*TOPONYMIC FACTFILE*

pc**gn**
The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

# Kazakhstan

| Country name | Kazakhstan |
|---|---|
| State title | Republic of Kazakhstan |
| Name of citizen | Kazakh |
| Official national languages | Kazakh; Russian |
| Country name in official languages | Қазақстан (*Qazaqstan*) (kaz); Казахстан (*Kazakhstan*) (rus)[1] |
| State title in official languages | Қазақстан Республикасы (Qazaqstan Respublikasy)(kaz); Республика Казахстан (Respublika Kazakhstan) (rus) |
| Script | Kazakh Cyrillic; Russian Cyrillic |
| Romanization System | BGN/PCGN Romanization System for Kazakh; BGN/PCGN Romanization System for Russian |
| ISO-3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3) | KZ/KAZ |
| Capital | Astana |
| Capital in official languages | Астана (kaz and rus) both romanized *Astana*[2] |
| Population/Area | Total area 2.72 million km$^2$; population 18.75 million[3] |

**Introduction**

Kazakhstan is the world's largest landlocked country, neighbouring Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea. Part of the Soviet Union between 1918 and 1991, it became the Republic of Kazakhstan on independence.

**Geographical names policy**

Kazakh is the official state language of Kazakhstan. As a former Soviet state and with a significant Russian population, Russian also retains official status for all purposes. In recognition of this joint official language situation, whilst also recognising that Kazakh-language knowledge is not yet widespread (see Languages below), PCGN maintains a dual-language policy for Kazakhstan. In practice this means that according to the product, PCGN might recommend that geographical names appear in either their Kazakh-language form, or their Russian-language form, or preferentially – if space allows - in both forms separated by a solidus, with the Kazakh-language form first (where the two differ). These names are to be represented according to the relevant

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[1] ISO 639-3 codes are given for languages mentioned in this Factfile.

[2] Renamed Astana in September 2022. Had been named Nur-Sultan, after outgoing President Nursultan Nazarbaev, in 2019. Astana had become the capital in 1997, replacing the country's largest city Almaty.

[3] Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world, with one of the lowest population densities (7/km$^2$) [https://data.worldbank.org/]

BGN/PCGN Romanization System (for Kazakh and Russian as appropriate, see below). To illustrate a few examples are:

Nur-Sultan *(spelling the same in both languages)*
Aqtöbe/Aktobe *(kaz/rus)*
Taldyqorghan/Taldykorgan *(kaz/rus)*

As is true across the former Soviet Union, many place names in Kazakhstan have changed since independence.  The PCGN document entitled Kazakhstan: Between Russia & Central Asia, produced in 2006, lists 337 name changes that had been made since 1991; though given that these were drawn principally from 1:2,000,000-scale sources even at this time there were likely to have been many more.

More information is included in the PCGN 2006 paper noted above, but the name changes can be categorized into a number of types:
a) Colonial Russian names have been replaced: e.g. Yermak became Aqsū (kaz)/Aksu (rus);
b) Soviet names have also been dispensed with, usually in favour of genuine Kazakh names: e.g. Komsomol became Zhetiaral (kaz)/Zhetyaral (rus), though occasionally to mark non-Kazakhs: e.g. Leninogorsk was renamed Rīdder (kaz)/Ridder (rus) in honour of Philip Ridder, who discovered important metal deposits there;
c) Some Russian names have been translated: e.g. Chërnaya Rechka (meaning "Black River") became Karasu in Russian to match the Kazakh name Qarasū (also meaning "Black River");
d) Some Russian names have been re-spelt to fit better the equivalent Kazakh-language toponym; this phenomenon of 'Kazakhification' is described in more detail in a PCGN 2018 paper (*Kazakhstan: 'Kazakhification' of Russian geographical names,* available on request), for example, Chimkent to Shymkent (rus and kaz); Novyy Uzen' to Zhanaozen (rus), aligning with Zhangaözen (kaz).
e) At least one genuinely Kazakh name has been replaced by another: Zhambyl, named after the Kazakh poet Zhambyl Zhabayev, was renamed Taraz (rus and kaz), an older Kazakh name related to the Talas river on which the city stands.

Kazakhstan does not maintain an up-to-date geographical names dataset and official geographical names sources are not easy to find.  PCGN holds Kazakh and Russian editions of 1:1,500,000-scale official maps (2007) and a series of official gazettes recording names (and changes) up to 2010.

The NGA GEOnet Names Server is also a good source of names in Kazakhstan.

**Languages**

As noted above, both Kazakh and Russian have official status.  Article 7 of the 1995 constitution of Kazakhstan begins:
*1. The state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan shall be the Kazakh language.*
*2. In state institutions and local self-administrative bodies the Russian language shall be officially used on equal grounds along with the Kazakh language.*
However, the knowledge of Kazakh, though difficult to determine precisely given that a sense of national identity may inflate speaker numbers, is reportedly at around 65%, whilst Russian knowledge (including native and second language speakers) is believed to be at least 95%.

A number of native and immigrant minority languages are also spoken (particularly Ukrainian, Uighur, Tatar, German and Korean), but these do not have official status and will not be reflected in the official toponymy of the country.

*Writing systems*

Both Kazakh and Russian are written in Cyrillic script.  In the case of Kazakh, it has long been discussed whether to adopt a Roman-script alphabet for that language, to align it more closely with its fellow Turkic language family members.  It is generally acknowledged that Roman script is more suitable for the Turkic languages since it more easily caters for the sizeable number of vowels encountered in those languages.  There have been a number of proposed Roman-script alphabets for Kazakh[4]; the currently promoted script, most recently altered in January 2021, and described in detail in PCGN's paper *Update on the implementation of the Roman script for Kazakh*, 2021 [available on request] is quite similar to the Turkish alphabet.  The programme for its implementation is understood to be due for completion in 2031.

Until the Roman script's implementation, Kazakh continues to use the Cyrillic script as it has done since 1940.  Kazakh had been written in Arabic script until 1928, at which point a Roman-script alphabet was introduced by the Soviet Union.  This campaign of 'latinization' saw the introduction of the Roman script for some 50 languages, but this campaign dwindled throughout the 1930s and by 1940 Cyrillic was introduced for Kazakh.  However, to adopt the Cyrillic script required additional characters to cover all the sounds of the Kazakh language, and therefore the Kazakh alphabet has 42 characters, rather than the 33 characters of Russian, the additional characters being: ә (romanized ä); ғ (gh); қ (q); ң (ng); ө (ö); ұ (u); ү (ü), һ (h) and і (i).

**Inventory of characters (and their Unicode encodings[5]):**

**The BGN/PCGN Romanization system for Kazakh** contains the following letter-diacritic combinations and special characters in addition to the unmodified letters of the basic Roman script (shown with the appropriate Unicode encoding):

| Upper-case characters | Unicode encoding | Lower-case characters | Unicode encoding | Other symbols | Unicode encoding |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ä | 00C4 | ä | 00E4 | " | 201D |
| Ī | 012A | ī | 012B | ' | 2019 |
| Ö | 00D6 | ö | 00F6 | | |
| Ū | 016A | ū | 016B | | |
| Ü | 00DC | ü | 00FC | | |
| Ė | 0116 | ė | 0117 | | |

**The BGN/PCGN Romanization system for Russian** contains the following letter-diacritic combinations and special characters in addition to the unmodified letters of the basic Roman script (shown with the appropriate Unicode encoding):

| Character | Unicode encoding |
|---|---|
| Ë | 00CB |
| ë | 00EB |
| ' | 2019 |

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[4] See more detail in PCGN's papers on this subject as it has evolved presented to the 24th, 29th, 32nd and 33rd BGN/PCGN Conferences [available on request].

[5]  See www.unicode.org

**Administrative structure**

Kazakhstan is divided into 17 regions (oblast' (Russian); *oblys/oblysy* (Kazakh)) and 4 cities of republic significance (*gorod* (Russian); *qala/qalasy* (Kazakh) at the first-order (ADM1) level.  These generic terms are represented with a lower-case initial in the original languages, and PCGN retains this style in the romanization.  Three new regions (Abay oblysy, Ulytaū oblysy, and Zhetisū oblysy) were created in June 2022[6].  Additionally, as Taldyqhorgan has become the administrative centre of the new Zhetisū oblysy, Almaty oblysy has gained a new administrative centre: Qonaev (a city which was named Qapshaghay until March 2022).

The first two columns in the table below give the names of the administrative divisions in Kazakh and Russian, each cell showing the long form name (with generic term) and the acceptable short form name shown below.

| Administrative division (ADM1) – (Kazakh long form and short form) | Administrative division (ADM1) – (Russian long form and short form) | ISO 3166-2 code | Administrative centre (Kazakh) | Administrative centre (Russian) | Location of centre |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abay oblysy<br>Abay | Abayskaya oblast'<br>Abay | - | Semey | Semey | 50° 25' 4 9"N 80° 16' 00" E |
| Almaty oblysy<br>Almaty | Almatinskaya oblast'<br>Almaty | KZ-ALM | Qonaev | Konayev[7] | 43° 51' 18" N 77° 03' 46" E |
| Almaty qalasy<br>Almaty | Gorod Almaty<br>Almaty | KZ-ALA | Almaty | Almaty | 43° 15' 00" N 76° 55' 00" E |
| Aqmola oblysy<br>Aqmola | Akmolinskaya oblast'<br>Akmola | KZ-AKM | Kökshetaū | Kokshetau | 53° 17' 00" N 69° 24' 00" E |
| Aqtöbe oblysy<br>Aqtöbe | Aktyubinskaya oblast'<br>Aktobe | KZ-AKT | Aqtöbe | Aktobe | 50° 18' 00" N 57° 11' 00" E |
| Atyraū oblysy<br>Atyraū | Atyrauskaya oblast'<br>Atyrau | KZ-ATY | Atyraū | Atyrau | 47° 07' 00" N 51° 53' 00" E |
| Batys Qazaqstan oblysy<br>Batys Qazaqstan | Zapadno-Kazakhstanskaya oblast' | KZ-ZAP | Oral | Ural'sk | 51° 14' 00" N 51° 22' 00" E |

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[6] О некоторых вопросах административно-территориального устройства Республики Казахстан  — Официальный сайт Президента Республики Казахстан (akorda.kz)

[7] The town's full name is Dinmukhamed Kunayev after a Kazakh Soviet politician. Though the Russian form of his name was spelt Kunayev, Russian spellings of the new town name have been seen as both Konayev (evidently following the Kazakh form more closely), and Kunayev.

| Administrative division (ADM1) – (Kazakh long form and short form) | Administrative division (ADM1) – (Russian long form and short form) | ISO 3166-2 code | Administrative centre (Kazakh) | Administrative centre (Russian) | Location of centre |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Zapadnyy Kazakhstan | | | | |
| Bayqongyr | Baykonyr[8] | –[9] | Bayqongyr | Baykonyr | 45° 37' 00" N 63° 19' 00" E |
| Mangghystaū oblysy Mangghystaū | Mangistauskaya oblast' Mangistau | KZ-MAN | Aqtaū | Aktau | 43° 39' 00" N 51° 09' 00" E |
| Astana qalasy Astana | Gorod Astana Astana | KZ-AST | Astana | Astana | 51° 10' 00" N 71° 27' 00" E |
| Pavlodar oblysy Pavlodar | Pavlodarskaya oblast' Pavlodar | KZ-PAV | Pavlodar | Pavlodar | 45° 00' 38" N 78° 23' 16" E |
| Qaraghandy oblysy Qaraghandy | Karagandinskaya oblast' Karagandy[10] | KZ-KAR | Qaraghandy | Karagandy | 49° 48' 00" N 73° 06' 00" E |
| Qostanay oblysy Qostanay | Kostanayskaya oblast' Kostanay | KZ-KUS | Qostanay | Kostanay | 53° 13' 00" N 63° 38' 00" E |
| Qyzylorda oblysy Qyzylorda | Kyzylordinskaya oblast' Kyzylorda | KZ-KZY | Qyzylorda | Kyzylorda | 44° 51' 00" N 65° 30' 00" E |
| Shyghys Qazaqstan oblysy Shyghys Qazaqstan | Vostochno-Kazakhstanskaya oblast' Vostochnyy Kazakhstan | KZ-VOS | Öskemen | Ust'-Kamenogorsk | 49° 58' 00" N 82° 36' 00" E |
| Shymkent qalasy Shymkent | Gorod Shymkent Shymkent | KZ-SHY | Shymkent | Shymkent | 42° 18' 00" N 69° 36' 00" E |
| Soltüstik Qazaqstan oblysy Soltüstik Qazaqstan | Severo-Kazakhstanskaya oblast' Severnyy Kazakhstan | KZ-SEV | Petropavl | Petropavlovsk | 54° 52' 00" N 69° 09' 00" E |
| Türkistan oblysy Türkistan | Turkestanskaya oblast' Turkestan | KZ-YUZ | Türkistan | Turkestan | 43° 17' 50" N 68° 15' 06" E |

[8] The city of Baykonur (Gorod Baykonur; Bayqongyr qalasy) is an administrative-territorial unit of Kazakhstan leased to Russia; the unit includes the city and the cosmodrome. The generic term has not been included in the list above to differentiate its status from other cities of republic significance; it is unknown whether Kazakh is considered to have official status within this area. The English spelling is often seen as Baikonur.

[9] Not included in ISO 3166; previously included as KZ-BAY.

[10] An example of Kazakhification, whereby the official Russian form has evolved to become closer to the Kazakh form. In this case, the former Russian form, Karaganda, is still frequently encountered.

| Administrative division (ADM1) – (Kazakh long form and short form) | Administrative division (ADM1) – (Russian long form and short form) | ISO 3166-2 code | Administrative centre (Kazakh) | Administrative centre (Russian) | Location of centre |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ulytaū oblysy Ulytaū | Ulytauskaya oblast' Ulytau | - | Zhezqazghan | Zhezkazgan | 47° 47' 17" N 67° 42' 03" E |
| Zhambyl oblysy Zhambyl | Zhambylskaya oblast' Zhambyl | KZ-ZHA | Taraz | Taraz | 42° 54' 00" N 71° 22' 00" E |
| Zhetisū oblysy Zhetisū | Zhetysuskaya oblast' Zhetysu | - | Taldyqorghan | Taldykorgan | 45° 01' 20" N 78° 22' 09" E |

**Other Significant Locations**

| PCGN Approved Name | Name in romanized Kazakh/Russian | Conventional Name | Location | Feature Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Altay (or local names labelled as appropriate) | Altay Zhotasy/ Gory Altay | Altay | 48° 00' 00"N 90° 00' 00"E | Mountains (China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Russia) |
| Aral Sea | Aral tengizi/Aral'skoye more | Aral Sea | 45° 00' 00"N 60° 00' 00"E | Sea (now mostly desert) (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) |
| Balqash köli/Ozero Balkash | Balqash köli/Ozero Balkash[11] | Lake Balkhash | 46° 30' 00"N 75° 00' 00"E | Lake |
| Caspian Sea | Kaspīy tengizi/ Kaspiyskoye more | Caspian Sea | 42° 00' 00"N 50° 00' 00"E | Sea |
| Qyzylqum/Peski Kyzylkum (if labelled in Kazakhstan) | Qyzylqum/Peski Kyzylkum | - | 42° 43' 13"N 63° 58' 18"E | Desert (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan) |
| Syr Darya (or local names labelled as appropriate) | Syrdarīya/Syrdar'ya | Syr Darya | 46° 03' 00"N 61° 00' 00"E | River (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) |
| Tien Shan (or local names labelled as appropriate) | Tängir taūy/ Tyan'-Shan' | Tien Shan | 42°00'00"N 80°00'00"E | Mountains (China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan) |

[11] A subject of the Kazakhification process, Russian has altered the medial 'kh' to 'k' in this name. The conventional name, such as it exists, has not yet made this change, though as a feature wholly within Kazakhstan, PCGN's recommendation is to show the local language names rather than the conventional name.

**Useful references**

- Administrative divisions: http://www.statoids.com
- BBC Country Profile: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15263826
- CIA World Factbook: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kazakhstan/
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Travel Advice: https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO): www.iso.org
- Languages: https://www.ethnologue.com/, www.omniglot.com
- National news agencies: KazInform news agency: https://www.inform.kz/qz; Qamshy newspaper: https://latyn.qamshy.kz/
- PCGN papers:
  Kazakhstan: Between Russia & Central Asia, 2006
  Various papers on the evolution of proposed Kazakh Roman scripts, presented to BGN/PCGN Conferences
  *Update on the implementation of the Roman script for Kazakh*, 2021
  *Kazakhification of Russian names, 2022 update*
      [all the above are available on request]
- Unicode Consortium: www.unicode.org
- US Board on Geographic Names GEOnet Names Server: http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html

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