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The Parliamentary Assembly should support Kazakhstan to continue its democratic reforms

Report[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
Rapporteur: Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, Hungary, European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates

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1. Reference to committee: Doc.15569, Reference 4673 of 10 October 2022.

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution 1506 (2006) "External relations of the Council of Europe" and reiterates its commitment to enhancing the role of the Council of Europe in promoting democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights beyond its borders, in particular in neighbouring regions, as an essential contribution to security, stability and development.

2. The Assembly recalls its Resolutions 1526 (2006) "Situation in Kazakhstan and relations with the Council of Europe" and 2193 (2017) "The relations of the Council of Europe with Kazakhstan" and reiterates its view of Kazakhstan as one of the pillars of stability in the Euro-Asian region. This role has gained particular relevance in the increasingly strained geopolitical environment that has emerged following the Russian Federation's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. It further notes Kazakhstan's growing international profile, supported by its strategic geographic location and balanced foreign policy, and welcomes Kazakhstan's contributions to international diplomacy.

3. The Assembly reiterates its commitment to the 2004 Co-operation Agreement with the Parliament of Kazakhstan which, in the last two decades, has served as a cornerstone for enhancing interparliamentary dialogue and fostering mutual understanding between the Council of Europe and Kazakhstan. It welcomes the commitment by the Parliament of Kazakhstan to uphold and further develop the structured dialogue with the Assembly, as underscored in the joint declaration by the President of the Assembly and the Speaker of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the agreement.

4. The Assembly further welcomes the commitment of Kazakhstan's political leadership to democratic transformation of the country and takes positive note of the constitutional and legislative reforms undertaken since 2019. It particularly commends Kazakhstan for the abolition of the death penalty in 2022, which has been one of the Assembly's key demands from the outset of the establishment of its relations with the Parliament of Kazakhstan.

5. The Assembly welcomes the comprehensive co-operation between Kazakhstan and the Council of Europe within the framework of the Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities, which has served as a valuable instrument for aligning the Kazakh legislation with Council of Europe's standards. In this context, the Assembly takes positive note of the adoption of the current Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities 2024-2027, which outlines an expanded range of areas for co-operation, including justice reform, anti-corruption measures, promotion of human rights, and support for democratic governance, *inter alia* through the co-operation with the Assembly. The Assembly expects that this broadened scope will lead to deeper engagement with Council of Europe standards and mechanisms, as well as tangible progress in the implementation of key reforms.

6. The Assembly highly appreciates the fact that Kazakhstan is party to a growing number of Council of Europe conventions and instruments and has requested to accede to a number of others. The Assembly has particularly taken note of Kazakhstan's request for a two-year extension of the invitation to accede to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"), with the expressed aim to continue aligning its legislation and acceding the convention thereafter. The Assembly is determined to follow up on this issue in due course.

7. The Assembly recalls that the 2004 Co-operation Agreement with the Parliament of Kazakhstan aims at promoting the principles of parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights as well as fundamental freedoms in the country. In this context, it takes careful note of reports about ongoing challenges in these areas. In particular, it emphasises the importance of ensuring genuine political pluralism, enhancing the independence of the judiciary, strengthening the freedom of expression and creating an environment that enables civil society to flourish. The Assembly also underscores the necessity of holding those accountable for past human rights violations, including those associated with the January 2022 events, and of further strengthening safeguards against torture and ill-treatment.

8. The Assembly remains committed to a co-operation with Kazakhstan that is based on shared values and is determined to support Kazakhstan to continue its democratic reforms. This support should be strategic and principled, encouraging Kazakhstan to continue with the implementation of reforms and exploring ways of closer co-operation.

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2. Draft resolution unanimously adopted by the committee on 10 September 2025.

9. Therefore, the Assembly encourages the Parliament of Kazakhstan to:

9.1. use its strengthened position within the country's institutional framework – a positive outcome of the recent constitutional reforms – to drive forward the democratisation process in Kazakhstan;

9.2. encourage the authorities of Kazakhstan to broaden the country's participation in the European legal space and acceding to relevant Council of Europe conventions which are open to non-member States, in particular:

9.2.1. accelerate progress toward the ratification of the Istanbul Convention;

9.2.2. consider becoming a member of the Council of Europe International Co-operation Group on Drugs and Addictions (Pompidou Group);

9.3. increase its participation in the work of the Assembly and its committees.

10. The Assembly calls on the authorities of Kazakhstan to:

10.1. continue with their reform agenda and translate political commitments into sustained, transparent, and measurable progress;

10.2. make full use of the expertise and tools available under the Council of Europe Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities, particularly in the newly expanded fields of justice reform, anti-corruption, human rights protection, and democratic governance.

11. The Assembly urges the authorities of Kazakhstan to:

11.1. acknowledge the importance of open public discourse and constructive criticism in a democratic society, foster genuine political pluralism, and ensure meaningful political competition and participation;

11.2. ensure a pluralistic and independent media environment and avoid disproportionate restrictions on independent journalism and civil society, including by removing legal and administrative obstacles that hinder their operation;

11.3. align with international human rights standards by ensuring that its domestic legislation, policies and practices reflect these norms, take into account the views and recommendations of domestic and international human rights bodies, including the United Nations Human Rights Committee, and implement their recommendations in full;

11.4. advance reforms aimed at enhancing judicial independence and accountability, reinforcing access to justice and the right to a fair trial;

11.5. ensure full accountability for past human rights violations, including those linked to the January 2022 events, and strengthen safeguards against torture and ill-treatment in all places of detention.

12. The Assembly encourages the authorities of Kazakhstan to:

12.1. continue their constructive engagement with the Council of Europe and other international bodies in the field of protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law and intensify efforts to address the concerns raised;

12.2. build on Kazakhstan's active participation in international diplomacy by supporting dialogue, regional stability, and co-operation in line with international norms and Council of Europe values. This includes the steadfast commitment to preserving and strengthening fundamental principles such as respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of States, the non-use of force or threats of force, and the peaceful resolution of disagreements and disputes between countries;

12.3. maintain their support for a peaceful resolution to the unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, guided by the principles of international law, sovereignty, and territorial integrity and consider joining international efforts aimed at creating a comprehensive approach to accountability, ensuring justice for victims and reinforcing international law.

13. The Assembly should regularly assess the situation in Kazakhstan and its adherence to the values of the Council of Europe.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Zsolt Nemeth, rapporteur[3]

1. Introduction

1. Kazakhstan, the largest landlocked country in the world and the ninth largest by land area overall, is located in Central Asia and shares borders with the Russian Federation, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

2. Since its independence from Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan has maintained relative political stability and generated measurable economic growth. The country has followed a gradual path of political modernisation, with the most significant reforms initiated since 2019.

3. The Parliamentary Assembly has followed this evolution with a combination of cautious optimism and constructive critique. In its Resolution 1526 (2006),[4] it recognised Kazakhstan's strategic importance and welcomed its openness to co-operation with European institutions. However, it also expressed concern about the lack of political pluralism, the weakness of independent media, and the excessive concentration of power in the executive branch.

4. More than a decade later, Resolution 2193 (2017)[5] acknowledged improvements, including Kazakhstan's expressed interest in Council of Europe conventions and its efforts to engage with the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). Nevertheless, the report reiterated many of the same concerns, particularly regarding civil liberties, electoral competitiveness, and the independence of the judiciary.

5. The present document is building on a visit carried out to Almaty and Astana from 3 to 6 May 2025 and on the side-event during the Assembly second part-session on 10 April 2025, attended by the Head of the Constitutional Court of Kazakhstan and the Deputy Speaker of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan.

6. Both events have shown that significant reforms aimed at strengthening democratic standards and freedoms in Kazakhstan have been initiated since the last report. Their impact has not yet been comprehensively presented to the Assembly.

7. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to provide an updated account of political and institutional developments in Kazakhstan since 2019, to examine the substance and impact of these reforms; and to identify how the Assembly could support Kazakhstan's democratic reforms, particularly those introduced under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

8. The rapporteur is convinced that it is both timely and necessary for the Assembly to strengthen its engagement with Kazakhstan as a key reforming partner in the Eurasian space.

2. General information

9. Kazakhstan's political system is defined as a presidential republic with a bicameral legislature. Its current President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, assumed office in 2019 following the resignation of Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had ruled the country since independence in 1991. President Tokayev's rise marked a turning point in the political landscape, setting the stage for reforms.

10. The Parliament consists of two chambers: the Mazhilis (lower house) and the Senate (upper house). The 98 members of the Mazhilis are elected by popular vote through a mixed-member majoritarian system. The 50 Senate members represent the interest of the regions, national and cultural communities on the national level, with 40 of them being elected by regional legislatures and 10 appointed by the president.

11. The country is administratively divided into 17 regions and three cities of national significance: Almaty, Astana and Shymkent. Kazakhstan has long pursued multivectorism as a foreign policy doctrine, seeking balanced relations with global powers and significantly contributing to the work of regional and international organisations. The most recent example in this regard was the signing of the host country agreement between Kazakhstan and the United Nations, establishing in Almaty the United Nations Regional Center for the Sustainable Development Goals for Central Asia and Afghanistan.

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3. The explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.
4. Resolution 1526 (2006) "The situation in Kazakhstan and the relations with the Council of Europe", adopted on 2 October 2006.
5. Resolution 2193 (2017) "The relations of the Council of Europe with Kazakhstan", adopted on 12 October 2017.

12. Kazakhstan's multivectorism enables the country to be a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while continuing the co-operation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). It also explains why Kazakhstan is advancing the economic co-operation within the Eurasian Economic Union, while also deepening ties with Europe, becoming the first Central Asian country to sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union (EU).

13. A significant player in global energy markets due to its rich reserves of oil, gas, and uranium, Kazakhstan has established close relations with all major economic players. As the largest economy in Central Asia, it has taken steps to promote regional co-operation, particularly in areas such as trade, infrastructure, and connectivity. While its efforts have not been without challenges, Kazakhstan is often seen as playing a co-ordinating role within the region and beyond. The country's active participation in the Organization of Turkic States is an example in this regard, as well as Kazakhstan's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where the country has driven forward the security, economic and connectivity agenda. Kazakhstan's strategic location along the Belt and Road Initiative corridor further amplifies its geopolitical importance, giving rise to arguments formulated by think tanks, academia and the press to consider Kazakhstan as a middle power.

14. Ethnically diverse, Kazakhstan is home to more than 130 ethnic groups.[6] Its commitment to promoting interethnic harmony is exemplified by institutions such as the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, a consultative body aimed at fostering national unity.

15. One special feature is the language policy, with Kazakh as the State language and Russian as an official language for interethnic communication[7] that is used on equal ground in State institutions.

16. The parallel use of both languages appears to function seamlessly in most cases in everyday life, including the communication with State authorities. Nevertheless, language policy remains a balancing act between minority rights on the one hand and the promotion of the State language as an instrument of nation-building, which is still taking place, on the other.

3. Recent political developments

17. Kazakhstan's democratic reform process under President Tokayev has been both ambitious and complex. Since 2019, the administration has launched a series of reforms – headlined with the slogan "strong president, influential parliament, accountable government" – aiming to shift the country from a super-presidential system to one with more institutional balance, enhanced civil liberties, and political pluralism.

18. The government has positioned the reforms as part of a broader agenda for a "Just Kazakhstan", focusing on greater political responsiveness, inclusivity, and rule of law.

19. Among the most notable initiatives are:

– the constitutional Amendments of 2022: a referendum approved 33 amendments that abolished the former president's privileges, reinstated the Constitutional Court, banned the death penalty, and enhanced the powers of parliament and local governance. These changes also included the establishment of a singular non-renewable seven-year presidential term to prevent monopolisation of power, which marks a decision unique to the region. Particular emphasis was placed on enhancing the autonomy of the Commissioner for Human Rights. The Commissioner's responsibilities, rights and duties have been enshrined in the Constitution, marking a transition from a government-based ombudsperson model to one that fully complies with the principle of independence. In addition, the possibility for the Commissioner to appeal to the Constitutional Court was added to his mandate.

– electoral Reforms: the reforms reduced the parliamentary electoral threshold from 7% to 5%, allowed independent candidacies, introduced a "None of the above" ballot option, and simplified political party registration by lowering the membership requirement from 40 000 to 5 000;

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6. Of which 71.3 % Kazakhs, 14.6 % Russians, 3.3 % Uzbeks (National Statistics Office of the Agency of Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, March 2025).

7. Extract of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan:

Article 7(1): The state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan shall be the Kazakh language.

Article 7(2): In State organisations and local self-administration bodies the Russian language shall be officially used on equal grounds with the Kazakh language.

Article 7(3): The State shall promote conditions for the study and development of the languages of the people of Kazakhstan.

– human rights measures: Since 2021, Kazakhstan has adopted three major documents that set out the human rights protection framework, namely the National Human Rights Action Plan; the Plan on Human Rights and the Rule of Law; and the Presidential Action Plan. The legal reforms and policy measures covered key areas such as disability rights (including ratification of the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities); support for vulnerable groups such as migrants or stateless persons; fight against discrimination; labour rights; criminal justice and penitentiary system reform; and gender equality. Measures aimed at improving gender equality were outlined *inter alia* in the National Action Plan 2022 – 2025 for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security; the Government Action Plan 2024-2027; and the National Concept on Family and Gender Policy. Other notable initiatives focussed on fighting domestic violence, torture, and promoting transparent policing at public gatherings.

– Decentralisation: Rural mayors (*akims*) are now directly elected, and regional authorities have been granted more autonomy. The institution of gender advisors to regional governors was introduced, a legal status for regional ombudspersons for children's rights was created.

20. The government portrays these reforms as a substantial pivot toward participatory governance. President Tokayev has emphasised the need to create a "listening State" that engages constructively with public concerns and enhances government transparency.[8] This concept has been reiterated by the President on numerous occasions since then, serving as a guideline for all State actions.

21. The progress made in constitutional and political reforms was commended by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe during his visit to Astana in May 2025.[9]

4. Reform assessment

22. The reform efforts have produced measurable changes, and at the same time they have also drawn scrutiny from some civil society actors and international organisations, who urge more robust implementation and inclusivity.

4.1. International perspective

23. In its report on the 2023 parliamentary elections, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) acknowledged improvements, such as legal changes that brought Kazakhstan "closer to holding elections in line with international standards and OSCE commitments"[10].

24. However, it noted significant concerns and concluded that while the elections marked a step forward, "further changes to the legal framework are needed to provide a sufficient basis for democratic elections".

25. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, in its most recent periodic report on Kazakhstan's implementation of the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, commended Kazakhstan for abolishing the death penalty and for ratifying the Second Optional Protocol to the Covenant. The Committee Chairperson concluded that the Kazakh delegation had actively engaged in the dialogue, which had addressed judicial independence, the prohibition of torture, and the rights of vulnerable groups, among other topics.

26. At the same time, the Committee expressed particular concern regarding the lack of accountability for the January 2022 events and restrictions on civil society and freedom of assembly.

4.2. Civil society perspectives

27. While civil society organisations in Kazakhstan recognise the symbolic and structural importance of these reforms, they caution that true democratisation will require more than legal amendments.

28. Human rights NGOs have welcomed the direction of change but have also expressed regret at what they see as the superficial implementation of the reforms. They have urged the authorities to strengthen pluralism and to fight limitations on fundamental freedoms.[11] NGOs positively noted that the permit-based

8. Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the Nation, September 2022.
9. Council of Europe Newsroom: Secretary General highlights Kazakhstan–Council of Europe cooperation as a pillar of regional and European stability.
10. ODIHR Election Observation Mission to Kazakhstan, Early Parliamentary Elections, 19 March 2023: Final Report.

system for rallies has been replaced by a notification model. However, in some cases, human rights organisations reported difficulties in obtaining approval for public events, which may indicate practical difficulties in implementing the notification procedure. Observers also refer to the restriction of the freedom of expression, where some human rights organisations view the charges against certain journalists and bloggers as possible manifestations of pressure on independent or critical media.[12]

29. In terms of electoral environment, civil society actors argued that the electoral system, though formally more competitive, remained tightly managed. Although the March 2023 parliamentary elections were described as "having brought elements of competitiveness into the political arena", observers noted that the participation of opposition forces in the elections remained limited. Media bias, deregistration of candidates, and the use of administrative resources were cited as critical obstacles.

30. Observers commended that, as a part of the law and justice reform, the Constitutional Court was reinstated, and the powers of the Human Rights Commissioner were expanded and enshrined in the constitution.[13] At the same time, concerns have been raised about the potential influence of the executive branch on judiciary independence, particularly in politically sensitive cases.

31. The aftermath of the January 2022 unrest ("Tragic January") remained a flashpoint with regard to criminal justice and police accountability: Despite the amnesty granted to many detainees, representatives of civil society continue to emphasise the necessity for an independent evaluation of the circumstances pertaining to these events. There are also voices accusing the authorities of not co-operating sufficiently in the investigation of serious human rights violations, or even of having been involved in them.[14]

5. Language policy and linguistic dynamics in Kazakhstan

32. Kazakhstan is constitutionally a bilingual State. Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan stipulates that Kazakh is the State language, while Russian is officially used on equal grounds in State institutions and local self-government bodies.

33. This legal duality reflects the country's demographic reality – Kazakhs constitute approximately 71% of the population, but Russian remains widely spoken, particularly in urban areas and the north of the country, where Kazakhstan shares a border with Russia that stretches over more than 7 500 km.[15]

34. Since gaining independence, successive governments have undertaken efforts to revitalise and promote the Kazakh language, particularly in education, public administration, and media.

35. The State has implemented trilingual education policies – emphasising Kazakh, Russian, and English – with the aim of increasing the functional usage of Kazakh without alienating Russian-speaking citizens. Government programs also include the expansion of Kazakh-language public services, increased Kazakh content in media, and incentives for civil servants to improve their proficiency.

36. The topic, however, remains sensitive and contested. Among ethnic minorities, particularly Russians (around 15% of the population), there are concerns that increased emphasis on Kazakh could marginalise their linguistic rights.

37. Nonetheless, many within the Kazakh majority view the promotion of the State language – based on its constitutional status – as a long-overdue correction of Soviet-era policies that suppressed indigenous cultural expression.

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11. EU External Action Service (EEAS), "16th EU-Kazakhstan Human Rights Dialogue", (Brussels, 6 March 2025); Human Rights Watch, "Kazakhstan: Journalists denied accreditation" (22 July 2025).
12. Amnesty International, "The State of the World's Human Rights" (London, 2025); Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025: Kazakhstan (New York, 2025); Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2025: Kazakhstan" (Washington, D.C., 2025); Reporters Without Borders, "World Press Freedom Index: Kazakhstan" (Paris, 2025); UN Human Rights Council, "Universal Periodic Review: Kazakhstan" (Geneva, January 2025).
13. Article 83.1 of the Constitution of Kazakhstan
14. OSCE/ODIHR, "Kazakhstan: Monitoring of January 2022 protest-related trials (November 2022-December 2023)" (Warsaw, 2025); European Parliament, resolution of 17 January 2024 on the EU strategy on Central Asia (P9_TA(2024)0027) and resolution of 20 January 2022 on the situation in Kazakhstan (P9_TA(2022)0012).
15. The World Factbook.

38. The assessment is somewhat more reserved with regard to the discussion about the use of the Latin script. While the government has basically set the course for the transition, there are voices from civil society who point out that a change in the writing system would make it more difficult for the Russian-speaking community in particular to learn Kazakh and thus slow down the overall implementation of the Kazakh language.

39. Human rights NGOs advocate a balanced approach that protects linguistic diversity while recognising the symbolic and functional role of the Kazakh language. In general, they commend the government's current approach that favours gradual language reform, avoiding abrupt shifts that could provoke ethnic tensions or undermine social cohesion.

6. Reform outcomes

40. Overall, Kazakhstan's recent reforms reflect a significant rhetorical and legal shift toward democratic governance. The country has introduced legislative reforms that align with international norms. Tangible changes – particularly in electoral law, judicial structure, and decentralisation – demonstrate political will.

41. In particular, Kazakhstan has made progress in combating torture and degrading treatment. In 2023, Article 146 of the Criminal Code was amended in line with international standards, clarifying definitions and increasing penalties. Investigations of torture were placed under the exclusive authority of the prosecutor's office, and mandatory video surveillance was introduced in detention facilities. As a consequence, the number of torture cases reaching court has increased, indicating improved transparency and accountability. A total of 98 individuals were convicted, with nearly 79% receiving real prison terms. Among them, 33 officials were prosecuted for torture related to the January 2022 events.

42. In regard to the endeavour to align the electoral environment with European standards, the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan has demonstrated a consistent openness to engaging in dialogue with the OSCE/ODIHR, the Council for Democratic Elections of the Council of Europe, and the Venice Commission. Electoral legislation – entrenched in constitutional provisions like the constitutional law on elections – grants equal active and passive voting rights. All candidates receive equal financial resources by the State; they are granted equal access to the media; and the media are obliged to disseminate information regarding all candidates in equal amounts of print space and airtime. According to the Central Election Commission, legislative amendments adopted since 2019 have significantly expanded the access of media representatives and national observers to polling stations on election day.

43. Yet Kazakhstan's democratic development remains in transition. Continued vigilance, robust international co-operation and internal demand from citizens and the civil society will be necessary to ensure the reforms put on paper produce lasting and inclusive democratic change.

7. Council of Europe's relations with Kazakhstan

44. According to Council of Europe's relevant decisions,[16] Kazakhstan cannot become a full member of the Council of Europe. However, the Organisation has increasingly pursued enhanced engagement with neighbouring countries, and Kazakhstan has emerged as a notable partner in this context.

45. The Council of Europe has functioned as both a normative benchmark and an implementing partner, assisting Kazakhstan in strengthening human rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance. This co-operation has played a formative role in shaping Kazakhstan's legal and institutional reforms, contributing to its broader democratisation agenda.

7.1. Co-operation with the Assembly

46. Kazakhstan's engagement with the Assembly has evolved significantly over the past two decades, particularly since the signing of the Co-operation Agreement between the Assembly and the Parliament of Kazakhstan in 2004.

16. Reply by the Committee of Ministers to Recommendation 1247 (1994) on the Enlargement of the Council of Europe.

47. This Co-operation Agreement laid the groundwork for structured dialogue between the Assembly and the Parliament of Kazakhstan. It encouraged Kazakhstan to align with Council of Europe conventions and norms and fostered regular interactions between parliamentary bodies. The agreement enabled Kazakh members of parliament to attend the Assembly's sessions and participate in committee work, providing them with exposure to European parliamentary practices.

48. On the 20th anniversary of the agreement in 2024, a joint statement by the President of the Assembly and the Speaker of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan reaffirmed the importance of parliamentary diplomacy in consolidating democracy. Both parties praised the agreement's contribution to reinforcing Kazakhstan's legal reforms, notably the abolition of the death penalty and the establishment of human rights institutions.[17]

49. The Assembly has been closely following the progress of the reform. Members have repeatedly took the opportunity to express their various, occasionally conflicting, views on the status, implementation and prospects of reforms. While some have voiced criticism of what they consider systematic violations of human rights and political freedoms through judicial, financial and transnational repression, others have commended the authorities for the progress made in the domain of political reforms and encouraged Kazakhstan to further the co-operation built on the achievement of interactions since 2004.

7.2. Co-operation with the Committee of Ministers – Council of Europe Neighbourhood Cooperation Priorities with Kazakhstan 2024-2027

50. Co-operation has also deepened through the Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities – a strategic framework for structured engagement with non-member States. The most recent Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities (2024-2027), adopted in October 2023 by the Committee of Ministers, outlines collaboration across critical areas, including:

– improving the independence and efficiency of the judiciary;

– combating corruption and money laundering;

– preventing violence against women and children;

– enhancing the role of parliament in democratic oversight;

– promoting the rule of law and human rights in criminal proceedings.[18]

51. These priorities build on progress achieved under the Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities 2019-2023, which led to Kazakhstan's accession to the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and formal invitations to join additional Council of Europe conventions, such as those on cybercrime and anti-corruption. The Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities process has enabled Kazakhstan to benefit from the Organisation's legal standards and institutional know-how without formal membership.

52. During his visit to Astana in May 2025, Council of Europe Secretary General Alain Berset highlighted Kazakhstan – Council of Europe co-operation as a pillar of regional and European stability. He commended Kazakhstan for the progress made in constitutional and political reforms and highlighted the further deepening of the co-operation in the Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities framework that, in its current reiteration, has been expanded and complemented in order to improve the alignment with Kazakhstan's national reform agenda.

7.3. Participation in Council of Europe instruments

53. Kazakhstan has already ratified several Council of Europe conventions, including the:

– European Cultural Convention (ETS No. 18);

– Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165);

17. Joint Statement by the President of the Assembly and Speaker of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan on the 20th Anniversary of signing of the Agreement on Co-operation between PACE and the Parliament of Kazakhstan, 27 April 2024

18. Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, "Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities with Kazakhstan 2024–2027", adopted on 18 October 2023.

– Convention on the Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime (ETS No. 141);

– Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters (ETS No. 127).[19]

54. Kazakhstan was invited by the Committee of Ministers to accede to the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (ETS No. 30) on 18 June 2025. This decision is valid five years as from its adoption.

55. Kazakhstan also requested a two-year extension of the invitation to accede to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"), which should enable the Kazakh authorities to continue aligning their legislation. The political support for progress in this area was clearly expressed during the rapporteur's visit to the country.

56. Kazakhstan has observer or participatory status with numerous Council of Europe bodies, including the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), and GRECO. Consultations with the Venice Commission have influenced Kazakhstan's constitutional, judicial, and human rights reforms – for instance the re-establishment of the Constitutional Court in 2023.

57. Kazakhstan has maintained an evolving relationship with the Venice Commission since the late 1990s, culminating in its accession as a full member in 2012. The country has actively engaged in co-operation with the Commission through various forms of legal assistance and expert consultations, particularly in the areas of constitutional and judicial reform. Notably, Kazakhstan has hosted and participated in high-level dialogues and regional conferences, including those held in 2006, 2017, 2021 and 2023, which have addressed issues such as judicial independence and constitutional review. Within the framework of EU – Council of Europe joint programmes, including the Central Asia Rule of Law Initiative, Kazakhstan has received and taken into account a number of Venice Commission opinions aimed at supporting legislative reforms. This co-operation continues to provide a platform for dialogue on rule of law and governance issues between Kazakhstan and European institutions.

58. The GRECO evaluation has had a catalytic impact, identifying vulnerabilities in Kazakhstan's anti-corruption framework and offering recommendations that have influenced national policy. As of the latest compliance review (2024), 4 of 27 GRECO recommendations had been fully implemented, with most others partially addressed.[20]

7.4. The road ahead: strategic potential

59. Kazakhstan's continued interest in deepening relations with the Council of Europe – despite geopolitical complexities – is a positive sign. Participation in Council of Europe conventions and bodies gives Kazakhstan access to the European legal framework while affirming its reformist credentials on the international stage.

60. Going forward, Kazakhstan may pursue:

– strengthened, more structured relations with the Assembly;

– full implementation of the Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities 2024-2027 to embed democratic principles in practice;

– accession to key treaties like the Istanbul Convention, the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185), and full GRECO compliance;

– expansion of technical co-operation, especially in the fields of judicial independence and civil society development.

61. For the Assembly, co-operation with Kazakhstan represents a strategic and political opportunity. By supporting reform from within, the Assembly can help foster a stable, rights-based governance model in a geopolitically sensitive region.

19. Council of Europe Treaty Office, Status of Kazakhstan's participation in Council of Europe Conventions, 2025
20. GRECO, Second Compliance Report – Kazakhstan (Fourth Evaluation Round), 6 September 2024.

8. Conclusion

62. Since 2019, under President Tokayev's leadership, the country has undertaken a broad spectrum of reforms aimed at recalibrating the political system, strengthening the rule of law, improving the protection of human rights, and creating space for a more pluralistic society.

63. These reforms went beyond symbolism: they include constitutional amendments, changes to the electoral and judicial systems, decentralisation efforts, and improved legal protections for civil and political rights.

64. Yet the transformation remains a work in progress. As civil society actors have repeatedly pointed out, legislative reform is only the first step toward genuine democratisation. They warn that the legacy of centralised power, State control over media, and constraints on dissent remain present, even amid ongoing reforms.

65. Observers have called for Kazakhstan to address significant challenges: ensuring true judicial independence, protecting freedom of assembly and expression, enabling an open media environment, and safeguarding the rights of opposition voices and marginalised communities.

66. The Council of Europe, particularly through the Assembly, has played an important supportive role in guiding and evaluating these reforms. The Assembly Co-operation Agreement, the Council of Europe Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities, and Kazakhstan's engagement with bodies like the Venice Commission and GRECO have helped embed European legal and democratic standards into Kazakhstan's evolving institutional framework.

67. The recent willingness of the Kazakh Government to accede to further conventions – on corruption, cybercrime, and human rights – signals that the authorities are ready to advance this co-operation even further.

68. Kazakhstan's reform agenda has not gone unnoticed, and its geopolitical balancing act – between Russia, China, Europe, and the broader international community – underscores the importance of ensuring domestic legitimacy through democratic governance.

69. If successful, Kazakhstan's democratic transformation could serve as a model for the region, demonstrating that meaningful reform is possible even in a context shaped by authoritarian and imperial legacies.

70. Now is the moment to deepen the Council of Europe's engagement – not only to acknowledge the progress made, but to help ensure that these changes endure. Democratic reform in Kazakhstan is not only in the national interest of its people – it is also in the strategic interest of Europe.

71. In this context, it is both timely and necessary for the Assembly to reinforce its support for Kazakhstan's democratic reforms. This support should be strategic and principled, encouraging Kazakhstan to continue with the implementation of reforms and exploring ways of closer co-operation.

72. Specifically, the Assembly could:

– encourage the Parliament of Kazakhstan to strengthen its institutional relations with the Assembly;

– closely follow the implementation of the Council of Europe Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities 2024-2027;

– increase exchanges and visibility of Kazakhstan's engagement in Assembly's sessions and committees;

– invite member States to contribute to strengthening capacity-building programs for judges, parliamentarians, civil servants, and civil society.