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## Kazakhstan: Country Dossier

December 2020



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

## Copyright notice

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

## Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

## External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

# WWL 2021 Short country profile / Kazakhstan

## Brief country details

Kazakhstan: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
18,777,000	4,852,000	25.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Kazakhstan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	64	41
WWL 2020	64	35
WWL 2019	63	34
WWL 2018	63	28
WWL 2017	56	43

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Kazakhstan:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

## Brief description of the persecution situation

Religious freedom is restricted by legislation dating back to September 2011 and the Kazakhstan government is constantly working at increasing its control over the whole of society, which means increased surveillance, raids on meetings and arrests. It is using the threat of militant Islam to restrict more areas of freedom. Russian Orthodox churches experience the least problems from the government as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Kazakh population. It is the indigenous Christians with a Muslim background who are bearing the brunt of persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs also preach against them.

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **November 2019:** Three self-exiled Protestant pastors, who had been given long prison terms in absentia in July 2019 for their time as leaders of the New Life Pentecostal Church in Almaty, lost their appeal at Almaty City Court on 1 November. (Source: [Forum 18, 14 November 2019](#))
- **April 2020:** A Kazakh pastor was arrested in April 2020 supposedly for violating COVID-19 lockdown measures and bringing food packages to other people. Local Christians think the authorities were just looking for an excuse to arrest him. (Source: Open Doors research)
- **July 2020:** Nur-Sultan city administration ordered the confiscation of Grace Presbyterian Church, and of Agape Pentecostal Church's half-finished place of worship on the same site. Grace Church - which bought its building in 2001 - is challenging the order in court. (Source: [Forum 18, 29 July 2020](#))

## Specific examples of positive developments

"In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan moved in a positive direction. The government made a concerted effort to improve its record on religious freedom, working to design and implement reforms in conversation with US counterparts. In May 2018, Kazakhstan hosted the first US-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group, with the participation of both the US Department of State and USCIRF, at which Kazakhstani officials openly discussed deficiencies in their regulation of religion and expressed their desire to address them. The government subsequently committed to a road map for religious legislation and oversight reform. This sustained shift in policy began in January 2019, when the government abandoned adding amendments to the country's restrictive 2011 religion law that it had proposed a year and a half earlier. If enacted, the amendments would have further restricted who may legally proselytize and under what circumstances; required both parents' approval for children to participate in religious activities; and limited worship to designated locations. Between October 2019 and early 2020, four Religious Freedom Roundtables were held in cities across Kazakhstan, at which government officials participated alongside representatives of various faith communities, including historically persecuted minority groups. Meanwhile, the number of administrative prosecutions for religious offenses continued to decline, reaching 160 in 2019 - down from 171 in 2018 and 284 in 2017." (Source: [USCIRF 2020](#)).

## External Links - Short country profile

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 14 November 2019 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2521](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2521)
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 29 July 2020 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2587](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2587)
- Specific examples of positive developments: USCIRF 2020 - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Kazakhstan.pdf>

## WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Kazakhstan

### Link for general background information

- [Kazakhstan country profile - BBC News](#)

### Recent history

Like all other countries in the Central Asia region, Kazakhstan came into existence as an independent country in 1991. It was the last former Soviet republic to do so - at the end of August 1991. Of all the former Soviet Union states, Kazakhstan has managed the economic transition best. Contrary to all other Central Asian countries, the country's rulers have participated in the international community and are eager to cooperate and host international talks. In March 2017, an international meeting was held in the Kazakh capital of Astana on the war in Syria. A highlight for Kazakhstan was to be honored with the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010.

However, since 2010, the regime under President Nursultan Nazarbayev has taken a much more dictatorial character, bringing the country more in line with the other countries of Central Asia. Repressive policies, strict media control and legislative restrictions (also in religious affairs) were introduced and implemented – the purpose being to maintain the government's hold on power.

The biggest change in Kazakhstan came in 2019. President Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was elected president on 9 June 2019 (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). For Christians the new leader has brought little change to their situation.

### Political and legal landscape

Kazakhstan is officially a democratic, secular, unitary, constitutional republic with a diverse cultural heritage. From 1991 to 2019 its first and only president was Nursultan Nazarbayev. The president may veto legislation that has been passed by parliament and is also the commander in chief of the armed forces. The prime minister chairs the Cabinet of Ministers and serves as Kazakhstan's head of government. Although four parties are represented in the Kazakh parliament (Majilis), there is no real political opposition. This was obvious again during the presidential elections on 26 April 2015 when President Nazarbayev had no real opponents and won the elections with 97.7% of the votes, which enabled him to start his fifth five-year term as the country's president.

The question of who would succeed President Nazarbayev was answered by the 78 year old president himself. On 19 March 2019, he publicly announced out of the blue that he was resigning ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE/RL - 19 March 2019](#)). In a televised address to



the nation he indicated that the speaker of the upper parliament chamber, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, would be acting president for the remainder of what would have been his term, in accordance with the Constitution. [Unsurprisingly](#), Tokayev was re-elected as president in the snap elections on 9 June 2019 with 70.76% of the vote (Asia News, 10 June 2019).

In May 2020 President Tokayev announced that he had removed Dariga Nursultanovna Nazarbayeva (i.e. the daughter of the former president) from her position as Senate speaker. This was totally unexpected as everyone believed Nazarbayeva would follow in her father's steps to govern Kazakhstan. (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 9 July 2020](#))

In politics and economy Kazakhstan is increasingly linking up with Russia (and China). This is partly due to the huge number of ethnic Russian citizens in the northern part of Kazakhstan.

In September 2011 new legislation regulating religious affairs was passed by parliament and signed into law in October 2011. The major consequences for Christians of the new law were:

- All religious communities need re-registration. This is a highly bureaucratic procedure which may result in only a fraction of all current communities passing the hurdle.
- Unregistered religious activity is banned. Leading, participating in or financing unregistered groups is punished. This has great effects for those Christian groups that refuse to register (like the Council of Baptist Churches), or those who do not pass the requirements of the new registration procedure.
- Compulsory religious censorship on religious materials is imposed. While the law states that everyone may acquire or own religious literature, importation and distribution of literature can only be done by registered communities. In-country production requires the full official name of the religious organization which produced it.
- New places of worship need approval from both local and central government.
- All founders or religious communities must be Kazakh citizens.
- Professional educational programs to prepare priests can only be done by organizations that are registered regionally or nationally. For Christians this means, in practice, that this can only be done by the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Religious organizations should take steps to prevent underage youth from taking part in their activities if one of the child's parents or legal guardians objects to this. Religious activities on children's holidays, sports and camps etc. are prohibited. Work among children and youth thus became more difficult.
- Foreign citizens working as missionaries need to have an invitation from a registered community in Kazakhstan; they also need to have a personal registration as a missionary. Any granted permission has to be renewed annually.
- Social activities (such as work in hospitals, prisons or old people's homes) can only be done by registered communities.

The Constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion. The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), part of the Ministry of Information and Social Development (MISD), is responsible for religious issues. According to local and international observers, the authorities continued to impose restrictions and additional scrutiny on what the government considers "non-traditional" religious groups, including Muslims who practice a

version of Islam other than the officially recognized Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and Protestant Christians. The authorities have continued to arrest, detain, and imprison individuals on account of their religious beliefs or affiliation; restrict religious expression; prevent unregistered groups from practicing their faith; restrict assembly for peaceful religious activities; restrict public manifestation of religious belief; restrict religious expression and customs, including religious clothing; criminalize speech "inciting religious discord"; restrict proselytism; restrict the publication and distribution of religious literature; censor religious content; and restrict acquisition or use of buildings used for religious ceremonies and purposes. The government again raided religious services, prosecuted individuals for "illegal missionary activity," and refused to register certain religious groups. Forum 18, an international religious freedom non-governmental organization (NGO), cited 159 administrative prosecutions for violations of the religion law during the year, compared with 165 in 2018. (Source: [IRF 2019](#))

In January 2019, the government abandoned adding amendments to the country's restrictive 2011 religion law that it had proposed a year and a half earlier. Religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan have thus begun to move in a positive direction (See: "*Specific examples of positive developments*" above).

Christians in Kazakhstan play no role in the country's politics. There is no Christian political party.

## Religious landscape

Kazakhstan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	4,852,000	25.8
Muslim	13,268,000	70.7
Hindu	840	0.0
Buddhist	20,000	0.1
Ethno-religionist	29,000	0.2
Jewish	5,500	0.0
Bahai	9,400	0.1
Atheist	80,000	0.4
Agnostic	500,000	2.7
Other - includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.	13,090	0.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Islam is the main religion in Kazakhstan (predominantly Sunni). However, it would be wrong to call Kazakhstan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence; the government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and seeks to keep Islam under control, while the overwhelming majority of the population merely follows Islamic traditions rather than strict Muslim teachings. Nevertheless, “to be a Kazakh is to be a Muslim” is the belief of many Kazakhs. As a result, converts to Christianity experience much pressure from family, friends, and local community. This pressure is much stronger in the countryside than in the major cities. Relatives will oppress converts to Christianity, sometimes using physical abuse, in attempts to make them turn back to Islam. Sometimes this is also done by local police.

Kazakhstan has by far the biggest Christian presence in Central Asia. The reason for this is not that Kazakhs have converted on a large scale to Christianity, but is due to the presence of a large Russian minority in the country’s northern provinces. As a result, more than 90% of all Christians in Kazakhstan belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. In contrast to other countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has not experienced a mass emigration of ethnic Russians.

Although the regime has imposed many restrictions on the production, importation and distribution of religious materials, the very long and open border with Russia means that access is less problematic than into other Central Asian countries.

## Economic landscape

According to [World Bank’s April 2020 update](#):

- **GDP (current US\$):** 179.34 billion (in 2018)
- **GDP annual growth:** 4.1%. Kazakhstan’s GDP growth has been declining since 2000

Kazakhstan is blessed with vast resources of oil, gas and various minerals. The current regime has promoted market reforms and has transformed Kazakhstan into the second largest economy of the former Soviet empire (after Russia). Despite the fact that the country was hit hard by the financial crisis that started in 2008 (and later by the economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia after it had annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of the Crimea in early 2014), Kazakhstan remains the wealthiest country in the region. As a result, Kazakhstan is the only country in the region that has few labor migrants abroad, but many labor migrants from other Central Asia countries (such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). This offers opportunities for Christian outreach among these people.

Kazakhstan holds a strategic position in the East-West connection between China and the West. A new version of the Silk Road is under construction, which is being pushed by both China and Turkey. This means that there are large-scale construction activities underway to build highways for trucks and tracks for trains. China has also been particularly active in Kazakh oil and gas exploration.

COVID-19 affected the Kazakh economy badly. Oil, gas and copper prices went down. A suspension of work at any of the major oil fields or major copper mines would represent an additional loss of revenue the state can ill afford. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 June 2020](#))

Kazakhstan is also the country with the second-highest number of migrant workers from other Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). When the COVID-19 crisis struck, thousands of these migrant were stranded in Kazakhstan's southern region of Turkistan because they were unable to travel back home due to restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 July 2020](#))

Just like the rest of the population, Christians are also suffering from the deteriorating economy.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and the [World Factbook](#) (accessed 31 July 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kazakh (Qazaq) 68%, Russian 19.3%, Uzbek 3.2%, Ukrainian 1.5%, Uighur 1.5%, Tatar 1.1%, German 1%, other 4.4% (2019 est.)
- **Main languages:** Kazakh (official, Qazaq) 83.1% (understand spoken language) and trilingual (Kazakh, Russian, English) 22.3% (2017 est.); Russian (official, used in everyday business, designated the "language of inter-ethnic communication") 94.4% (understand spoken language) (2009 est.)
- **Urban population:** 57.7% of total population (2020)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8%

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.817, ranking 50
- **Total population:** 18.31 million
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 73.2 years
- **Expected years of schooling:** 15.3 years
- **Employment to population ratio (15 years and older):** 67.3%
- **Unemployment, total (% of labour force):** 4.9%
- **Gender inequality index:** 0.999

The government is successfully promoting the use of the Kazakh language and the renaissance of traditional Kazakh culture. According to RFE/RL reporting on [12 April 2017](#), President Nazarbayev ordered the authorities to come up with a Latin-based alphabet for the Kazakh language by the end of 2017, marking a major shift after nearly 80 years with a Cyrillic-based alphabet. Despite this, 95% of the population of Kazakhstan is still capable of communicating in Russian. [Nazarbayev](#) announced that all publications, documents, and street signs in Kazakhstan will switch from a Cyrillic-based alphabet to a Latin-based alphabet by 2025. In [November 2018](#) Kazakhstan held a nationwide exam to test students' proficiency with the Latin alphabet, part of the former Soviet republic's shift away from Cyrillic.

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Kazakhstan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can read materials in their own language. However, the restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially.

The COVID-19 crisis also hit Kazakhstan in 2020. At first, not all COVID-19 cases were registered. This led to the curious situation that the number of graves in a cemetery in Almaty that were set aside for the burial of COVID-19 victims exceeded those that were in the official records. (Source: [RFE/RL, 25 May 2020](#)). Later on, the country's main economic sectors (oil and natural gas winning and copper mining) were shown to have more COVID-19 infections than average. This meant that the Kazakh government found itself in dire straits: On the one hand it could not allow the income from the oil, gas and copper resources to be lost, but it also could not afford to have recurrent outbreaks of infections at work sites which threatened to spread to local populations either. Workers found themselves in a similar conundrum: Stay home and lose one's income, or go to work and run the risk of catching the virus (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 June 2020](#)).

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

## Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed July 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 78.9% penetration - survey date: June 2018
- **Facebook usage:** 13.4% penetration – survey date: December 2018.

According to [World Bank's Country Profile](#) (accessed 20 August 2020):

**Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people - 2018):** 142.3

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated April 2020):

- Kazakhstan has developed one of the most advanced telecoms sectors in Central Asia, supported by the largest economy in the region which itself has benefited from abundant oil and natural gas reserves.
- The fixed broadband market in Kazakhstan remains relatively underdeveloped, due to the dominance of the mobile broadband sector, which is in turn driven by the strong mobile sector.
- The number of fixed telephone lines in Kazakhstan is declining steadily, again related to the preference for the mobile platform for voice services. The rate of decline began to accelerate in 2015, and further decline is anticipated in coming years.
- Kazakhstan's mobile market was once highly competitive but has since been consolidated and is effectively a duopoly between Kazakhtelecom and Beeline Kazakhstan. Both operators have developed extensive LTE infrastructure to support mobile broadband services and have trialled 5G though commercial launches are not anticipated until 2021.

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2019](#) Kazakhstan is listed as 'Not Free'. According to Freedom House the following restrictions are imposed in Kazakhstan:

- Social media or communications platforms are blocked
- Political, social, or religious content are blocked
- ICT networks are deliberately disrupted

- Progovernment commentators manipulate online discussions
- New law or directive increasing surveillance or restricting anonymity have been passed
- Blogger or ICT user have been arrested, imprisoned, or in prolonged detention for political or social content
- Blogger or ICT user have been physically attacked or killed (including in custody)
- Technical attacks against government critics or human rights organizations

Satellite dishes provide a good alternative for many people in Kazakhstan to access international information. The media that are under state control offer only very limited independent information, if at all.

There are many options for Christians to communicate aspects of the Christian faith - via (foreign) websites, via SD cards in smartphones, and via radio and television programs through satellite broadcasts. The situation for books, magazines and DVDs is more problematic since these can be more easily confiscated during raids and searches.

## Security situation

Radical Islamic attacks have not occurred in Kazakhstan for 9 years. There was a sudden spike at the end of 2011 when there were bombings and killings in Atyrau (western Kazakhstan) and Taraz (southern Kazakhstan), for instance. Since then, the government of Kazakhstan has stepped up its suppression of radical Islamic influences.

Officials have admitted that hundreds of Kazakhs went to Iraq and Syria to join IS fighters in recent years. Many, they say, were killed fighting as IS militants (Source: [Radio Free Europe, 10 May 2019](#)). In the first days of May 2019, the authorities repatriated 231 Kazakh citizens from Syria many of whom were believed to be IS family members. On 13 May 2019, Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbayev told a press conference that the group included 16 men, 59 women and 156 children, most under six with 18 orphans (Source: [AsiaNews, 16 May 2019](#)).

From time to time there are tensions on the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In March 2019 Kazakh authorities started conducting elaborate checks of all trucks entering Kazakhstan from Kyrgyzstan. As a result, Kyrgyzstan lashed out at neighboring Kazakhstan over what they saw as burdensome bureaucratic procedures that slowed the movement of trucks across the border to a crawl for the second time in two years (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 April 2019](#)).

On 8 February 2020, there were ethnic clashes in a southern Kazakh district, with mobs torching houses, overturning cars and sending hundreds fleeing into neighboring Kyrgyzstan. At least eight people were killed. This was the worst ethnic violence in the Zhambyl region (130 kilometers west of Almaty) for some years (Source: [Radio Free Europe, 8 February 2020](#)).

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and have not been especially targeted as far as national security issues are concerned.

## Trends analysis

### 1) The change in presidential leadership has made little change to the running of the country

When President Nazarbayev abruptly announced his resignation in March 2019, he did not intend to disappear from the political scene. He handed over his public tasks to his chosen candidate (who was then elected in June 2019), but behind the scenes Nazarbayev continued to exert his influence. No major changes have occurred in Kazakhstan since then, with one exception - the removal of Nazarbayev's daughter as Speaker of the Senate.

### 2) The situation for Christians has deteriorated since 2011

Since the passing of a new law on religion in October 2011 (see *Political and legal landscape*), Christians have been facing very high levels of pressure. In January 2019, however, planned additional restrictions were shelved. It is yet too early to conclude that the situation for Christians in Kazakhstan has improved.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Kazakhstan country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15263826>
- Political and legal landscape: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE/RL - 19 March 2019 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-president-nursultan-nazarbaev-says-he-is-resigning-/29830123.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Unsurprisingly - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Tokayev-elected-president-amid-protests-and-arrests-with-almost-71-per-cent-of-the-vote-47242.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 9 July 2020 - <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13629-dariga-nazarbayevas-political-ambitions-effectively-ended-by-president-tokayev.html>
- Political and legal landscape: IRF 2019 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kazakhstan/>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kazakhstan?view=chart>
- Economic landscape: RFE/RL, 3 June 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-takes-another-economic-hit-as-coronavirus-infects-oil-fields-copper-mines/30650397.html>
- Economic landscape: RFE/RL, 3 July 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbek-tajik-migrant-workers-stranded-in-kazakhstan/30704986.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/KAZ>
- Social and cultural landscape: 12 April 2017 - <http://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-president-orders-shift-from-cyrillic/28425590.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: Nazarbayev - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-issues-new-coins-featuring-latin-based-alphabet/29905954.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: November 2018 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-holds-nationwide-exam-in-shift-away-from-cyrillic-alphabet/29600469.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL, 25 May 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-covid-cemetery-has-more-graves-than-reported-coronavirus-victims/30634039.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL, 3 June 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-takes-another-economic-hit-as-coronavirus-infects-oil-fields-copper-mines/30650397.html>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#kz>

- Technological landscape: World Bank’s Country Profile - [https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report\\_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=KAZ](https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=KAZ)
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Kazakhstan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2019 - [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019\\_Report\\_FH\\_FOTN\\_2019\\_final\\_Public\\_Download.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf)
- Security situation: Radio Free Europe, 10 May 2019 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/over-200-kazakhs-linked-to-islamic-state-repatriated-from-syria/29933295.html>
- Security situation: AsiaNews, 16 May 2019 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Nur-Sultan,-231-Kazakhs-repatriated-from-Syria-over-feared-links-with-the-Islamic-State-47031.html>
- Security situation: RFE/RL, 3 April 2019 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-trucks-border-kazakhstan-delays-ees/29858576.html>
- Security situation: Radio Free Europe, 8 February 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-/30423629.html>

## WWL 2021: Church information / Kazakhstan

### Christian origins

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Nestorian Christianity spread through southern Kazakhstan. In the year 1009, Nestorian missionaries baptized one of the numerous groups of Mongol-speaking ethnic Kereiti whose Khan took the Christian name Mark, Marguz. In the same period Nestorian Christianity spread among other peoples of Central Asia, and Metropolitan sees were established.

Timur Lenk (also called Tamar Lane: 1336-1406) eradicated Christianity in the 14th century. Stalin (1878-1953) ordered the deportation of many politically unreliable and religious citizens of the USSR to Kazakhstan during the “Great Purge” in the 1930s. During those years many Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians were sent to Central Asia and many of them settled in Kazakhstan. Many priests were deported and sent to concentration camps in Kazakhstan. Having been released, they started a clandestine ministry among the people. The church grew mainly among the non-Kazakh people.

After the country gained independence in 1991, the new religious liberty allowed missionary and evangelistic efforts to reach thousands of ethnic Kazakhs who embraced Christianity. The indigenous Church (i.e. Christians with a Muslim background), which was practically non-existent in 1990, is now estimated to number around 15,000. The church is not growing rapidly, due to pressure from both the Muslim environment (family, friends and community) and the local authorities.



## Church spectrum today

Kazakhstan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	4,500,000	92.7
Catholic	130,000	2.7
Protestant	51,000	1.1
Independent	126,000	2.6
Unaffiliated	50,000	1.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-5,500	-0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,851,500</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	41,000	0.8
Renewalist movement	110,000	2.3

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

According to the World Christian Database data of February 2020 the biggest denominations in Kazakhstan are:

- Russian Orthodox Church, with 3,900,000 members
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church, with 250,000 members
- Catholic Church in Kazakhstan, with 128,000 members

The overwhelming majority of Christians in Kazakhstan are ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. They mainly live in the north of the country.

# WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Kazakhstan

## Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

## Position on the World Watch List

Kazakhstan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	64	41
WWL 2020	64	35
WWL 2019	63	34
WWL 2018	63	28
WWL 2017	56	43

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Kazakhstan scored the same as in WWL 2020: 64 points. Practically nothing has changed regarding the persecution situation for Christians. Pressure is highest in the *Private* and *Church spheres of life*. These are indications of the two dominant Persecution Engines in Kazakhstan: *Islamic oppression* in the *Private sphere of life* and *Dictatorial paranoia* in the *Church sphere of life*. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure especially on converts, while the government imposes many restrictions on the functioning of Christian churches.

## Persecution engines

Kazakhstan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Very weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all

Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Pressure from the authorities has been stepped up since 2015 and raids and arrests have continued. Members of Protestant churches are particularly targeted since they are regarded as a foreign influence aiming to destroy the current political system. Hence their need to be severely controlled.

### Islamic oppression (Medium)

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

## Drivers of persecution

Kazakhstan:									
Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM	-	-	-	VERY WEAK	-	-	STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-

<b>Kazakhstan:</b>										
<b>Drivers of persecution per engine</b>	<b>IO</b>	<b>RN</b>	<b>ERH</b>	<b>CO</b>	<b>CDP</b>	<b>CPCO</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>DPA</b>	<b>OCC</b>	
	MEDIUM	-	-	-	VERY WEAK	-	-	STRONG	-	
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Strong):** The government suppresses all religious activity taking place independently of state control. Protestants have been fined, arrested and had their churches raided. Registration has been denied for years to several Christian groups. It is illegal for non-registered churches to gather, forcing them to go underground and leading to police raids. Religious literature must be approved by the government. Unapproved religious meetings can result in fines and imprisonment, with members being interrogated.
- **Political parties (Strong):** The ruling party functions as a driver since much of the persecution is government-sanctioned.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** 71% of the population are Muslims. They will protest against conversions and report Christian activities to the local authorities.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Extended family (Strong):** Pressure on converts exerted by family, friends and community to recant their Christian faith and return to Islam is high and can involve violence.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Local officials will have connections to the Muslim community, affecting their dealings with Christians.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Kazakh leaders (with the support of the authorities) see conversion as an assault against Kazakh identity.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Muslim clerics are open in their hostility towards non-Orthodox Christians and particularly against converts from Islam.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** At the local level, citizens are mostly Muslim and will oppose conversion and have a negative attitude toward Christian activities.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Pressure from the Muslim environment on converts is more intensive outside the major cities.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

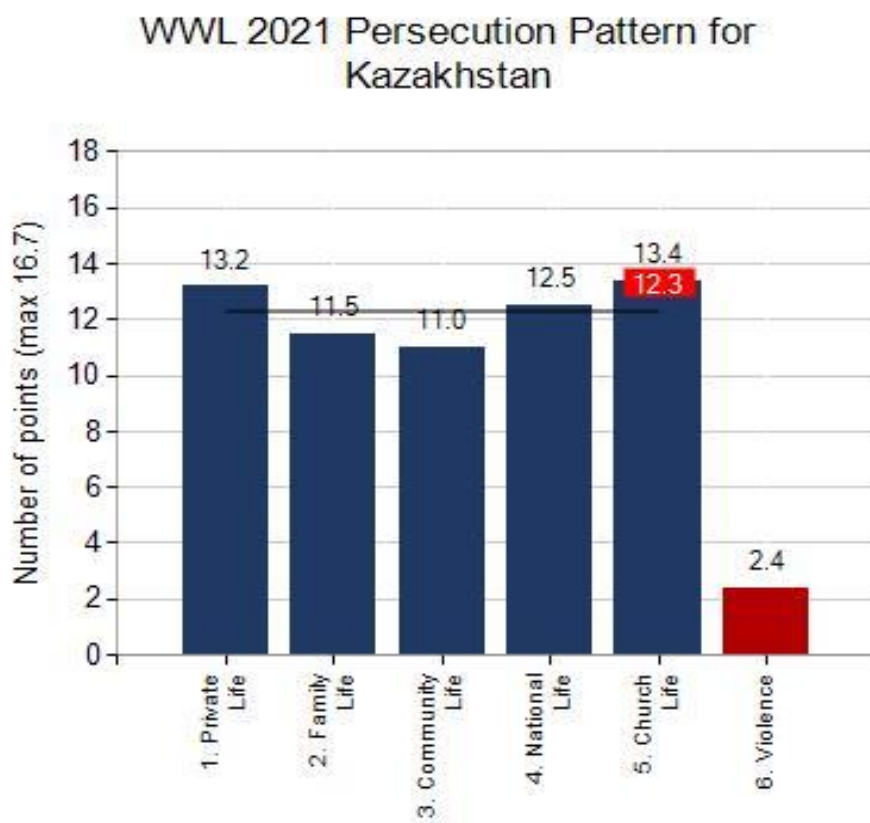
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians in Kazakhstan are not isolated from other Christian groups and are therefore not classed as a separate category in WWL analysis.

**Historical Christian communities:** These groups, of which the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is by far the largest, are not involved in evangelism among Kazakhs. They can function relatively freely since the Kazakh regime does not consider them a threat. Also, the Kazakh government has no interest in provoking Russia by making difficulties for the ROC – the events in eastern Ukraine have set an example.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christian converts with a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution in Kazakhstan. Apart from certain state restrictions, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. For them the latter is by far the more powerful.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** The unregistered groups of this category (which include Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations) experience increasing persecution, especially where they are active in evangelism. All Christians in this category suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines by the authorities.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Kazakhstan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (12.3 points), decreasing from 12.4 in WWL 2020. The two *spheres of life* where most of the decrease occurred were the *Community* and *Church spheres of life*.
- Pressure is extreme in the *Church sphere* and at very high levels in all other *spheres of life*. After the *Church sphere*, the next highest levels of pressure are to be found in the *Private* and *National spheres of life*. This is an indication that pressure on Christians in Kazakhstan

comes from two main sources: *Islamic oppression (Private sphere of life)* and *Dictatorial paranoia (National and Church spheres of life)*.

- The score for violence is low, increasing from 1.7 in WWL 2020 to 2.4 points in WWL 2021. As in all other countries in Central Asia, reports of violent incidents tend to be few in Kazakhstan.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

### **Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.50 points)**

Christian materials are considered as hard evidence for conversion. For converts at home in the countryside, if such materials are discovered, persecution comes from family and local community. The government of Kazakhstan distinguishes between approved and non-approved materials, and between registered and unregistered Christians. The ROC does not seem to experience problems in this respect.

### **Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)**

Conversion is the issue that triggers the fiercest reaction from family, friends and community in Kazakhstan. Conversion is viewed as betrayal of the family and culture, as well as of Islam. This can lead to physical violence too. This only affects converts in the countryside. Officially, there is no hindrance to conversion - the laws are secular. But the government is concerned that conversions could lead to tension among the population.

### **Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.25 points)**

Converts in the countryside have a problem in this respect as openly showing their new faith will draw negative reactions from their families, friends and the community, but any Christian wearing Christian symbols will draw attention from the Muslim environment. Any non-Orthodox Christian wearing Christian symbols also draws unwanted attention from the state.

### **Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)**

Converts in the countryside will avoid sharing their new faith with members of their communities as this could be regarded as a form of evangelism. Non-traditional Protestants can also be quickly accused of conducting evangelism by the state authorities.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.25 points)**

Baptisms are regarded as the final farewell to the faith of the fathers - the final sign of conversion. Family, friends and community will oppose this. Baptisms are regarded by the state with hostility as they are automatically connected to evangelism and conversion - two activities opposed by the state.

### **Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (3.25 points)**

Muslim families and communities will block adoption and fostering procedure if it is known that a person is a Christian. The adoption of a Kazakh child into a Christian family is not permitted.

### **Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.25 points)**

The Muslim environment (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts in particular to attend Islamic instruction - sometimes even against the wishes of their parents. The administration of schools and institutes periodically organize state-funded public meetings about combating "sects". These meetings spread negative propaganda against religious minorities, including against Evangelical churches. These meetings are supposedly voluntary, but everyone is strongly urged to attend.

### **Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.25 points)**

Christian children are slandered and Muslim children are kept from having close contact with Christian children. Children of converts are seen as outsiders and so often experience harassment from their Muslim peers.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

### **Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)**

Converts are monitored by their family and surrounding community. Unregistered Christian churches are monitored by the local authorities.

### **Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.25 points)**

Threats are very common. Converts are threatened by the family, friends and community (including the local imam). Local state officials regularly threaten unregistered Christian groups.

**Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 points)**

This occurs frequently and all over the country. Christians are fined for illegal religious activities such as worshiping at a non-registered church, distributing religious literature or sharing their faith. Worst hit are converts and unregistered churches.

**Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community. When a meeting is raided, people present will be interrogated, fined and sometimes detained, while all materials found on the spot are confiscated. Once they have been recorded in police records, Christians are required to report regularly.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)**

The amendment to the existing Constitution recognizes two religious organizations that are not required to re-register: i) the state-supported Muslim Board and associated religious communities, and ii) the Russian Orthodox Church, as a cultural representative of Russian Federation. Other religious organizations and communities are required to re-register. The registration process is complicated and limits the opportunities for non-traditional religious organizations to operate on an official basis. Islam has no impact on legislation in Kazakhstan. The role of the Muslim community does not reach to this level.

**Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (3.75 points)**

Military service is obligatory and those Christians who for religious reasons do not want to take up arms, are still forced to join the armed forces.

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.50 points)**

It is prohibited to express religious views in public, without official authorization, according to the law regulating religious life. In practice, such permission is only given to state-supported religious organizations.

**Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.50 points)**

There are no Christian political parties in Kazakhstan. There are no Christian civil organizations as they would be falling under the category 'religious' (Kazakhstan is a secular country). There are charity organizations and rehabilitation centers run by Christians, but Muslims regard such activity as a form of outreach and will often oppose them.



## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

### **Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)**

The law on religion is very restrictive about literature which can only be distributed in registered church buildings, recognized religious educational institutions and special places appointed by the state. In December 2016 President Nazarbayev signed amendments to anti-terrorism legislation which requires compulsory censorship of all religious literature produced and distributed in Kazakhstan. New, more restrictive legal amendments are presently under consideration by parliament. Muslims regard most Christian materials as evangelism tools.

### **Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (4.00 points)**

According to the law, no religion-based organizations, institutions or schools are allowed. The Muslim community will regard any social work by Christians as a form of outreach and will oppose it.

### **Block 5.12: Churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in printing Christian materials or owning printing presses. (3.75 points)**

The law on religion puts restrictions on printing and distributing religious literature. Since January 2017, more restrictions came into force under the law on anti-terrorist activities. (See Block 5.8 above)

### **Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.75 points)**

When the instigators of persecution are state agents at any level, it is dangerous to speak out against them and they can more or less act with impunity. And since the judiciary in Kazakhstan is not independent, any complaints will result in detention or fine. Speaking out against incidents of persecution committed by members of Muslim communities in rural parts of the country is also risky and will be swiftly blocked.

## Violence

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.*

Kazakhstan: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	2	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	10	15
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	3	4
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	0	2
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	2
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	3	0

For the WWL 2021 reporting period:

- **Churches confiscated:** There were two confiscations of Church Buildings in Nur-Sultan in February 2020 - Grace Presbyterian Church and Agape Pentecostal Church.
- **Christians arrested:** 10 Christians were detained mostly for distributing Christian literature or for leading meetings during the COVID-19 restricted measures.

- **Christians sentenced/forced to leave country:** Three pastors of New Life Church were sentenced in absentia to 4-5 years in prison and lost their appeal on 1 November 2019, with the verdict coming into force on 11 November 2019. The pastors are now living in the USA where they had to flee to avoid arrest and cannot return to Kazakhstan because they would be immediately imprisoned. (See: "Specific examples of violations of rights of Christians" above.)

## 5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Kazakhstan: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	12.3
2020	12.4
2019	12.0
2018	11.8
2017	11.0

As can be seen from the table above, the average pressure over the 5 spheres of life in Kazakhstan has been constantly very high. After increasing in each of the first four WWL reporting periods shown, the average pressure now seems to have stabilized at the 12.3/12.4 point mark.

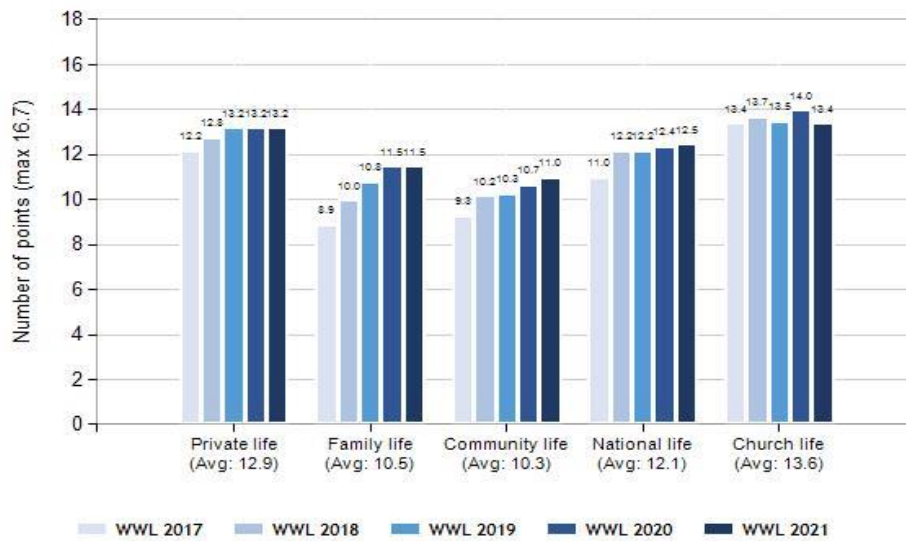
### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As with the table for average pressure, pressure in each *sphere of life* increased (with a few exceptions) in each of the first four WWL reporting periods shown. The two dominant *spheres of life* have remained the same: *Private* and *Church life*, reflecting the two dominant Persecution engines at work in Kazakhstan.

- Pressure in *Private life* over the past five years has always been high - it has never been lower than 12.2 points. Since WWL 2019 the score for this sphere remained stable at 13.2 points.
- Pressure in *Family life* has steadily been going up over the past five years. The score was 8.9 points in WWL 2017 to 11.5 points in WWL 2021. This shows that pressure on converts from their family has increased markedly.

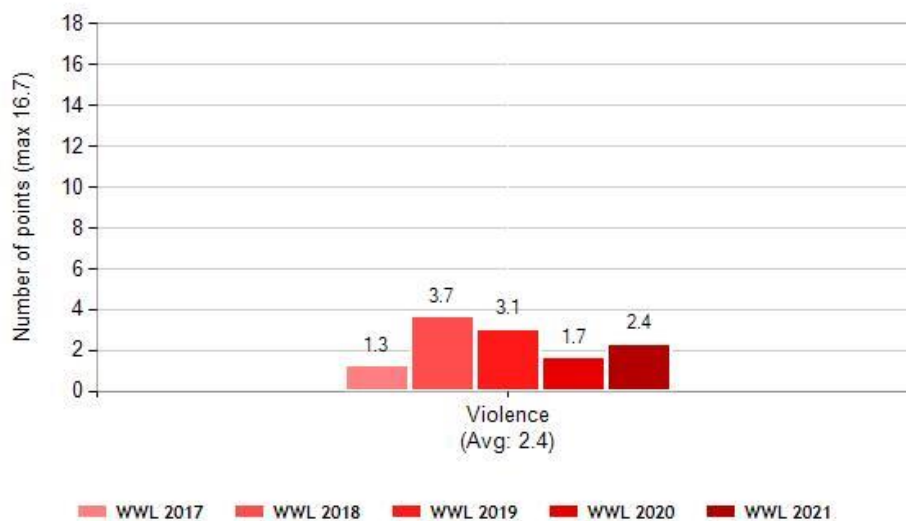
- Pressure in *Community life* has also constantly gone up from 9.3 in WWL 2017 to 11.0 points in WWL 2021. This shows that pressure on converts from their community has increased also.
- Pressure in *National life* steadily increased from 11.0 points in WWL 2017 to 12.5 points in WWL 2021. This is a clear indication that the government of Kazakhstan has been tightening restrictions constantly.
- Pressure in *Church life* has always been highest of all the *spheres of life*, only going up and down slightly over the past five years.

WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Kazakhstan (Spheres of life)



### 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Kazakhstan (Violence)



As in many other former Soviet republics, the number of violent incidents in Kazakhstan tends to be relatively low. Over the past five WWL reporting periods the score for violence varied between 1.3 points at the lowest to 3.7 points at the highest. The score for WWL 2021 (2.4 points) is the same as the overall average.

## Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Abduction
Forced marriage
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Violence – physical
Violence – Verbal

Although Kazakh law gives equal rights to men and women, gender equality has not been achieved in practice. This is in large part due to traditionalist [views](#) that consider women as subservient to men (UNH, Spring 2020). A report by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)) published on 11 November 2019 congratulated Kazakhstan for its progress in reducing maternal mortality and improving girls' access to education. Nonetheless, it also noted the lack of effective measures necessary to address gender-based violence against women, as well as the prevalence of polygamy, child and forced marriage and bride kidnapping. The issue of domestic violence has since been [highlighted](#) as a pervasive problem (Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2019). The traditional Islamic and cultural practices which treat women as inferior to men is felt to be the main factor that makes women and girls, who convert to Christianity, more vulnerable to pressure and violence for their faith.

Female converts are at greater risk of suffering physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats and house arrest. A family might keep a convert under house arrest, since the exposure of a convert in the family would bring great shame to the family in the eyes of the community. Such persecution is experienced especially by converts, but non-convert Christians who are married to a non-Christian may also experience this. Forced marriage to a Muslim is not uncommon and is sometimes linked to abduction. Spouses and children of converts in the countryside have also experienced pressure from their families who try to keep them within Islam. It is difficult for a woman to escape these pressures as she stands little chance of living on her own, due to high unemployment and a lack of financial dependency (Open Democracy, 19 June 2018).

The persecution of Christian women serves to create fear and anxiety in families and Christian communities. Persecuting women can also be used as an instrument for persecuting their husbands.

## Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Denied inheritance or possessions
Discrimination/harassment via education
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Economic harassment via fines
Imprisonment by government
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

In the public sphere, men tend to have roles with [higher levels of responsibility](#) than women, and the religious persecution which Christian men experience reflects this socio-cultural structure (OECD Gender Policy Delivery Review, 2017, “Kazakhstan”). Church leaders are normally male and men are the head of the family and the main financial providers. Pressure comes from both the State as well as family and community pressures.

State-based persecution has included interrogations, fines, detention and imprisonment. When a Christian gathering is raided, the leaders (generally men) bear the brunt of the raid. Church leaders have also been imprisoned following these interrogations. Further, obligatory military service for young men provides an extra potential risk of persecution because it is a highly controlled environment in a Muslim-majority state. Further, those Christians, who for religious reasons, do not want to take up arms are still forced to join the army.

Family-based persecution affects converts from a Muslim background. They face harsh verbal harassment and physical beatings. Young men who are still students and need financial support, risk losing this support upon conversion. Compounding the issue for young male converts seeking a Christian education, a recent regulation now restricts travel for educational purposes. These regulations severely limit the opportunity for Kazakh citizens to travel abroad to study in institutions of Christian education. Since men travel more than women, men are affected more.

When a Christian man becomes a target for persecution - for instance, losing his job - his whole family will be affected. Earning a living remains complicated for Christian men since they are directly affected by the bribes required of Protestants in order to run their businesses. Converts in the countryside are especially under pressure at this point. Some business owners keep their Christian beliefs a secret. Reports indicate that Protestants are persecuted in this way but not Orthodox Christians, and converts most definitely face pressure on their businesses from the local authorities and local community. Converts and church leaders particularly risk losing employment due to their faith. If a man is a church leader, any persecution he faces will also affect the congregation he serves, which can easily result in an increase of fear in the church community.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2019](#) report (pages 196-202):

- "The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion. The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), part of the Ministry of Information and Social Development (MISD), is responsible for religious issues. According to local and international observers, authorities continued to impose restrictions and additional scrutiny on what the government considers 'non-traditional' religious groups, including Muslims who practice a version of Islam other than the officially recognized Hanafi school of Sunni Islam".
- "In August an Almaty court sentenced 10 Muslims to between five and one-half and eight years in prison for propaganda of terrorism and incitement of discord. Several followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir stood trial for participation in activities in the organization, which is banned in the country."

The focus of the Kazakh government on non-traditional groups means that all religions are targeted equally. Kazakhstan has not banned Jehovah's Witnesses.

Further examples:

- "As the criminal trial of Sunni Muslim Zhuldzybek Taurbekov continues in Almaty, 24 individuals are known to be in jail for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. All of them are Sunni Muslim men. In addition, a further 6 individuals are known to be serving restricted freedom sentences for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. All but one of them are Sunni Muslim men." (Source: [Forum 18](#), 18 December 2019)
- "In 2020, courts ordered destroyed one Muslim and 196 Christian publications. The owners were each fined one month's average wage. Punishing an individual for importing one religious book ('Selected Hadiths') for personal use is a 'clear violation' by the court, a legal specialist noted. 'Normally [the Police] destroy books by putting them in a stove, but I cannot say if they've already destroyed the book', the judge told Forum 18." (Source: [Forum 18](#), 1 April 2020)
- "24 Muslims were jailed for up to 8 years to punish exercising freedom of religion or belief." (Source: [Forum 18](#), 22 April 2020)

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Dictatorial paranoia

The current government exerts a high level of control over the country. Government officials at all levels are the main persecutors of Christians in Kazakhstan, imposing all kinds of legal restrictions, monitoring all religious activities, carrying out raids on meetings and blocking the availability of religious materials. This is not likely to change in the near future.

### Islamic oppression

Islam is not the state religion but it is the traditional religion of most of the population. Muslims are treated in the same manner as other religions. Muslim pressure on Christians in Kazakhstan does not come from radical Islamic movements but rather from the far-reaching cultural influence of Muslim family, friends and community on converts. The chances that this will change soon are as good as non-existent.

Due to the stability of these two main Persecution engines, Christians in Kazakhstan will continue to face considerable levels of surveillance and pressure.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: views - <https://www.unh.edu/inquiryjournal/spring-2020/media-gender-and-national-identity-almaty-kazakhstan>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: (CEDAW) - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25277&LangID=E>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: highlighted - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/kazakhstans-unheard-voices-domestic-violence-victims-0>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: higher levels of responsibility - <https://www.oecd.org/gov/Gender-Highlights-Kazakhstan.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2529](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2529)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2558](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2558)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2566](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2566)

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Kazakhstan>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Kazakhstan>