



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Kazakhstan covers 1,052,090 square miles (2,724,900 square kilometers) of central Asia and is roughly four times the size of Texas. Kazakhstan's landscape features mountains in the south and east, forested hills in the north, desert and semidesert terrain in the south and west, and a vast central steppe. The country's major rivers include the Ural, Irtys, and Syr Darya; major lakes are the Balkhash and Zaysan. More important is the oil-rich Caspian Sea to the west. The Aral Sea straddles the southern border with Uzbekistan. Once a large and healthy sea, the Aral shrank by half under Soviet agricultural policies. The former capital, Almaty, lies in the foothills of the Tien Shan Mountains in the southeast. Astana, which lies on the Ishim River, in the central steppe, became the nation's new capital in 1997.

Kazakhstan has a dry continental climate with extreme temperature variations. Long, harsh winters prevail in the north. Temperatures can dip to  $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$  ( $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ ); windstorms are common. Southern winters are shorter and less severe, but temperatures during the hot, dry summers can reach  $104^{\circ}\text{F}$  ( $40^{\circ}\text{C}$ ).

### History

The territory now known as Kazakhstan was home to nomadic peoples for centuries. Mongol tribes began migrating to the area in the eighth century AD, and in the early thirteenth century, central Asia was conquered by Genghis Khan's Golden Horde. Their descendants, known as the White

Horde, ruled the territory until the Mongol Empire crumbled in the late 14th century. The Kazakh nation that emerged was a mixture of Turkic and Mongol peoples.

From 1511 to 1518, Kazakhs were unified and their territory expanded under the leadership of Kassym Khan. Their language and culture gradually became distinct from those of neighboring Uzbek and Kyrgyz peoples. Following Kassym Khan's reign, the Kazakhs divided into three distinct groups, each dominating a particular geographic area but maintaining a common language and heritage. Fiercely independent, they avoided relations with outside nations.

Contact with imperial Russia was minimal until the early 1700s, when Russia built forts in southern Siberia and northern Kazakhstan. When the Kazakhs were threatened by the Kalmyks, they reluctantly accepted protection from czarist Russia. In the 19th-century Great Game race for territory and influence between Britain and Russia, Russia eventually solidified its control of the area. Subsequent Kazakh uprisings, including one in 1916, were put down with force. In the wake of Russia's Bolshevik Revolution, a Kazakh autonomous government was formed and nominally held power from 1917 to 1919. By 1920, however, communist forces had gained control; Kazakhstan officially became a Soviet republic in 1936.

Years of war, followed by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's forced collectivization campaign in the 1930s, virtually eliminated the traditional nomadic way of life; one-third of the population and most livestock perished. During World War II (the Great Patriotic War), Stalin deported hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities from European Russia to the forced labor camps and planned cities of the Kazakh steppe.

The postwar period brought industrialization and improved education. Still, tension between Russians and Kazakhs was never far beneath the surface. In 1986, after Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev replaced then Kazakh Communist Party leader Dinmukhamed Kunaev with an ethnic Russian unfamiliar with Kazakh language and culture, riots broke out in Almaty, which government troops violently suppressed. In 1989, Nursultan Nazarbayev became the party leader.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan declared its independence, and Nazarbayev was elected its first president. He was reelected in 1999 and 2005 amid accusations that the elections were flawed. Nazarbayev has successfully consolidated his personal power. In May 2007, Parliament waived the two-term limit for Nazarbayev, and in elections later that year, his Nur-Otan party secured every seat in the *Majilis*, Parliament's lower house. Kazakhstan has since signed energy and business deals with France and partnered with China to build a natural gas pipeline.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Kazakhstan's population of 15.4 million is growing by 0.4 percent annually. The nation has one of the world's lowest population densities: 15 people per square mile (6 per square kilometer). About 58 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Kazakhstan's urban landscape includes ancient trade-route settlements such as Zhambyl (now Taraz) and Shymkent and Soviet-era cities such as Karagandy and Ostkomen.

Ethnic Kazakhs comprise about 53 percent of the population. Russians (30 percent) live mostly in northern Kazakhstan and urban areas. Other ethnic groups include Ukrainians, Tatars, Germans, and Koreans. On official documents, such as passports, people are identified by both their citizenship and nationality (for example, a Kazakh Russian). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most Germans returned to Germany, and many Russians relocated to Russia. Similarly, many Jews emigrated to Israel. However, many ethnic Kazakhs who fled the country during the Soviet era have returned to Kazakhstan.

### Language

Kazakh became the state language in 1989, but Russian (which retains official status) is still widely spoken. Many Russian city and street names have been changed to Kazakh names. Kazakh, a Turkic language, has at various times been written in Arabic, Latin, and Cyrillic scripts. Today it is written in Cyrillic and includes 42 letters: 33 letters of the Russian alphabet and 9 additional characters.

Radio and television stations broadcast in Kazakh and Russian. Government forms usually are formatted to include both languages, and Russian is still the primary language of interethnic and international communication. English is the most commonly studied foreign language.

### Religion

Historically, Kazakhs have identified themselves with Islam,

while people of Slavic and European descent have considered themselves Christian. Today, 47 percent of the population is Muslim, 44 percent is Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 9 percent is composed mainly of Protestants and Jews. Religion does not play a significant role in the average Kazakh's daily life, but Kazakhs do consider religious ceremonies, such as funerals, important.

### General Attitudes

The people of Kazakhstan are generally modest and hospitable. Society has a long-standing heritage of respect for elders and generosity to all. Guests to a Kazakh home are greeted with the phrase *Torge shygyny* (Have the seat of honor), which stems from the nomadic custom of seating a guest in the warmest place—the seat farthest from the door of a *yurta* (nomadic tent). Today, visitors are directed to an honorary seat. Younger generations value and respect their elders, who often live with their children or grandchildren.

Economic and other changes to society since independence have strained family and community life, though less today than they once did. A gap generally exists between older generations who are nostalgic for more stable days under Soviet rule and young people who view the future optimistically. Increasingly, social status is measured by one's ability to acquire possessions and be well connected.

### Personal Appearance

Western-style clothing is worn in most areas. Traditional clothing is reserved for festivals and performances. Most people, especially women, want to look their best in public. A sloppy or disheveled appearance is considered to be in poor taste. While urban women increasingly wear jeans and slacks, rural women rarely do. Some rural Kazakh men wear small, decoratively embroidered caps called *taqya*. Older married Kazakh women wear a headscarf or sometimes a *kimeshek* (Muslim-style head wrap).

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Men shake hands with other men, each clasping both hands around one of the other's hands, and often slap one another on the back as a sign of friendly respect. Close friends and relatives often kiss cheeks when arriving at or leaving someone's home. Common Kazakh greetings include *Salem* (Hi) and *Salemetsis-ba?* (How do you do?). Russians use *Zdravstvuyte* (Hello) or a less formal *Privyet* (Hi).

In formal introductions, people usually use their first name, patronymic, and last name. The patronymic is based on one's father's first name and is modified with a male or female suffix. Last names come from the father's side of the family but may have a male and female variant. For example, a wife and her husband might have the last names of *Ismailova* (female) and *Ismailov* (male). Schoolchildren address their male teachers with the title *Agai*; the female form is *Apai*.

Good friends of similar age usually address one another by first name. Elderly Kazakhs sometimes use the term *Aynalayin* (darling) to call to children. Russian speakers add

diminutive endings to first names to form a term of endearment: a boy named Yuri might be called *Yurka* or *Yurchik*.

### Gestures

Kazakhs and Russians are generally reserved in public; smiling is saved for meaningful occasions. However, in their apartments and in the company of friends, people are warm and cheerful. Men usually are polite and attentive to women. They open doors, help women with their coats, and offer to carry heavy bags. During dinner parties and celebrations, men often pour drinks and dish up food for their female companions; heaping portions are a sign of affection. Women and girls commonly link arms as they walk along the sidewalk.

### Visiting

Visits, whether prearranged or spontaneous, are always welcomed. Many hosts prefer prearranged social calls so they can prepare adequately. Friends and neighbors who simply drop by are usually offered tea and a snack. Offering food and drink is a way of expressing love and respect. Invited guests typically are served a meal that includes appetizers, soup, salad, main dish, and dessert. They often linger over tea. In warmer weather, people socialize in urban courtyards or outside their rural homes. Some events center on a *dastarkhan* (spread), a table filled with food, candy, bread, drinks, and more. Guests bring their hosts flowers, candy, or a bottle of wine or spirits. Flowers must be in odd numbers. (Even numbers are considered a sign of bad luck.) Shoes are left at the door. Most households provide house slippers for visitors.

### Eating

Families eat together as schedules (and cramped kitchens) permit. Breakfast (*tangyertengi as* in Kazakh; *zavtrak* in Russian) is usually eaten around 8 a.m. A substantial midday meal (*tyski as* in Kazakh; *obyed* in Russian) is eaten around 1 or 2 p.m. Working adults bring food from home, return home for the meal, or eat at a cafeteria. Around 7 p.m., a lighter evening meal (*kyeshki as*; *uzhyn*) is served and usually is followed by tea and something sweet. Evening meals marking special occasions such as birthdays and holidays are often quite structured, including several rounds of long, eloquent toasts. For special occasions, Kazakhs ceremonially carve a boiled sheep's head. As the eldest man carves off a part of the head, he says a few words about the person for whom the part is most fitting. For instance, a child might be presented with the ear so he or she will listen to parents, while a talkative guest might receive the tongue.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

The average family in Kazakhstan has two children, but Kazakh families are usually larger than Russian families. Fathers are the primary income earners, but most mothers also work outside the home as well as perform the bulk of child care and domestic tasks. Extended family ties are highly

valued. Grandparents and grandchildren often develop especially close bonds. Members of the extended family network support and rely on one another. Relocation within Kazakhstan is uncommon. Young adults usually attend local universities or schools, although some go abroad for more opportunities. Newlyweds often live with their parents until they can afford an apartment of their own.

### Housing

A typical apartment has a living room, one bedroom, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. Floors and living room walls are usually carpeted. Neighborhoods built during the Soviet era consist of apartment complexes (*mikrorayony*) that surround a common courtyard. Clothes are dried on balconies.

Rural homes are often larger than urban apartments but may lack modern conveniences. Electricity, telephone, and television access is generally good, but indoor plumbing is often not installed. Residents must collect water with buckets, usually from a pump in the yard. Most rural houses do not have a bath or shower, but in the yard is a sauna (*monsha*), which is heated once a week. In villages, homes are heated with a direct gas supply. In more remote rural areas, gas is bought in containers and used only for cooking. Homes are then heated using a wood and coal oven. Rural people usually eat at low tables sitting on handmade mattresses (*korpeshe*) on the floor. In summer, people like to eat and drink tea in their yard on a terrace-like platform called a *tapshan*. Most rural residents have a small garden where they grow their own vegetables; they often have structures for cattle or other livestock.

### Dating and Marriage

Teenagers socialize at school dances and holiday celebrations. In warm weather, they meet in their neighborhoods and nearby parks. Young adults meet at universities, on the job, and through friends. People pair off quickly; long-term relationships are more common than casual dating. Dating couples visit friends, see movies, and go on walks. People usually marry in their early twenties, or later in urban areas, and often have their first child soon thereafter.

By custom, a Kazakh groom asks the bride's father for her hand in marriage. The groom's parents visit the bride's parents and bring gifts for each member of her family. During the wedding, the bride's parents give her dowry to the married couple. Rural Kazakh weddings often incorporate other traditional rituals and can last for three days. Urban weddings are conducted in a "wedding palace." After the brief civil ceremony, the newlyweds visit local landmarks and take photographs outside while relatives set up a festive reception banquet.

### Life Cycle

During the first week after the birth of a child, a party called a *shildekhana* is held for relatives and friends, usually only women. The guests bring presents of clothes and other items the family may need for the baby. On the seventh day after the birth, especially among Tartars, the name of the child (traditionally chosen by the father's family) is whispered three times into his or her ear. On the fortieth day, the family holds

the ceremony of bathing the baby and cutting the baby's hair. When a child takes his or her first steps, the family asks a respected person to cut a string tied around the ankles of the child. It is important to choose the right person for this ceremony, called the *tusau kesu*, as it is believed that the child will follow in the footsteps of the person who does the cutting.

When a person dies, the body remains at the home for two or three days. Relatives and friends visit to offer condolences to the family and to say good-bye to the departed. On the first or second evening, a large meal is served with help from relatives, friends, and neighbors. In keeping with Muslim tradition, family members wash the body and wrap it in white cloth for burial. Only men attend the burial. Memorial services are held on the seventh and fortieth day after the death and on the first anniversary. Smaller commemorations are held on each subsequent anniversary.

### Diet

A favorite Kazakh dish, *besbarmak* (five fingers), is made of dough rolled into thin, wide noodles and cooked in a broth called *sorpa*. The noodles are then covered with pieces of cooked meat and garnished with onions. The dish is named for the way in which it is eaten—with the hand. *Manti* are large steamed dumplings filled with chopped mutton or beef, onions, and pumpkin. Russian *pyelmeni* are smaller, boiled dumplings. *Pierozhki* are meat- or potato-filled pastries. *Plov* is a favorite Uzbek dish of rice, carrots, onions, and mutton. Mutton is a staple in most Kazakh households and horse meat is enjoyed on special occasions.

People drink hot tea year-round. Summer drinks include the Kazakh *kumis* (fermented mare's milk) and the Russian *kvass* (a tangy juice made from dried bread). Cold beverages are thought to cause sore throats and other health problems.

Vegetables and fruits can be scarce in winter, especially in the north. More common produce includes potatoes, cabbages, onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, apples, pears, melons, and berries of all sorts. Some urban dwellers have gardens, either at a summer cottage or on a plot of land outside the city (*sayazhai* in Kazakh; *dacha* in Russian). Livestock are valued for the butter, milk, and meat they provide. Women go to great lengths to preserve vegetables and jams for the winter. Imported convenience foods are available but expensive.

### Recreation

Leisure time for most adults, particularly women, is limited by work and family responsibilities. People relax by watching television, reading, or visiting with friends and neighbors. In good weather, people enjoy strolling in parks, hiking, and fishing. Day trips “into nature” and picnics are popular among city dwellers. People also like the sauna (*monsha* in Kazakh; *banya* in Russian).

Spectator sports include soccer, boxing, and in the north, hockey. Participation in sports leagues has declined as government funding has been reduced. Ballroom, modern, and traditional dance are popular. During rural festivals, Kazakhs enjoy wrestling (*kures*) and traditional horseback competitions such as *kokpar*, in which teams try to move a

goat's carcass to a central goal. Kazakh boys like *asyk*, a game similar to marbles but played with dried sheep bones.

### The Arts

Kazakhs are proud that their culture has survived years of suppression, especially their musical and poetic traditions. In the popular *aitys* (singing debate), two people sing their arguments and rebuttals accompanied by music from a *dombra* (a two-stringed instrument similar to a mandolin). Rural families usually have one member skilled on the guitar or the *dombra*, and many children are musically instructed at an early age. Kazakhstan's large towns and cities generally have a movie theater and a “palace of culture” for plays, dance performances, and concerts. Weaving is an important industry in Kazakhstan. Rugs (*tekemets*) made of felt or wool are among the finest in the world and are common in Kazakh homes. Geometric designs and vibrant colors are typical features. Embroidery is used to embellish clothing and crafts.

### Holidays

New Year's Day is the most important holiday. Families and friends gather around a decorated fir tree, eat, drink champagne, dance, and light fireworks for the New Year celebration (*Zhanga Zhyl* in Kazakh; *Noviy Gohd* in Russian). Children often wear costumes and wait for Grandfather Frost (*Ayaz Ata*; *Dyed Morosz*) to deliver gifts. Christmas is celebrated by many families. Russian Orthodox families celebrate it on 7 January. Another major holiday is the traditional Kazakh New Year and spring festival, *Nauryz* (22 Mar.). Many communities have a street festival with Kazakh food, music, and dancing to celebrate the renewal of nature.

Public holidays include International Women's Day (8 Mar.), for which women and girls receive flowers and presents from loved ones; Victory Day (9 May), marking the end of World War II; Day of the Republic (25 Oct.); and Independence Day (16 Dec.), which honors those slain in the 1986 Almaty riots. Individual birthdays are celebrated with a special dinner or party. Holidays are also designated for professions: Miners' Day, Teachers' Day, etc.

## SOCIETY

### Government

Kazakhstan's president (currently Nursultan Nazarbayev) is head of state. He effectively controls all three branches of government. The prime minister (currently Karim Masimov) is often given responsibility over the economy. Kazakhs generally view a strong president as the key to stability, though many complain that government business is unduly influenced by personal connections.

Opposition political parties and a small independent press are active, but public debate on sensitive issues remains limited. Opposition leaders often have no access to media and other forums to express their views. Parliament's upper house, the Senate, has 47 members. Senators serve six-year terms. The members of the lower house of Parliament, the 107-seat *Majilis*, are elected to five-year terms. The voting age is 18.

## Economy

Kazakhstan has vast natural resources, including some of the world's largest oil reserves. Oil production has steadily increased since independence. Two export pipelines feed into Russia. A new oil pipeline from central Kazakhstan to western China was completed in 2005; plans are underway to link it to huge reserves in the Caspian Sea. Coal mining, metallurgy, and chemical production play an important role in Kazakhstan's industrial sector, which employs 18 percent of the labor force. Roughly 32 percent of workers are employed in agriculture, with most of the focus on grain production and livestock. While foreign investment, privatization, and entrepreneurship have brought wealth to a small segment of the population, the transition from a planned economy to a market economy has been difficult for the average citizen. The 2008 global financial crisis hurt Kazakh banks, which have received government aid. The country also faces high inflation. The currency is the *tenge* (KZT).

Kazakhstan's economy is still closely tied to Russia's. The nations have agreed to joint oil ventures, and Russia pays more than \$100 million per year to lease an area of 3,700 square miles (6,000 square kilometers) around the Baikonur Space Center, an important rocket launch site in central Kazakhstan that employs 80,000 people.

## Transportation and Communications

Most families do not own cars, and those who do often use them as makeshift taxis. Buses and trolleys carry passengers within cities. Bus routes and an extensive train network link cities in Kazakhstan and extend to neighboring republics. Travel on the national airline is too expensive for most citizens.

Most towns and cities have a public telephone/telegraph station. Cell phones are popular in cities. Most households receive television broadcasts from Almaty, Astana, and Moscow; some have access to satellite or cable connections. Urban dwellers are increasingly accessing the internet.

## Education

Children study in schools from age six or seven to sixteen or seventeen. They attend six days each week; all grades are usually in one building. Both Russian- and Kazakh-language schools exist. Private and foreign-language (especially English and Turkish) schools are growing in popularity. After ninth grade, students may transfer to a vocational or technical school, or study for two more years in preparation for university. Students must pass several entrance exams to enter universities. During the Soviet era, public education was free, but now the government offers a large number of scholarships and interest-free loans to help students finance their educations. Many students also attend private universities.

## Health

In Kazakhstan's national healthcare system, most hospitals lack modern equipment and basic medical supplies. Patients must provide their own supplies and medicine, which can be expensive and difficult to obtain. Private health care offers better service for patients who can afford it. Getting adequate health care in rural areas and in emergency situations can be

especially difficult. In most areas, tap water is unsafe to drink. Heavy urban air pollution contributes to respiratory problems. Tuberculosis has infected people in many cities. Areas around Semey, a former Soviet nuclear test site, have seen a rise in birth defects and cancer.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of Kazakhstan, 1401 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036; phone (202) 232-5488; web site [www.kazakhembus.com](http://www.kazakhembus.com). Consulate of Kazakhstan, 535 Fifth Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10017; phone (646) 370-6331; web site [www.kazconsulny.org](http://www.kazconsulny.org).

### POPULATION & AREA

Population	15,460,484 (rank=63)
Area, sq. mi.	1,052,090 (rank=10)
Area, sq. km.	2,724,900

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	66 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	67 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$11,800
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 100% (female)
Infant mortality rate	25 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	63 (male); 74 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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