

THE
PEACE &
SECURITY
MONITOR

Central Asia



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Cover Photo: Caspian Sea

ISSN 2989-3038

Editors

Francesco Chiavon

Fadhilah Gubari

Authors

Lova Jansson

Natalia Arkhipova

Ruchi Singh

Tuck Kei Yong

Davide Campagnola

Grace Bell



Central Asia

Issue 11

March 2025

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Central Asia

Issue 11

March 2025

Foreword

In Central Asia, where weakened government institutions and limited civic freedoms hinder effective governance, the impacts of climate change and the reduction of USAID funding are severely straining communities' coping mechanisms. These combined challenges are casting a shadow over the region's future, leaving it increasingly uncertain and vulnerable.

Kazakhstan is poised to seek support and follow Russia's example by imposing registration requirements on NGOs operating within its territory – a dangerous precedent that could endanger the lives and rights of many communities that rely on their assistance. At the same time, NGOs are facing severe pressure from their U.S. donors, with funding withdrawals that could have grave consequences for the population.

Climate change remains a serious concern in Central Asia, a region already battered by the devastating legacy of Soviet agricultural policies that polluted the environment and reduced access to fresh water in many countries. Ongoing environmental changes could further diminish food security for numerous communities. Among the areas most affected is the Caspian Sea, where water levels are rapidly declining, leading to the desertification of its shores.

The recent arrest of a journalist in Turkmenistan serves as another stark reminder of the country's dire human rights situation, where freedoms are severely restricted and journalists face significant obstacles imposed by the government.

Central Asia is also one of the regions with the highest rates of gender-based violence, and efforts to reduce domestic violence have faced persistent challenges. The issue remains a taboo in many communities, and government actions have so far failed to decrease the number of cases.

The articles in this edition highlight the human rights challenges facing Central Asian countries and examine the actions being taken to promote peace, security, and social justice in the region.



Kazakhstan at Crossroads: Following Russia on NGO Control or Fostering a Strong Civil Society?

Lova Jansson

Key Takeaways

- Kazakhstan has committed to closer collaboration with Russia on NGO regulation, sparking fear among civil society of increasing Russian-style repression and control.
- The Kazakh government's approach to civil society over the past decades has been contradictory, signaling support, while also introducing burdensome regulation and violating the human rights of activists.
- A critical choice lies ahead: follow Russia's authoritarian playbook or embrace freedom and democracy – the latter being an obligation but also in the economic, social, and political interest of the Government and citizens of Kazakhstan.
- How Kazakhstan implements the two-year agreement with Russia will reveal its true intentions, making this a critical period for domestic civil society and international actors to advocate firmly for NGO independence and protection.

Expanded Kazakh-Russian Cooperation on NGO Regulation

On the 1st of January of this year, the implementation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the governments of Russia and Kazakhstan commenced, facilitating the two countries' cooperation on the regulation of non-governmental organizations (in Kazakh legislation referred to as non-commercial organizations – NCOs). The arrangement,

which covers 2025 and 2026, will allow the parties to exchange experiences in the normative-legal regulation of NCO activities, including legislative texts, processes, and monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, according to official statements.[1] Though the bilateral agreement is vaguely worded, it has sparked concern among Kazakh and international NGOs that it may translate into a tougher operating environment for organized civil society actors, with stronger surveillance, more far-reaching information sharing, and heavier regulation, if Kazakhstan follows in Russia's footsteps. Executive Director of Wings of Freedom Elena Shvetsova reacted saying 'it sounds scary: Kazakhstan will study the experience of a country that is on the path of suppressing the freedom of NGOs and persecuting activists.' [2]

The Government of Kazakhstan has dismissed such cries of alarms, stressing that national legislation has primacy over the bilateral agreement, that cooperation can accordingly be refused in certain areas, and that the MOU can be terminated at any time if deemed desirable. It has also continued to frame the scope of the cooperation in innocent terms; exchange of experiences and information, consultations, working meetings and events. Nonetheless, for Kazakhstan to take even inspiration from Russia about civil society control is no uplifting prospect for the country's NGOs and activists. Russia has a particularly appalling track record in the area, having actively over many years suppressed freedom of speech and political pluralism.



President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, shaking hands before the 2024 Victory Day Parade in Moscow. Source: Kremlin

Strict regulatory frameworks effectively prevent civil society representatives from operating in Russia. Its ‘foreign agents’ law’, passed in 2012, requires NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as ‘foreign agents’ and subjects them to intensified reporting and labelling requirements and state control.[3] NGOs pursuing politically sensitive topics have in recent years been stamped as ‘undesirable organizations’ and have sometimes simply been shut down.[4] And indeed, Russian authorities also have a history of seeking to export its repressive practices to its neighbours in Central Asia, variously using diplomatic and legislative approaches. In February of last year, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu accused Central Asian NGOs – especially the ‘100 large pro-Western NGOs operating in the region’ – of engaging in ‘anti-Russian activities’, and cautioned that such behaviour could reduce transboundary military-technical, economic and cultural cooperation.[5] Setting precedent for what could be the outcome of Russian-Central Asian “experience sharing” in the area of civil society control, Kyrgyzstan in 2023 introduced a law which non-profit analysts say mimic the original Russian foreign agents’ law to 90 per cent.[6]

Kazakhstan’s Conflicting Approaches to Civil Society

Kazakhstan has thus far showed greater resilience than Kyrgyzstan in the face of Russian pressure and has recently evidenced some commitment to strengthening the freedoms and capacities of civil society. As early as 2006, President Nazarbayev adopted the first Concept of Civil Society Development for 2006 – 2011: encompassing a shared national understanding of civil society and a set of policies and programmes for its development.[7] Scholars have argued that Nazarbayev’s move represented the entry of Kazakhstan into a new phase of state-civil society relations, where the government has been more involved in supporting and shaping the sector. Since this time, NCOs delivering so-called social projects – oriented toward assisting and empowering vulnerable groups – have received more public financial backing through a national system of tenders.[8] Since the country’s independence, state funding for civil society initiatives has exceeded 140 billion Kazakh tenge (about 270 million USD). Articulating Concepts of Civil Society Development has now become tradition, with the 2020-2030 iteration under implementation. Phase I of the Concept (2020-2025) has involved the establishment of a working group on NCO regulation and development, which offers an opportunity for direct civil society participation in policy shaping for the sector. Since the start of the century, the Government of Kazakhstan has also hosted ten high-profile civic forums, serving as platforms for dialogue, policy progress and partnership by bringing together NCOs and government representatives at different levels.[9] A recent independent report confirmed that local and international groups enjoy ‘some freedom’ to speak out on human rights violations[10], and civil society representatives themselves have indicated feeling at ease as long as they do not touch on politically and socially sensitive topics.[11]

As of April 2023, Kazakhstan had 23,335 registered and 18,204 active NCOs, covering public associations, foundations, institutes, and unions of various legal entities and entrepreneurs.[12] Responding to the February 2024 attack of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, Kazakh Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vasilenko defended these organizations, saying that they ‘operate in accordance with our legislation and are a very important part of our society’.[13] In sharp contrast to these signs of freedom and a supportive state, however, there are also several restrictive practices and incidents of repression. The events of January 2022, when thousands of Kazakhs protesting hiked fuel prices were subjected to excessive force, arbitrary detention, torture and unfair convictions, have been followed by continued restrictions on freedoms of assembly, association and expression[14], motivating Kazakhstan’s current rating on the global Civic Monitor as ‘Repressed’ (compared to Russia’s ‘Closed’).[15] 2023 was the first time that Kazakhstan’s State Revenue Committee published a list of entities receiving foreign funding or support. 240 various high-profile individuals and organizations were on the list[16], while government-affiliated entities and individuals receiving foreign grants, as well as China- and Russia-affiliated news outlets, were not.[17] International human rights organizations – among them Human Rights Watch, Civil Rights Defenders and Freedom House – quickly voiced deep concern about the foreign funding register and requested it be abolished, referencing the risk of named entities being subjected to intimidation and harassment.[18] Following the release of the registry, some organizations and individuals have indeed experienced intensified scrutiny from authorities. More broadly, the US Embassy’s 2023 report on human rights practices in Kazakhstan highlights reports of the holding of political prisoners and detainees, retribution against non-governmental and media representatives speaking out on human rights matters, as well as government monitoring and harassment, including police visits and intrusive surveillance, of local and

international NGOs.[19] Burdensome regulations further function as a damper on NCO activities in Kazakhstan. For example, registration with the Ministry of Justice and with authorities in each region of operation is mandatory, and the process is complicated and opaque, effectively enabling authorities to refuse legal status to organizations deemed politically or socially unfavourable. Highly specific territorial limitations, meanwhile, mean that organizations conducting any work outside their defined geographical scope risk getting in legal trouble [20], and penalties even for minor violations are heavy.[21] The current Concept for the Development of Civil Society ignores many recommendations previously made by civil society actors, including tax reforms to support sector sustainability and removal of strict reporting requirements, including the foreign funding registry.[22] International actors have spoken out against Kazakhstan’s NGO regulations, saying that ‘authorities could use criminal and administrative penalties to exert pressure on dissenting voices’ and warning that this ‘could have a chilling effect on the activities of independent civil society’[23].

Kazakhstan’s Competing Economic, Political, and Social Interests

In light of these sobering events, practices, and regulations, it is perhaps not surprising that the Kazakh government is showing openness to learning from Russia’s experiences in managing NGO activity. Kazakhstan also has clear economic interests in remaining on good terms with its northern neighbour. Trade and investment across the border are significant and growing, with 23,000 Russian companies reportedly active in Kazakhstan – 4,000 of which commenced operations in the past year – and 2023 alone seeing reciprocal investments of \$3 billion.[24] Centrally, Russia is in control of the main export route of Kazakh crude, responsible for 60 per cent of the country’s GDP.[25]

These strong ties are repeatedly brought up in diplomatic exchanges between the two parties, with Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in November last year writing in a Russian op-ed that the ‘relations between Kazakhstan and Russia serve as a model of strong and unbreakable friendship’[26], while saying in a press statement following talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin that he is ‘convinced that by maintaining positive dynamics, we will be able to increase our mutual trade to more than \$30 billion in the next few years’.[27]

Economic gain, however, is no valid excuse for Kazakhstan to throw the rights and freedoms of civil society out the window.



A woman carrying a child in a village of Kazakhstan. Civil society organizations play a critical role in many aspects of social and political development, including support for vulnerable groups. Source: 2017 REUTERS / Shamil Zhumatov

As a party to major international agreements such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Kazakhstan has a duty to uphold freedom of assembly and free speech, and rights to due process. As previous President Nazarbayev recognised, a healthy civil society is also closely tied with the ‘development of democracy in the country’.[28] NGOs have been a driving force of Kazakhstan’s development and democratization since its independence from

the Soviet Union, advocating for human rights and democratic reform.[29] A free and open society and political system remain in the interest of all Kazakhs, especially as the country is experiencing a youth bulge, with more than half the population under 29 years of age. Authoritarian rule and proximity to Russia will produce neither the social and political conditions nor the jobs needed by this generation, with increasing social unrest a growing risk. Fostering a vibrant civil society, on the other hand, can help Kazakhstan build an inclusive society and strong and diverse international connections. The activity areas of Kazakh NGOs are wide-ranging, with a fifth engaged in citizen rights protection, some 16 per cent active in education and science, 9 per cent promoting health outcomes, and 8 per cent supporting socially vulnerable population groups. These organizations are an invaluable asset – not a threat – as Kazakhstan aims to advance development, growth, and global repute.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan is at a crossroad. The country can choose a path of authoritarian practices stifling organized civil society, or it can choose to march toward greater political and social openness. The government has showed tendencies in both directions over the past decades and is facing allies on both sides. Implementation of its MOU with Russia on NGO regulation over the next two years should provide some answers as to the selected approach. Now is an opportunity for the government of Kazakhstan to evidence its stated commitment to a vibrant and supported civil society. It is also an important moment for organizations and activists to voice their needs and priorities to put the government to the test. The international community, meanwhile, has a critical role to play in bolstering the political and economic case for Kazakhstan to choose the path of freedom and democracy by clearly offering its support.

Recommendations

- The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan should reverse existing measures subjecting NGOs and rights defenders to stigmatizing and restrictive regulations, in accordance with the freedoms of association and expression provided for by the constitution as well as by international commitments.
- The Government should further take active measures to promote an enabling civic space, including by acting on reform recommendations made by civil society representatives and by increasing opportunities for sustainable and diversified funding and capacity building.
- Civil society organizations in Kazakhstan should increase efforts at joint advocacy toward public actors, as far as possible working together to develop and implement a cohesive strategy.
- Kazakh private companies should avoid discriminatory measures toward civil society organizations based on their inclusion in the foreign funding register.
- The international community should increase its financial backing of Kazakh civil society actors defending rights and delivering social services. More broadly, international actors intent on advancing democracy and freedoms globally should make clear their willingness to collaborate with and support foreign governments conditional on their commitment to freedom of association and speech.



Kazakh state officials and civil society representatives convened by OSCE at a workshop on digital rights. Source: OSCE / Akbota Sarzhanova, 2024

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Feeding the Future: The Impact of Climate Change on Food Security in Central Asia

Davide Campagnola

Key Takeaways

- Water scarcity, food security, and ecological degradation are deeply interconnected. Rising demands for food combined with decreasing water availability further worsen these challenges.
- Over the past 30 years, food production has more than doubled. Meeting the food needs of a growing global population will require a 60% increase in production by 2050. Consequently, water demand will rise. FAO projects a 50% increase in irrigated food production by 2050, but agricultural water withdrawals can only grow by 10%.
- Increasing resource constraints on land, water, energy, and climate change in Central Asia pose a significant menace to the sustainability of agriculture, threatening food security and source of income in the region.
- Central Asian countries should adopt comprehensive agricultural policies that integrate water, energy, and ecological considerations, ensuring coordinated governance, strategic production incentives, and ongoing monitoring of trade-offs.

The World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2024 identifies climate change as a structural force capable of significantly impacting the speed, spread, and scope of global risks.[1] In this regard, climate change is one of the most pressing challenges affecting global food security, and Central Asia is particularly vulnerable due to its arid and semi-arid environment.[2] Although the region has made impressive progress concerning multiple dimensions of hunger in the past twenty

years[3], it faces increasing climate-induced threats such as rising temperatures, decreasing water availability, and the degradation of arable land that could hamper these developments.[4] Indeed, these factors pose severe risks to agricultural productivity, livestock sustainability, and food availability. [5] Climate change affects food security in direct and indirect ways, impacting the regional population through a large spectrum of consequences, and depicting a worrying portrait if nothing is done to address the present and upcoming challenges.

Climate Trends and Environmental Changes in Central Asia

The region has experienced a significant warming trend over the past century, with temperatures increasing at a rate faster than the global average.[6] Models suggest that the warming will continue, with temperature increases of up to 6.1°C projected under high-emission scenarios by the end of the century. [7] The warming trend has led to decreased snow depth and a decline in glacier coverage, particularly in mountainous regions such as the Tian Shan.[8] Moreover, desertification represents a significant challenge for the Central Asia countries which see their healthy and productive land decreasing and degrading. These changes, coupled with shifting precipitation patterns, result in increased aridity in some areas and sporadic flooding in others. Although some climate models predict increased precipitation, it is unlikely to offset rising evaporation rates, resulting in reduced water availability.[9] The latter is critical to

understand when discussing food security in the region because of its centrality in food production and the significant issue that water scarcity embodies in Central Asia.

Water Scarcity and its Implications

Water security is crucial to food security, particularly in Central Asia, where agriculture heavily depends on irrigation.[10] However, water availability is declining due to a combination of factors, including glacial melt, reduced river inflows, and unsustainable water management.[11] Climate-induced heat stress will intensify drought conditions and worsen water scarcity for irrigation.[12] For instance, the Amu Darya River is projected to see a 10%–15% decline in runoff by 2050, while the Syr Darya River's seasonal flow pattern may shift from spring/early summer to late winter/early spring, thus resulting in a significant reduction in water availability precisely when it is most needed for crop cultivation.[13] Furthermore, the Aral Sea catastrophe serves as a warning of the consequences of poor water governance. The continued diversion of water for agriculture has left the sea a fraction of its former size, leading to soil salinization and loss of biodiversity.[14]



The Aral Sea's decline, as captured in satellite images from 1977 to 2020. Source: NASA.

Moreover, water scarcity put under stress regional cooperation, triggering conflicts over shared transboundary water resources.[15] These political tensions further reduce the necessary cooperation to properly address water scarcity.[16]

While water scarcity remains a pressing challenge for agriculture in Central Asia, it is only one piece of a larger crisis. Climate change is intensifying these water shortages while also introducing new threats to food production. Rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns, and more frequent extreme weather events are disrupting traditional farming practices, threatening crop yields, and exacerbating food insecurity. As the region grapples with diminishing water resources, it must also confront the broader implications of climate change on agricultural productivity and sustainability.

Impact of Climate Change on Food Production

Agricultural productivity in Central Asia is highly vulnerable to climate change. Rising temperatures, salinization, and soil degradation are contributing to declining of crops production.[17]



Dead corn fields. Source: iStock.

Extreme weather events, including droughts and heatwaves, are becoming more frequent, leading to crop failures and reduced food supply. For instance, wheat production, a staple in the region, is projected to sharply decline under severe drought conditions.[18] Moreover, climate change is expected to significantly increase crop water demand, further jeopardizing food security.[19] Climate change-induced land degradation has severely hindered food production. Notably, the expansion of desert climates [20] resulted in a loss of arable land, thus affecting food production.

Climate change effects, such as droughts, are worsened by inefficient water use. Indeed, a lack of responsible water use and integration of cleaner energy in machine-based farming activities contributes to increasing unpredictable food production patterns and undermine long-term agricultural sustainability in the region.[21] Additionally, the heavy reliance on oil fuel in agricultural activities increases greenhouse gas emissions, accelerating global warming and driving climate change. In turn, these climate shifts disrupt food production, threatening food security and creating a reinforcing cycle where agriculture both contributes to and suffers from climate change, ultimately jeopardizing the stability of food supplies.[22]

Finally, climate change is altering natural ecosystems, reducing pollinator populations, which are crucial for fruit, vegetable and pollinator-dependent crop production and, therefore, food security.[23] Such developments are reinforced by the excessive use of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, along with monoculture farming and rapid crop rotation, which diminishing pollinator species diversity.[24] Changes in habitat and biodiversity could impact wild food sources, such as fish stocks in rivers and lakes.[25]

Climate change, combined with poor land management [26] poses a significant threat to food security in the region. Without a significant green transition, accounting for the necessary changes in the light of climate change challenges, the food production will be disrupted and placed under severe conditions which will therefore have a cascading effect into the food security. In the light of this situation, it is not surprising that data shows [27] that food insecurity impacts millions of people in Central Asia each year.



A woman farmer in Khatlon Province, Tajikistan. Source: Sandra Coburn/USAID Land via Flickr

Socioeconomic Consequences of Food Insecurity

Agriculture is central in Central Asia's economy, accounting for a significant percentage of the gross domestic product and employing of the labor force.[28] Climate change induces land degradation and desertification that subsequently put under strains agricultural-rooted livelihoods.[29] Rural populations, who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, are disproportionately affected by food insecurity. Many rural households are unable to cope with climate-induced shocks, leading to increased poverty and malnutrition. [30] In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, more than 25% of the population lives below the poverty line, with rural communities being the most affected.[31] The lack of access to sufficient food and poor nutrition has led to widespread anemia and stunted growth among children.[32]



Three Kazakh children joyfully gather around a basket of fresh tomatoes, sharing laughter and curiosity in a rural setting. Source: UNICEF.

Already vulnerable groups, such as pastoral communities, are particularly impacted by such development. Indeed, climate change is disrupting traditional grazing patterns. Reduced pasture quality due to desertification and unpredictable weather conditions threaten livestock health and productivity.[33] Hence, the food security and income of a significant percentage of Central Asia's population is already facing a growing threat.[34]

Despite playing a crucial role in food production and water management, women in Central Asia are often excluded from decision-making processes.[35] Climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities, as women bear the burden of securing household food and water supplies, and further marginalize them.[36]



Women working in a greenhouse in Uzbekistan. Source: World Bank Blogs.

Many women in rural areas engage in subsistence farming but lack land ownership and access to agricultural financing. Additionally, increased male labor migration due to economic hardships has placed additional responsibilities on women, making them more vulnerable to food insecurity.[37] Climate-induced displacement is becoming a growing concern, with people forced to migrate due to loss of agricultural productivity. Areas with limited water availability and low crop productivity will face the greatest challenges, with the poorest and most climate-vulnerable regions being the hardest hit.[38] The Global Report on Internal Displacement underscores the intersection of food security and internal displacement.[39] Without effective strategies to address food insecurity, the number of food-induced internal migrants is likely to rise. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are particularly vulnerable to socioeconomic isolation, as the loss of income and livelihoods deprives them of the means to afford food. [40] In such circumstances, water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change, further restricts access to clean water.[41] Additionally, internal displacement can have severe health and psychosocial consequences for affected populations.[42] Large-scale migration to urban areas not only exacerbates food insecurity but also threatens the survival of traditional rural communities. As smallholder farmers, pastoralists, small-scale fishers, and forest-dependent populations abandon their ancestral lands, the social fabric of these communities weakens, leading to profound demographic and economic shifts.[43] In the five Central Asian countries, where rural livelihoods have historically shaped cultural identity and regional economies [44], this transition could have lasting consequences. The decline of traditional communities may accelerate urbanization, straining city infrastructures and reshaping labor markets, while also diminishing agricultural production in rural areas.[45] To prevent this, it is crucial to enhance the resilience of rural livelihoods by strengthening their adaptive capacity to climate change,

agricultural disruptions, and food insecurity. Investing in sustainable farming practices, ensuring equitable access to resources, and creating policies that support rural populations can help sustain these communities and mitigate the broader societal impact of their decline. Finally, beyond its impact on rural livelihoods and urbanization, food insecurity also poses a serious threat to regional stability. Competition over scarce resources, particularly water, has heightened tensions between countries, increasing the risk of conflict.[46]

Toward a Greener and Sustainable Food Security Approach

In light of this urgency, a political shift is necessary in order to tackle these challenges in the most effective way. A first step toward this direction has been the ratification of the Paris Agreement by all five Central Asia countries, although the transition from fossil fuel to a greener approach is far to be reached. Indeed, the region remains profoundly dependent on fossil fuels.[47] Furthermore, a lack of political will to eradicate food insecurity, sustain farmers with efficient farming technologies as well as properly fund land management research programs undermine the possibilities to mitigate food insecurity.[48] Each Central Asian country has taken different approaches to addressing food security and climate adaptation. Kazakhstan took the lead by starting its green transition in 2013 with the "Concept for the Transition to a Green Economy," followed by the 2020 Action Plan. By 2050, it aims to generate 50% of its electricity from renewable and alternative sources, including nuclear power. On the contrary, developments in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan have been less significant, deprived of a proper commitment to a sustainable energy transition.[49] Nonetheless, the available perspectives for a green transition may be promising if the necessary measures are taken.



The Hyrasia One project, a collaboration between Svevind Energy Group and Kazakhstan's national investment company, plans to establish a wind and solar-powered hydrogen and ammonia facility by 2032. Source: Hyrasia One.

The potential for renewable energies is massive, fostered by a diverse geography, with an access to a comprehensive spectrum of energies.[50] Success stories are scattered across the region, such as Kazakhstan Resilient Landscapes Restoration Project and RESILAND CA+ Program in Uzbekistan. These community-centered and sustainable landscape management projects offer tangible solutions to protect the food security in the region.

In conclusion, the challenges posed by climate change on food security in Central Asia are multifaceted, encompassing water scarcity, land degradation, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The region faces an urgent need to adopt sustainable agricultural and water management strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of rising temperatures and shifting precipitation patterns. Without decisive action, food insecurity will continue to threaten millions, exacerbating social inequalities and regional instability. A transition toward resilient, climate-adaptive policies is not just necessary—it is imperative for ensuring long-term food security in Central Asia.

Recommendations

- Sustainable water management is crucial for food security. Policymakers must prioritize investments in efficient irrigation systems, such as drip and sprinkler irrigation, to reduce water waste. Additionally, promoting agroecological practices can help improve food production under changing climatic conditions.
- Given the transboundary nature of Central Asia's water resources, enhanced regional cooperation is necessary to manage shared water supplies equitably. On the matter, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program can play a central role in addressing food insecurity, as highlighted in the CAREC water sector progress report and work plan 2024.
- Policies should aim to increase women's access to land, agricultural finance, and decision-making roles in resource management. A gendered perspective by Central Asian states will contribute to addressing the challenges of food and water security.
- A combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches is essential for effective agricultural policy. Combining state regulation with land privatization will empower farmers, enhance supply chain participation, and boost small-scale productivity.
- Enhancing agricultural structures and technology fosters high-value, diversified farming, benefiting more people while conserving resources and strengthening food security.
- Such a comprehensive approach, incorporating effective policies, academia, local communities and unrepresented groups, is central to properly achieving a green transition that would allow Central Asia to safeguard its food security.

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The Caspian Sea Crisis: Climate Change and Its Human and Environmental Consequences

Ruchi Singh

Key Takeaways

- The Caspian Sea is shrinking by ~25 cm/year, threatening biodiversity (seals, sturgeon) and mirroring the Aral Sea's ecological collapse.
- Declining water levels disrupt trade routes, fisheries, and ports, risking economic instability and geopolitical tensions.
- Coastal communities face displacement, cultural loss, and poverty as shorelines vanish and ecosystems degrade.
- Cross-border cooperation, tech solutions (e.g., desalination), and equitable funding are urgent to prevent irreversible damage.

Climate Change as a Driver of Human Insecurity



A map highlighting the approximate drainage area around the Caspian Sea, indicated in yellow. Source: CABAR.asia, 2024

The Caspian Sea, the world's largest inland body of water, has been facing an alarming environmental crisis. It borders five countries: Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Azerbaijan, with the northern region being the shallowest. With water levels decreasing by approximately 25 cm annually since 2006, the sea has lost an estimated 22,000 square kilometres of its area—half of this loss occurring in Kazakhstan. This reduction signifies a loss of 22,000 square kilometres in area, affecting coastal regions such as Aktau and raising concerns paralleling the historic shrinkage of the Aral Sea.[1] The year 2024 saw heightened global attention on this issue, as regional governments and international organizations scrambled to mitigate the growing ecological, economic, and political challenges.



Fishermen attempting to catch fish at Buzovna beach, where water levels have dramatically receded. Source: CNA/Jack Board, 2024

The declining water levels in the Caspian Sea are exacerbating the risks to already endangered species, including the region's unique seal populations. Sturgeon numbers have already plummeted by about 90% due to overfishing, pollution, and poaching, and further drops in water levels are expected to put additional strain on aquatic life, particularly since shallow-water habitats essential for breeding and feeding are increasingly at risk. [2]The shrinking of the Caspian Sea not only endangers the region's distinct ecosystems but also threatens significant economic sectors, including fisheries, port infrastructure, and the livelihoods of local communities. In Kazakhstan's Atyrau region, for instance, water has receded by hundreds of metres from the shoreline, severely affecting the area. The northern Caspian coast, bordering Kazakhstan and Russia, is becoming notably shallower. Desalination projects, while growing, are insufficient to maintain the health of the sea, particularly since the dams and reservoirs constructed by the Soviets in the Volga River, such as the Cheboksary Dam and the Volga Hydroelectric Station, block water flow into the Caspian. If these water levels are not stabilised, the Caspian could face consequences similar to those of the Aral Sea. The reduction in biodiversity will have far-reaching effects, threatening food security and exacerbating poverty, which could lead to increased outmigration from affected coastal communities. Besides these challenges, trade and commerce also will be affected. Specifically, the maritime and transportation sector will be impacted by the Caspian's disappearance. Bypassing Russian territory, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), commonly known as the Middle Corridor, is integral to the transport of commodities and goods from China and Central Asia to Europe.[3]The Caspian Sea serves as a crucial component of the TITR, with tankers and cargo ships sailing from Baku and Aktau to Turkmenbashi and vice versa. Declining water levels would put heavier ships at risk of being trapped and unable to access ports—and undercut the usefulness of the TITR. [4]

The Caspian Sea is highly sensitive to a varying climate. Although the IPCC report has not specifically assessed the Caspian Sea, we know from its global assessment that as global temperatures rise, increased evaporation rates are expected to lead to significant declines in water levels. This will alter ecosystems and result in severe socioeconomic consequences for the surrounding regions.

The Human Cost: Migration and Social Disruptions



Wastewater discharge into the Caspian Sea, exacerbating pollution risks. Source: trend.az, 2024

The shrinking of the Caspian Sea is not just an environmental issue but a profound social and economic crisis that disrupts the livelihoods, ecosystems, and cultural heritage of communities that have depended on it for generations. The decline in water levels has severe implications for local populations, threatening their traditional way of life and the industries that have sustained them for centuries. As the sea recedes, vital resources such as fish and marine biodiversity, which many rely on for food and income, are disappearing, leaving communities vulnerable to economic decline and social upheaval. Residents of Aqtau, a Kazakhstani port city located on the northeastern shore of the Caspian Sea, are on edge these days. . For more than two decades, they have watched the Caspian Sea shrink and the local economy wither.

Azamat Sarsenbayev, a documentary maker and environmental activist who grew up in Aqtau, said the drop in sea level has been most noticeable on the Kazakhstani segment of the coast, which is the shallowest. "I remember as a kid I and my friends would be afraid to swim 10 metres from the shore. These days, the sea has become so shallow that we can walk for 200 meters on the rocks, which once used to be deep underwater," he said in an interview with Voice of America English News (VOA). [5]



Parched shoreline in Baku, Azerbaijan, where the Caspian Sea's waters have receded significantly. Source: CNA/Jack Board, 2024

In Azerbaijan, abandoned swings on Baku's desiccated beaches symbolize a vanished way of life. They were built to be close to the water of the Caspian Sea.[6] Now the ground beneath them is parched, and they are just relics of what once was there. "It is sad...even heartbreaking sometimes," said Elana Alizade, who used to play on other beaches around Baku"[7] This is the place where as a kid we first discovered what biodiversity is, where we first saw snakes. We used to see turtles, different kinds of birds. We used to play with sand. And they were very narrow beaches. Now it's like we are in a different land." [8] This environmental shift is a stark reminder of the interconnectedness of nature, culture, and economy.

These stories underscore a generational rupture: communities that thrived on the Caspian's bounty now grapple with displacement, poverty, and the erasure of cultural identity. For generations, the people of these coastal communities have lived in harmony with the Caspian Sea, drawing their livelihoods and cultural identity from its shores. However, as the sea continues to recede, the disruption to both the environment and the local way of life is becoming increasingly visible. The continued decline of the Caspian Sea represents not just a tragedy for biodiversity, but a loss of a way of life that has been central to the identity of these regions.



Aerial view of the Caspian Sea's dramatically receding coastline. Source: CNA/Jack Board, 2024

2024-2025 Responses and Policy Actions

The year 2024 saw heightened global attention on this issue, as regional governments and international organisations scrambled to mitigate the growing ecological, economic, and political challenges.

In May 2024, the Central Asia Climate Change Conference (CACCC-2024) convened experts and stakeholders to discuss these pressing issues and explore strategies for regional cooperation in addressing climate change impacts.[9]

The shifting shoreline has led to renewed negotiations over maritime boundaries. In July 2024, Kazakhstan hosted a summit to address territorial adjustments necessitated by the sea's retreat, but disagreements over resource ownership persist.[10] The "Meet the Caspian Sea" side-event at COP29 on 19 November 2024 highlighted the Tehran Convention's role in addressing climate change impacts, enhancing resilience, and protecting biodiversity in the Caspian region.[11] In November 2024, Russia and Azerbaijan agreed to form a commission to address the issue of the Caspian Sea's shrinking. Both countries pledged to collaborate on preventing further water loss. A joint Russian-Azerbaijani program is set to be developed and adopted in the first quarter of 2025, focusing on appropriate actions to combat environmental changes. [12] Additionally, plans are underway to create a five-party structure to address the Caspian Sea's desiccation, which is seen as a crucial step for a coordinated response to preserve the region's ecosystems and ensure economic sustainability. [13]

On February 14, 2025, environmental activists and policymakers convened in Astana, Kazakhstan, for a roundtable titled "You. Sea. Problem"—a pointed reference to the urgent need for public engagement in addressing the Caspian Sea's ecological crisis.

Discussions focused on shrinking water levels, mass wildlife deaths, and solutions to mitigate the disaster. However, the event underscored persistent challenges: debates over financing mechanisms (e.g., equitable contributions from littoral states) and accountability for historical environmental mismanagement threatened to delay concrete action, despite earlier pledges of regional cooperation. [14]



Comparison of the Caspian Sea's water levels near Aktau, Kazakhstan, showing a drop of over two dozen meters between July 2008 and 2024. Source: CNA/Jack Board, 2024

Conclusion

The Caspian Sea crisis epitomises the cascading impacts of climate change: ecological collapse, economic fragility, and human displacement. Its fate is tied to global patterns of water stress, demanding a human-centred approach that prioritises equity and cross-border solidarity. Without urgent collaboration—bridging technology, policy, and grassroots voices—the Caspian could become another cautionary tale of ecological and societal failure.

Recommendations

- **Technological Solutions:** Innovations that improve water efficiency—such as drip irrigation, wastewater recovery, and desalination—can help optimise water use. However, these technologies must be context-specific and affordable.
- **Financing Adaptation:** A substantial portion of climate adaptation funding is allocated to the water sector, particularly in urban areas where water management and disaster risk reduction are critical. However, financial constraints—exacerbated by the global pandemic—may limit developing countries' ability to invest in effective water-related adaptation.[15]
- **Equity and Justice:** Integrate Indigenous knowledge into policymaking and empower local stakeholders in resource management. The world's poorest and most vulnerable communities bear the greatest burden of climate change while contributing the least to global emissions. Indigenous and local knowledge can provide sustainable adaptation strategies, but these communities must be given a seat at the table in international policymaking.[16]
- **Participatory Governance:** Effective water governance requires inclusive legal, regulatory, and institutional frameworks that empower local communities. Bottom-up decision-making, stakeholder participation, and polycentric governance—where multiple actors collaborate across different sectors—can enhance water adaptation efforts.

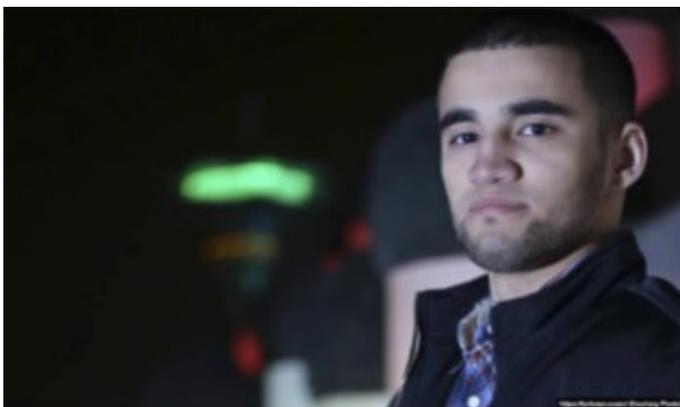
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The Case of Nurgeldi Halykov: A 2025 Review of Freedom of Expression in Turkmenistan

Tuck Kei Yong

Introduction

Turkmenistan has long been recognised and continues to be one of the most repressive governments regarding press freedom and fundamental freedom of expression, with the Turkmen government having absolute control over all forms of media and its activities. In one recent example of Turkmenistan's decades-long practice of surprising media freedom, Turkmen authorities prevented journalist Nurgeldi Halykov from boarding a flight to the United Arab Emirates on 12 January 2025. [1] For context, Halykov worked as a local journalist for Turkmen.news when he was arrested in July 2020 for exposing inconsistent statements by the Turkmen government regarding COVID-19 statistics. [2] In September 2020, he was sentenced to four years in a Turkmen prison for arbitrary charges, allegedly fraud for failing to repay loans. [3] Despite having completed his sentence, Turkmen border authorities continued to harass Halykov by imposing a temporary travel ban on him without providing any justifications. [4]



Photograph of Nurgeldi Halykov, (Turkmen.news, 14 December 2020) accessed 1 March 2025

Instead, Turkmen authorities subjected Halykov to several hours of interrogation and a thorough body search, marking a blatant attempt to harass him for his work as a journalist. [5] Halykov's experience is the norm, not an exception, for journalists working in Turkmenistan. Reporters Without Borders positioned Turkmenistan in the bottom six of its 2024 Press Freedom Index, [6] which is essentially on par with the most isolationist and despotic countries like Iran and North Korea. [7] Noting this, this article examines the factors and environment attributing to the absence of freedom of expression in Turkmenistan and, if possible, provides concrete recommendations to remedy the dire situation.

Freedom of Expression in Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan acceded to the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) on 1 May 1977. [8] In doing so, Turkmenistan has undertaken legal obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil all human rights listed in this international treaty, including freedom of expression, as enshrined under Article 19(2). [9] Article 19(2) of the ICCPR stipulates that 'everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression', which includes the fundamental freedom to 'seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds' regardless of its form or medium. [10] Expanded from Article 19 of the 1949 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, [11] Turkmenistan's legal obligation under the ICCPR is to respect, fulfil, and protect the freedom of expression amongst everyone currently within its jurisdictional bounds. [12]

This legal obligation not only requires the Turkmen government to refrain from overtly interfering with the flow of information in everyone's daily lives but also to take concrete measures via legislation and policies to protect the freedom of expression. [13] Whilst international law permits Turkmenistan a degree of derogation from its treaty obligations, such derogation is only permitted if it is truly necessary, pursues a legitimate aim, and is explicitly provided by law. [14] Turkmenistan's legal obligation to undertake immediate steps to realise the freedom of expression also exists under other international legal instruments. These legal obligations can be observed in core human rights treaties that Turkmenistan has ratified, such as Article 5(viii) of the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, [15] Article 15(3) of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, [16] Article 13(1) of the 1989 Convention of the Rights to Child, [17] and Article 21 of the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. [18] Given the monist nature of Turkmenistan's legal system, the international safeguards for the freedom of expression, in theory, should have an immediate application in Turkmen domestic courts, legislations, and policies. [19] Even without explicit international legal provisions on freedom of expression, Turkmenistan could still have similar legal obligations under international law. Given that a considerable body of treaty law also recognises and guarantees the freedom of expression, it is sometimes regarded as part of customary international law, given its wide reference in various other international and domestic soft law instruments, declarations, constitutional guarantees, and case law. [20] The combination of general and consistent practices by States, alongside the firm belief that these practices amounted to legal obligations, [21] strongly suggests the binding effect of the freedom of expression on Turkmenistan's legal obligations. [22] In the domestic legal sphere, Article 42 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan explicitly



President of Russia Vladimir Putin and President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhammedow before the 2024 Victory Day Parade, Moscow, Russia. Photo by Официальный веб-сайт Президента Российской Федерации via Wikimedia Commons

guarantees the freedom of opinion and expression, of which its standards and normative content are the same as Turkmenistan's existing international treaty obligations. [23] Turkmenistan's Media Law in 2013 guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting censorship and state interference in media activities. [24] These legislations are the only two main instruments that explicitly protect freedom of expression in Turkmenistan. Beyond legislative measures, the Turkmen government have established several bodies and agencies to strengthen human rights practices, including the Interagency Commission on Enforcing Turkmenistan's International Obligations on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in 1996, [25] the parliamentary Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Liberties in 2005, [26] and the Institute of State, Law and Democracy in 2018. [27] These legal instruments and established bodies should, on paper, support the idea that freedom of expression is an enforceable fundamental right in Turkmenistan. However, actual practices are far from ideal guarantees.

Media Freedom

The Human Rights Committee has stressed, in its General Comment 34, that 'a free,

uncensored and unhindered press or other media is essential [in ensuring] freedom of opinion and expression [in any society]'. [28] This concept is key as freedom of expression enables dialogue among individuals offering differing ideas, opinions, and perspectives on the same discussion topics. [29] Thus, media free from external influence is fundamental to political dissent and diverse cultural expression without the fear of political repercussions. [30] However, this has not been the case since Saparmurat Niyazov, a former bureaucrat of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, ruled Turkmenistan during its independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics from 27 October 1991 until 21 December 2006. [31] Nor did the Turkmen media landscape improve after Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and Serdar Berdimuhamedow took office in 2007 and 2022, respectively. [32] Instead, the Turkmen government's main methods of governance,



Igor Sasin, Photograph of former President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov on a stallion in celebrations for the Day of the Horse in April 2018 (AFP, 2018) accessed 1 March 2025. Note: This is how the Turkmen government presents its leaders in media, often conveying a sense of tradition, strength, and confidence. Failure to capture government-sanctioned narratives would get media outlets and their journalists in trouble.

particularly its harsh repression of all political dissents, have largely remained the same for the last 20 years.[33] Turkmenistan enacts strict control and surveillance on all local media. To paint a picture of the extent of State control, there are only about 23 small newspapers and seven magazines in Turkmenistan, all of which have been instructed to publish government-sanctioned news such as propaganda and presidential eulogies. [34] All print media must maintain Berdimuhamedow's cult-like personality as 'protector of Turkmenistan' and avoid all negative critiques of its government at all costs. [35] The Turkmen government ensures adherence to this narrative by allowing the President to appoint their subordinates directly as newspaper editors-in-chiefs.[36] Moreover, given that most newspapers are either founded by cabinet ministers or at least related to them in some way, Turkmen cabinet ministers reinforced this narrative through their respective measures. [37]

The Turkmen state's control over media extends beyond print media, including television, radio, books, and the Internet. Turkmenistan, via its State Committee for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography, owns and operates all seven domestic television channels.[38] The Turkmen Ministry of State Security's secret police regularly enforce a ban on certain religious literature, including books on sharia law. [39] Translating to the digital age, the Turkmen government has, as of 12 April 2023, banned at least 122,000 domains and websites. [40] Using virtual private networks to bypass the firewall to access government-banned websites is illegal under Turkmen criminal law, [41] and anyone caught using them is often fined and detained. [42] The structure of Turkmen media control by state entities means funding for media is subjected to strict approval and review, accepting only local funding.[43] By selectively choosing to fund only state-owned media outlets and not independent foreign media outlets, Turkmenistan ensures biased news

coverage by preventing media outlets from reporting critically about state policies.[44] Such practice makes local media outlets subservient to the government's demands in fear of losing their funding, [45] distorting the media market and preventing diverse opinions from surviving in this sphere. [46] Worse, the long-term consequences of this state control practice could create ill-informed voters who will not vote in their best interest, instead allowing corrupt politicians to mismanage funds and divert resources away from development projects.[47] Thus, the current media landscape in Turkmenistan is structured in such a way that media outlets are essentially 'unofficial government mouthpieces' that can only report on filtered and government-approved content.

Journalist Safety

Journalists in Turkmenistan who attempt independent reporting often face political and legal repercussions, which have ranged from harassment, fines, imprisonment and fabricated charges to arbitrary detention, physical abuse, and even death in custody. [48] For the past few decades, the Turkmen government has systematically targeted journalists who have collaborated with foreign media outlets or reported on corruption and human rights abuses.[49] The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has documented multiple cases of journalists being arrested on fabricated charges, subjected to intimidation and torture, and forced into exile.[50] To paint a vivid picture, this article draws attention to the three cases of Ogulsapar Muradova, Saparmamed Nepeskuliev and Soltan Achilova, all of which are textbook examples of how Turkmenistan treats its journalists. On 18 June 2006, the Turkmen government arrested human rights defender Ogulsapar Muradova and detained her for two weeks without being charged. [51]



Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, Photograph of a typical Turkmen prison. (RFE/RL, 27 September 2022) accessed 1 March 2025.

It was only on 25 August 2006 that a two-hour closed trial was held for Muradova, where the courts sentenced her to six years in prison on fabricated charges of illegal possession of ammunition. [52] Three weeks later, Muradova died in custody, after having been subjected to severe torture with 'marks on her neck' and a 'large wound' on the back of her head. [53] Despite multiple requests from her family, the Turkmen government denied all wrongdoing and refused any independent medical examinations. [54] Instead, the then Turkmen President Niyazov proudly supported his government's action as a need to 'condemn the traitors' who were 'engaged in dirty business [such as human rights].'[55] Freedom House noted in its Freedom in the World 2024 Report how Turkmen prison authorities often employed torture to extract confessions or punish inmates, resulting in deaths in custody. [56]



Yevgeniy Sydorov, Protesters supporting RFE/RL contributor Saparmamed Nepeskuliev at Turkmen Embassy in Washington on 27 October 2017 (RFE/RL, 27 October 2017) accessed 1 March 2025.

On 7 July 2015, the Turkmen government arrested journalist Saparmamed Nepeskuliev, whose work revealed ministerial corruption as seen in the 'decaying infrastructure and economic inequality in western Turkmenistan.' [57] Turkmen courts sentenced Nepeskuliev to three years in prison for drug possession, although human rights organisations suspected that the drugs were planted on his person. [58] Throughout his prison sentence, he was held incommunicado, where prison authorities denied his family visitation rights, and his exact whereabouts or well-being were often unknown. [59] A classic example of how Turkmen authorities fabricate the charges and evidence to suppress any form of perceived dissent.

For the Turkmen government, age knows no limits. From 2016 to 2024, the Turkmen government employed a series of illegal tactics to harass 75-year-old journalist Soltan Achilova for her work in human rights reporting. In addition to physical violence, Achilova was subjected to travel bans, forced hospitalisation, death threats, arbitrary detention, and smear campaigns. [60] In the most recent recorded case, on 20 November 2024, reports suggested that the Turkmen authorities tried to poison Achilova before her planned trip to Geneva, Switzerland. [61] As of writing, Achilova is being forcibly detained in a hospital despite a clean bill of health. [62]

Noting these three cases alone, the Turkmen government's persecution tactics to eliminate independent journalism range from fabricating charges to false imprisonment, from torture and ill-treatment to years of harassment. A journalist based in Turkmenistan has little choice but to report according to government-sanctioned narratives. Failure to do so always results in retaliatory attacks on their person, livelihood and family. These illegal tactics have forced many journalists to self-censor or operate in exile, with the remaining few independent journalists working in secrecy. Without independent journalists, there is no freedom of expression in Turkmenistan.

Right to Information

In the absence of independent media outlets and journalists, the Turkmen people have limited access to independent information. This right to receive information is not only part of an individual fundamental freedom of expression, [63] but it is important for their participation in the democratic process to make informed decisions and hold authorities accountable. [64]



Derya Jomartov, Photograph of the evening news program on Turkmenistan's state TV Watan Habarlary, (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 7 December 2020) accessed 1 March 2025.

In Turkmenistan, due to external interference in media activities, state narratives dominate all public discourse. [65] Turkmen authorities regulate the historical narratives in books and other academic literature to ensure that all educational materials reflect the State's ideological stance. [66] Worse, local reports have revealed how students are employed to surveil private conversations among their university peers. [67] If the Turkmen government suspects those studying abroad of wrongdoing, they will invite them back to the country under pretences and detain them. [68] Beyond narratives, the Turkmen government monitors the telecommunication of all its people in the digital and physical spheres. Turkmen authorities monitor all telephone conversations. [69] All letters and parcels are also intercepted before delivery. [70] Furthermore, local reports have exposed how Turkmen intelligence has begun to employ technologies capable of tracking locations, breaking encryption to steal social media passwords, and recording calls using the built-in webcams and microphones on computers. [71]

With education, literature, and communications under tight state control, the Turkmen people are generally ignorant of domestic policies and measures, instead resorting to using rumours to obtain key information on topics such as dollar exchange rates, market prices, and other government policies. [72] This means of information-sharing is unreliable and would only continue to reinforce the Turkmen government's unchallenged monopoly on information. To date, no one in Turkmenistan can freely access independent information, communicate freely, or engage in open discussions.

Recommendations

Solving Turkmenistan's issue of freedom of expression cannot simply be summarised in a few bullet points, given that any reform is extremely unlikely without a major leadership change. Although no single measure alone can improve freedom of expression in Turkmenistan, this article refers to Uzbekistan as a case study on how change is possible. Uzbekistan, like Turkmenistan, is also a Central Asian country with an equally repressive government and limited media freedom. Unlike Turkmenistan, however, Uzbekistan saw some media reforms after the death of President Islam Karimov in 2016, such as:

- Easing media press laws to allow journalists to do their media work freely. Whilst Uzbekistan still faces hurdles, there are fewer legal and political retaliatory attacks towards journalists. For the first time in four decades, the president has made positive press comments, making it possible for Uzbek journalists to now publish a media piece using their actual names without fear of legal consequences. [73] In Turkmenistan, President Berdimuhamedow, or his successors, will have to undo decades of journalistic persecution by first refraining from antagonising journalists and ensuring their safety in their line of work. Creating this atmosphere of safe space for journalists is necessary for realising freedom of expression.

- Unblocking all foreign websites to allow Turkmen people access to key information. In 2018, Uzbekistan unblocked several banned independent news websites like BBC Uzbek and Deutsche Welle, as well as sites for human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. [74] The Turkmen government should go against the trend of expanding internet censorship in central Asia and restore its people's access to key information to make informed decisions. The world and its means of media consumption have digitalised. It's time Turkmenistan followed suit.

- Allocate more funding to strengthen media outlets and their work. Uzbekistan, through its Public Fund for Support and Development of National Mass Media, has started supporting the development of self-governance mechanisms for media outlets to avoid unwarranted government interference. [75] In 2025, the Uzbek government even increased funding to their state media so that these media outlets could provide unbiased, consistent news coverage. [76] Whilst the better decision is to have diversified media outlets that do not solely rely on government funding, Turkmenistan can, as a starter, follow suit and develop self-governance mechanisms within its existing media outlets.

All in all, using Uzbekistan as a brief comparison, change is possible in Turkmenistan, but it requires a tremendous political will that far surpasses the status quo.

Conclusion

This article examines the factors and environments that contributed to a lack of freedom of expression in Turkmenistan, noting that the Turkmen government has legal obligations under international and domestic law regarding freedom of expression.

However, this article notes how decades-long state surveillance and censorship of media content and its journalists have instead created a culture of misinformation, fear and secrecy. Worse, the Turkmen government restricts and antagonises journalists for their media activities, and consequently, the Turkmen people have no right to access information invaluable to their daily lives.

No journalists should ever need to face retaliatory attacks for simply doing their work.

No media outlets should be subjected to excessive state control.

No one should ever be restricted from accessing information necessary for their participation in democratic processes.

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Domestic Violence in Central Asia: A Global Issue with Regional Specificities

Grace Bell

Key Takeaways

- Domestic violence, also known as domestic abuse or intimate partner violence, is a global phenomenon and affects those regardless of race, class, or socioeconomic status. While it is an issue across the world, it remains especially pervasive where patriarchal norms are particularly extreme and victim protections aren't established, such as in many countries in Central Asia.
- While statistics only paint part of the picture, they show a bleak outlook for women and girls in much of the region. Women and girls experience high levels of domestic abuse across Central Asia. While some governments, such as those of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are increasing protections, many other countries have yet to meaningfully join the fight against domestic violence.
- In order to reduce domestic violence in the region, countries must strengthen legal and social support and patriarchal norms must be dissolved or, at the very least, shifted, both on a societal level and within the home.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) defines domestic violence, also known as “domestic abuse” or “intimate partner violence”, as a “pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner.”

Abuse, by the same UN definition, is physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions which influence another person. Intimate partners can be married, living together, or dating. [1] Additionally, other definitions of domestic violence include non-romantic close relationships, such as a parent, sibling, or other familial or close connections. [2] Domestic violence is a global phenomenon, representing the most common form of violence against women. Women, and it is most often women, experience violence within their homes, at the hands of their loved ones, regardless of race, class, and socioeconomic status. The 2018 World Health Organization (WHO) reports that globally, roughly 1 in 3 women between the ages of 15-49 who have been in a relationship have been physically and/or sexually abused by their romantic partner. What's more, 13% of women globally reported having been abused by an intimate partner within the past 12 months. These are the most recent statistics available, however the occurrence of major global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as various regional crises, may have exacerbated many situations. [3]



Amnesty International Ukraine, accessed on 6th April 2025

While these statistics are startling, it is important to note the complexity of gathering data on the subject. The very nature of domestic violence and violence against women more generally, leads to underreporting due to a lack of visibility, a fear of further violence, and even shame. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most instances of domestic violence occur within the home, with serious implications for detection and prevention. [4] Additionally, as mentioned previously, the very definition of domestic violence is varied, and data collection is subsequently inconsistent in both theory and practice. Thus, the numbers may, in fact, be much larger than what is reported, especially in certain areas of the world where societal norms and a lack of victim protection are especially prevalent.

Regional Trend

While domestic violence plagues developing and so-called “developed” nations alike, progress toward positive change is inconsistent across the globe. Central Asian countries have regional specificities which may preclude accurate reporting. According to WHO reports, Central Asia experiences domestic violence at a smaller frequency than the global average – 18% of women have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, and 9% have experienced this abuse within the past 12 months. [5] However, this again may point to the unreliability of quantitative observations, especially those on a broad scale, when it comes to domestic violence. Another smaller study, which looked at instances of femicide, or “the killing of females by males for being females”, in Uzbekistan and among Uzbek migrants abroad, found that among the 305 cases, they could reliably collect from online news and court archives in the last 10 years, 46% of deaths were caused by intimate partners, and an additional 15% were at the hands of close family members. This indicates that a large majority of women in Uzbekistan and among Uzbek communities (61%) die due to domestic abuse. [6]

Yet again, this is only of the cases identified, and is therefore limited in its reliability. In Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that police received 99,026 complaints related to family violence in 2023 alone. [7] In Kyrgyzstan, domestic violence is reportedly on the rise, with the number of domestic violence survivors nearly tripling between 2015 and 2021, 96% of them being women. [8] According to UNAMA, Afghanistan has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world, with 9 out of 10 women experiencing at least one form of domestic violence in their lifetime. [9] Another startling statistic arises from an attitudinal survey, which found that 59% of women in Turkmenistan believe that a man has the right to beat his wife. [10] Hence, a closer look at trends, country by country, paints a different picture. Domestic violence is a serious and persistent issue endangering the lives and well-being of women and girls across Central Asia.



Activists hold a rally to support women's rights on International Women's Day in Almaty, Kazakhstan, March 8, 2023. © 2023 Pavel Mikheyev/Reuters. Accessed at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/09/action-needed-confront-domestic-violence-central-asia> 6th April 2025.

So, while some statistics may cause one to minimize the threat of domestic violence in the region, it should most definitely not be ignored. For one, the data is most likely, if not definitely, an underreporting. The picture shifts as one spans in and out of the region, with varying levels of clarity. Second, regardless of the global comparison, any frequency of domestic violence above zero is a serious issue warranting attention. For those who experience

this abuse or know someone who is, it is very real. Domestic violence is an abuse of human rights, with serious effects on individual and societal well-being.

Legal and Governmental Recourse

Countries within Central Asia are varied in their response to domestic violence. While there is an overall lack of legal protections from domestic abuse, countries have made progress to varying degrees. Kazakhstan, for example, recently enacted new legislation meant to increase protections for women and children from domestic violence. Under this new law, all acts of violence against women and children count as crimes, whereas battery and minor physical harm were before decriminalized. Another promising component of this new legislation requires police officers to collect evidence and investigate all cases of domestic abuse, including those heard via social media or television. Yet, despite these promising steps, many argue that domestic violence needs further gravity in Kazakh law, perhaps by making it a stand-alone offense in the Criminal Code. [11] Kyrgyzstan also strengthened protections for women against rape, sexual assault, and bride kidnapping in July 2024. However, the law still ignores women and girls with disabilities, who are particularly vulnerable to domestic abuse. [12] Turkmenistan and Tajikistan still lack legislation explicitly criminalizing domestic violence. [13]



Credit: Pixabya, accessed at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/why-do-central-asian-governments-keep-failing-the-regions-women/> 6th April 2025

Beyond legal recourse, survivors of domestic violence have limited and varied access to aid. This has been further exacerbated by recent cuts to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), impacting programs in the region. Across Central Asia, there remains a lack of adequate support from the state, especially in rural areas. This support comes in the form of shelters, health services, and other survivor-centered care, as well as a well-trained police force and judiciary ready to respond to cases in a manner which upholds human rights. Social support is again lacking across the region, with certain countries increasing support more than others. In Kazakhstan, new legal amendments have included increases in survivor social supports. [14] In Afghanistan, while far from complete, many survivors of domestic abuse had access to a national network of shelters and services, including free legal representation, medical aid, and counseling. However, since the US withdrawal and resurgence of the Taliban in 2021, legal and social supports have all but disappeared for women and girls suffering or having suffered from intimate partner violence. [15]

Challenges

Central Asia experiences unique, yet not uncommon, challenges to reducing domestic violence in the region. Deep-seated patriarchal norms hamper survivor's access to justice and aid across the region, making impunity the rule, not the exception. [16] Climate change, which has led to devastating floods and water scarcity across the region, increases the risk of domestic violence due to displacement, food and resource insecurity, and service disruptions. [17] Conflict and insecurity is present in much of the region, which not only affects the physical and socioeconomic well-being of its citizens, but also destabilizes support for social infrastructures for domestic abuse survivors.

For example, following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, support for survivors, such as shelters and other protective services, was abandoned, and perpetrators were released from prisons. [18] Additional risk factors include lower levels of education, a history of personal or witnessed abuse, a lack of women's economic security and ability to make their own living, and low levels of gender equality. [19]



Press panel at the regional conference on combating domestic violence in Central Asia, featuring representatives from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan on Nov 25. in Almaty. Photo credit: OSCE / Vlad Semyonov. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/12/central-asia-unites-to-combat-domestic-violence-at-fes-conference/> accessed at 6th April 2025

Recommendations

Although by no means complete, the following are a list of necessities to improve the lives of women and girls affected by domestic violence. While these are intended for the Central Asian region, one would find them applicable to many other regions of the world.

- Laws which protect domestic abuse survivors and punish perpetrators must not only be created, but also enforced. Globally, countries with domestic violence legislation exhibit lower rates of domestic violence (9.5%) than their counterparts (16.1%). [20] Effective legislation requires comprehensive and consistent legal definitions and laws, as well as a well-trained and human-rights focused judiciary and police force prepared and ready to respond to domestic violence cases.

- States must provide social, economic, health-related and other support for survivors. This not only helps those that have reported their domestic abuse but provides further encouragement to others who have yet to speak up, as major barriers to speaking up, such as a lack of housing and economic dependency, will be removed or lessened.
- State aid and legal recourse can only go so far. There must be a shift in societal norms. Patriarchal ideals which place women as subservient to men must be evaluated and dismantled. Women must feel able to speak up about their abuse without shame. Further, they must be able to identify their own rights and when they are being abused. Men must learn and teach other men that abuse of any kind is never acceptable.

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The Impact of Recent USAID Changes on Kazakhstan

Natalia Arkhipova

Key Takeaways

- In the recent 30 years, USAID spent more than \$500 million supporting development projects in Kazakhstan, but its recent 90-day freeze caused concerns among local NGOs whose work depends on foreign funding.
- Some politicians in the country call for the check of USAID support and activities, advocating for the reduction of foreign influence. Meanwhile, the NGOs are concerned with the limited finance available and its potential consequences to the social programs in the country.
- In the current situation of uncertainty, NGOs can explore alternative funding sources, such as governmental grants, international organisations support and corporate social responsibility programs to ensure their continuous operations and independence.

Introduction

The United States Agency for International Development has been working in Kazakhstan since 1992. It has contributed more than \$500 million to different programs aimed at the country's development.[1] In partnership with the government agencies, NGOs, private sector, and local communities, USAID supports economic reforms, energy market development, regional trade promotion, and business environment improvement in Kazakhstan. In the healthcare sector, USAID is helping to enhance primary care, maternal and child health, and combat diseases like tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. USAID also supports

local institutions in strengthening good governance, expanding access to information, and encouraging civic engagement.[2] On January 20th 2025, the United States President Donald Trump ordered to freeze the country's international development program for 90 days.[3] The program provides humanitarian support to many communities around the world, with the vast majority of USAID money is spent in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Europe - primarily on humanitarian efforts in Ukraine. [4]



Picture 1: USAID logo and the American flag, photo: Getty Images.

Despite the court decision to lift the freeze of the USAID programs, many experts believe that the future of the agency and its foreign influence stays unclear.[5] With the President Trump's "America First" approach, and the intention to reorganize the agency's structure and reevaluate its programs, it is highly likely that many of the beneficiaries will be affected by these decisions. [6]

This article aims to look at Kazakhstan's USAID-supported programs, their meaning for the country and the risks of the recent news affecting their operations. It will also look at the alternative funds that can be addressed as an alternative to USAID.

NGOs and other USAID-supported programs in Kazakhstan

During the 33 years of work in the country, USAID has supported limitless projects in healthcare, ecology, tourism, agriculture, and many other fields, supporting a lot of NGOs in Kazakhstan.[7] Yet, according to Forbes Kazakhstan, 90% of grants were given to the Government, with only 10% left to the NGOs.[8]

Within the government-supported programs, USAID support was spread throughout a variety of fields, and one noticeable example of its influence would be the area of Media and Information Literacy, which has been gaining more and more importance in recent years.[9] School of Media Literacy was one of the bigger projects in the field that was supported by USAID.[10]

As for the independent NGOs, according to the Ministry of Justice, even 10 years ago Kazakhstan already had 36,815 registered non-governmental organizations, and the number kept growing. These include 8,134 public associations, 4,831 foundations, 1,288 associations of legal entities, and 1,331 religious groups. The remaining 7,965 consist of cooperatives, private institutions, non-commercial joint-stock companies, and other organizations.[11] As of 2022, Kazakhstan had approximately 22,763 registered non-governmental organizations.[12]

NGOs have been playing a crucial role in development around the world for more than 50 years now, serving as the indicator of a healthier civil society.[13] Of all the NGOs receiving funding in Kazakhstan, about 70% are reportedly linked to American sources, including USAID.[14]

The USAID freeze and the potential change in its work can significantly influence the life of the NGOs in Kazakhstan, especially the ones depending on foreign financial support.

In this new reality, these organizations can face the necessity of adaptation to the changing funding sources, including internal grants and private investments. This can result in the civil society transformation, change in its priorities and potential limitation in some of the organizations' independence, which can influence the whole non-profit sector in the country.

Alternative opinions

The recent 90-day freeze of USAID's work has been a big topic in the humanitarian society in since the announcement on the 20th of January. It was a "humanitarian disaster" by Doctors Without Borders, highlighting the devastating influence it has on some of the world's most vulnerable populations.[15] Moreover, there have already been significant effects noticed in some areas of the world. As such, the delivery of life-supporting medicine, food, and other necessary supplies has been paused in Ethiopia, the largest recipient of USAID support in sub-Saharan Africa before January the 20th.[16]

Similarly, such programs as counterterrorist education in Somalia, anti-drug programs in Columbia, refugee support in Myanmar, and many other critically important programs around the world were paused, causing serious concerns from the humanitarian organizations and the international community in general. [17][18] Many experts note that this freeze will potentially not only decrease the stability in the world's most vulnerable regions and beyond, but also seriously affect the trust in the USA as a reliable international partner.[19]



Picture 2: USAID and the Kazakhstan Agency for International Development (KazAID) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to increase cooperation on development assistance that fosters social, political, and economic stability and security in Central Asia and Afghanistan. (2021)

In Kazakhstan, the USAID freeze caused very controversial reactions. Some politicians voiced their worries about the agency's influence on the internal affairs of the country. As such, it was suggested to check the USAID-supported projects' contents, as there is an opinion that the human rights defending and developing projects are, in fact, a way to promote "foreign ideology" that can have a negative influence on the Kazakh people.[20]

Moreover, in February 2025, soon after the USAID freeze, on the platform for electronic petition, the petition was posted demanding to close the agency's branch in Kazakhstan.[21] Simultaneously, a representative of the Ministry of Trade and Integration claimed, that they don't have any programs planned together with USAID in 2025, which might also indicate a decrease in the country's interest in the collaboration.[22] However, the situation still raises a lot of concerns from the non-governmental organizations in the country, as it can lead to the end of financial support for a wide range of projects in healthcare, education, and civil society support.[23] In current uncertain situation they have to look for alternative ways of financing their work, including the governmental grants, which can influence their independence.[24]

To sum up, the USAID freeze brought about a controversial reaction both internationally and in Kazakhstan. The opinions got divided between the risks of extensive international influence and the worries about the future of non-profit sector. Despite the political discussions, it is clear that the complete end of USAID funding can seriously influence social and humanitarian programs, that ensure protection and support of the vulnerable groups.

Alternative Funding Sources for NGOs in Kazakhstan

The situation of a 90-day USAID freeze brought attention to the importance of diversifying the funding sources. Many NGOs in Kazakhstan faces a situation where they find themselves in need if alternative grant-giving organizations to ensure the smooth continuation of their work. One of the most natural steps for them is to look at the potential governmental support and local organizations that connect Kazakh organizations with international donors; one of such organizations is Civil Initiatives Support Center working in the country since 2016 with total budget of 12 billion tenge (~\$24 million) of total spendings on project support.[25] Moreover, some international financial organizations, such as European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and International Finance Corporation also offer financial support for the projects in different fields.[26] The other international grant sources include European Union-affiliated funding, United Nations and numerous private philanthropic foundations, such as Open Society Foundations, Ford Foundation and the others. [27][28] Another potential source of financial support for Kazakhstan-based organizations can be partnering with local and international businesses as a part of their corporate-social responsibility programs that become more important both globally and in Kazakhstan.[29][30]

Some organizations in the country already dedicate a lot of resources to their corporate social responsibility practices. As such, Beeline Kazakhstan offered free connection to the doctors in the country, free access to more than 600 educational and governmental resources, as well as finances for the building of 50 houses for people left without a place to stay after the flooding in Maktaaral region, thus only during the pandemic time the company spent around 1.5 billion tenge (\$3 million) on social project support.[31] Diversifying the financial support sources, including governmental grants, international organisations' funds, as well as corporate social responsibility programmes can ensure Kazakh NGOs' further development and independence.

Conclusion

The USAID freeze and the future uncertainty the recent changes bring became a challenge for non-governmental sector in Kazakhstan. During the three decades of its work in the country, the agency spent more than \$500 million on development projects, but the 90-day pause became an indicator of this source not being as stable anymore. Despite the development with elevating the limitations, President Trump's policy "America first" can still lead to a significant reduction in the financial aid the agency is able to provide to other countries. It has already led to a lot of discussions in Kazakhstan, where some politicians call for more independence from USAID and foreign influence in general, while NGOs are worried for their future due to their dependency on foreign aid. In these circumstances, the focus switches to searching for alternative funding sources. Government-supported grants, international organizations support and corporate-social responsibility funds can become crucial instruments for NGO support.

Local organizations already invest in social initiatives, and the development of such partnerships can reduce the NGOs' dependency on international grants. Yet, it is important to remember that relying only on domestic sources can also influence the NGOs' independence. Thus, it is important to adapt and diversify the funding sources, as well as build sustainable finance models to keep the organizations independence and continue work further.

Recommendations

- Diversifying the funding sources is the key. Kazakh NGOs should look into different alternative sources to get their funding from, also keeping their independence in mind.
- Strengthening collaborations with local and international businesses within their corporate social responsibility programs can be a great way to ensure sustainability for the NGOs.
- The changes withing USAID should be closely monitored to ensure that NGOs and the government adapt smoothly to all the changes and minimize the risks to their main social programs.

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The Peace & Security Monitor is produced by the Platform for Peace and Humanity

The Peace & Security Monitor

Central Asia

Issue 11

March 2025

ISSN 2989-3038

Platform for Peace and Humanity

contact: office@peacehumanity.org

www.peacehumanity.org

