



# Societal Change Afoot in Central Asia

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Central Asia is undergoing a dramatic transformation. Its governments face legitimacy crises at a time when long-standing leaders are being replaced by little-known, untested ones. Social contracts, by which citizens traded political freedoms for improved economic conditions and stability, are collapsing under the weight of growing socioeconomic distress. Almost thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states still struggle to provide basic services—from essentials like clean water and quality healthcare to more complex social welfare programs, disaster response, and emergency management systems that can improve or even save lives. The entrenched kleptocracies that sustained the region's post-Soviet regimes for decades are proving unable to address the growing needs of rapidly expanding populations. Indifferent attitudes toward citizens and ham-fisted efforts to squelch dissent are widening the gap between governments and the governed. As a result, grassroots social activism is on the rise.

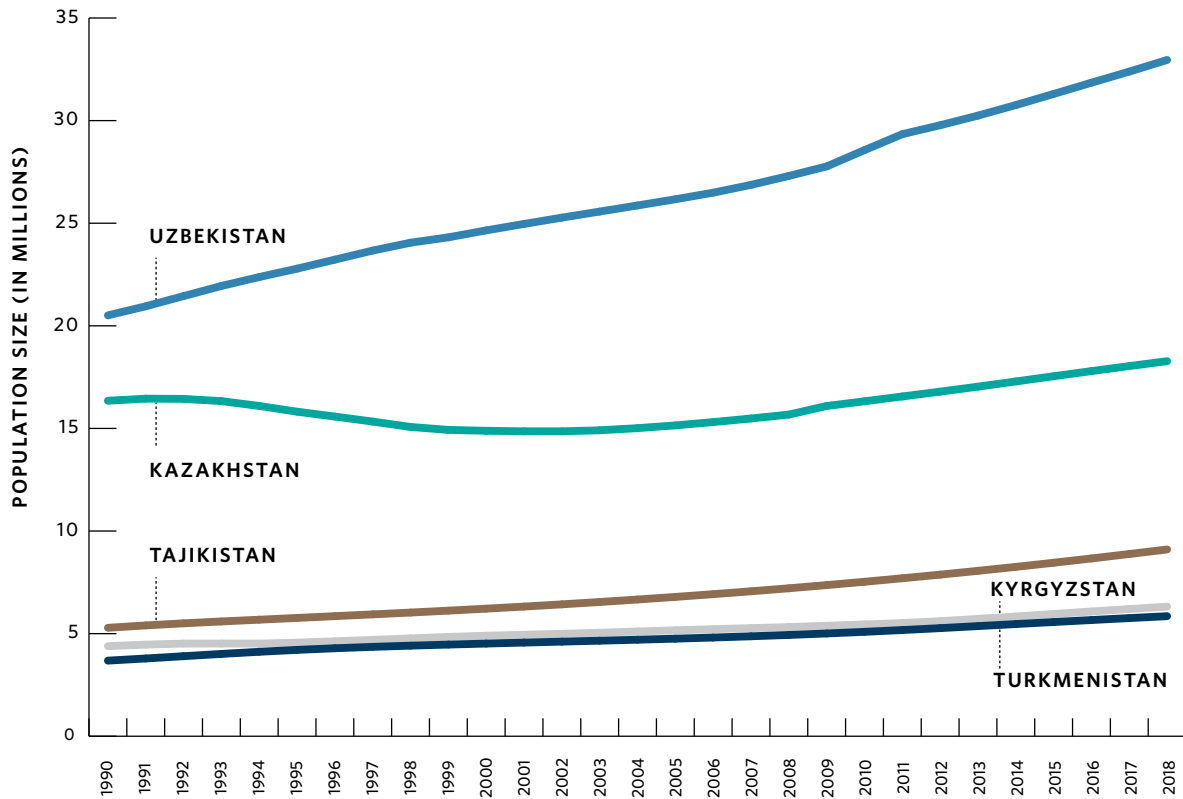
No country in Central Asia has advanced democratically as much as many Western officials hoped they would when the Soviet Union collapsed, but the

region is changing fast. Despite the strong hold of authoritarianism, Central Asian societies gradually are becoming more pluralistic. New voices—nationalistic, Islamist, Western-friendly, and simply angry ones—are proliferating as Central Asians seek greater accountability in governance. Most people are not calling for full democracy. Instead, they want ruling regimes to live up to their promises of securing a better future. Surprised by growing social activism, Central Asian regimes appear paralyzed. Instead of seeing their mobilized citizens as partners to engage and support, the region's governments see them as potential threats. As these social, political, and economic changes play out, six important trends stand out.

## THE MAKINGS OF A YOUTH SURGE

Memories of the Soviet era are declining as the post-Soviet generation reaches adulthood. The region is in the midst of rapid population growth. The most dramatic growth is occurring in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but other Central Asian countries are growing too, except for Kazakhstan, where

FIGURE 1  
**Central Asia's Burgeoning Population**



SOURCE: World Bank

population growth remains stagnant (see figure 1). As of 2018, the entire population of Central Asia is about 72 million—a net increase of about 16 million since 2000. One estimate forecasts that the regional population will reach about 95 million by 2050.

The people of Central Asia are quite young. Nearly a third of the region's entire population is under fifteen years old. Only between 3 and 7 percent of the populations in each country are older than sixty-five. The median age in Central Asia is just under twenty-seven years. The governments of the region seem unable to meet the needs of this expanding population. Their economies, including in wealthier Kazakhstan, are not creating the jobs needed to employ all the young people poised to enter the workforce.

## AN UNWIELDY BRAND OF NATIONALISM

Members of this younger generation are far less content with the status quo, less friendly toward Russia, and less trusting of Soviet-era elites than their parents are. This is a problem for governments run by leaders with lingering Soviet-style mind-sets and habits. For years, those leaders promised bright futures and often stoked nationalist narratives about prosperity on the horizon. Those promises and this nationalist rhetoric now are coming back to haunt these governments.

Kyrgyzstan, for example, was hailed in the 1990s as the future Switzerland of Central Asia, amid hopes it would become a similarly wealthy, mountainous democracy. It

remains mountainous, but the country has proven to be perennially unstable and poor. Ethnic violence in the city of Osh in 2010 left deep scars on the country and still highlights its fragility, particularly when [political leaders](#) are willing to play on ethnic or social differences to shore up power. The Asian Development Bank [estimates](#) that about 26 percent of Kyrgyzstanis live below the poverty line. The country's dependence on remittances sent from abroad leaves its small economy vulnerable to [external shocks](#). Much like its other Central Asian neighbors, Kyrgyzstan struggles with rampant corruption and administrative opaqueness. These obstacles deter diversified foreign investment. As a result, the country is increasingly reliant on Chinese investment and largesse, which periodically causes spikes in [nationalistic anger](#) at Beijing's outsized influence.

In Kazakhstan, former president Nursultan Nazarbayev deserves credit for keeping the multiethnic country stable and transforming it into an [upper-middle-income country](#).

But this narrative rings less true as economic problems mount and the country becomes more ethnically Kazakh in visible ways. The government is trying to play catch-up to [growing popular calls](#) for a greater role for Kazakh "values, culture, and language" in public life. Kazakh ethnonationalism helped motivate the government's long-resisted decision in 2017 to switch the written form of the Kazakh language from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet by 2025. Rising nationalist sentiment also likely is contributing to the continued [outflow](#) of ethnic Russians, as are the country's bleak economic prospects.

The Kazakh government's close relationship with Russia and its economic embrace of China provoke unease among many Kazakh nationalists, a growing group that sees incumbent elites as vestiges of the Soviet era. After 2014, many Kazakhs voiced fears of a Crimean-style Russian [land grab](#) in the north, while a government-proposed [land reform initiative](#) became the target of

nationalistic, anti-Chinese protests in 2016. Protesters voiced concerns that the reform would prompt massive land sales to Chinese firms and infringe on Kazakh sovereignty. [Nationalistic segments](#) of the population were highly visible in [public protests](#) in 2019, including when newly installed President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [traveled to China](#) in September 2019.

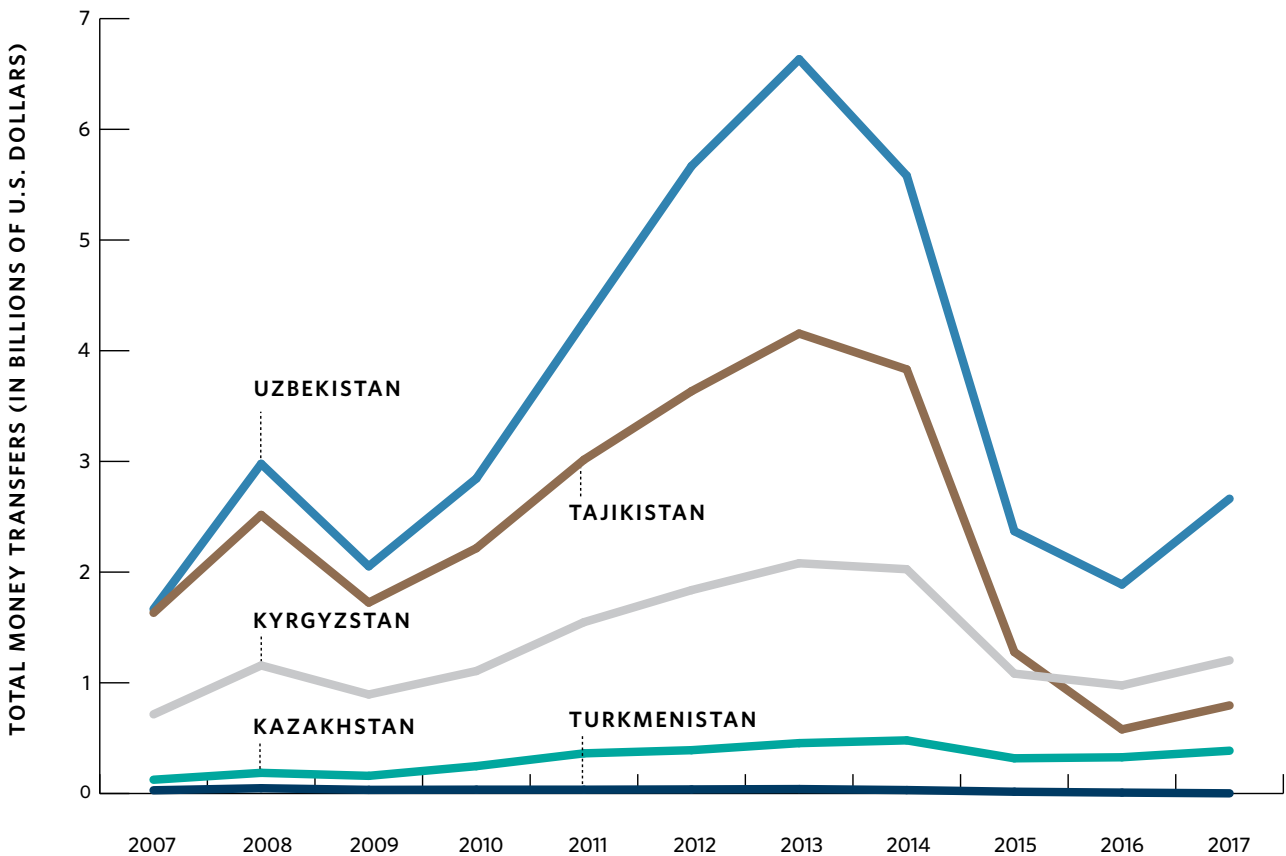
## THORNY MIGRATION PROBLEMS

Many Central Asians are [on the move](#) in search of jobs and educational opportunities. Most of the region's economies depend on remittances sent back by migrant laborers, most notably from Russia (see figure 2) but also from Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan takes in the most remittances each year. A fifth of the Uzbek labor force earns its living abroad, and \$5.1 billion was [wired back](#) to the country last year, according to the country's central bank. Meanwhile, remittances to [Kyrgyzstan](#) and [Tajikistan](#) are key to local poverty alleviation.

Yet the struggles of the Russian and Kazakh economies have forced Central Asians to look elsewhere for economic opportunities, including [Europe](#), [Turkey](#), [the Gulf States](#), and [South Korea](#). Promising young students regionwide strive to study abroad in places like China, Europe, Japan, Russia, and the United States. A scholarship to a foreign university or graduate school often is seen as a ticket to a white-collar future overseas. Consequently, outbound migration of both elites and the working poor is draining Central Asia of some of its most ambitious, entrepreneurial, and talented citizens.

Migration within Central Asia has exacerbated the region's social problems. Migrants are flooding into rapidly growing Central Asian cities. These newly arrived urban residents often live in poor conditions on the outskirts of cities, straining existing urban infrastructure. This population influx fuels tensions between longtime urban dwellers and the new arrivals, who are often blamed for a rise in crime.

FIGURE 2  
**Central Asian Remittances From Russia**



**SOURCE:** Central Bank of Russia

Areas outside of major cities are experiencing the opposite problem (see Map 1). Labor migration is depopulating large swathes of the Central Asian countryside of everyone except the elderly and children. The impact of such labor migration on the women left behind by their husbands has been [well documented](#) in Tajikistan. However, the plight of the young and elderly left behind has been studied less. Some children are abandoned to live with [distant relatives](#) or grandparents who often are already struggling to get by. With state welfare agencies providing little support and few monitoring services, many of these people are vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

## DEMANDS FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Democracy is important to the people of Central Asia, but their notions of democracy are different from American ones. Far more than the desire for political parties, free elections, or an independent parliament, Central Asia's budding social activism is motivated by the desire for transparent and accountable government, even if it is not fully democratic. Central Asians want governments that are capable of improving their quality of life, providing essential [social services](#), and helping lessen the gap between rich and poor. This list of demands suggests that Soviet-style elements of social justice continue to permeate Central Asian notions of

MAP 1  
**Central Asia**



effective governance. Central Asians still see the state as playing a necessary regulatory role in their lives, in a manner akin to European-style social democracy. Above all, people in the region resent entrenched local elites who advance their own narrow economic interests, not those of society at large.

In more democratic Kyrgyzstan, politicians have a history of jockeying for political power and wealth. But these power contests are generally at the expense of the population's prosperity and well-being. The country's democratically elected officials have never been able to deliver essential services, curb corruption, transform the economy, or bring social stability. Even if power is contested in Bishkek, Kyrgyz democracy has not yet served the socioeconomic interests of the broader population.

Meanwhile, Tajikistan's social contract is crumbling. The government is largely indifferent to its citizens' problems. For years, President Emomali Rahmon diverted attention from his regime's economic mismanagement by highlighting his legacy as the leader who brought stability to the nation after its 1992–1997 civil war. This tactic worked for roughly two decades, resonating particularly with older citizens who remain traumatized by the violent war and are fearful that instability could spill over from neighboring Afghanistan.

But this narrative is losing its appeal. [Seventy percent](#) of Tajiks are now under thirty and have fading or no firsthand memories of the war. Their primary concerns are finding jobs and creating some sort of future for themselves and their families. [World Bank data](#) reveals that almost a third of Tajikistan's population lives below



the poverty line, and around a quarter of children under five experience chronic malnutrition. And the Rahmon regime is failing on the stability front too. In 2015, a senior security official defected to the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and an Islamic State–inspired attack in 2018 on foreign tourists raised serious questions about whether Dushanbe can keep the country stable. Large swathes of the country remain controlled by warlords.

Nearby Turkmenistan is struggling amid food security challenges and rumors about the president's ill health. The government's decision to cut subsidies in 2019 for basic goods and utilities shattered the country's social contract. Ashgabat also has struggled over the past few years to secure its borders with Afghanistan, where both the Taliban and the Islamic State have increased their presence. The government of President Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov appears hamstrung, focusing its response almost exclusively on regime security and theatrics at the expense of the well-being of the country's citizens or soldiers, who have been on the front lines defending against cross-border incursions.

## GOVERNMENTS STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE STATUS QUO

Given its continued Soviet-style political mentalities, Central Asia is unlikely to build European-style social democratic systems in the near future. All five countries are mired in economic stagnation or worse. The region's trade and investment prospects are limited by entrenched corruption and its distance from the world's most important advanced markets. Neither of those problems will go away anytime soon. Yet the tools governments used to keep people quiescent in the past—public sector jobs, opportunities in the extractive industries, and labor migration—are not keeping up with the region's population growth or public expectations.

Central Asian states need to improve their investor climates and create diversified private sectors that could create sustainable jobs over time. To do so, however,

these governments and economic systems need to become more transparent and efficient. Economic development must take hold in secondary cities, not just in shiny capitals that help project power and influence. Oligarchic structures need to be questioned and challenged. But these reforms threaten the status quo, unnerve Central Asian elites, and could undermine their hold on power.

In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev rhetorically acknowledges the need for economic reforms. The Soviet-style, state-driven economic model of his long-serving predecessor Islam Karimov never fully met the demands of the country's population. Karimov's egregious human rights violations and his family's notorious corruption further isolated Uzbekistan from global investors. Although Mirziyoyev was a key participant in the Karimov system, his government has taken some initial steps to liberalize the country and open up its economy to the outside world.

Yet the new Uzbek government has not been tested by any internal or external shocks. Uzbeks have not yet demanded more than the government is willing to offer. To date, much of the country's liberalization has been symbolic, as the government has targeted some low-level officials for corruption and poor job performance and has gone after the president's powerful political rivals as opposed to initiating sweeping systemic change. The government currently lacks the capacity and resources to institute broader reforms. Nonetheless, this is a step in the right direction.

In contrast, Kazakhstan does have the capacity to reform: it is the region's economic powerhouse due to its abundant hydrocarbon reserves, mineral wealth, and vast agricultural resources. But the Nazarbayev-era social contract, wherein the people received improved socioeconomic conditions in return for a limited say in how they were governed, has begun to break down as well. Repeated currency devaluations and high inflation have exacerbated poverty in Kazakhstan, while extravagant spending by the country's elites further stokes domestic resentment.



## A RISING TIDE OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM?

Kazakhstan now is on the forefront of Central Asian social activism and protests. Growing disenchantment with the government, as evidenced by 2019 protests, reflect the people's frustration with a state that has come a long way but now struggles to deliver the brighter future it promised. This new wave of social activism is the culmination of years of growing dissatisfaction among diverse domestic groups with how the country has been ruled. Years of lofty promises about curbing corruption and improving social services have not produced tangible changes in the everyday lives of Kazakhstanis. Caught off guard by the protests, the government appears uncertain about how to respond. Instead of meeting protesters halfway and letting them blow off steam, the state began to **crack down**, trying to curb the people's ability to take to the streets or use social media.

As disheartening as Kazakhstan's recent crackdown has been, one encouraging note is that police violence toward protesters has been minimal so far. Demonstrators appear less fearful of the government's response than in the past, and most detainees have been released quickly. But this positive note may be blunted, as it is uncertain how extensively the state is surveilling or intimidating these new social movements behind the scenes, or what the regime will do if it ultimately feels threatened by grassroots activism. Recent moves to curtail internet privacy, as well as the region's rush to embrace **emerging technologies** that could enhance authoritarian control (such as facial recognition software and some smart city technologies), are worrying.

On August 21, 2019, former Kazakhstani president Nazarbayev, who remains highly influential, forcefully **rejected** protesters' demands for early parliamentary elections—an ironic decision, given his history of moving forward elections when **politically expedient**. Nazarbayev's formal successor, Tokayev, a capable technocrat and logical choice to replace him, has resorted to populism to quell the protests. He has

promised to **write off** the debt of the country's poorest citizens, offered to fight inflation with **food subsidies**, and created a national **public council** to help bridge the divide between the rulers and the ruled. These tactics may **placate** people for a while, but they all have been tried before.

Kazakhstan's public dissatisfaction and social unrest is not unique. Noisy protests are relatively **common** in Kyrgyzstan and mark an important way for the population to convey its concerns to the government. The rest of the region's governments, however, do not view protests along the same lines. In Turkmenistan, small groups of people occasionally **take to the streets** over rising food prices, shortages of basic goods, and deteriorating **economic conditions**—a testament to how bad the economy in that police state must have become. Protests remain **rare** in Uzbekistan, but the government increasingly responds to public criticism on local issues. Elsewhere, anticipating protests, the Tajik government has taken a harsh authoritarian turn over the past several years, eager to squelch dissent before it becomes public. The state **pushed** the country's Islamist opposition party into exile and underground, further undermining popular trust in the regime while failing to undercut the appeal of political Islam.

## CONCLUSION

Central Asian officials' apparent disdain for popular calls for less corruption and better governance will only widen the gaps between state and society. Authoritarian leaders are unlikely to loosen their hold on power, fearful of the risks of acknowledging their shortcomings. Yet empowering the region's bureaucracies—some of which are quite capable of meeting public demands—could pay off in the long run by delivering better governance and generating popular goodwill. This is particularly true in Kazakhstan, where the state has invested tremendous resources in educating and training a cadre of highly qualified technocrats and professionals.

It is not yet clear whether Central Asia's political elites can recognize societal change, adapt, or meet their citizens at least halfway. In the meantime, the countries of the region are continuing to undergo dizzying demographic shifts, as their economies struggle to keep up with rapid population growth and social change. Central Asians' heightened demands for better governance will likely only increase the pressures under which regional governments operate.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## NOTES

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