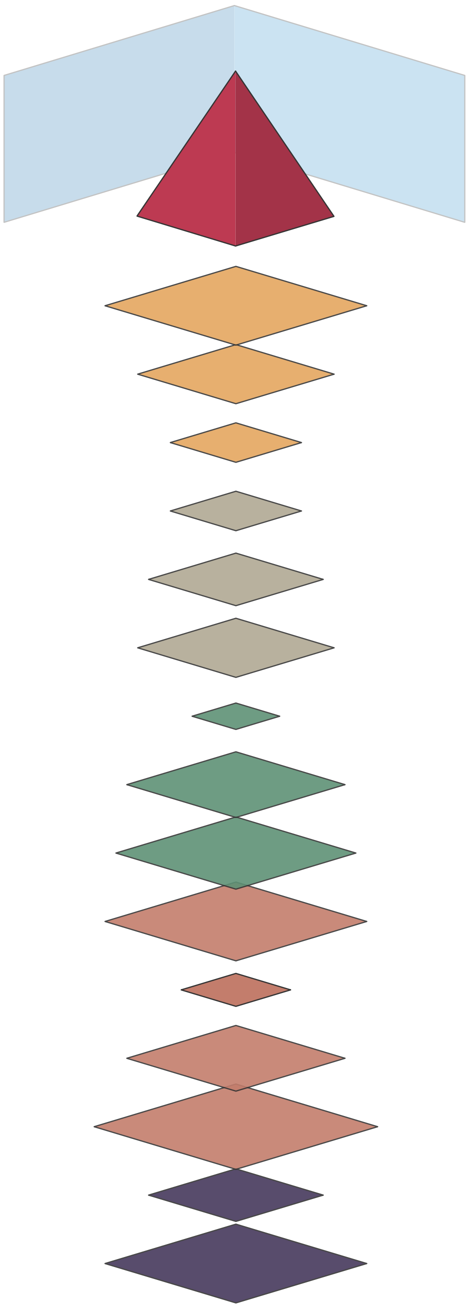
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

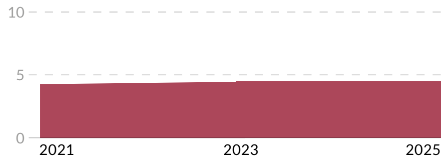
KAZAKHSTAN



4.45 ↘0.02

CRIMINALITY SCORE

131st of 193 countries ↘4
34th of 46 Asian countries -
5th of 8 Central Asian and Caucasian countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS	**4.50**	↗0.17
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	6.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	4.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	3.00	↘0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	3.00	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	4.00	0.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	4.50	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	2.00	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	5.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	5.50	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	6.00	↘0.50
COCAINE TRADE	2.50	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	5.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	6.50	↗0.50
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	4.00	↗1.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	6.00	↗1.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	**4.40**	↘0.20
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	3.00	↘1.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	5.00	↗0.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.00	↘0.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	4.00	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	4.00	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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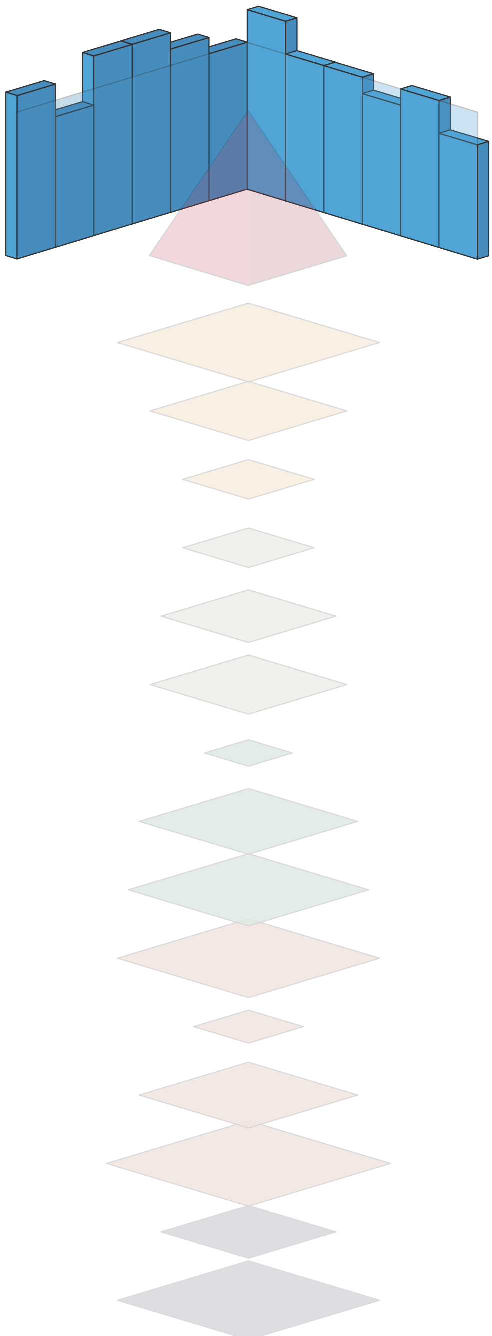
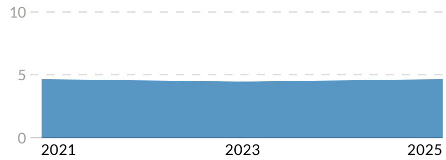
KAZAKHSTAN



4.67 ↗0.12

RESILIENCE SCORE

102nd of 193 countries ↗8
19th of 46 Asian countries ↗2
3rd of 8 Central Asian and Caucasian countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	5.00	0.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	4.00	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	5.50	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	5.50	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	5.00	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	4.50	↗0.50
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	5.50	↗0.50
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	4.50	↗0.50
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	4.50	↘0.50
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	4.00	0.00
PREVENTION	4.50	↗0.50
NON-STATE ACTORS	3.50	0.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Kazakhstan is both a source and a destination for human trafficking. Although 2024 has seen a rise in the number of criminal cases related to human trafficking – reversing a prior declining trend – the changes did not inflict a significant impact on the market. Victims include domestic and foreign nationals, exploited for forced labour and sexual purposes. Migrants unable to enter Russia and citizens fleeing regional conflicts are particularly vulnerable. Exploitation occurs in agriculture, construction and domestic work, with forced labour more prevalent in rural areas. Organized criminal groups and local recruiters, often with transnational ties, use coercion and exploit legal vulnerabilities. Reports indicate complicity among some police officers, while recent initiatives may signal greater institutional recognition of trafficking-related issues.

Irregular migration through Kazakhstan, particularly among Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik nationals, is due, in part, to Russian entry bans and regional instability. Although traditionally a transit country, Kazakhstan has increasingly become a destination. Despite visa-free regimes with neighbouring states, irregular movements persist, owing to individuals' lack of valid travel documents such as passports, and is often aided by smugglers. Individuals from South Asian also transit through Kazakhstan en route to Russia or the EU. Cases of Kazakh citizens attempting irregular migration to the US and Europe have been recorded. Although border crossing attempts continue, data suggests a slight decline in smuggling, possibly owing to economic shifts, tighter EU border controls and regional geopolitical changes. Criminal groups remain active along key border areas.

Extortion and protection racketeering in Kazakhstan are rare. Although such activities occur at a limited scale in certain regions, their prevalence has been stable over recent years and the occurrence is not systemic. Isolated cases have been recorded, including a 2024 incident in Shymkent that involved a group impersonating law enforcement extorting local business owners. However, these incidents do not indicate organized or cross-border criminal activity. Kazakhstan's generally robust law enforcement supports small and medium enterprises, and there is limited evidence of non-state criminal racketeering.

TRADE

Kazakhstan functions primarily as a destination for illicit firearms, with occasional smuggling routes extending to Russia. Sources include Russia, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, along with internal diversion from state stockpiles and craft production. Seizures following the 2022 unrest revealed large weapons caches, including of automatic rifles and grenades, some tied to anti-government protests. Authorities dismantled multiple trafficking networks and workshops in recent years, seizing substantial quantities of firearms and ammunition. Recent crackdowns have focused on domestic criminal groups, with some ties to Russian networks. Craft production remains limited relative to levels in neighbouring regions.

Kazakhstan serves as a transit hub for counterfeit goods en route from Asia to Europe, with illicit products originating mainly from China. Seizures have included luxury items, electronics and pharmaceuticals, but quantities are uncertain. Counterfeit medicines are a growing concern, driven by drug shortages, demand for generics and online purchasing. Experts estimate counterfeit medicine turnover may exceed 10–12%.

Kazakhstan's position as a transit hub has made it a key node in the illicit trade of excise goods, particularly counterfeit tobacco products. Seizures of counterfeit cigarettes, primarily smuggled from Kyrgyzstan and China, have grown significantly since 2022. International sanctions imposed on Russia have amplified Kazakhstan's role in global illicit supply chains. Although illicit alcohol is also present, trade appears to be of a lesser extent. Interrupted exports, re-exports, duty-free channels and porous borders are common mechanisms by which smuggled goods, primarily from Gulf states, enter the country.

Kazakhstan has also become a source of cigarette smuggling – alongside Kyrgyzstan and Belarus – owing to factors such as low tobacco prices, simplified border crossings, and the absence of restrictions on personal-use transport of cigarettes. Kyrgyzstan, with its historically lower excise taxes, had previously served as a notable point of origin for such smuggling. Authorities have introduced anti-contraband measures, including a QR-code tracking system and phased excise tax increases. Despite these efforts, Kazakhstan remains vulnerable owing to its geographic location and regional trade dynamics.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes in Kazakhstan are limited, although illegal logging persists despite afforestation efforts and regulatory improvements. Forest cover is projected to grow by 5% by 2030, but unauthorized harvesting, particularly for fuelwood, continues to cause environmental and economic damage. Enforcement actions include the seizure of vehicles and equipment. The most affected areas are Almaty, East Kazakhstan and Abai. Isolated cases involved protected species, such as saxaul trees, underscoring the ongoing threat to Kazakhstan's unique desert forest ecosystems.

Fauna trafficking in Kazakhstan is a concern, particularly as the country serves as both a source and a transit point, with expanded regional connectivity increasing trafficking risks. Although anti-poaching efforts have led to a decline in offences and a notable recovery of the saiga population, the illegal saiga horn trade continues to thrive, driven by high international demand and the merging of legal and illicit stocks. Organized crime networks are also involved in trafficking falcons, tortoises and sturgeon. Despite significant recent seizures of saiga horns and sturgeon derivatives, law enforcement effectiveness remains inconsistent.

Fuel smuggling across Kazakhstan's borders, especially with Kyrgyzstan, is driven by price disparities and limited enforcement capacity. The black market for refined fuels remains active despite global price fluctuations, while government control of the price of domestic liquefied petroleum gas continue to incentivize illegal exports. In early 2024, authorities seized substantial volumes of illicit fuel and documented hundreds of related cases. Extractive crimes, including sand, gravel and subsoil resource theft, are widespread and cause ecological damage, with significant losses reported in Almaty. Overall, organized crime and economic pressures contribute to sustained vulnerability in this sector.

DRUGS

Kazakhstan is a key transit country for heroin trafficking along the northern route from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe; however, seizures have declined, suggesting a potentially reduced role. Unlike neighbouring countries, Kazakhstan records relatively low heroin interdictions, which may reflect limited enforcement rather than reduced trafficking. There is local demand for opiates, with substitutes such as synthetic substances becoming more common. In 2024, enforcement actions intensified, targeting online distribution networks that use dead-drop models and seizing narcotics near the Afghan border, amid broader concerns about corruption and shifting regional drug flows.

Cocaine trafficking in Kazakhstan is limited, with no notable changes in market trends. The country is not a significant transit or consumption hub, although Russia is a key entry point for shipments into Kazakhstan and scattered incidents that have been recorded in recent years highlight the use of parcel services for low-volume drug trafficking. However, these do not suggest a broader shift in cocaine flows through the country.

Kazakhstan functions as a source, transit and destination country for cannabis, which is the most trafficked drug in the country. Official data showed a notable rise in cannabis trafficking since 2022, with cannabis accounting for most of the narcotics seized by volume. Although cultivation and consumption are criminalized, enforcement is inconsistent and sometimes linked to extortion by authorities. Widespread local use and production persist despite punitive laws, underscoring the entrenched role of cannabis in Kazakhstan's illicit drug market.

The country has experienced a sharp rise in synthetic drug production, trafficking and use, with high volumes of drugs and precursors having been seized in recent years. Once mainly a transit and destination country, Kazakhstan is now a source, supplying neighbouring states. Domestic production has grown significantly in recent years, with clandestine laboratories multiplying. Methamphetamines, synthetic cannabinoids and amphetamines are most commonly used, particularly in urban areas. The market has shifted to online platforms and e-wallet payments. Informal police protection of dealers is a concern.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cybercrime in Kazakhstan is increasing rapidly, with cyber-attacks on service providers and data breaches becoming more frequent. In recent years, an increasing number of attempted cyber-attacks were recorded, primarily originating from foreign actors, such as Ukraine, the US, Poland, Russia and China. Kazakhstan is also a leading hub for cryptocurrency mining, incentivized by favourable policies. However, this growth poses high security and financial risks, as regulation and enforcement are in early stages.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Kazakhstan is considered a high-risk country for financial crime owing to the prevalence of fraud and tax evasion and a shadow economy. Financial fraud is widespread, with more than half the population reporting exposure. Thousands of cases of online fraud are recorded annually and account for nearly half of all fraud cases. Common scams include fake online sales, impersonation of bank employees and fraudulent online loans. Kazakhstan has also been linked to economic sanction evasion efforts benefiting Russia and Belarus.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Mafia-style groups in Kazakhstan have significantly diminished in influence over the past two decades, transitioning from large, hierarchical organizations to smaller, fragmented syndicates. Although these groups retain some operational presence – particularly in major urban centres such as Almaty, Astana and Shymkent – their territorial control is limited. These residual factions are often tied to broader cross-border criminal organizations, particularly with connections to Russia. The 'thieves in law' tradition persists, with both domestic and foreign figures still present, although their influence has waned considerably. The structure of these groups is less formalized than in the past, often consisting of fewer than 10 members, in contrast to the extensive, multi-tiered syndicates of the 1990s. Although the remnants of mafia-style activity are still visible – especially in racketeering and smuggling – state-led crackdowns in the early 2010s and in the aftermath of the 2022 protests have significantly disrupted their operations. Notably, influence within the prison system – traditionally a power base for mafia figures – has been substantially reduced.

Kazakhstan's criminal landscape is shaped by loosely structured, opportunistic networks rather than hierarchical mafia groups. These criminal networks, often operating in chain formations, are active in drug trafficking, human smuggling and the illegal wildlife trade. Their operations are especially concentrated along the country's borders with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia, leveraging Kazakhstan's vast terrain to facilitate illicit transboundary movement. These networks are typically small and receive protection from corrupt local police rather than being embedded within a larger, transnational framework. Despite this, the January 2022 unrest revealed a higher-than-expected degree of organization and potential for political interference among some of these groups. Fragmented actors dominate drug trafficking, with many operating independently or with nominal ties to transnational groups. A functional division of labour exists, with local groups handling wholesale and distribution within Kazakhstan. In some cases, individuals involved in legitimate business act as couriers or small-scale traffickers. Similar networked structures are evident in the human trafficking market, where recruiters cooperate with brothels across borders.

Although not as deeply entrenched as in neighbouring countries, state-embedded criminal actors in Kazakhstan have a notable role in sustaining organized crime. Their influence is particularly visible at local levels, where officials may act as protectors for illicit operations rather than active participants. High-level political entrenchment, although present, has been partially curtailed by recent reforms. Nonetheless, progress remains slow and systemic vulnerabilities persist. Collusion between criminal groups and political elites has been exposed despite a relatively strong rule of law, particularly during recent unrest. State-linked actors are known to extract rents from drug trafficking and the illicit trade in natural resources, while also benefiting from corruption in customs and border control practices. Reforms have begun but have had limited to date.

Foreign actors are involved in Kazakhstan's organized crime ecosystem, particularly in drug trafficking. Nationals from Afghanistan, Russia and China reportedly exploit Kazakhstan's geography as a strategic transit route. Although intensified law enforcement following the 2022 unrest has curtailed some foreign influence, the long-term effectiveness of these measures is uncertain. These groups are believed to maintain wide-ranging connections beyond Kazakhstan's borders, suggesting that international criminal networks still consider the country a viable logistical hub. While the immediate impact of enforcement measures and arrests is notable, the resilience and adaptability of transnational actors may still pose challenges to long-term suppression efforts.

Private-sector actors in Kazakhstan have a limited but notable role in facilitating organized crime, primarily through gaps in legal enforcement and regulatory oversight. The absence of corporate liability for corruption-related offences enables politically connected individuals to exploit the system with relative impunity. Although there is no substantial evidence of widespread collusion between private businesses and organized crime groups, regulatory gaps – particularly in verifying ultimate beneficial ownership – create systemic risks. The continued absence of strict penalties and enforcement mechanisms for financial misconduct and tax evasion further weakens the country's resilience to private-sector exploitation by criminal actors.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

During the reporting period, Kazakhstan experienced a volatile political environment shaped by leadership transitions, mass protests and a partial consolidation of power by the current administration. After suppressing anti-government unrest, the administration removed key figures associated with its predecessor, including those with links to organized crime. An inter-agency committee continued coordinating anti-trafficking efforts, while the re-establishment of a dedicated organized crime unit signalled renewed law enforcement focus. Amendments to electoral laws introduced incremental reforms. Despite some institutional changes, civil liberties remain restricted and widespread public dissatisfaction persists.

Corruption is entrenched at all levels of Kazakhstan's public sector. Although the country has introduced reforms to improve transparency – such as legal amendments, procurement regulation efforts – and the publication of its first anti-corruption implementation report – enforcement and oversight remain weak. Public procurement, border customs and major state holdings are particularly vulnerable to embezzlement and bribery. Key institutions lack independence, including the anti-corruption agency and judiciary. Despite asset recovery efforts following political unrest, elite impunity persists, with prosecutions largely limited to individuals who have fallen out of favour. Access to government information is restricted, and civil society has limited influence over policymaking processes.

Kazakhstan demonstrates broad international engagement in combating organized crime, having ratified key UN treaties and conventions, including those on transnational organized crime, corruption and trafficking. It maintains over 70 bilateral criminal legal agreements and has extradition treaties with more than 60 countries, with dozens of extradition requests having been fulfilled. Kazakhstan also cooperates outside formal treaties, including its first extradition to the US. Recent efforts include agreements with China and Qatar on information-sharing and joint crime prevention, and steps towards joining the Convention on Cybercrime. Kazakhstan also participates in regional dialogues with the EU to address transnational criminal threats, including terrorism and trafficking.

In recent years, Kazakhstan has continued to revise its criminal legislation addressing organized crime and trafficking. Provisions exist for combating human and labour trafficking, although they remain inconsistent with international standards in that they do not include force, fraud or coercion as core elements. Key laws target drug trafficking, with recent amendments criminalizing even minimal synthetic drug possession. Wildlife trafficking penalties have been also increased. Capital punishment has been abolished and replaced with life imprisonment. Kazakhstan has passed laws aimed at protecting women and children, and in 2024 adopted new legislation against human trafficking. However, parallel legal changes, including stricter media regulations, have raised concerns about civil liberties and press freedom. Furthermore, in response to increasing counterfeit medication, authorities introduced mandatory drug labelling from mid-2024.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Kazakhstan's judicial and penal systems face challenges related to corruption and a lack of independence, with the judiciary often perceived as serving elite interests and bribery being an issue. However, recent reforms – such as increased oversight of the Higher Council of Justice by the Supreme Court – have contributed to a decline in bribery within judicial appointments. Although prisons still fall short of international health standards and suffer from limited oversight and underfunding, the government has taken steps to reduce incarceration rates by decriminalizing certain offences, promoting alternatives to detention and expanding early release options. These efforts have significantly lowered the prison population in recent years, although reintegration programmes remain weak.

Kazakhstan has expanded its law enforcement and anti-corruption measures, introducing advanced technologies such as AI-powered surveillance and developing a national cyber shield to counter IT-related crime. Efforts to modernize border control and environmental enforcement continue, supported by international partnerships and training. However, police corruption remains pervasive, with widespread reports of arbitrary arrests, abuse and low trust in police reliability. Legal reforms have increased penalties for corruption, particularly for public officials, while narrowing eligibility for parole and leniency. Institutional anti-corruption frameworks exist, but implementation and accountability are challenging.

Kazakhstan's geographic position and porous borders make it a key node for trafficking in persons, drugs, arms and fuel. Border control is challenging owing to underfunding, insufficient training and corruption within enforcement units. Authorities have responded with increased funding, US-supported capacity-building and collaboration with the UN and neighbouring states. A tunnel discovered on the Uzbekistan border highlighted persistent smuggling concerns. Kazakhstan also enhanced cyber capabilities during the reporting period. Increased border measures have been implemented in response to unrest and perceived external agitation.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Kazakhstan is vulnerable to money laundering and financial crime, acting as a transit country for narcotics revenues, and struggles with low conviction rates and limited investigative capacity. Recent reforms include an updated national risk assessment and amendments to anti-money laundering legislation, alongside participation in international initiatives. However, poor inter-agency coordination and the absence of parallel financial investigations hinder enforcement. Despite notable progress in countering money laundering and the country not being placed on the Financial Action Task Force's high-risk list, experts question the country's commitment to reform owing to suspected elite involvement in financial crimes and tender fraud. Illicit financial outflows and offshore holdings remain substantial.

The country continues to pursue economic reform and diversification, although corruption, state dominance, and bureaucracy constrain private-sector growth. The government has introduced structural reforms to improve the business climate, including administrative simplification and a privatization roadmap. However, oligarchic influence, politically connected tendering and weak enforcement hamper market competition. The economy is heavily reliant on extractive industries, with oil and gas generating significant GDP, exports and state revenue. Despite recent reforms aimed at improving business transparency and attracting foreign investment, critical vulnerabilities remain. In addition, deficiencies in judicial reform undermine trust in the resolution of business disputes and increase the risk of property raiding, particularly by actors with state ties. Despite modest privatization efforts, state-owned enterprises continue to dominate major sectors of the economy.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Kazakhstan has taken steps to combat trafficking through legislative reforms, a national action plan and increased funding for victim shelters, but significant gaps in protection and enforcement remain. Victim identification is low, particularly among foreign nationals, who face legal and institutional barriers to accessing support. Victims often avoid reporting owing to distrust in law enforcement, fear of retaliation and weak witness protection mechanisms. NGO-run shelters offer services to Kazakh citizens, but foreign victims must cooperate with law enforcement to access aid. Administrative inefficiencies, underfunding and legal inexperience limit support. Organized crime continues to exploit vulnerable populations for labour and sexual exploitation. During the reporting period, the country has taken steps to offer support and rehabilitation services for individuals with drug-use disorders. However, the overall effectiveness and impact of these services are unclear.

The country has expanded anti-trafficking prevention efforts, including the use of public awareness campaigns, territorial mobile teams and enhanced cooperation with NGOs. Despite these measures, major gaps persist in victim identification and prosecution, particularly regarding foreign nationals and labour trafficking. Government-funded media and hotlines promote prevention, but actions to reduce demand for exploitation remain limited. Anti-drug efforts include school programmes and public messaging, although recent data is lacking. The Anti-Corruption Strategy (2015–2025), updated in 2022, outlines broad goals across both the public and private sector, yet implementation is seen as largely symbolic.

Media freedom and civil society in Kazakhstan are severely constrained. Independent outlets face systematic harassment, shutdowns and self-censorship, while journalists are often surveilled, attacked or detained. The government exercises extensive control over internet access and content, with restrictive laws used to silence dissent. NGOs face burdensome registration processes and are prohibited from engaging in political activity if foreign funded. Legislative amendments continue to tighten control under the pretext of combating extremism. Despite collaboration with NGOs in areas such as trafficking support, civic space is shrinking. Recent government pledges to investigate crimes against journalists have done little to reverse the worsening media environment.

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