2017 est.); Russian (official, used in everyday business, designated the "language of inter-ethnic communication") 94.4% (understand spoken language) (2009 est.)
- **Urban population:** 58.2% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8% (male: 99.8%, female: 99.7%) (2020)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Kazakhstan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.802 (0.799 for females, 0.801 for males), ranking 67 (2022)
- **Total population:** 19.4 million (2022)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 69.5 years (73.0 for females, 65.8 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 14.8 years (15.0 for females, 14.6 for males) (2022)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.177 (2022)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 63.3, Male: 74.6 (2022)

The government is successfully promoting the use of the Kazakh language and the renaissance of traditional Kazakh culture. According to RFE/RL reporting on [12 April 2017](#), President Nazarbayev ordered the authorities to come up with a Latin-based alphabet for the Kazakh language by the end of 2017, marking a major shift after nearly 80 years with a Cyrillic-based alphabet. Despite this, 95% of the population of Kazakhstan is still capable of communicating in Russian. According to RFE/RL reporting on [26 April 2019](#): "Nazarbayev announced in April 2017 that all publications, documents, and street signs in Kazakhstan will switch from a Cyrillic-based alphabet to a Latin-based alphabet by 2025." Already in November 2018, the country held a nationwide exam to test students' proficiency with the Latin alphabet, part of the former Soviet republic's shift away from Cyrillic (RFE/RL, [14 November 2018](#)).

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Kazakhstan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can read materials in their own language. However, the restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially.

Social reforms

In his September 2022 address to the nation, President Tokayev spoke much about social issues, and in particular about reforms in the education and healthcare sectors. Rural and remote areas in particular do not benefit from the same level of service provision as larger cities and the social reforms introduced by President Tokayev aim at correcting this. (Source: [The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 7 November 2022](#))

Poverty

In December 2022, [RFE/RL](#) reported that in Kazakhstan, Central Asia's wealthiest country, many citizens are living in a desperate situation and can barely afford to buy food and pay their rent.

In 2023 Kazakhs experienced heavy rises in the cost of living, despite the growth of all national indicators. The Minister of National Economy of Kazakhstan, Alibek Kuantyrov, blamed the crisis of the world economy, rather than the national one, with the consequences of war and widespread inflation. (Source: [AsiaNews, 20 October 2023](#))

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Gender perspective

On 16 November 2021, three Kazakh activists, acting on behalf of five feminist groups and activists - KazFem, Feminita, FemPoint, Svet, and FemAgora - requested permission to hold a peaceful march and rally in Almaty on 8 March 2022. The Almaty city administration, in written responses, denied the requests on 26 November, citing a conflict with "cultural and entertainment events" and "repair and installation works" allegedly scheduled on that day at the exact same location and time. (Source: [HRW, 10 December 2021](#))

According to a report by the Asian Development Bank, cultural norms are generally positive towards the concept of gender equality ([ADB, 2018, p.17](#)). A public opinion study published in 2016 revealed that most men and women believed that the situation for women had improved over the last 10 years ([EBRD, 2016](#)). Women are viewed as active members of society, although are expected to assume more of the traditional domestic duties and are less likely to be granted positions with decision-making power. There remains significant stigma around divorce, such that even sisters of divorcees may struggle to marry.

Domestic violence also remains an ongoing area of concern, particularly as it reportedly worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic ([HRW Dispatches, 9 April 2020](#)). President Tokayev has repeatedly stated that domestic violence is an acute problem and protection of women's rights is key. Yet in January 2022, parliament suspended the review of a new draft domestic violence law and has not, since then, proposed any new legislation offering strengthened protection to women from family abuse. Meanwhile, police and service providers lack appropriate training to identify, prevent, and adequately respond to domestic violence. (Source: [HRW 2023 Kazakhstan country chapter](#))

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Kazakhstan](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 92.3% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 71.5% of the total population - 51.1% were female and 48.9% male
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 133.1% of the total population

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (Publication date: April 2024):

- “Kazakhstan has one of the most developed telecommunications sectors in the Central Asian region. This is especially true of the mobile segment, where widespread network coverage led to very high penetration rates, though in recent years the market has seen some rationalisation and with the declining number of multiple SIM cards in use the penetration rate fell from the high seen in 2012. The principal telcos have successfully generated revenue growth on the back of value-added services and the extended each of LTE and fibre networks. This has resulted in strong growth in mobile fixed line traffic, and in ARPU.”
- “At the turn of the century, Kazakhstan had a relatively high fixed-line teledensity thanks to concerted efforts to invest in the fixed-line infrastructure and in next-generation networks. However, as with most developed telecom markets globally, demand for traditional voice services is on the wane as customers are increasingly attracted to the flexibility and ubiquity of the mobile platform for voice as well as data services.”
- “Although the mobile segment dominates the telecom sector in Kazakhstan overall, there was a drop in the number of subscribers in 2020 as the economic effects of the pandemic told on household incomes. These effects also limited growth in 2021, though the easing of restrictions in 2022 resulted in a stronger recovery.”
- “The extensive deployment of LTE networks across the country, and the launch of limited 5G services by Kcell in mid-2023 bodes well for a steady uptake of lucrative mobile broadband services.”

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net report 2023 Kazakhstan](#):

- “Internet freedom in Kazakhstan continues to face severe restrictions. Unlike during the previous coverage period, the government did not shut down the internet nationwide in response to protests; instead, it throttled internet access locally during protests and rallies. The government routinely blocks websites and orders the removal of content. Online journalists and individuals critical of the government continue to face legal repercussions, and this coverage period also witnessed an increase in physical attacks against online journalists and media outlets ahead of snap presidential and parliamentary elections. News outlets and government institutions experienced significant cyberattacks during the coverage period.”
- “Several national elections were held during the coverage period. Changes to 33 articles of the constitution were approved by referendum in June 2022, and included removing the law giving former president Nursultan Nazarbayev special status. Incumbent president Qasym-Jomart Toqayev was reelected in November 2022, taking 81.3 percent of the vote according to government sources; Toqayev’s authoritarian regime was further entrenched following snap parliamentary elections held in March 2023, which saw Kazakhstan’s ruling party, Amanat, retain its majority in the legislature. None of the polls held during the coverage period were considered to be either free or fair by independent observers.”
- “Former president Nazarbayev ruled Kazakhstan from 1990 to 2019, when he stepped down. Nazarbayev initially maintained significant influence over governance, which waned after the January 2022 protests and riots. In February 2023, President Toqayev invalidated the legal instruments that provided numerous privileges to Nazarbayev and his family members. Parliamentary and presidential elections are neither free nor fair, and major parties exhibit

- continued political loyalty to the government. The authorities have consistently marginalized or imprisoned genuine opposition figures. The dominant media outlets are either in state hands or owned by government-friendly businessmen. Freedoms of speech and assembly remain restricted, and corruption is endemic.”

Satellite dishes provide a good alternative for many people in Kazakhstan to access international information. The media that are under state control offer only very limited independent information, if at all.

There are many options for Christians to communicate aspects of the Christian faith - via (foreign) websites, via SD cards in smartphones, and via radio and television programs through satellite broadcasts. The situation for books, magazines and DVDs is more problematic since these can be more easily confiscated during raids and searches.

Security situation

Criminal activity decreased in 2023

Since the 1990s, the city of Taraz in the Dzhambyl region had a reputation for being the main hub of organized crime in the country. However, according to statistics for 2023, criminal violations in public environments fell by 19%, those carried out under the influence of alcohol by 8.6%, the participation of minors by 28.1%, and crimes attributed to organized groups by 13%, with a 53% drop in gun use. Many cases have been solved, including sexual violence, theft, vandalism, and kidnapping of humans and pets. (Source: [AsiaNews, 30 January 2024](#))

Violent Islamic militancy has decreased

Radical Islamic attacks have not occurred in Kazakhstan for roughly a decade. There was a sudden spike at the end of 2011 when there were bombings and killings in Atyrau (western Kazakhstan) and Taraz (southern Kazakhstan); but since then, the government has stepped up its suppression of radical Islamic influence. However, officials have admitted that hundreds of Kazakhs went to Iraq and Syria to join Islamic State group (IS) fighters in recent years. According to RFE/RL, it is said that many were killed fighting as IS militants (Source: [RFE/RL, 10 May 2019](#)). In May 2019, the authorities repatriated 231 Kazakh citizens from Syria many of whom were believed to be IS family members. On 13 May 2019, Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbayev told a press conference that the group included 16 men, 59 women and 156 children, most under six with 18 orphans ([Asia News, 16 May 2019](#)).

Border tensions flare up occasionally

From time to time there are border tensions between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In March 2019 Kazakh authorities started conducting elaborate checks of all trucks entering Kazakhstan from Kyrgyzstan. As a result, Kyrgyzstan lashed out at neighboring Kazakhstan over what they saw as burdensome bureaucratic procedures that slowed the movement of trucks across the border to a crawl for the second time in two years ([RFE/RL, 3 April 2019](#)).

On 8 February 2020, there were ethnic clashes in a southern Kazakh district, with mobs torching houses, overturning cars and sending hundreds fleeing into neighboring Kyrgyzstan. At least eight people were killed. This was the worst ethnic violence in the Zhambyl region (130 kilometers west of Almaty) for some years ([RFE/RL, 8 February 2020](#)).

On 28 October 2021, street clashes struck Pidzim, a Kazakh town in the province of Panfilovo. The local authorities spoke of a "fight between young people" that began with verbal clashes and ended in a brawl with the use of sticks and improvised weapons. At a meeting of the municipal assembly, however, it became clear that this was a real inter-ethnic conflict. Pidzim is located 15 kilometres from the Chinese border, and has 12,000 inhabitants: 7,000 Kazakhs and 5,000 Uyghurs, almost all of whom are farmers. Villagers said that 'the conflict did not start yesterday, the youth has long been divided between the different nationalities', calling on the local government to establish a real policy of tolerance. The aim of the meeting was to calm things down, but the videos show that the situation remained very tense. Several residents called for the renaming of the town and the local schools. (Source: [Asia News, 2 November 2021](#))

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and have not been especially targeted as far as national security issues are concerned.

Christian origins

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Nestorian Christianity spread through southern Kazakhstan. In the year 1009, Nestorian missionaries baptized one of the numerous groups of Mongol-speaking ethnic Kereiti whose Khan took the Christian name Mark, Marguz. In the same period, Nestorian Christianity spread among other peoples of Central Asia, and Metropolitan sees were established.

Timur Lenk (also called Tamar Lane: 1336-1406) eradicated Christianity in the 14th century. Stalin (1878-1953) ordered the deportation of many politically unreliable and religious citizens of the USSR to Kazakhstan during the "Great Purge" in the 1930s. During those years many Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians were sent to Central Asia and many of them settled in Kazakhstan. Many church leaders were deported and sent to concentration camps in Kazakhstan. After their release, they started a clandestine ministry among the people. The church grew mainly among the non-Kazakh people.

After the country gained independence in 1991, the new religious liberty allowed missionary and evangelistic efforts to reach thousands of ethnic Kazakhs who embraced Christianity. The indigenous Church (i.e. Christians with a Muslim background), which was practically non-existent in 1990, is now estimated to number around 15,000. The church is not growing rapidly, due to pressure from both the Muslim environment (family, friends and community) and the local authorities.

Church spectrum today

Kazakhstan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	4,678,000	93.0
Catholic	123,000	2.4
Protestant	49,600	1.0
Independent	138,000	2.7
Unaffiliated	58,300	1.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-16,400	-0.3
Total	5,030,500	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	42,100	0.8
Pentecostal-Charismatic	113,000	2.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) the largest official church denominations in Kazakhstan are:

- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)
- The Ukrainian Orthodox Church
- The Roman Catholic Church

The overwhelming majority of Christians in Kazakhstan are ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. They live mainly in the north of the country.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Kazakhstan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

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