

# Opinion – Challenges to Kazakhstan’s Transition to the Green Economy

Written by Darzhan Kazbekova

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## Opinion – Challenges to Kazakhstan’s Transition to the Green Economy

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DARZHAN KAZBEKOVA, JUN 14 2020

“Green economy” is one of the important instruments for the sustainable development of Kazakhstan. On May 30, 2013, the document entitled *Concept of Transition of Kazakhstan to “Green Economy”* was approved according to the act of the first president of the country. *Concept of Transition of Kazakhstan to “Green Economy”* defines the concept of “green economy” as an “economy with a high level of quality of life for its population, and a careful and meaningful use of natural resources in the best interests of the current and future generations”. This Concept is one of the recent acts launched by the government of Kazakhstan to demonstrate its intentions towards the implementation of the general goals of sustainable development.

*Concept of Transition of Kazakhstan to “Green Economy”* was also released in accordance with Kazakhstan’s international and national environmental obligations, including the ratification of the Paris Agreement and the revision of national environmental legislation and regulations related to the adopted concept of “green economy”. In this context, the development of well-being and the quality of the environment through the transition to “green economy” are the key parts of environmental policy in the country.

According to the Concept’s annual reports, the decline of natural resources and the environmental pollution in Kazakhstan have exerted negative impacts on public health and implementing the Concept can help Kazakhstan transition from the use of rich reserves of natural resources to the cost-effective measurements for environmental protection. Because of Kazakhstan’s public health concerns, the country was ranked number two in environmental pollution by organic substances among Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In terms of general ranking, according to regional and country analysis of competitiveness and income level, including data by the pillars of regional performance of Kazakhstan, and according to the 98 indicators of the Global Competitiveness Index demonstrating the economic profiles of every country, Kazakhstan ranks 57th among 137 countries.

Though the goal of Kazakhstan is to become one of the 30 developed countries in the world, the dangerous levels and density of air pollution are ten times higher than the same figures in the European Union which makes it difficult for the country to improve in ranking. But the implementation of the Concept is used as a tool to help Kazakhstan achieve this goal. However, this remains an ongoing process. The expansion of air pollutants, recently observed in Kazakhstan, shows the increase of diseases that lead to an increase of costs for health services and a decrease in labor productivity. According to information provided in the Statistical Compendium for 2012-2016, there was an increase in the incidences of respiratory diseases from 2015 to 2016, from 22 018.8 to 24 705.2 respectively. Official data shows a negative impact from air pollutants on the general health of Kazakhstan’s population which is affected by outstanding government issues like the lack of standards on pollution emission, the increase of greenhouse gas emissions, and the lack of development on legislation for waste management.

Kazakhstan as one of the largest countries from the post-Soviet-Union era is considered the world’s biggest landlocked area in terms of land with a population of 18.55 million, which ranks 64<sup>th</sup> in the world. While Kazakhstan’s geographical area is considered the 9<sup>th</sup> largest in the world, the relatively small population of Kazakh nation, that is divided into 17 regions with local governments, is managed from the central government located in Nur-Sultan. While Kazakhstan is currently ranked as 50<sup>th</sup> under Human Development Indicators of United Nations Development

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Programme among 186 countries in the world, there is still a huge gap concerning the transparency and collaborative nature of environmental policy between government administrators and non-government stakeholders.

During 28 years of independence from the previous Soviet regime, Kazakhstan faced many challenges related to social, economic, and political formation. The command-administrative system of governance that was based on the development of an economy with the restricted autonomy in the sphere of production and controversies in the agrarian sector was one of the inheritances of the Soviet regime. Moreover, the ecological tragedies of the Aral Sea and the construction and the use of the Semipalatinsk nuclear-testing area during 1949-1991, along with plenty of industrial wastes – over 23 billion tons where 9 billion tons of anthropogenic mineral formations are the heritage from old Soviet industrial enterprises’ activities, and still existing water problems with the neighboring countries have had a disastrous impact on future Kazakh generations. With the terrible consequences of the mass distribution of oncological diseases due to many atomic reactions, and industrial pollution, the progress and population of Kazakhstan has been affected despite its huge geographical area with rich natural resources.

While the Concept represents a commitment to strengthening environmental policy in the country, the last seven years since its adoption has revealed certain weaknesses and deficiencies based on the growing debates among stakeholders. Therefore, there are still discussions among scholars and experts concerning the relevant definition of the “green economy,” particularly in the case of Kazakhstan, and what kind of policy changes or policy learning need to be realized to reach the goals of sustainable development. Given Kazakhstan’s long history of environmental challenges, surrounding, for example, the adverse ecological consequences of diverting water from the Aral Sea or the Semipalatinsk nuclear-testing area that ran from 1949-1991, current changes to environmental policy in the country will have a significant impact on current and future Kazakh generations.

According to the key components of ACF’s traditional scope – policy change, advocacy coalitions, and policy-oriented learning – the key focus of this study is related to the role of stakeholder dynamics in policy learning among government administrators. This study aims to examine stakeholder dynamics, including advocacy coalitions, non-governmental stakeholders, and government administrators in the context of the environmental policy subsystem of Kazakhstan. While there are different examples of the ACF’s empirical applications in various political regimes, there are key characteristics of the ACF that play a primary role in its analysis: a policy subsystem, a long-standing focus on policy analysis, actors in coalitions, and the process of transformation of beliefs. This theoretical approach is well suited to examine a current situation that is happening today in Kazakhstan. Particularly, a study of different stakeholders within and outside of coalitions can provide a unique information that explain general approaches of how the environmental policy needs to be changed.

The examination of government administrators’ learning in the case of Kazakhstan is applicable and valid because of their governmental dominance in decision-making and in providing new approaches for the country’s policy development. Based on preliminary research between July and November 2019, there are stakeholders and advocacy coalitions in Kazakhstan that have different views related to the implementation of the Concept. One of the main arguments regarding why it’s hard to implement the Concept is the economic performance in Kazakhstan that doesn’t allow the establishment of a unified set of measures to implement green technologies for environmental management. Another argument references the industry’s lack of understanding with the market for accessible technologies of energy efficiency and emission reduction. Moreover, the huge tax and tariff policy for hydrocarbon development and mining industry, intensive agriculture techniques, fossil fuel, and mineral resources production are examples of the many barriers to realizing the goals of sustainable development and the transition to the “green economy”.

In addition to these issues, there is still a lack of strategic, long-term vision for environmental protection despite the approval of the *Concept of Transition of Kazakhstan to “Green Economy”*.

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## About the author:

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**Darzhan Kazbekova** has an MA and a PhD in International Relations. Her most recent work position was as a Deputy Director of the Institute for Applied Research, Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Darzhan’s research interests are focused on environmental policy formation, stakeholder analysis, and theoretical frameworks of policy analysis in the case of Kazakhstan.