



EIAS Event: 30 Years of Kazakhstan Independence and Prospects for Future EU-Kazakhstan Cooperation

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On 7 December 2021, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted an in-person event celebrating the 30th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence and the future prospects for EU-Kazakhstan relations. The discussion was chaired by Lin Goethals, EIAS Director, and included distinguished panellists that explored the topic from various standpoints.

The symposium was launched by **His Excellency Margulan Baimukhan**, the Ambassador of the Republic of Kazakhstan to Belgium and the Head of Mission to the EU and NATO, who delivered his opening remarks. H.E. Baimukhan underscored the impressive speed of Kazakhstan's transition to a free market and openness to democratic institutions. Kazakhstan is now the largest economy in Central Asia with a GDP of over 180 billion USD, a 16-fold increase since 1991. This has been possible due to free-market reforms that have been introduced over the past 30 years. Moreover, Kazakhstan has successfully established a multiparty democratic system, which is fostered by an open civil society.

H.E. Baimukhan also remarked how Kazakhstan has become increasingly active internationally, gaining a seat at the UN Human Rights Council for 2022-2024. Nur Sultan has also played a key role in the non-proliferation regime by giving up the 4th largest nuclear arsenal and establishing a nuclear-free zone in 2009. Moreover, in compliance with the Paris Agreement, Kazakhstan has pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2060 and halve greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.

The second panellist, Senior Adviser for Eastern Europe and Central Asia at the European External Action Service, **Boris Iarochevitch**, went over the EU-Kazakhstan bilateral relationship. Established soon after independence, the EU-Kazakhstan bilateral relationship has culminated in the EU-Kazakhstan Partnership and Cooperation agreement in 2020. This agreement underscores converging interests, from the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, to the transition to a green economy and regional stability, especially in the context of the recent crisis in Afghanistan. This convergence has been enabled by the enormous modernisation process undertaken in 2019 by President Tokayev, which introduced sweeping social and economic reforms. Together, Kazakhstan and the EU have implemented more than 350 projects to strengthen judicial, social, economic reforms across Central Asia.

The EU also aims to support Kazakhstan's transition to clean energy and sustainable forestry through the 2021-27 budget and the aforementioned Partnership and Cooperation agreement. Such funds are also allocated to Kazakhstan's digitalisation and to promote people-to-people exchanges. Especially in higher education and

research, the EU-Kazakhstan partnership has encouraged the exchange of students and researchers in partner universities, fostering understanding between the bloc and Nur Sultan.

Mukhit-Ardager Sydyknazarov, Director of the Institute for Contemporary Studies at the Eurasian National University followed, presenting his new book titled “Uninterrupted Nationhood in Kazakhstan: Kazakh State on the European and American maps of the XVI-XIX centuries”. With this fundamental research, the author examined how Western cartography has conceived the nation of Kazakhstan between the 16th and the 19th century. Kazakhstan has historically played an important bridging role between West and East, which was recognised by cartographers over the examined period.

Jean De Brabander is a lawyer, economic diplomat, Honorary Consul of Malta for the Province of Limburg, Coordinator of the Expertise Pillar for Technology, Science and Innovation Diplomacy, as well as Adviser for the SIC countries at the Brussels Diplomatic Academy of the Free University of Brussels (VUB). He dwelled over his personal experience in Kazakhstan, struck by the far-sightedness of the leadership during his visits, especially regarding energy issues. Indeed, although relying on oil for the bulk of its revenues, Kazakhstan has embarked on a diversification effort to make its economy more resilient and less dependent on hydrocarbon exports.

Another sign of foresight is the country’s bid to project itself as a vital logistical and trade hub. An example is Kazakhstan’s biggest dry port, Khorgos, which has become a major node for land connectivity in Eurasia. As an alternative to seaborne routes, railways are vital to shorten supply chains and help address the challenges that disruptions such as Covid-19 have borne on trade.

The last panellist, **Marat Terterov**, Head of Expansion Activities at Energy Charter Secretariat has reflected upon Kazakhstan’s road to statehood and the consolidation of its institutions and economy. He identified two factors that have played a key role to Kazakhstan’s modernisation. The first is the openness and solidity of the banking sector. Being an early reformer among the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kazakhstan’s top-class banking sector attracted foreign investors because of its reliability.

These propitious reforms resulted in enormous volumes of FDI, especially in the oil industry. This further consolidated Kazakh statehood. As more and more private equity entered Kazakhstan, Nur Sultan was prodded to update its legal regime for investments, adding to the sophistication of Kazakhstan’s institutions. According to Dr. Terterov, the oil economy thus played a vital role not just in terms of economic development, but also in terms of institutional modernisation.

The Q&A session touched upon the role of civil society in Kazakhstan’s modernisation path as Kazakhstan established a National Council of Public Trust, an advisory body to encourage dialogue between interest groups, NGOs, state-owned agencies, and the government. The growing number of NGOs – around 27.000 – is a sign of Kazakhstan’s increasingly vibrant civil society and the newly established dialogue testifies to their importance in consultation and decision-making.

Boris Iarochevitch remarked on the positive evolution in the involvement in Kazakh civil society in decision-making, which the EU warmly welcomes. Moreover, together with Jean De Brabander, he underlined the positive role that Kazakhstan is playing in regional cooperation, being a leading power in the Central Asia region.

Dr. Marat Terterov, explored a major challenge for Kazakhstan – ensuring economic growth while decarbonising. This opens up for cooperation between Nur Sultan and the EU. Dr. Terterov underscored the positive impact that the private sector could bring to the partnership, calling for increased involvement of private actors.