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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Action Plan for enhancing cooperation between civil society organisations in the European Union and Kazakhstan in the framework of the implementation of the New Strategy on Central Asia and of the Global Gateway

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2025/2955)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC acknowledges the potential to expand EU relations with the Republic of Kazakhstan on the basis of the economic and trade interdependencies already created in certain areas such as investments in energy and in logistics. However, it is essential to ensure that these relations prioritise sustainability, human rights and inclusiveness, and that they align EU values and strategic goals. For fostering a balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation, it is important that EU-Kazakhstan relations be as diversified as possible in various fields of activity, carefully integrating environmental, social and geopolitical concerns.

1.2. The EESC supports the development of civic and social dialogue in the Central Asia region and advocates for it to be formalised, since civil society in the region is pursuing this objective, along the lines of the good practices implemented in relations with organised civil society in the Western Balkans and to some extent the Eastern Partnership.

1.3. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the countries that can most easily and quickly synchronise with the EU in the social and civic dialogue support programmes, including the experience they have already gained by participating in the annual EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum.

1.4. EESC firmly believes that the implementation of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) and the Global Gateway in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia in general cannot be carried out without the involvement of civil society organisations and without a clear financial component allocated to support the measures provided for in Chapter 5, Article 251 of the EPCA.

1.5. The EESC is convinced that relations between organised civil society in the EU and Kazakhstan can develop in a structured way on the basis of an Action Plan, with several priorities and in line with the objectives of the New EU Strategy for Central Asia. Funding must be provided by the Global Gateway initiative, with the proportional governmental contribution of the states in this region, as well as other international donors. The **Action Plan's priorities should be:**

— Ensuring constant independent monitoring, evaluation and implementation of: a) workers' conditions, respect for workers' rights and trade union activities; b) respect for human rights and non-discrimination; c) freedom of the press; d) certainty and respect of the rule of law.

— Establishing an EU-Central Asia Civil Society Platform on the basis of the model and experience gained within the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forums periodically organised by the European institutions and the good practices developed by the European Economic and Social Committee or by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

— Involving civil society organisations to promote the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the EU and Kazakhstan on a strategic partnership in the field of raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen is essential. Their engagement can also ensure alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 7 (Affordable Clean Energy), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), by contributing to the assessment of project sustainability and due diligence obligations according to the EU and OECD standards.

— The European Union could also help support the development and consolidation of civil society in Kazakhstan by creating an experience exchange programme for civil servants in the administration and staff in the judicial system in the country, with the involvement of the European Institute of Public Administration in Maastricht and the European Centre for Judges and Lawyers in Luxembourg.

— The European institutions should also support the development of civil society in Kazakhstan by increasing the educational opportunities for young Kazakhs through the Erasmus programme, which has already facilitated the training of new civil society representatives, thus contributing to a better understanding of the system of principles and values in the EU. Young people from the Member States who go to study in Kazakhstan also play an important role in strengthening bilateral cooperation based on mutual understanding and respect.

2. General comments

2.1. This opinion focuses on strengthening cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan, particularly in areas of concern to organised civil society, considering the priorities and opportunities resulting from the implementation of the New EU Strategy on Central Asia and the Global Gateway initiative.

2.2. Partnership with the EU remains a cornerstone of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, and it is the first country in the Central Asian region to sign the EPCA with the EU, which fostered deeper collaboration in key sectors such as trade, investment, energy, agriculture and connectivity.

2.3. The EU is Kazakhstan's largest trading partner. In 2023, European investment in Kazakhstan reached EUR 170 billion and EU goods trade with Kazakhstan totalled EUR 42,4 billion, an increase of 5,6 % compared to 2022. EU exports were worth EUR 12,1 billion, an increase of 17,2 % compared to 2022, and imports from Kazakhstan reached EUR 30,3 billion (up 1,6 % compared to 2022) ([1]).

2.4. Trade between Kazakhstan and the EU includes significant exports of energy resources and imports of machinery and equipment. Kazakhstan ranks twelfth in the world in oil reserves. About 13 % of the EU's oil demand is provided by this country.

([1]) https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/kazakhstan_en.

2.5. Kazakhstan's strategic role extends to critical raw materials (CRM), as it has 33 of the 34 elements identified in the European Commission's Critical Raw Materials Act. Of these, 19 are currently in production and another 14 are confirmed for future extraction, positioning Kazakhstan as a key partner for the EU in ensuring a stable supply of essential materials for the energy transition and advanced technology sectors.

2.6. To this end, on 7 November 2022 a MoU was signed between the EU and Kazakhstan regarding a strategic partnership in the field of raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen ([2]), with the objective of stepping up cooperation in this field, both to multiply investments in the areas covered by this agreement and to encourage participation in innovation and research programmes.

2.7. Kazakhstan is 'building bridges' between Asia and Europe by developing connectivity and transport networks. A total of 13 international transport corridors cross Kazakhstan, including five rail and eight road corridors. The Middle Corridor has significant potential to become a key trade link. Kazakhstani and foreign airlines operate flights to 132 destinations in 32 countries, providing connectivity between Central Asia and Europe.

2.8. Based on an EU and EBRD *Study on Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia* ([3]), but also in the context of the implementation of the Global Gateway initiative, Astana hosted on 12 June 2024 the launch of a Coordination Platform for the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).

2.9. The platform is designed to facilitate projects along the TITR and brings together donors, investors, stakeholders and beneficiaries involved in this transport route. These include the five Central Asian states, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye, the European Commission and EU, Member States, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

2.10. Prior to the Russian war in Ukraine, the Northern Eurasian Corridor served as the main route connecting Europe to Asia by land, but the study identified the TITR as an alternative. In this study, priority investments in Kazakhstan for the modernisation of railway infrastructure were also recommended.

2.11. Kazakhstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which Russia leads. Strong economic ties between Kazakhstan and the EU could enhance Kazakhstan's economic stability, indirectly benefiting Russia by strengthening the EAEU and its member states' economies. Given EU sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, there have been concerns about Russia using neighbouring countries, including Kazakhstan, as alternative export routes or as intermediaries for accessing restricted goods. This increase in trade volume might open up opportunities for Russia to circumvent sanctions.

3. **Specific comments**

3.1. *Civil society in Kazakhstan – the legal and institutional framework. Public engagement and consultation with civil society*

3.1.1. In the last 30 years, new and quite significant NGO initiatives have emerged in the country, most of which are operating successfully, providing a wide range of services to society. In practical terms, some of the civil society initiatives have some influence on political, social, economic, cultural and humanitarian life in Kazakhstan.

([2]) https://primeminister.kz/en/news/kazakhstan-and-eu-sign-strategic-partnership-document-8103856.
([3]) https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/international-relations/study-sustainable-transport-connections-central-asia_en.

3.1.2. By presidential decree no. 341 of 2 June 2020, a strategic document was approved that defines the main directions of long-term civil society development – *The concept for the development of civil society in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030* – which sets out new approaches for transforming the activities of the civil sector. The concept will be implemented in two stages: the first stage from 2020 to 2025 and the second stage from 2026 to 2030.

3.1.3. On 29 December 2021, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan *On the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Republic of Kazakhstan* entered into force. The Law regulates aspects of human rights activities carried out by human rights defenders, guarantees of the rights and freedoms of human rights defenders and the creation, functioning and monitoring of the mechanism for protecting people carrying out human rights activities.

3.1.4. On 3 January 2021, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan On the introduction of amendments and additions to some legislative acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the activities of public councils was adopted. In the formation of public councils, work was carried out to ensure the involvement of representatives of active NGOs, parties and civil activists.

3.1.5. In December 2021, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan On the introduction of amendments and additions to certain legislative acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the improvement of civil procedural legislation and the development of institutions for extrajudicial and prejudicial settlement of disputes (On Mediation) was adopted.

3.1.6. On 4 July 2022, the head of state signed the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on volunteering and charity activities, in which changes were adopted regarding state social orders and grant funding. Today, the number of active volunteers is approximately 200 thousand people. More than 65 000 volunteers are registered on the Qazvolunteer.kz website.

3.1.7. Also in 2022, the National Kurultai was created under the leadership of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. This is a consultative body with the main declared purpose of developing ideas and steps for the further development of social empowerment ([4]).

3.1.8. On 2 October 2023, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan *On Public Control* was adopted. The law emphasises the importance of citizen participation in public administration and ensuring government transparency. It proposes mechanisms to allow the public to actively participate in monitoring the activities of government agencies.

3.1.9. The country's current leaders implemented in 2019 the concept of a 'listening state', as a means of responding promptly to 'constructive criticism and suggestions from citizens'. Some of the tools of this initiative include online petitions and referendums. For an online petition to be considered, it has to gather 50 000 signatures. Civil society representatives agreed that this instrument worked well. However, some changes are envisaged, in particular regarding the number of signatures that will be required for to validate a petition. So far, no official figures are known, but some representatives have said that 150 000 signatures are required, which would be exceedingly difficult to obtain in such a vast country with an unevenly distributed population of 20 million.

3.1.10. In addition, any citizen can ask the authorities an online query on the eOtinish web portal ([5]), and Kazakhstani representatives met during the mission said that the tool worked very well, although the answers were not always satisfactory.

3.1.11. On 6 October 2024, the government held a referendum on the construction of a nuclear power plant. Concerns were raised by NGOs and citizens about who would finance such a large project and the fact that Kazakhstan alone could not finance the construction from its state budget. In addition, the population seemed to be more concerned about the possible defects (corruption, incompetence, bureaucracy) of the project, rather than about its nature – the nuclear power plant.

3.1.12. The EPCA provides for cooperation between EU and Kazakhstani civil society – Chapter 5, Article 251 – stipulating that 'The Parties shall continue and strengthen their dialogue, in the form of meetings and consultations, and shall cooperate on the role of civil society'.

([4]) https://quryltai.kz.
([5]) https://eotinish.kz/kk.

3.1.13. The EESC delegation met with a civil society organisation monitoring the implementation of the EU-Kazakhstan MoU on a Strategic Partnership in Raw Materials, Batteries and Renewable Hydrogen. Representatives of this organisation suggested that obtaining reliable information was a challenge, as the MoU contained a clause on both confidentiality and transparency.

3.1.14. Civil society with expertise is concentrated in large cities, mainly in Astana and Almaty, and is lacking in rural areas. As a result, environmental impact assessments in the regions are difficult to obtain. At the same time, involvement of young people in civil society organisations is growing and civil society initiatives are receiving support.

3.2. *Labour migration policies in Kazakhstan*

3.2.1. Kazakhstan has signed the Declaration on the Coordinated Migration Policy of the Member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Kazakhstan has ratified the *Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families of the CIS Member States* ([6]). The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan also signed agreements on the legal status of migrant workers and their family members and on cooperation in combating illegal work force migration from third countries.

3.2.2. The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan *On Population Migration* is the main legal instrument. In accordance with the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan *On Employment*, the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan annually establishes a quota for attracting foreign labour to conduct work activities on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan. For 2024, the quota was approved at 0,23 % of the economically active population of the republic.

3.2.3. In 2023, the unemployment rate in the republic decreased from 4,9 % to 4,7 % compared to 2022. The country's main migration exchange is with the CIS countries. The share of arrivals from CIS countries and departures to these countries was 89,7 % and 70,6 %, respectively.

3.3. *Youth policy in Kazakhstan*

3.3.1. Kazakhstan's progress in youth political engagement presents significant opportunities for cooperation with the European Union. As Kazakhstan continues to prioritise empowering young people through its Youth Policy Concept 2023-2029, the framework aligns with the EU's commitments to promote civic engagement, social inclusion and sustainable development among young people.

3.3.2. Partnerships with EU youth parliaments could facilitate exchange programmes, joint sessions and mentoring from MEPs, enriching the legislative experience of young Kazakhs and fostering an understanding of EU practices in representative democracy.

3.4. *Business sector*

3.4.1. Every business entity must apply for membership in the Atameken (Kazakhstan Chamber of Commerce) and pay relatively high membership fees. Atameken and various business organisations from the EU support the strengthening of economic and trade relations between Kazakhstan and the EU.

3.4.2. Visa requirements for Kazakhstani companies and businesses entering the EU are an administrative burden and are often a reason for their absence from EU business forums and events. In this respect, businesses consider that a visa facilitation regime would be a major step not only towards people-to-people contacts, but also towards business-to-business contacts.

([6]) The Commonwealth of Independent State.

3.5. *Trade unions*

3.5.1. According to the law, trade unions can organise strikes but only after the end of the usual procedures (arbitration and mediation). The authorities must be notified if a strike or assembly is planned and only 5 % of the meetings are finally authorised, significantly limiting workers' rights to peaceful assembly. Trade unions are independent but have a low degree of membership within government institutions. Strengthening collective bargaining mechanisms is critical to empower trade unions, enhance worker representation and address this limited participation.

3.5.2. In 2014, a law on trade unions was tabled, but its form was disputed by the international community. These concerns were dismissed after unions were able to propose major changes to the proposed legislation. In the regions, the executive bodies tend to ignore the proposals and suggestions of the trade unions. There are still challenges in the area of freedom of association.

3.5.3. It should be noted that according the 2024 ITUC Global Rights Index, Kazakhstan has the rating 5: corresponding to no guarantee for workers' rights, being one of the worst countries in the world to work in ([7]). In this context of evident fragility for workers' rights and for normal trade union activities, enhancing cooperation between civil society organisations in the European Union and Kazakhstan must necessarily pass through full respect for the rights of workers and independent trade unions.

3.6. *Human rights and non-discrimination*

3.6.1. Human rights organisations have highlighted both progress and ongoing challenges in Kazakhstan's human rights record. While they have acknowledged improvements in areas such as legal reforms and efforts to modernise the political landscape, they have also expressed concerns about setbacks in certain key areas, including the protection of civil liberties and freedom of expression. Despite the launch of reforms to strengthen democracy, tangible, consistent progress remains uneven.

3.6.2. Despite existing legislation that allows for peaceful protests and ensures freedom of assembly, the gap between theory and practice is quite significant. Entities wishing to organise a protest no longer need prior authorisation from Akimat (the local municipality) but only have to notify the authorities. However, in most cases, the potential organiser receives an answer that either the space is already reserved by another CSO (usually a GONGO) or the public space where the protest or event is to take place is under construction. It then transpires that there is no event taking place in the requested place.

3.6.3. In recent years, some gender-based violence cases have been shown on Kazakhstan media via live-streamed trial processes, which brought the issue to the centre of public debate. In this context, a subsequent law was adopted in April 2024, which toughens the punishment for domestic violence seven years after it was decriminalised.

3.6.4. Women are underrepresented in public office: despite The Law on Election in Kazakhstan introduced quotas requiring 30 % of MPs to be women, young people and people with disabilities. In the current legislative term 20 % of the members of the Senate and 18,4 % of the members of the House of Representatives (Mazhilis) are women ([8]).

3.6.5. After the events of January 2022, the possibility of organising a protest has decreased dramatically, and the authorities tend to disperse even small gatherings of a few people. The activists also note that justice was not carried out for the victims of violence against protesters during the events. The last larger rally was held in February 2022 in Almaty in support of Ukraine after it was invaded by Russia and there have been few protests since.

3.6.6. To help people with disabilities, CSOs have launched an initiative called *Accessible Kazakhstan*. This online tool shows the assessment of the level of accessibility of urban facilities and services for people with disabilities ([9]).

([7]) https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/2024_ituc_global_rights_index_en.pdf.
([8]) https://data.ipu.org/parliament/KZ/KZ-UC01/.
([9]) https://www.unicef.org/kazakhstan/en/stories/paving-accessible-path-future.

3.6.7. LGBTQI+ activism is possible to a greater extent than in other Central Asian countries. Traditionally, the Kazakh nomadic population has been non-discriminatory, open to accepting differences. The situation has worsened considerably for LGBTQI+ people because of Russian propaganda and stigmatisation. Transgender people have to have undergone surgery on their genitals if they want to have their new gender recognised on their identity card ([10]). The proposal to present anti-LGBTQI+ legislation, similar to that in force in Russia has not materialised.

3.7. *Media and press freedom*

3.7.1. According to the Press Freedom Index, in 2024, Kazakhstan ranked 142nd out of 180 countries, compared to 134th in 2023. The government exercises considerable control over the media landscape: approximately 90 % of the media are state-sponsored. The independent press is struggling with sustainable financing. In some cases, they are sponsored by well-known brands that wishing to promote their reputation.

3.7.2. The recently-announced new media legislation raises concerns among journalists and media workers as it is considered to be quite restrictive. Moreover, some measures on the access of foreign journalists to Kazakhstan are under discussion.

3.7.3. Kazakhstan's media and information laws impose a certain level of controls on media content. The media law requires all media outlets to be registered, and the government retains the right to suspend or revoke their certificates in case of publishing sensitive information.

3.7.4. Civil society reports that there is a limited legal framework on access to information of public interest, despite the adoption of digital technologies and their influence on governance and public service. Much information at the request of the public, such as budget information, is not accessible to journalists and citizens, just as few meetings of state authorities are open to the public.

3.7.5. There is a huge amount of Russian propaganda and its impact is extraordinarily high, also since most of the population is Russian speaking. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, there has been a considerable increase in fake news and propaganda. Public institutions seemingly, do not counter it with necessary action.

3.8. *Justice*

3.8.1. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan's judicial system is considered to be superior to that of other countries in the region. The fact that most of the legal information exists in Russian creates an information vacuum for the Kazakh-speaking population. There have also been complaints about too high a level of political dependence between judges, prosecutors and the police.

3.8.2. The Constitutional Court of Kazakhstan was established in 2023. All its procedures are conducted online. Representatives from state agencies and citizens who have raised a case before the Court are invited to the hearings. It acts as a mediator and as a rapid response mechanism. Its role is preventive, while it also monitors the execution of decisions.

3.8.3. The increase in the number of cases submitted to the civil courts is evidence of an increase in the population's confidence in judicial proceedings at this level. The situation differs in criminal cases, in which certain situations of repression have been complained of. In this regard, one of the cases known internationally is that of activist Zhanbolat Mamai, an opposition figure accused of organising mass riots in Almaty during the January 2022 protests.

3.8.4. Opinion No. 11/2023 (Kazakhstan), adopted on 28 March 2023, of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the United Nations Human Rights Council, states that 'The deprivation of liberty of Zhanbolat Mamai is contrary to Articles 3, 9, 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Articles 9 (1), 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights'.

([10]) https://www.rferl.org/a/fighting-for-identity-kazakh-laws-make-life-difficult-for-transgender-community/30774062.html.

4. **Action Plan for enhancing cooperation between civil society organisations in the European Union and Kazakhstan**

4.1. The EESC firmly believes that the implementation of the EPCA and the Global Gateway in Kazakhstan and Central Asia in general cannot be achieved in line with EU standards without the involvement of civil society organisations and without the EU institutions allocating a clear financial component to support the measures provided for in Chapter 5, Article 251 of the EPCA.

4.2. The EESC is convinced that relations between organised civil society in the EU and Kazakhstan can develop in a structured way on the basis of an Action Plan, with several priorities and in line with the objectives of the New EU Strategy for Central Asia. Funding must be provided by the Global Gateway initiative, with a proportionate contribution from the governments of the states in the region, as well as other international donors.

4.3. Setting up an EU-Central Asia Civil Society Platform on the basis of the model and experience gained within the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forums periodically organised by the EU institutions and the good practices developed by the EESC or by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

4.4. The Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan are developed states that have the financial and administrative capacity necessary to ensure to set up an institutional framework for relations between civil society organisations in Central Asia and the European Union.

4.5. The establishment of national civil society platforms in these states would represent an important step towards the establishment of an EU-Central Asia Civil Society Platform, which will allow ongoing, structured dialogue to take place between civil society representatives from EU Member States and the states of the Central Asian region.

4.6. This structured way of ensuring relations between representatives of organised civil society from these two regions of the world can bring significant benefits in strengthening economic, commercial, social and cultural relations, facilitating the exchange of experience and good practices, thus ensuring the conditions for better coordination and synchronisation of action on the international stage.

4.7. The MoU between the EU and Kazakhstan on a strategic partnership in the field of raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen is not just an important tool for attracting investment in these areas of strategic interest for the signatories of this agreement, but also an opportunity to involve organised civil society in the assessment of project sustainability and due diligence obligations in accordance with the UN SDGs, particularly SDG 7, SDG 12 and SDG 13, and the standards adopted by the EU and the OECD.

4.8. The European Union could also help support an enabling institutional environment for a strong and independent civil society in Kazakhstan by creating an experience exchange programme for civil servants in the administration and staff in the judicial system in the country, with the involvement of the European Institute of Public Administration in Maastricht and the European Centre for Judges and Lawyers in Luxembourg.

4.9. Following meetings with representatives of civil society and the Constitutional Court, the EESC delegation which visited Kazakhstan found that many of the situations reported by human rights organisations could have been avoided if the professional training and the mindset of some state representatives in the public administration or in the judicial system had been in line with best practices in OECD countries.

4.10. For example, gaps have been reported in the training of magistrates, mainly due to confusion around legal terminology, as the education and training processes for magistrates are still based on pedagogical methods and teaching materials from the former Soviet system or the current Russian system, without seriously considering the need for magistrates and litigants to interact increasingly in the Kazakh language.

4.11. The EU institutions can also support the development of civil society in Kazakhstan by increasing the educational opportunities for young Kazakhs through the Erasmus Plus programme, which has already facilitated the training of new civil society representatives, thus contributing to a better understanding of the system of principles and values in the EU. Young people from the Member States who go to study in Kazakhstan also play an important role in strengthening bilateral cooperation based on mutual understanding and respect.

4.12. Universities in Kazakhstan are interested in increasing opportunities to involve their students in international exchange programmes with similar higher education institutions in the EU, and this interest is supported by the experience and capacity of universities in this country to manage Erasmus projects according to EU procedures.

Brussels, 26 March 2025.

The President

of the European Economic and Social Committee

Oliver RÖPKE