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## Post-2019 Reforms in Kazakhstan: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Since 2019, Kazakhstan has pursued a state-led reform agenda under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, branded as building a “New Kazakhstan.” Catalyzed by the constitutional transfer of power from Nursultan Nazarbayev and accelerated by the January 2022 unrest, these reforms span political liberalization, economic diversification, and social modernization. Employing qualitative document analysis of official policy documents, presidential addresses, parliamentary records, constitutional drafts, reports from institutions such as the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies and the Congressional Research Service, and peer-reviewed academic literature (2019–early 2026), this study provides a comprehensive, integrated assessment across political, economic, and social dimensions. While notable institutional adjustments and targeted improvements have occurred—such as constitutional amendments, increased non-resource exports, and expanded social protections—the reforms largely reflect a pattern of “authoritarian modernization” or “controlled liberalization.” This involves formal changes and managed pluralism that strengthen executive capacity and regime resilience rather than substantive democratization or power redistribution. By integrating the three dimensions within a single analytical framework, this article advances theoretical debates on state-led reform in hybrid regimes, highlighting how elite-driven transitions in post-Soviet contexts often prioritize stability and institutional renewal over genuine democratic deepening. The analysis concludes with implications for Kazakhstan’s long-term governance trajectory and its relevance for understanding hybrid regime evolution in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** Political transition, New-Kazakhstan, Political system, Constitutional reform, modernisation

### INTRODUCTION

The Kazakh Parliament ratified the country’s first post-Soviet Constitution in January 1993, following its unexpected independence (Kumar, H. 2023 p. 115). Subsequently, in March 1995, the document underwent significant revisions to reflect the evolving political landscape and was presented to the public for approval. According to official data, the referendum held on August 30, 1995, recorded a voter turnout of approximately 91 percent, with 89 percent endorsing the revised constitutional text. The Kazakhs Constitution institutionalized a presidential system of governance and defined the state as a “democratic, secular, and unitary republic.” It further emphasized the “primacy of life, liberty, and the inalienable rights of the individual” (Kumar, 2024). This study focuses specifically on assessing the political, economic, and social reforms initiated under President Tokayev’s leadership.

The introduction situates Kazakhstan’s reform agenda within the broader political transition from Nazarbayev to Tokayev in 2019, marking a significant turning point in the country’s governance narrative. It highlights how the concept of a “New Kazakhstan” emerged as a state-led vision to address long-standing institutional, socio-economic, and legitimacy challenges. This theme sets the stage by identifying key drivers of reform - including public demand, generational shifts, and regional pressures - and underscores the need for a detailed, multidimensional assessment of political, economic, and social reforms initiated since 2019.

According to the Kazakhs Embassy in the Croatia Republic (2021), Kazakhstan’s post-2019 reforms emerge from a period of unprecedented transition in the country’s modern history, sparked by the peaceful and constitutional transfer of presidential power in March 2019. This event, marking the first leadership change since 1991, set the stage for a phased and systematic agenda of renewal. Under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, reform has

become the centerpiece of national strategy, guided by ambitions to modernize the political system, diversify the economy, and advance social development in line with both domestic expectations and international standards.

These reforms were not spontaneous but stemmed from necessity and popular demand. By 2019, Kazakhstan's previous development model, reliant on sustained state control and resource rents, had reached its economic and participatory ceiling, with population growth outpacing economic gains and rising public expectations for greater transparency and inclusivity. In response, Tokayev launched his vision of a "Listening State," seeking to rebuild trust between government and society by fostering dialogue, accountability, and a new political culture (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025).

At the heart of these reforms lies a broad set of objectives: strengthening sovereignty, reinforcing the rule of law, and improving social well-being. The country's reform trajectory includes limiting presidential powers, boosting parliamentary influence, expanding human rights protections, and fostering economic liberalization and regulatory modernization. An essential dimension is the gradual cultivation of democratic values, which includes not just legislative changes but also efforts to shift public consciousness away from decades of political stagnation towards greater civic engagement and institutional trust (Zhiyenbayev, 2025.) The National Council of Public Trust, which unites prominent members of civil society and government officials, is one of the new organisations Tokayev established to oversee reforms. According to Tokayev, "this institution, and its working groups, has been a vehicle for the generation of and deliberation on ideas for reforms." However, Kazakhstan still faces obstacles to sustaining democratic reforms, and current events in the nation attest to this. The country saw the most violent and fierce protests in its 30-year history of independence at the start of 2022. The violence "broadened to include political demands and tense standoffs between protesters and the police" when it first erupted over the price of liquefied petroleum gas and quickly expanded to major cities across the country (Mishra, 2022).

Kazakhstan, which has long been seen as a symbol of stability in Central Asia, saw a devastating period of civil turmoil at the beginning of January 2022. A statewide riot quickly erupted from the initial protests, which were sparked by a double increase of petrol prices. After the disturbance was brutally put down by troops from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), hundreds of people were killed, and many more were injured or arrested. Even though the protests were first sparked by worries over fuel prices, they have also shown how deeply unhappy many Kazakhs are with the country's autocratic government. Following these demonstrations, Tokayev, the president of Kazakhstan, proposed a number of political and legislative changes that were subsequently approved by a national referendum. Among others, these reforms include the reinstatement of the Kazakh Constitutional Court, prohibiting the president's relatives from holding public office, and expediting the registration of new parties and the election of legislative officials (Chan, 2022).

According to Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (2025), Kazakhstan's journey of reform continues to blend ambition with pragmatism. The process has gradually extended into every sphere - from executive restructuring and parliamentary reform to legal protections for the vulnerable, fiscal discipline, digital governance, and educational overhaul. The effectiveness of these changes, however, depends on persistent cooperation between civil society and government institutions, highlighting the ongoing interplay between state-led modernization and societal adaptation (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). The post-2019 political, economic, and social aspects of reform in Kazakhstan are thoroughly and comprehensively examined in this paper.

Despite growing scholarly attention to Kazakhstan's post-2019 transition, existing studies often examine political, economic, or social reforms in isolation. Few offer an integrated, multi-dimensional assessment of the entire post-2019 period up to the 2026 constitutional referendum. This article addresses that gap by providing a comprehensive evaluation across the three dimensions. It contributes to broader debates on post-Soviet governance, state-society relations in hybrid regimes, and the conditions under which elite-led reforms produce

meaningful institutional change versus managed continuity. The analysis draws on qualitative document analysis to evaluate the extent to which stated reform ambitions translate into substantive outcomes.

## **METHODS**

This study employs qualitative document analysis to examine Kazakhstan's post-2019 reforms. Data were collected from publicly available sources covering the period 2019 to early 2026, including presidential addresses (e.g., "Kazakhstan in a New Reality: Time for Action," 2020; "New Kazakhstan: The Path of Renewal and Modernisation," 2022), constitutional texts and referendum materials, parliamentary legislation, official reports from the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Kazakh embassies, and international sources such as the Congressional Research Service, Freedom House, and the World Bank/IMF. Peer-reviewed journal articles and analytical reports (e.g., Knox & Orazgaliyev, 2025; Cornell, 2024; Alzhanov, 2022) were also consulted. Documents were retrieved using targeted keywords such as "New Kazakhstan," "Tokayev reforms," "constitutional referendum," "economic diversification," and specific reform packages. Selection criteria emphasized institutional authority, direct relevance to the political, economic, or social dimensions, and chronological representativeness to capture evolution from early packages through the 2022 and 2026 referendums. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns, stated objectives, implemented measures, and contradictions between official narratives and observed outcomes. This method is particularly appropriate for assessing state-led reform discourses in authoritarian or hybrid contexts, as it allows critical examination of how reforms are framed, justified, and potentially used for regime legitimation or adaptation. No primary data collection (e.g., interviews) was conducted; thus, the analysis focuses on publicly articulated policies and secondary interpretations rather than private actor perspectives or public perception.

## **POLITICAL REFORMS**

Political reforms represent the most visible component of Kazakhstan's post-2019 changes. This section discusses the constitutional amendments and their objectives. It also analyses electoral system changes. Kazakhstan's political reforms post-2019 have represented the most ambitious effort at institutional change since the country's independence, arising from both domestic demand and external pressures. Following the peaceful transition of power to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2019, Kazakhstan embarked on a multi-stage program of political modernization designed to dismantle remnants of the super-presidential system and gradually embed principles of parliamentary democracy, transparency, and accountability (Omirgazy, 2025). In comparison with other Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has undertaken significant institutional reforms, notably through the Concept of Administrative Reforms and the adoption of the Law on Civil Service, which have laid the foundations for a professional bureaucracy, enhanced transparency, and the development of mechanisms for state–society dialogue. In Kazakhstan, particular emphasis has been placed on political modernization and the implementation of anti-nepotism measures. In Kyrgyzstan, reform efforts have focused on reducing bureaucratic complexity and simplifying the provision of public services (Otajonov, 2025).

Following his election (in 2019), in order to modernise Kazakhstan's political, social, and economic institutions, President Tokayev initiated a comprehensive reform trajectory. From 2019 to 2021, four major reform packages were implemented. The first 'December 2019' targeted political liberalisation, while the second 'September 2020' concentrated on enhancing local governance mechanisms and safeguarding human rights. The third package "January 2021 lowered the electoral threshold for political parties, introduced an against all option in national ballots, and expanded elective positions for district akims". Building on these measures, the fourth package 'September 2021' sought to improve political representation for marginalized communities. These initiatives culminated in the landmark constitutional referendum in 2022, which revised one-third of the Constitution, transforming Kazakhstan from a "super-presidential model into a more balanced presidential republic with

a stronger Parliament”, limited presidential powers, and newly re-established institutions such as the Constitutional Court’. Subsequent reforms advanced the “Listening State” concept by expanding public participation, decentralizing authority through the first-ever elections of district and city akims, and introducing laws to protect human rights, including measures on domestic violence, labour safety, peaceful assembly, and the abolition of the death penalty (Alnekady, 2024).

According to the Kazakh Embassy to the United Arab Emirates (2021), Kazakhstan’s post-2019 political reform agenda has been articulated through three sequential packages aimed at liberalising political participation, strengthening human rights protections, and enhancing citizen-state accountability. The first package (2019) implemented significant institutional changes, including shifting peaceful assembly regulations from a permission-based to a notification-based model, introducing a “30% quota for women and youth” on party lists, lowering membership requirements for party registration, establishing a formal parliamentary opposition, decriminalising libel, and ratifying the Second Optional Protocol abolishing the death penalty. The second package advanced decentralisation and oversight by introducing direct elections of rural akims, developing frameworks for local self-government, adopting a Law on Public Oversight, creating a unified online-petition system, and strengthening legal mechanisms against torture, human trafficking, cyberbullying, and violations of children’s rights. The third package further deepened political competitiveness and accountability by reducing the parliamentary threshold from 7% to 5%, adding a “none of the above” option to ballots, expanding elections to district akims, formalising online petitions, enhancing the powers and regional reach of the Human Rights Commissioner, introducing the Youth Development Index, supporting charitable activities, and expanding mechanisms for public oversight.

He delivered at the joint session of both Houses of Parliament on 1 September 2020 and titled “Kazakhstan in a New Reality: Time for Action” President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev presented a comprehensive framework of political and administrative reforms designed to enhance the effectiveness, transparency, and responsiveness of the state apparatus. Central to these reforms is the reconstruction of the state administration system, which the President identifies as the top priority. This includes the establishment of the “Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms”, reporting directly to the President, and the creation of the Supreme Presidential Council on Reforms, whose decisions are final. The transfer of the Committee on Statistics to the Agency - later to be transformed into the Bureau of Statistics - serves to ensure greater institutional efficiency and transparency. A revision of interdepartmental relations is proposed to reduce excessive bureaucratic constraints and achieve a more balanced legal framework for executive authorities. The Address further emphasizes the need to reform the National Planning System, especially through the reduction of unrealistic indicators in government programmes and the introduction of a functioning Government Action Program. In addition, the President calls for the introduction of a factor-score scale to assess civil servants’ performance, reductions in the size of the civil service and quasi-government sector, and wage increases tied to improved outcomes. The Address also highlights the goal of strengthening local self-government, including fortified rural district budgets and clearer delineation of powers between local state administration and local self-government bodies. In addition, the Address stresses the formation of a “new quality of the nation,” calling for new values, behaviours, and societal benchmarks that reflect readiness for global challenges and modernisation (Mamytbekov, 2020).

According to Congressional Research Service (2022), Since 2019, Kazakhstan has undertaken a series of political reforms under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, accelerated significantly after the January 2022 unrest. The reforms aim to restructure the political system, reduce the long-standing influence of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, and address both domestic instability and shifting regional geopolitics. The ‘January 2022’ protests - initially triggered by fuel price hikes but soon expanding into broader grievances over corruption and inequality - exposed tensions within the ruling elite and catalyzed Tokayev’s consolidation of power. In the aftermath, Tokayev initiated a process

often described as “de-Nazarbayevification,” removing Nazarbayev’s allies from key institutions and restoring the capital’s name from Nur-Sultan to Astana.

In March 2022, president Tokayev unveiled political reforms aimed at empowering parliament, strengthening the judiciary, and widening political participation at the local level. Central to these reforms is the new constitutional court, open to citizen appeals and staffed partly by justices with civil-society backgrounds, raising expectations that it could play a key role in driving future reform (Cornell, 2024). On 16 March, 2022, the President articulated a reform agenda during the address, formally titled “New Kazakhstan: The Path of Renewal and Modernisation.” The address identified constitutional reform as “pivotal for pursuing democratisation, political decentralisation, and a shift from a super-presidential model to a presidential republic endowed with a robust Parliament”. With the end of March, the President instituted a 19-member working group comprising officials from state bodies and experts associated with the ruling party, under the leadership of senior presidential appointees. Tasked with designing constitutional amendments aligned with the presidential directives, the group produced a draft law released to the public on 5 May 2022. The constrained timeframe preceding the scheduled referendum impeded opportunities for comprehensive public consultation and legislative scrutiny, just one month before a ‘planned referendum’. Although the draft proposed ‘56 amendments across 33 articles’ - representing substantial numerical changes - the revisions largely failed to establish meaningful separation of powers or significantly enhance the institutional capacity of Parliament to act as an effective counterbalance to presidential authority (Alzhanov, 2022).

A major constitutional referendum in June 2022 introduced reforms curbing presidential powers, enhancing the role of parliament, and eliminating Nazarbayev’s privileged constitutional status. Additional legislative changes extended the presidential term to a single seven-year mandate, followed by a snap election in November 2022 that Tokayev won overwhelmingly—though international observers criticized the election for limited political competition. Tokayev’s reform agenda, promoted under the banner of building a “New Kazakhstan,” envisions a stronger parliament, a multipolar party system, and fairer political processes. However, many analysts argue that the reforms reflect “authoritarian modernization” rather than genuine democratization, noting persistent limits on political pluralism (Congressional Research Service, 2022).

A historic milestone came in 2022, when a national referendum approved amendments to nearly one-third of Kazakhstan’s constitution. These changes expanded the powers and independence of Parliament, enhanced government accountability, and redistributed authority between the central and local administrations. Kazakhstan transitioned from a purely super-presidential system to what is now called a presidential-parliamentary model, reducing presidential dominance and codifying the separation of powers as a guiding national goal (Akhmetkali, 2025).

The post-2019 reform agenda in Kazakhstan introduced a wide-ranging restructuring of the political system through the redistribution of power, enhanced parliamentary authority, and expanded public participation. Major measures included transferring greater powers to the Mazhilis and imposing new checks on presidential authority, such as restricting term limits and prohibiting presidential involvement in political parties during tenure (Omirgazy, 2025). Parliamentary reform advanced with President Tokayev’s proposal to abolish the Senate and transition from a bicameral to a unicameral legislature, a move scheduled for national referendum in 2027 following extensive public debate (RANE Network, 2025). Electoral and party reforms further reduced the threshold for party representation from 7% to 5%, eased party registration requirements - enabling the legal recognition of new parties for the first time since 2006 - and reinstated a mixed electoral system that allowed independent candidates to contest single-member districts, enhancing political competition and representation (Blackwood, 2023). To strengthen inclusivity, gender and youth quotas were introduced in party lists (Kazakh Embassy in Croatia, 2021), while a broader emphasis on civic engagement positioned major constitutional changes as “irreversible” and dependent on nationwide consultations and referendums (Zhiyenbayev, 2025).

While the reforms have elicited cautious optimism, they have also faced scrutiny regarding the depth of democratization. Observers note that despite the liberalization of the party system and expansion of electoral competition, most new parties registered remain government-aligned and civil society remains tightly managed. Critics warn that some moves, such as recent proposals to reverse certain decentralizing reforms, may reflect an ongoing tension between regime stability and the democratization agenda (Tlegenova and Beysembaev, 2024).

Kazakhstan's post-independence political development, as analysed by Colin Knox and Serik Orazgaliyev (2025), remained deeply shaped by Soviet-era institutional legacies and the continued dominance of former Soviet elites. Nursultan Nazarbayev's transition from First Secretary of the Communist Party to the first president exemplified this continuity. The authors highlight that authoritarian governance persisted under both Nazarbayev and his successor, Tokayev, through a highly centralised political system marked by limited pluralism and restrictions on opposition, media, and civil society. The carefully managed presidential succession prioritised stability over democratic reform, reflecting Kazakhstan's limited historical experience with self-governance. In the early years of independence, the state faced the urgent task of establishing foundational institutions—such as a constitution, political structures, and a foreign policy framework—to ensure stability and guide the country's emergence from Soviet rule (Knox and Orazgaliyev, 2025).

President Tokayev's recent proposals for the 2027 referendum to abolish the Senate would represent the most significant structural transformation in Kazakhstan's parliamentary system to date. The new political model - "summarized as a strong President, an influential Parliament, and an accountable Government" - is intended to prevent a return to personalist rule and broaden the scope for public participation, but its practical effectiveness will depend on continued vigilance, broad-based engagement, and the evolution of civic culture (RANE Network, 2025). According to Akhmetkali (2025), Kazakhstan's post-2019 political reforms are designed to realize a vision of gradual evolutionary democratization, combining managed institutional change with expanded, though still controlled, opportunities for civic engagement and pluralism.

The first official draft of the Republic of Kazakhstan's new constitution was released by the Constitutional Commission on January 31, 2026. This is a comprehensive revision of the Basic Law, not just a collection of modifications, with changes impacting around 84% of the text (roughly 77 out of approximately 101 articles in the current form). Based on thousands of suggestions from individuals, political parties, NGOs, experts, and conversations at the National Kurultai, the Constitutional Commission, led by Constitutional Court Chair Elvira Azimova, created the text. According to the government, extensive public discussions on constitutional revision took place over a period of six months. Through internet forums, people, lawyers, experts, attorneys, political parties, NGOs, and professional and commercial circles submitted almost 2,000 citizen initiatives. The draft constitutional change consists of 104 articles, 11 sections, and a preamble, according to Bakyt Nurmukhanov, Deputy Chair of the Constitutional Court. "People's Council and The Process of Amending the Constitution are two new parts that are suggested. Four current constitutional sections are also to be renamed: General Provisions to Foundations of the Constitutional System, Person and Citizen to Fundamental Rights, Freedoms, and Duties, Parliament to Kurultai, and Courts and Justice, Prosecutor's Office, Commissioner for Human Rights to Justice, Prosecutor's Office, Human Rights Mechanisms." According to Nurmukhanov, 77 constitutional articles - or 84% of the text - have proposed modifications (Shpunt, 2026).

Deputy Foreign Minister Arman Issetov gave a briefing to foreign journalists at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Astana early on March 14, 2026, the day before Kazakhstan's countrywide constitutional referendum. The press conference was a part of a special media tour for foreign journalists covering what officials call one of the most significant political events in the nation's contemporary history. Deputy Foreign Minister Issetov welcomed the journalists assembled in the ministry's Kazakhstan Hall and stressed the significance of the occasion as he opened the briefing. He stated, "I warmly welcome you in Kazakhstan... during the period of a

significant event for our country – the national referendum on the new draft of the Constitution." He emphasised that the vote, which is set for March 15, would represent a significant stride in the political growth of the nation. "Today our country is experiencing a truly historic stage in its development," the Deputy Foreign Minister said, constantly framing the referendum as a historic turning point (Soysa, 2026).

The most significant changes of Kazakhstan's constitution since its adoption in 1995 under former president Nursultan Nazarbayev was passed by voters on March 15, 2026. In addition to laying out Kazakhstan's future course, this drastic revision of 80% of the constitution will leave President Kassym Zhomart Tokayev with a legacy. Tokayev wants to leave a lasting impression on Kazakhstan's political culture in addition to making structural changes to the political system. Strong, legalistic governments that prioritise social stability, secularism, environmental preservation, and technological advancement are among them. The new constitution will modernise and simplify the political system, according to the government. However, this type of modernisation, which is already underway, calls for a departure from liberal economic models driven by the West that prioritise privatisation, deregulation, and foreign investment (Mallison, 2026). According to Mallinson (2026), "it will move Kazakhstan towards a more institutional, less personalist authoritarian system – similar to the political economy of its neighbour, China. Tokayev appears to admire the technocratic authoritarianism of China, where he served as counsellor to the Soviet ambassador in the late 1980s. Instead of looking west, the Tokayev administration, supported by large parts of the professional class, now looks to emulate the state-led economies of China and the Gulf".

## **ECONOMIC REFORMS**

Kazakhstan's post-independence trajectory reflects a broader pattern of economic reform supported by institutional consolidation and regulatory modernisation. Emerging from the Soviet collapse in 1991 amid severe economic contraction, demographic complexities, and initial political uncertainty, the country undertook gradual yet sustained reforms that enabled long-term stability and growth. As noted by Martin Russell (2019), Kazakhstan evolved from a fragile post-Soviet state into a politically stable, upper-middle-income economy, achieving significant reductions in poverty and unemployment while improving its global economic standing. Crucially, this transformation was not driven solely by its vast hydrocarbon resources; it was equally underpinned by policy reforms, an improved investment climate, and integration into global markets, reflected in its sharp rise in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings. The introduction of mechanisms like the Emissions Trading Scheme and early ratification of the UNFCCC further illustrate Kazakhstan's effort to integrate environmental considerations into its broader economic reform agenda, reinforcing both regulatory capacity and international credibility (Kumar, 2025, p. 1019).

He delivered at the joint session of both Houses of Parliament on 1 September 2020 and titled "Kazakhstan in a New Reality: Time for Action" the President discussed the economic dimension. The economic dimension of the Address focuses on mitigating the effects of the 'COVID-19 pandemic', ensuring macroeconomic stability, and safeguarding employment and household incomes. The President outlines a comprehensive set of interrelated economic tasks rooted in a new strategic vision of development. Major measures include improving the effectiveness of the national planning system and designing a new industrial policy centered on diversification, innovation, and technological competitiveness. The Address mandates the development of a strategic investment agreement mechanism to improve the investment climate and reduce bottlenecks in government procurement. A substantial portion of the reforms targets the improvement of the environment for small and medium-sized enterprises through more liberal tax administration and changes in regulatory policy. The Address identifies the need to maximise returns from the quasi-government sector, evaluate the true long-term contribution of the "National Welfare Fund", and ensure a more rational, sustainable use of national resources. Finally, the Address foregrounds the creation of a socially oriented state as the ultimate aim of economic reforms. In this context, the government is directed to begin drafting a Social Code to harmonise legal frameworks, and strengthen the social sector. Economic policy is thus framed not simply as a pathway to

growth but as an integrated mechanism for enhancing societal welfare, stability, and long-term national resilience (Mamytbekov, 2020). In addition, Kazakhstan's strategic engagement with regional economic platforms such as the 'EAEU, SCO, and China's Belt and Road Initiative' is assessed for its implications on economic sovereignty, external dependencies, and geopolitical balancing.

Before the start of the "Belt and Road Initiative, renowned American political scientist Frederick Starr, (Chairman of the Silk Road Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University at Washington), noted that, despite its apparent appeal, the idea of the Eurasian land transport corridor is not becoming a reality due to a lack of strategic imagination and the obsession of many nations with pertinent and significant but current issues, making it difficult to encompass the entire geopolitical and geoeconomic situation. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative presents a strategic perspective. Without exaggeration, the megaproject's execution will enable a global reform of trade and economic processes and convert infrastructure integration to the advantage of landlocked countries like Kazakhstan. Active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative makes sense for Kazakhstan, whose foreign and economic policies were founded on the idea of a multi-vector approach and openness to constructive cooperation with neighbouring countries and the global community at the outset of independence" (Nurgaliyev, 2020).

Following the completion of the electoral cycle, President Tokayev swiftly initiated a broad agenda of economic restructuring that has demonstrated tangible outcomes over the past five years, including a more than 1.5-fold increase in non-resource exports and the "attraction of nearly \$117 billion in direct foreign investment; service exports - particularly in the IT sector - expanded twenty-fold since 2019, surpassing \$500 million. Anchored in the new economic model introduced in September 2023, the reforms rest on three core principles - fairness, inclusivity, and pragmatism - reflected in major initiatives such as the National Fund for Children, which has already benefited 6.9 million children, and the reallocation of over one trillion tenge toward nationwide school construction. Concurrently, the government launched comprehensive modernization efforts in the energy and engineering sectors under the tariff in Exchange for Investment framework, while broader market reforms focused on openness and competitiveness. Further measures enacted in May aimed to 'liberalize the economy by enhancing business freedom', fostering competitive development, and reducing state involvement, with a major component being the gradual privatization of state assets - excluding strategic, social, and financial sectors - by 2028". Complementing these initiatives are forthcoming steps designed to strengthen the market environment through the development of medium-sized enterprises, recognized as essential drivers of sustainable employment, economic diversification, and healthy competition (Nakispekova, 2024).

Kazakhstan's post-2019 economic reform agenda, reinforced by President Tokayev's September 2023 announcements, reflects a strategic shift toward a new economic model grounded in fairness, inclusiveness, and pragmatic governance. Central to this transformation are efforts to accelerate demonopolization, strengthen industrial and economic self-sufficiency, and diversify the national economy—particularly through expansion of the manufacturing sector. The government has introduced a more enabling regulatory framework for small and medium-sized enterprises, recognising their role in sustainable economic growth and employment generation. Aligned with its target to provide jobs for more than 3.3 million citizens by 2029, Kazakhstan aims to create 450,000 new positions, nearly half of which are designated for youth. The reform programme is also supported by robust foreign investment inflows, with \$41.3 billion attracted in 2022-2023 and an ambitious objective of securing \$150 billion by 2029. Complementing these initiatives are measures to 'reduce the shadow economy to 15% of GDP' by 2025 and to enhance the country's status as a critical Asia-Europe transit hub, with plans to increase annual transit capacity to 10 million tons by 2027 (Alnekady, 2024).

Additionally, reforms have aimed to simplify tax codes, increase transparency, and boost fiscal discipline, all intended to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and nurture a competitive, innovation-driven market economy. The state continues to leverage sovereign

wealth funds to channel resource windfalls into high-potential, non-extractive sectors, with special attention to metallurgical, petrochemical, food, and logistics projects (Tjia, 2020).

Kazakhstan's ambitious "green transition" targets a 15% renewable share in the energy mix by 2030 and 50% by 2050. Modernized energy laws, transparent renewable energy auctions, tax incentives, and large-scale grid expansion are core to the country's strategy. There are currently over 150 active renewable energy facilities and plans to add another 8.4 GW by 2035, with a further push toward hydrogen energy and the introduction of a carbon-neutrality target by 2060 (Pokidaev, 2025). Natural gas acts as a bridge fuel in this transition, supporting stability while Kazakhstan expands wind, solar, and hydropower capacities, and initiates coal-to-gas conversions in regional power generation. Structural reforms also focus on updating tariff systems, encouraging efficiency, and redirecting subsidies to better serve vulnerable populations while incentivizing sustainable growth (Bakdolotov, 2025).

The "Digital Kazakhstan" strategy lies at the intersection of economic modernization and digital governance, aiming to create a technological hub for Central Asia. This includes rapid development of AI, 5G, smart cities, fintech, and the establishment of 'the Astana International Financial Centre' to attract global investment and innovation. Digitalization boosts not only tech-based sectors but also introduces e-government and digital finance innovations to the broader economy (Cornell et al, 2021).

Recent years have also seen emphasis on coordinating fiscal and monetary policy, aiming for sustained GDP growth of 6-7%. Efforts include bringing in more foreign banks to spur competition and expand corporate lending, as well as continued use of sovereign wealth funds to buffer against external shocks and recapitalize priority economic areas (Tjia, 2020). In sum, Kazakhstan's post-2019 economic reforms embody a complex balance of urgent stabilization and long-horizon modernization, with reforms centering on diversification, sustainability, support for SMEs, and digital and financial innovation as keys to future resilience (Pokidaev, 2025).

All of the country's regions underwent engineering and utilities infrastructure modernisation in 2024. 'New passenger terminals' were opened at the 'airports of Almaty, Kyzylorda, and Shymkent' 7,000 kilometres of roads were erected and restored; and 18 million square meters of housing were developed. Major projects in the mining, metallurgical, and petrochemical sectors were also implemented throughout the year. It should be mentioned that the manufacturing sector has grown significantly and is now on par with the extractive industry in terms of the nation's industrial structure. Additionally, technology in the agricultural industry has advanced significantly, leading to a 'record harvest of nearly 27 million tonnes' of grains in the last ten years. Over the course of its five-year development, a country has implemented structural economic reforms, which have occasionally been difficult and painful but are showing results (Sánchez, 2025).

As highlighted by Knox and Orazgaliyev (2025), Kazakhstan faced profound economic challenges in the post-independence period as it transitioned from a 'centrally planned to a market-based economy'. The Soviet Union dissolution disrupted long-established supply chains, eliminated Soviet-era subsidies, and precipitated a collapse in production. Early attempts to privatize state assets, introduce a national currency, and construct the institutional foundations of a market economy resulted in hyperinflation, widespread industrial decline, and substantial job losses throughout the 1990s. These difficulties persisted despite Kazakhstan's considerable—though largely underdeveloped—natural resource endowments, which at the time lacked adequate 'infrastructure and external investment'. Over subsequent decades, Kazakhstan's dependence on extractive industries has deepened. Although the country succeeded in attracting substantial foreign investment by liberalising sectors and positioning itself as a major actor in global energy markets, 'the resource sector remains vulnerable to corruption and rent-seeking practices'. "Embedded political and economic structures have further exacerbated unequal wealth distribution, widening the gap between urban elites and rural communities". These disparities have

periodically fuelled social unrest, while successive efforts to diversify the economy beyond resource extraction have achieved only limited results.

Oil and gas revenues, contributing roughly 35% of GDP and 75% of exports, constitute the principal engine of economic growth in Kazakhstan's downstream sector (Kumar, H. 2021, p. 92; Kumar, 2015, p. 67). According to the IMF, Kazakhstan's economic growth continued to be robust in 2024 after hitting 5.1% in 2023. However, it fell to 3.9% from 5.1% in 2023, primarily as a result of flat oil production, which was partially offset by widespread non-oil growth. The 2024 budget was amended by Kazakhstan's Senate in December 2024, increasing the deficit from 2.6% to 2.7% of GDP. While expenditures rose by 0.4% to KZT 24 trillion, planned revenues were lowered to KZT 14.1 trillion, down 12% or KZT 2 trillion from the initial forecast. From KZT 3.5 trillion to KZT 3.6 trillion, the budget deficit increased. Reduced oil output, a large rise in VAT refunds for 2023 at KZT 594 billion, and unstable external variables, including the volatility of global commodity prices and the logistical difficulties faced by large corporations, all contributed to the decline in revenue'. Continued low tax receipts, increased spending, and National Fund transfers totalling roughly 3.9% of GDP are all part of the 2025 draft budget. Kazakhstan's national debt is still low despite rising (to 24.8% in 2024), with substantial financial assets amassed in the 'National Fund' (about 23% of GDP by the end of 2023). With plenty of liquidity in the banking sector and comparatively low loan demand, the government intends to use the domestic market to cover most of its financing needs through 2026 (Lloyds International Trade Portal, 2026). Major reserves of 'oil, natural gas, coal, iron ore, manganese, chromium ore, nickel, cobalt, copper, lead, zinc, bauxite, or uranium' are only a few of Kazakhstan's many natural resources. Kazakhstan is ranked 13th in the world for its large agricultural area (ibid), which is made up of both pastures and arable land.

According to Olzhas Kizatov (2026), "Deputy Chairman of the Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Regulation and Development of the Financial Market", financial inclusion is emerging as a crucial component of socioeconomic sustainability in Kazakhstan. It entails having easy and equitable access to a variety of financial services for both individuals and companies. It is a strategic tool for the state to build 'human capital, encourage entrepreneurship, and bolster confidence in the financial system'. The "Concept for the Development of the Financial Sector of the Republic of Kazakhstan" until 2030, which reflects a systemic approach to creating an inclusive and sustainable financial environment, enshrines this objective at the strategic level. The nation has transitioned from discrete, focused programs to an all-encompassing financial inclusion policy in recent years. This initiative has mostly focused on increasing consumer protection, actively digitising financial services, and offering targeted assistance to particular vulnerable demographic groups.

A set of legislative changes was put into effect in 2025 with the goal of improving citizens' financial security and streamlining their access to financial services. Important measures include of: shielding victims' money received during natural disasters from being collected by third parties; required loan payment deferrals that banks and microfinance organisations offer to individuals impacted by emergencies and socially vulnerable groups for a minimum of three months; the elimination of penalties for early loan repayment by individuals; establishing precise deadlines, no more than 15 business days, with the option to extend for a comparable amount of time, for financial institutions to review consumer appeals; the implementation of a model that guarantees the systematic incorporation of safeguarding the rights and interests of customers into the daily operations and management procedures of financial institutions, enabling the consideration of consumer interests throughout the whole financial service delivery process (Kizatov, 2026).

## **SOCIAL REFORMS**

Social reforms reflect the state's recognition of rising public expectations and the need to modernize vital human development sectors. This section discusses transformative efforts in education, including curriculum updates, expanded digital infrastructure, and alignment with international standards to strengthen human capital. Social protection policies aim to expand

welfare coverage, support vulnerable populations, and mitigate inequality. Equally important are reforms promoting civic engagement, public dialogue, and youth participation, which signal a gradual, though cautious, recalibration of state–society relations and public trust.

Kazakhstan's social reforms since 2019 have been both expansive and strategic, aimed at enhancing social protection, public safety, access to justice, and quality of life - especially for vulnerable populations. These changes reflect President Tokayev's commitment to building what he calls a "Just Kazakhstan" through comprehensive upgrades to welfare and public service systems, progressive legal measures, and a focus on inclusivity and equal opportunity (Stevens, 2025).

According to the Kazakh Embassy to Croatia (2021), a major focus of Kazakhstan's reforms since 2019 has been on expanding social protections and improving social infrastructure. Welfare reforms targeted greater coverage and effectiveness, with efforts to modernize healthcare infrastructure and boost access to services, particularly in rural communities. Education reforms have modernized curricula and expanded vocational training to better match labor market needs, while investments in school facilities and digital education have worked to close regional and demographic gaps. Pension reform, anti-corruption in social fund management, and increases in social payments for families, children, and the disabled were also core outcomes.

Law enforcement and justice reforms have led to substantial decreases in crime, especially against women and children. A 2024 law introduced harsher penalties for such offenses, resulting in a '30% decrease in crimes against women and children' and halving related offenses over five years. Judicial reforms include 'the creation of a 'Constitutional Court', expanded powers for the human rights commissioner, abolition of the death penalty', and the use of amnesty and penal reform to humanize corrections - especially for women, minors, and the elderly (Haidar, 2025). New legal mechanisms for protecting children's rights have been passed, shrinking bureaucratic barriers to reporting abuse and addressing online threats. Civil society development has also been promoted through national strategies and action plans supporting broader societal participation and increased transparency in public service delivery (Freedom House, 2025).

Anti-corruption remains a cornerstone: significant funds confiscated from corrupt officials have been redirected to building schools and public infrastructure—over 150 billion tenge financed the construction of 89 schools in the last three years. These steps have been paired with widespread digitalization in the delivery of social services, making welfare more transparent and accessible, and reducing avenues for rent-seeking (Stevens, 2025). Kazakhstan has introduced a series of measures to promote gender equality and youth empowerment. Policy frameworks promise more inclusive education, employment opportunities, and housing access. Early indications suggest improved social awareness, with society demonstrating increased intolerance for domestic violence and greater willingness to report abuse.

Social reforms in 2024 include increased pensions, allowances, scholarships, and civil servant salaries, as well as support for families through the "National Fund for Children." Over 10 branches of esteemed international universities were established, and hundreds of new schools, kindergartens, and sports facilities were constructed across the nation. Additionally, there has been a dedication to the growth of mass sports and the enhancement of citizens' creative capacities (Sánchez, 2025).

More than 6 trillion tenge were set aside in 2025 alone to assist 4.7 million vulnerable residents, including large families, the elderly, and people with impairments. In order to ensure that resources are allocated equitably and effectively, a new digital platform based on a vulnerability rating system assists in determining genuine financial need. In certain areas, pilot testing is in progress. Additionally, Kazakhstan still indexes benefits and pensions for more than 4.7 million people each year. The basic pension will rise to 70% of the baseline norm by 2027, with a maximum of 120%, as part of a gradual reform initiated in 2023. Consequently, in 2023, the pensions of 2.3 million retirees increased by an average of 28%.

Early in 2025, the pension replacement rate hit 45.5%, which is in line with ILO guidelines. In 2024, Kazakhstan established a new approach for calculating the minimum wage. The method balances company capacity and worker requirements while increasing wage predictability based on median compensation levels and labour productivity. Salary increases for 1.2 million federal servants were substantial between 2020 and 2025. This includes 40,000 social workers and almost 600,000 teachers whose pay doubled between 2020 and 2023. Additionally, 600,000 public personnel earned incremental rises, and healthcare workers benefited from annual increments of 20% for nurses and 30% for physicians. In an effort to promote job safety and avoid occupational diseases, the nation implemented a special social payment in 2024 for those who worked in dangerous environments (Rich, 2026). Kazakhstan's post-2019 social reforms constitute an ambitious, multi-faceted change, targeting not just poverty reduction or service expansion but also a profound shift in norms, legal standards, and the quality of state-society relations. These reforms are ongoing, blending institutional change with evolving social values that support the vision of a more just, equitable, and resilient "New Kazakhstan".

The long-term implications section explores potential trajectories for Kazakhstan's governance model and socio-economic development. It evaluates whether the post-2019 reforms could contribute to gradual democratization, or instead reinforce a controlled, state-managed approach to political evolution. Economically, it examines Kazakhstan's prospects for sustainable diversification amid regional uncertainties and global energy transitions. Socially, it assesses the likelihood of sustained improvements in welfare, public trust, and social cohesion. The analysis highlights how the interplay of political will, institutional resilience, and societal pressures will shape Kazakhstan's developmental trajectory over the coming decade.

## RESULTS

The article presents substantial material organized under the subheadings Political Reforms, Economic Reforms, and Social Reforms, which effectively function as the Results section. Drawing on official documents, presidential addresses, parliamentary records, and institutional reports, the study systematically captures the scope and trajectory of Kazakhstan's post-2019 reform agenda. The absence of raw interview data is methodologically appropriate, given the study's reliance on qualitative document analysis.

In the political dimension, the evidence demonstrates significant institutional restructuring, including the 2022 constitutional referendum, which amended the Constitution, and the 2026 draft revisions affecting constitutional provisions. Additional reforms—such as lowering electoral thresholds, introducing quotas for women and youth, and expanding local elections—indicate efforts toward political modernization. However, the data also suggest that these changes largely constitute procedural adjustments rather than substantive democratization, as executive dominance and managed political pluralism persist.

In the economic sphere, the results highlight measurable progress in diversification and modernization. Structural reforms targeting SMEs, privatization, digitalization, and green energy transition further illustrate a shift toward a more diversified and innovation-driven economy. Nevertheless, continued dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and exposure to external economic volatility indicate that these reforms represent partial structural transformation rather than a complete economic shift.

In the social domain, the findings reveal expanded welfare provisions and improvements in public services. Quantitative indicators—such as reduction in crimes against women and children, pension replacement rates reaching, and increased social spending benefiting millions of citizens—demonstrate tangible outcomes. Reforms in education, healthcare, and social protection reflect a commitment to improving quality of life and reducing inequality. Yet, these measures primarily enhance state capacity and social stability, suggesting incremental improvements within an existing governance framework rather than transformative social restructuring.

## DISCUSSION

The findings across the three dimensions reveal consistent patterns of controlled liberalization and authoritarian modernization. Politically, successive constitutional changes (2022 and especially 2026) have streamlined institutions and introduced formal pluralism (e.g., lowered thresholds, new Kurultai structure), yet they simultaneously consolidate presidential appointment powers and limit genuine opposition space—evident in the shift to a fully proportional unicameral system and criticisms regarding erosion of checks and balances. Economically, diversification efforts and investment inflows coexist with persistent resource dependence and state dominance in key sectors. Social reforms show tangible investments in welfare and education but operate within tightly managed civic space, often redirecting anti-corruption proceeds without addressing deeper inequality drivers.

These patterns confirm and extend arguments in prior literature. They align with Knox and Orazgaliyev (2025) on enduring Soviet-era institutional legacies and centralized elite continuity, while supporting Cornell (2024) and others on “authoritarian modernization” as a strategy for regime adaptation rather than democratization. The analysis challenges overly optimistic official narratives by highlighting the paradox of expanded formal participation alongside restricted civil society and media (as noted by Freedom House classifications).

Theoretically, this multi-dimensional assessment demonstrates that in hybrid regimes like Kazakhstan, reforms often serve dual purposes: responding to legitimacy crises (e.g., 2022 unrest) while renewing institutional tools for stability and succession planning. Empirically, it underscores the limits of top-down change without deeper societal inclusion. The 2026 referendum, with its high approval but compressed consultation, exemplifies this dynamic.

## CONCLUSION

This study assessed the political, economic, and social reforms initiated in Kazakhstan since 2019 under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, with the objective of determining whether these changes represent substantive transformation or controlled, state-led adaptation within a hybrid regime. The findings indicate that, politically, constitutional amendments and institutional reforms—particularly the 2022 referendum and the extensive 2026 draft revisions—have redistributed formal powers and introduced limited pluralism, yet have not fundamentally altered the concentration of authority, as executive dominance persists, yet have not fundamentally altered the concentration of authority, as executive dominance persists.

Tokayev noted, reforms sought to reverse the state's hegemony over society during the Soviet era and transform governmental institutions into ones that are driven by the idea of serving the populace. Tokayev's concept of a “listening state” encapsulated his goal (Cornell, 2023). According to Olzhas Bektenov (Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan), Kazakhstan's socio-economic and political development model has undergone a profound and steady shift over the seven years of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's presidency. The epidemic, the downturn of the world economy, logistical and inflationary shocks, geopolitical unrest, and the necessity of resolving domestic political and economic imbalances that had developed during earlier decades all occurred during these years. The President was able to guarantee stability and set the nation on a path of assured growth in spite of objective challenges. Significant reforms targeted at the state's long-term sustainability have been implemented in response to various problems. President Tokayev does not seek immediate outcomes and is not inclined toward populism. The head of state is actively working to establish a strong basis for the nation's progress, guaranteeing both political and economic stability as well as an increase in the well-being of its population (Bektenov, 2026). Finally, the reform trajectory reflects a pattern of “authoritarian modernization” or “controlled liberalization,” characterised by incremental institutional change and regime resilience. The study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated, multi-dimensional framework for analysing reform processes in hybrid regimes, with implications for policymakers seeking to balance stability and reform, civil society actors advocating for deeper participation, and

scholars examining post-Soviet governance. At the same time, the study is limited by its reliance on official and publicly available sources.

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