THE OXUS SOCIETY FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS

ENSURING A POSITIVE FUTURE FOR KAZAKHSTAN

MADINA JUNUSSOVA, AIGUL BEIMISHEVA, MEREKE TANAGUZOVA, AND ALBINA TORTBAYEVA

ENSURING A POSITIVE FUTURE FOR KAZAKHSTAN

About the authors:

Madina Junussova: *CERGE-EI Foundation Fellow-Teacher, University of Central Asia*

Aigul Beimisheva: *Professor. Humanities School, Narxoz University*

Mereke Tanaguzova: *Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Public Policy, Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University*

Albina Tortbayeva: *Founder of Arlab Research Community and Program Manager at Oxus Society*

THE OXUS SOCIETY FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS

INTRODUCTION

In March 2024, the annual spring flooding in the northern regions of Kazakhstan was unprecedented in its severity and caused serious socio-economic disruption. Within just a few days, over 86,000 people were displaced, over 5,000 livestock killed, and many left without a means of subsistence [1]. The damage to critical infrastructure could cost over $400 million according to one Kazakh parliamentarian [2]. While the struggle to combat the immediate damage from the floods is drawing to a close, the real struggle is to put in place mitigating practices and investments to form adequate channels for surface water collection and reinforced riverbanks during the drought season. This climate emergency highlights the urgency for Kazakhstan to reassess its current stance on weak climate adaptation and unpreparedness to tackle the consequences of natural disasters. There is a need to develop better climate policies by engaging in expert dialogue and offering evidence-based solutions and policy recommendations on strengthening the institutional environment and enhancing resilience capacities to achieve a strong and sustainable future for every region in the country.

Climate resilience is only one of numerous challenges facing Kazakhstan. This report synthesises ideas discussed at an academic dialogue between Kazakh and American scholars during Phase II of the Kazakhstan Futures project, consisting of a series of moderated online discussions and a final event, held between April 18th and 19th, 2024, in Astana. The event provided a platform for rigorous brainstorming sessions focused on the long-term prospects of Kazakhstan's development, specifically looking toward the year 2050. The discussions revolved around the central question: "What could Kazakhstan look like in 2050?" Scholars examined three scenarios titled "no change, realistic, and optimistic" relating to the potential socio-economic development of Kazakhstan up to 2050 and the key factors and risks shaping the likelihood of these different outcomes unfolding. The insights gathered from these discussions reflect a comprehensive analysis of potential future policy pathways for Kazakhstan, highlighting the threats, opportunities, and challenges ahead in a constantly evolving and uncertain geopolitical context.

CORE CHALLENGES

The government of Kazakhstan faces a number of key challenges:

1): Governmental Inaction and Corruption

Persistent inaction and widespread corruption could continue to impede effective governance and public trust. This may prevent the implementation of necessary policies and reforms needed to address emerging challenges. This is also exacerbated by the low-skilled civil service staff and absence of effective performance management and training.

2): Political Instability and Unrest

Ongoing issues in the western regions of the country, including protests, strikes and frequent flooding, could lead to increased political unrest. Western regions, particularly Mangistau, are centres for the extractive industries that drive the country's economy. However, the benefits of this resource wealth have not trickled down to the local population. A government intervention to end strikes by oil workers in Zhanaozen in December 2011 resulted in over ten deaths. A decade later, unrest that swept across the country in January 2022 started in the western regions. Disillusionment with the government might manifest in social protests and other forms of opposition, potentially destabilising the country.

3): Environmental Degradation

Temperatures in Kazakhstan are projected to rise by 5.3°C by the 2090s compared to the 1986–2005 baseline under the highest emissions pathway (RCP8.5), with a 3.7°C greater increase than under the lowest emissions pathway (RCP2.6). This significant warming will lead to more frequent severe droughts, accelerated glacier melting, and increased flood risk, threatening human lives, agriculture, and ecosystems, with spring wheat yields potentially declining by up to 50% by the 2050s [3]. Without proactive measures to manage environmental challenges, there may be an escalation in problems such as water scarcity, pollution, and adverse impacts of climate change. These issues could severely affect agriculture, water resources, and overall public health.

4): Socio-economic Disparities

Continuing on the current path might exacerbate socio-economic inequalities, leading to more significant disparities in wealth, access to resources, and quality of life. This could result in heightened social tensions and further divide society.

5): Educational inequality

The disparities between urban and rural schools and university education quality are persistent, as well as low teacher training, absence of textbooks and overpopulated schools - all resulting in low-skilled human capital, exacerbating youth unemployment and social tensions and unrest. The difference between rural and urban schoolchildren in Kazakhstan has been growing. In the international report PISA 2018, the gap between rural and urban schools was 37 points. Four years later, in 2022, the difference had increased to 44 points [4].

6): Migration Pressures

Almost one third of the population lives outside the district where they were born according to the 2021 census [5]. The combination of environmental degradation, lack of opportunities, and political unrest could lead to both internal and external migration, straining urban infrastructure and increasing tension in regions that receive large numbers of migrants.

7): Lack of Resilience Against Natural Disasters

Insufficient preparedness and response mechanisms for natural disasters might result in growing vulnerability of the population and infrastructure, leading to greater human and economic losses during such events.

8): Economic Stagnation

Without innovation and investments in infrastructure and technology, Kazakhstan could face economic stagnation. The lack of diversification and reliance on traditional industries might not sustain long-term growth, particularly in a rapidly changing global economic environment.

9): Connectivity

Kazakhstan faces several connectivity challenges that affect its integration into the global economy. These challenges include its landlocked status, limited air connectivity, trade barriers, digital infrastructure discrepancies, regulatory complexities, and geopolitical factors. Diversifying and securing reliable trade

routes is essential to protect Kazakhstan's economy from global supply chain disruptions and to achieve economic growth and integration into the global economy.

Kazakhstan faces significant challenges, including governmental inaction, corruption, political instability, and environmental degradation. Without proactive measures, these issues could lead to increased political unrest, migration pressures, and economic stagnation. Addressing these challenges is critical for ensuring sustainable development and stability.

The following section discusses three possible futures for Kazakhstan. The no-change scenario reflects the current trend of stagnation and ineffective governance. The realistic scenario of mixed actions builds on the observed gradual improvements that can lead to partial policy implementation and community engagement. The optimistic scenario is an ambitious hope to improve existing capacities using international experience, digital infrastructure, active stakeholder engagement and policy dialogue, which can lead to substantial socio-economic transformation and resilience.

BASELINE SCENARIO

In this scenario, the political and economic situation remains stagnant due to the absence of strong political incentives for climate action and halfhearted implementation of development policies caused by a combination of corruption and ineffective management at national and local levels of governance. Policies continue to sit idle on shelves, and a persistent implementation gap exacerbates the social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by residents of Kazakhstan. In the western regions of the nation, amidst ongoing conflicts and frequent flooding, there is an escalating risk of increased political unrest and decreasing public trust in the national government. Such dissatisfaction creates another danger of growing governmental criticism, a new round of social protests, and other forms of political opposition.

This scenario could potentially lead to significant consequences, including both internal and external migration. For instance, persistent annual flooding in specific locations raises logical concerns about the viability of continued residence in these areas, prompting

residents to relocate. This phenomenon could extend to areas suffering from chronic water shortages, potentially leading to an increase in "climate migrants" due to ecological migration. The current country's stance necessitates immediate climate actions involving data-informed and context-sensitive mitigation [6] and adaptation policies and action plans.

Moreover, systemic issues such as ill management, low transparency, and poor accountability exacerbate current development challenges. Recent investigations by the general prosecutor's office have revealed mismanagement of funds designated for flood control, highlighting a pattern of severe corruption and misconduct at all levels of the country's governance. Such revelations intensify public distrust and disappointment, further complicating the socio-political landscape and resulting in unrest and instability. This situation underscores the urgent need for robust governance reforms to restore public trust and effectively manage natural disasters and their broader socio-political implications.

MIXED SCENARIO

Recent reports from international organisations such as the World Bank's Kazakhstan Overview suggest a gradual economic improvement in Kazakhstan, with a potential uplift in socio-economic development by a total of 4.7 percent GDP growth in 2025 (from 3.4 percent 2024) due to increases in oil production, following a period marked by high inflation and other challenges [7]. Lessons drawn from successful and less compelling scenarios could be integrated into the national development plan, enhancing future strategic initiatives, including focusing on the risks of climate change.

After the flooding accident, the national government may develop the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) to increase preparedness for natural disasters. European nations, for instance, have demonstrated the ability to manage and derive benefits from uncontrollable natural phenomena by innovating energy solutions from floods. Drawing on these international examples, there is a realistic expectation that, supported by international organisations, the national government will begin drafting comprehensive national action and mitigation plans.

International institutions continue to provide the country with technical assistance and develop the capacities of government officials and researchers. The emphasis on further academic programs and research is critical to ensuring that data-driven decisions are not merely reactive or anecdotal and that constant learning and adaptation occur. The potential for significant research funding, likely supported by governmental and non-governmental donors, presents an opportunity for academic institutions to develop projects incorporating climate considerations into broader research agendas. There is also a connection between climate-induced migration and increased risks of human trafficking and illegal migration since droughts and flooding can make rural populations leave their villages looking for other job opportunities in cities and leaving them more vulnerable to human trafficking. These risks underscore the necessity for structured legal and institutional frameworks to safeguard existing capacities and not allow brain drain.

Increasing public awareness of climate issues, strengthening urban and regional resilience, and sustainable development is pivotal. As discussions around these topics permeate all levels of society—from kindergartens to community platforms—it is crucial that these dialogues lead to informed, constructive community engagement rather than protests. It will help apply downward societal pressure that encourages transparency and accountability from the government and lead to a community-based and participatory approach in relevant national project design and delivery.

While the commitment to both anti-corruption measures and climate action exists, the dichotomy between positive and negative actions creates a palpable sense of uncertainty. The uncertainty can only be resolved by decisive actions and clear, monitored strategies that align more closely with positive outcomes. Effective monitoring and reporting systems are essential to track progress and ensure accountability, clearly indicating policy impacts and community dynamics. As researchers, our role extends to evaluating these policies' real-world impacts and efficacy, contributing to informed policymaking and effective governance.

OPTIMISTIC SCENARIO

In a favourable scenario, leveraging Kazakhstan's relatively small population of 19 million and its robust digital infrastructure presents a unique opportunity for socio-economic transformation and behavioural change. The country's digital technologies are advancing, and despite some imperfections, government operations are functional, contributing to practical electronic services efforts. This technological framework facilitates a strong networking culture among citizens, enhancing the dissemination of information and fostering community engagement.

The government's climate actions could be easily supported by the populace's comprehensive participation, and transformative positive change is attainable. However, the government must recognize its role not merely as a unilateral decision-maker but as a facilitator of decentralised governance. Enhancing the efficacy of policy implementation necessitates empowering local stakeholders like city and regional governments, industry, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and residents. The empowerment involves providing them with additional responsibilities, decision-making power and capacities like taxation power to have the necessary resources and tools for effective collaboration with businesses and residents.

The envisioned model advocates for a governance structure where local governments actively engage with their communities and industries, fostering a dialogue beyond governmental confines to include citizen feedback. Such an approach could use existing government concepts such as the Listening State, a concept launched by Tokayev in 2019 to refer to a governance system that "quickly and efficiently responds to all constructive citizen requests." [8] This approach should be supported by transparent digital communication tools, allowing for a seamless flow of information and accountability from local to national levels.

Additionally, this scenario underscores the importance of substantial investment in climate action education and raising awareness, particularly in areas like climate action and civic responsibility. Enhancing public awareness and knowledge is pivotal for collective action and is essential for nurturing a culture of responsibility towards one's community and environment. This comprehensive approach promises greater transparency and the potential for enduring positive change.

POLICY OPTIONS

Kazakhstan's vision for a prosperous and sustainable future depends on developing transparent and robust governance, forecasting, long-term planning and efficient investment, technological innovation, inclusive and resilient decision-making, sustainable policies, and effective implementation of these policies by engaging all key stakeholders at local and regional levels across the country. This section outlines the strategic roadmap necessary to achieve these objectives by setting specific, measurable goals and enhancing transparency in government operations. Key initiatives include strengthening environmental resilience, promoting equitable economic growth, fostering community engagement, investing in disaster preparedness, and reinforcing critical infrastructure. The suggested steps may create a reliable long-term basis for a resilient and sustainable nation capable of adapting to and overcoming future challenges and transforming to guarantee a high quality of life for all country residents.

Policy Goals at the national level:

Aim to foster a resilient and sustainable future through improved governance, technological innovation, and inclusive socio-economic development.

Set specific, measurable objectives to:

1): Enhance Transparency and Efficiency in Government Operations

- Develop a robust monitoring system to track the progress of implemented policies against set indicators;
- Regularly update and refine policies based on feedback and changing conditions to ensure adaptability and effectiveness;
- Engage local communities and stakeholders in the evaluation process to maintain relevance and responsiveness of initiatives.

2): Strengthen Environmental Resilience and Sustainability

- Establish stringent environmental regulations to protect natural resources and mitigate the impact of climate change;

- Promote decentralisation and fostering local level stakeholder engagement and community participation in strengthening resilience of regions, urban and rural areas;
- Stimulate initiatives to study, plan, manage and mitigate the impact of natural disasters, focusing on the most vulnerable regions.

3): Promote Equitable Economic Growth and Social Inclusivenes

- Invest in development of inclusive, accessible and resilient critical infrastructure to support economic growth and innovation;
- Foster public-private partnerships to drive technological advancements and infrastructure improvements.

SAMPLE ACTION PLAN: CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Kazakhstan faces various challenges as it navigates towards a more sustainable future. In this section, we reflect on the recent national-level flooding and propose an action plan for addressing one of these challenges: Disaster preparedness and community resilience at the subnational level:

Action 1: Investment in Research and Technological Development: To enhance the capacity for forecasting and assessing natural disasters.

- Allocate funding for the development of advanced geographical information systems (GIS) and remote sensing technologies to create detailed hazard maps. However, it is crucial to avoid applying a pure-sectoral approach. The management of this initiative should be undertaken in an integrated manner by the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Digital Development, Innovation, Aerospace Industry, and others.
- Establish partnerships with academic institutions and international organisations to support ongoing research and innovation in disaster prediction and management. This could include the creation of a special research fund for interdisciplinary research on the drivers and effects of climate change.

Action 2: Development of Decision Support Systems at the Regional Level: To enable regional governments to effectively manage and respond to natural disasters.

- Develop and deploy digital decision support systems that integrate real-time data analysis with hazard mapping to aid in quick and effective decision-making.
- Train regional government officials in the use of these systems to enhance their ability to preemptively manage potential disaster scenarios.

Action 3: Integrated Habitat Assessment: To identify and assess hazard-prone areas and develop local emergency response strategies.

- Conduct comprehensive habitat and environmental assessments to identify regions at high risk of natural disasters.
- Develop localised emergency response strategies that are tailored to the specific needs and conditions of these regions.

Action 4: Capacity Building for Regional and Local Governments: To strengthen regional and local government capabilities in resilience planning and emergency management.

- Implement training programs for local and regional officials on resilience planning and disaster response.
- Establish a framework for continuous learning and improvement in disaster preparedness at the local and regional levels

Action 5: Infrastructure Investment for Enhanced Resilience: To strengthen critical infrastructure to withstand natural disasters.

- Prioritise investments in the reinforcement of critical infrastructure such as water management systems, power grids, and transportation networks.
- Implement engineering projects aimed at strengthening river embankments and other key structures to prevent flood-related damage.

Action 6: Public Awareness and Community Engagement: To educate and engage communities in disaster preparedness and resilience building.

- Launch public awareness campaigns to educate residents about the risks of

living in hazard-prone areas and the importance of emergency preparedness.
- Encourage community involvement in resilience-building activities, such as community-driven hazard mapping and emergency planning workshops.

Action 7: Strategic Relocation and Settlement Planning: To mitigate the risk to human life and reduce disaster vulnerability by relocating settlements from high-risk areas.

- Develop a strategic plan for the relocation of populations from high-risk areas to safer locations.The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the RK, together with the Ministry of Emergency Situations of RK, should manage this initiative.
- Work closely with affected communities to ensure that relocation efforts are sensitive to local needs and cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

This paper has articulated the contours of a positive scenario for Kazakhstan's socio-economic and environmental future, emphasising the necessity of strategic adaptation and proactive governance. The current situation, while challenged by issues of corruption, inadequate policy implementation, and environmental stresses, also presents significant opportunities for transformative change. This change, supported by digital technologies in areas such as e-governance, data analytics, and communication, can enhance transparency, efficiency, and public participation.

To realise the positive scenario, it is imperative to establish clear, measurable indicators that can guide progress and ensure accountability. These indicators should encompass economic growth, technological advancement, ecological sustainability, and social inclusiveness. Specific benchmarks could include the reduction of poverty levels, improvement in digital infrastructure, enhancement in local governance capacities, and tangible decreases in environmental vulnerabilities. Strategies for reducing these vulnerabilities could involve stricter environmental regulations, increased investment in renewable energy, and community-based conservation efforts.

Furthermore, the establishment of a robust monitoring and reporting mechanism is crucial. This system should not only track progress against set indicators but also

facilitate a responsive governance framework that can adapt and refine strategies in real-time. Engaging community stakeholders in this process will ensure that the initiatives are grounded in local realities and needs, enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability.

Ultimately, Kazakhstan can navigate its complex challenges towards a resilient and prosperous future by focusing on a positive trajectory and rigorously measuring the current situation against clear indicators. This approach will require concerted efforts from all sectors of society—including government, industry, academia, and civil society—to collaboratively forge a path that is not only ambitious but also achievable, ensuring a stable and thriving Kazakhstan for generations to come.

REFERENCES

1. *"Kazakhstan Floods: March 2024," ReliefWeb, 2024 https://reliefweb.int/disaster/fl-2024-000039-kaz*
2. *"Floods May Cost Kazakhstan's Economy $446 Million, Says Kazakh Expert," Inform.kz, 2024 https://en.inform.kz/news/floods-may-cost-kazakhstans-economy-446-million-says-kazakh-expert-0383a4/*
3. *"Climate Risk Profile: Kazakhstan," World Bank, 2024 https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/15834-WB_Kazakhstan%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf*
4. *"Kazakhstan Pass 'PISA' With Excellent Marks," CABAR, 2024, https://cabar.asia/ru/kazahstan-podgotovitsya-k-pisa"*
5. *"A Spatial Analysis of Internal Migration in Kazakhstan," Eurasian Research Institute, https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/41789/*
6. *"People on the Move in a Changing Climate: Linking Policy, Evidence, and Action," IOM UN Migration, November 2022, https://rovienna.iom.int/news/people-move-changing-climate-linking-policy-evidence-and-action*
7. *"The World Bank in Kazakhstan," World Bank, 2024, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kazakhstan/overview#:~:text=Economic%20Outlook-,The%202024%20economic%20forecast%20anticipates%20a%20growth%20slowdown%20to%203.4,adherence%20to%20OPEC%2B%20production%20cuts.*
8. *"State of the Nation Address," Akorda.kz, 2019, https://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019*

APPENDIX

Cover Photo Source

InBusiness.kz. Population of Kazakhstan increased by 112 thousand people since the beginning of the year [Internet]. Almaty: InBusiness.kz; 2024 [cited 2024 Jun 24]. Available from: https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/naselenie-kazahstana-vyroslo-s-nachala-goda-112-tysyach-chelovek

Ensuring a Positive Future for Kazakhstan

Written by

Madina Junussova, Aigul Beimisheva,
Mereke Tanaguzova, and Albina Tortbayeva

Edited by

Edward Lemon, Bradley Jardine
and Michael Hilliard

For more information please visit

www.oxussociety.org