RSAA
ROYAL SOCIETY FOR ASIAN AFFAIRS
125th Anniversary 1901-2026
Advancing Knowledge of Asia

Kazakhstan at 35: A Symposium on a Transforming Nation

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King's College London

British Embassy Astana

Hosted in partnership with the British Embassy in Astana and sponsored by the Caspian Policy Center

CASPIAN POLICY CENTER

Welcome

The Royal Society for Asian Affairs is delighted to partner with the British Embassy in Astana to host this symposium marking 35 years of Kazakhstan's independence. We warmly welcome you and thank you for joining us.

Central Asia is gaining strategic importance as global dynamics shift, and Kazakhstan stands at the heart of this transformation. In the UK, the country features increasingly in discussions of energy security, critical minerals, trade routes and commercial opportunity. Yet beyond these headlines, understanding of Kazakhstan's history, national identity, political evolution and social change remains limited.

As Kazakhstan approaches 35 years of independence, its identity has been shaped by a distinctive history, from nomadic traditions and Tsarist expansion to Soviet rule and the challenges of independence. These legacies continue to influence the country's institutions, society and ambitions for the future.

This symposium looks beyond immediate strategic and commercial interests to explore the historical forces, political developments and cultural richness that define Kazakhstan today. Bringing together perspectives across disciplines, it aims to deepen understanding of a country in transformation and strengthen academic, cultural and policy ties between the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan.

We are extremely grateful to the Caspian Policy Center for sponsoring this event, to King's College London for hosting us and to Dr Carolyn Browne CMG for chairing proceedings.

From the British Embassy in Astana

The UK and Kazakhstan are building an ambitious, modern partnership based on shared prosperity, resilience and strong people-to-people ties. We are using the new UK–Kazakhstan Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement - ratified earlier this summer - to launch a new phase in our relationship: expanding two-way trade and investment; supporting Kazakhstan's ambitions in clean energy, critical minerals, infrastructure and innovation; deepening our growing education, research and skills links; and working together on shared regional and global challenges. We see this as a mutually beneficial and long-term partnership, bringing together government, business, and civil society to create opportunities and deliver tangible benefits for people in both countries. Academic links are a key part of this, and we are very pleased to be able to support today's symposium.

Opening Remarks - 10:00-10:30

To open today's event we are very pleased to welcome Her Excellency Sally Axworthy MBE, British Ambassador to Kazakhstan, and His Excellency Alibek Bakayev, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the United Kingdom.





Keynote Address - 10:30-11:10 GMT
Under the Eternal Blue Sky
Aiganym Gali



Aiganym Gali is a Kazakh-born painter based in London and Mallorca. Trained in Almaty and at Sotheby's Institute of Art, she has spent fifteen years painting the light of the steppe from memory, in work grounded in Tengrism, the ancient belief system of the Turkic and Mongol steppe, which sees the person as part of nature, held between sky and earth. Her work has been exhibited at the Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi, and is held in the Kistefos Museum and the LightEn collection (UK and USA).

Distance made the steppe her subject. Away from the landscape of her formative years, she began to paint it from memory, or rather from the remembered feeling of a memory: open fields of colour built from thin washes and finished with the fingertips, in search of what she calls "the fullness of nothing, the light in emptiness". Alongside runs a sustained study of Tengrism, the pre-Islamic belief system of the Turkic and Mongol steppe, which she describes as "an ancient, silent religion in which you relate the self to nature". She paints in long, unplanned sessions, a form of automatic painting with deep roots in modern abstraction; the Financial Times has placed her among the heirs of Hilma af Klint.

Her work unfolds in series. Steppe (since 2011) is the foundation. Tengri. Light Works (since 2021) brings geometric form into those open spaces. ÜNDES (2025–26), from the Kazakh word for resonance, adds raw canvas and gold leaf: paintings she calls instruments rather than images, which ask the viewer to slow to a more human tempo in an age of endless digital images.

This session will be followed by a twenty minute break.

11:30-12:40 GMT
From Empire to Independence: Kazakhstan's Historical Legacies

This panel will explore how imperial and Soviet rule, from the transformation of nomadic life to the political and environmental legacies of the twentieth century, have shaped Kazakhstan's national identity and ongoing reckoning with its colonial past.



James Sharp served in the British Diplomatic Service from 1987 to 2022. During his diplomatic career, he held a wide range of postings including serving as British Ambassador to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (2002–05) and later British Ambassador to Azerbaijan (2019–22). He is currently a member of the Caspian Policy Center Advisory Board.



Dr Diana Kudaibergenova is a cultural and political sociologist researching nationalism, dictatorship, and power relations. Her work examines state structures, nationalising regimes, ideologies, dominant discourses, and political decision-making. Before joining UCL SSEES as a Lecturer in Central Asian Politics and Society, she was an Assistant Professor at Cambridge.



Dr Beatrice Penati is a historian of Central Asia under Russian and Soviet rule, specialising in economic policy, taxation, agriculture, and the environment. Her research examines agrarian reform, political mobilisation, and capitalism, with current interests in entrepreneurship, credit, resourceification, living standards, land rights, and forestry.



Dr Alexander Morrison is a historian of empire and colonial warfare, specialising in Russian Central Asia and comparative Russian and British imperial and military history. With a background in South Asian history, he teaches European and Asian history, global and imperial history, and the history of modern warfare.

This panel will be followed by a one hour lunch break. Lunch is not provided but their are plenty of cafés, restaurants and other places to purchase food in the vicinity of the venue.

13:40-14:50 GMT
Power and Prosperity: Kazakhstan's Political and Economic Trajectory

Bringing together political and economic perspectives, this panel examines how Kazakhstan's political institutions and governance are evolving through a pivotal period of reform, and what that means for the country's development strategy and economic ambitions.



Dr Carolyn Browne CMG served as British Ambassador to Kazakhstan (2013–2018) and Azerbaijan (2007–2011). A former research scientist, she has held senior diplomatic roles in Moscow, New York and Brussels and has recently ended her time as Director of Verification at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.



Dr Saltanat Janenova's research examines comparative public policy and public management reforms across Eurasia, particularly Central Asia, focusing on public service innovation, open government, civil service, corruption, and authoritarianism. She has held academic positions in the UK and Kazakhstan and consulted for international organisations.



Professor Yelena Kalyuzhnova is Director of the Centre for Euro-Asian Studies at Henley Business School, University of Reading. Her research focuses on emerging economies, energy economics, hydrocarbon development, and corporate governance, particularly in resource-rich countries. She previously advised the President of Kazakhstan.



Nicholas Pomeroy is a senior energy executive with extensive experience across Kazakhstan, Central Asia, and international energy markets. Founder of AngloKazakh, he specialises in oil and gas, hydrogen, energy transition and cross-border partnerships supporting organisations pursuing energy and infrastructure opportunities across the region.

This session will be followed by a twenty minute break.

15:10-16:20 GMT
Beyond the Steppe: Kazakhstan's Natural and Cultural Heritage

This closing session brings together the science of Kazakhstan's landscapes and biodiversity with the culture and identity built upon them, treating the country's natural and cultural heritage as two sides of the same under-recognised story.



Dr Guillaume Tiberghien is a tourism scholar specialising in cultural heritage, sustainable tourism development, and tourism marketing. With decades of international teaching and research experience, he has contributed to tourism education and consultancy in Central Asia, New Zealand and the UK, including programme development in Kazakhstan.



Indira Dyussebayeva-Ziyabek is an independent curator, co-founder of the International Art Development Association, and founder of Ainalaiyn Space. Her research explores memory, cultural trauma, and nomadic identities. She has curated international exhibitions promoting contemporary art from Kazakhstan and Central Asia.



Dr Aliya de Tiesenhausen is an independent scholar, art critic, curator, and author specialising in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Central Asian art. She co-curated Focus Kazakhstan: Post-Nomadic Mind (2018) and authored Central Asia in Art: From Soviet Orientalism to the New Republics (2016). She holds a doctorate from the Courtauld Institute of Art.



Professor Mark Macklin FRGS, FBSG is an internationally recognised river scientist and geoarchaeologist, specialising in river systems, climate change, and human settlement. His research examines how rivers shape civilisations, with particular focus on Central Asia, where changing waterways influenced agriculture, trade and urban development.

This event has been organised by the Royal Society for Asian Affairs (RSAA), an independent, charitable organisation dedicated to advancing knowledge and understanding of Asia. Founded in 1901, the Society provides a platform for informed debate and the exchange of ideas, bringing together experts, policymakers, academics and the wider public to explore Asia's political, historical, cultural and social affairs. By becoming a member, you can connect with a diverse international network, access a wealth of knowledge and take part in the Society's activities. Scan the QR code to discover more and explore membership opportunities.

This event is supported by Central Asian Survey, an established, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary journal examining the history, politics, cultures, religions, and economies of Central Asia and the Caucasus. It promotes research across the social sciences and humanities, exploring regional change and connections with neighbouring regions through original research articles, research notes, and book reviews.

Central Asian Survey

This event is kindly sponsored by the Caspian Policy Center, an independent, nonprofit research think tank headquartered in Washington, DC, with an office in London. Economic, political, energy and security issues of the Caspian region are the Center's central research focus. Established in 2016, CPC aims to become a premier research and debate platform on the Caspian region, with publications, events, projects and media productions that nurture a comprehensive understanding of the region's intertwined affairs. With an inclusive, scholarly and innovative approach, CPC provides a platform where diverse voices from academia, business and the policy world in the region, the UK, Europe and the United States interact to produce distinct ideas and insights on the Caspian region's outstanding issues.



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10 YEARS