

Chapter 24

Public Access ICT in Kazakhstan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world; however, it has a population of only 15 million. Kazakhstan is roughly the size of Western Europe and had been the second largest republic of the former Soviet Union until gaining independence in 1991. The nation has subsequently experienced enormous political, economic, and social changes. The national economy relies heavily on the extensive natural wealth in oil, natural gas, and metal ores, including large deposits of uranium. The worldwide markets for these products produced a growth in the GDP of nearly 10% each year in 2002 through 2006, but the economy was sharply affected by the worldwide financial liquidity crisis in 2007-2008.

Kazakhstan shares its borders with Russia, Uzbekistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, and the country is divided regionally among sixteen administrative areas. Astana is the capital, and the other most prominent large cities are Almaty, Karagandy, Shymkent, Atyrau, and Oskemen.

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The climate is continental, with warm summers and colder winters, with precipitation that varies between arid and semi-arid.¹

The political structure of the country is based on a bicameral parliament, and as Kazakhstan's head of government, a prime minister chairs the Cabinet of Ministers. The president is the commander in chief of the armed forces and may veto legislation that has been passed by parliament.

Ethnically and culturally, Kazakhstan is widely diverse, with Kazakhs being the largest ethnic group, followed by Russians and more than one hundred lesser ethnic minorities. Islam is the primary religion, followed by Orthodox Christianity. Although the official language is Kazakh, Russian is used predominantly in business and casual communication.²

Kazakhstan's huge territory and low population density combined with the ethnically diverse population, present a challenge to developmental and technological change. An over dependence on the extractive industries has worsened the situation. At the same time, these factors present an opportunity to develop an information-based society using modern information and communication

technologies (ICTs) that can bridge distances and differences in age, ethnicity, and language. The deployment of these technologies, and the development of an information-based society, present huge social, political, and cultural challenges.

Rapid economic growth, high literacy levels, and new government programs were largely responsible for the increased computer and Internet penetration in Kazakhstan. Increased disposable income levels allow more and more people to own computers. Decreasing Internet tariffs and the increasing availability of broadband coverage in large cities allow for easier access to information. Implementation of government awareness programs will provide access to key government services for all of the population, especially to underserved and vulnerable groups.

Largely because of the promising opportunities that Kazakhstan presents, the country was selected to participate in this international investigative study to assess the ability of the public to access information and communication venues, and also to review the role of ICTs across the overall economic, political, and regulatory framework in Kazakhstan. The researchers assessed how the venues function, how they serve user needs, how they meet operational constraints, and how they realize successes.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW

The Republic of Kazakhstan was the second largest republic of the former Soviet Union and became an independent nation in 1991. Since that time, the country has undergone a wide range of political, economic, and cultural transformations. Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world (roughly, the size of Western Europe) and is one of the world's least densely populated nations with a little over 15 million people. The regional climate is continental, with warm summers and colder winters, and the precipitation varies between arid and semi-arid conditions.³

Vast distances between communities present a challenge to development, and because Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked country in the world, the lack of any direct access to seaports further constrains development. Kazakhstan shares its borders with Russia, Uzbekistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan is divided administratively among sixteen regional divisions composed of fourteen oblasts (regions) and the cities of Almaty and Astana (the capital). The other most prominent cities are Karagandy, Shymkent, Atyrau, and Oskemen.

President Nursultan Nazarbaev has held office since independence in 1991, and the bicameral national parliament tends largely to be pro-presidential. The president also is the commander in chief of the armed forces and may veto legislation passed by parliament. A prime minister chairs the Cabinet of Ministers and serves as the functional head of government. Opposition to the incumbent Nur Otan party is weak and seldom faces any significant political challenges. Since 1991, Kazakhstan has pursued a balanced foreign policy and has worked to develop its economy, especially through oil and natural gas production.

The national economy relies heavily on the extensive natural wealth in oil, natural gas, and metal ores, including large deposits of uranium. The worldwide markets for these products produced a growth in the GDP of nearly 10% each year from 2002 to 2006, but the economy was sharply affected by the worldwide financial liquidity crisis in 2007-2008 due to dependencies on credits from abroad by the banking sector. The country's booming financial and construction sectors were affected the most. The GDP then increased by only 8.5% percent, and economic growth was expected to slump further given the world's economy in 2008. The limited money supply and increasing food prices caused a sharp increase in the inflation rate, which was 18.8% percent at the end of 2007 and into 2008. The government has presented several reforms in the effort to manage the infla-

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