

Analysis of Kazakhstan Rock Climbing in the Form of Competitions Success: From the Origins to the Present Day

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Abstract

The article examines the main historical facts about the formation of rock climbing in the Republic of Kazakhstan since the establishment of the state in 1991. An assessment of the state of Kazakhstani sports as a whole was made using the example of Olympic sports. A detailed analysis of all official international performances of Kazakhstani rock climbers in adult and youth competitions was conducted. Visual tables and graphs are presented showing the negative state of sport climbing in Kazakhstan today. Key external factors influencing the development of Kazakhstani rock climbing are highlighted. The continuity of the country's general political system was demonstrated in the choice of the leadership of the Federation of Rock Climbing and Mountaineering

Keywords: rock climbing; sport climbing; Kazakhstan history; history of sport; Kazakhstan sport



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Introduction to the state of Kazakhstani sports

In the early years of independence, Kazakhstan faced significant economic and social upheaval. The transition from a centralized, Soviet-style economy to a market-driven system resulted in a steep decline in the country's GDP, with a drop of around 40% in the first five years. Though the pressure created by these internal and external threats was far too great, and the emotional shock experienced by the society far too strong, with its status as a state not yet evident in every way, Kazakhstan managed to avoid the pitfalls of struggles and conflicts that had occurred in several other former Soviet republics¹. As the country stabilized and began to chart a path towards prosperity, the government recognized the potential of sport and tourism as a driver of young nation growth. Kazakhstan, being an autocracy, uses sport as a tool for political struggle and demonstration of development and strength. The most significant event for the country's leadership is the most high-profile event - the Olympic Games. Sports education is a national idea for Kazakhstan. Many resources, both financial and organizational, are applied to develop sports. However, such aspiration of the country's political leadership does not exclude benefits for the social development of the country and benefits for the growth of sports infrastructure².

It is also worth noting Kazakhstan's desire to use sports for branding the country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has been associated with the image of an oil and gas exporter. Holding competitions and events on the territory of the country, as well as participating in international events in other countries, is an example of modern and effective soft power that Kazakhstan uses. Today, Kazakhstan has an Asian orientation in organizing sports events, and a Western orientation in participating in competitions³. An unspoken competition between post-Soviet countries and the rest of the world is the medal count in the Olympic Games. Winning gold medals is especially valued, which become an indicator of a

¹ Seidikenova, Akkari, and Bakitov, "The Construction of Citizenship in Kazakhstan Between the Soviet Era and Globalization."

² Zakir'Yanov, Andruschishin, and Makogonov, *The Status and Perspective of Development of Sport in the Republic of Kazakhstan*.

³ Besbayev, "Branding Kazakhstan Through Sport."

country's ability to: organize government structures and officials; the strength of the economy aimed at developing sports; social orientation and humanism. Because of this, states allocate large amounts of money to developing sports infrastructure. An analysis of medals won by sports shows that Kazakhstan has the most successful indicators in martial arts: boxing, judo, wrestling, karate and taekwondo (Table 1). Summer sports have a significant advantage over winter ones: 75 and 8 medals, respectively. The results of the Summer Olympic Games are most interesting, since they include rock climbing. Despite the changes in the number of gold, silver and gold medals, the overall trend remains the same (Figure 1). It is important to note that sports in Kazakhstan do not have a clear trend towards growth or decline, which is demonstrated by the graph of performances of Kazakhstani athletes at the Olympic Games.

The post-Soviet history of Kazakhstan's development is characterized by the era of autocratic rule of the elites under Nazarbayev. The imposition of their own rules and leaders in all structures of state governance is a practice that is still being implemented today. When the country's leadership changed, the expected changes in the governance structure did not occur. The change of elites did not lead to a change in the system. Those close to power under Nazarbayev were removed from power, but were replaced by those close to Tokayev⁴. A similar system did not bypass the system of organization in sports and physical education. The existence of the Ministry of Sports and the financing of the training process and competitions is both a unique legacy from the USSR, but also a system that blocks the development of the private sector and the development of amateur sports⁵. The influence of the state system on the structure of sports training is manifested in the appointment of people who are advantageous to the state to leadership positions. The reason and instrument of the state's influence on the system of sports and physical culture is also the monopoly on sports facilities. With rare exceptions, all major sports facilities are under the jurisdiction of the state. This fact limits private initiatives and alternative ways of developing sports⁶. The soft power of influencing the nation through sports and mega events is a way of forming the identity of Kazakh society. Fostering patriotism through physical education and representation of athletes at international competitions is an effective tool for influencing society. The need to control federations for individual sports and influencers in the field of sports is the most important task for implementing this soft power effect⁷.

Sport climbing rise in Kazakhstan

The Republic of Kazakhstan has access to the Tien Shan Mountains, which could not but affect the development of rock climbing in the country. However, it is still unclear which region of Kazakhstan is the "Mecca" of Republican rock climbing and the center of attraction. Also, early studies of the history of rock climbing in the Republic of Kazakhstan do not reveal the topic of success or development trends. Sport climbing is a modern and young sport that developed in a similar period of time as a sports discipline. The main marker of the success of any sport as its goal is success in competitions and the availability of infrastructure. Sport climbing as a sporting activity and competitive exercise separately from mountaineering in Kazakhstan was first mentioned in the works of I.A. Antonovich⁸. In the Sarysay gorge, not far from Almaty, 40 cadet mountaineers took part in the first competitions in the Kazakh SSR for rock climbing competitions in 1948. At that time, the competitions were little like today's and there is no

⁴ Eurasia Institutes and Terzyan, "New President, Old Problems."

⁵ Сактаганова and Григоркевич, "Physical Culture and Sports in the USSR and Soviet Kazakhstan in the 1940s–1980s."

⁶ Tolegen et al., "Medeu Sports Complex."

⁷ Koch, "Sport and Soft Authoritarian Nation-Building."

⁸ Antonovich, *Sport Climbing*.

reason to characterize them as modern rock climbing. However, these were the harbingers of the formation of sport climbing, although with the overwhelming influence of mountaineering. Rock climbing was further considered the "brainchild of Soviet mountaineering."

In 1952, rock climbing in Kazakhstan spread to 4 more cities: Karaganda, Chimkent, Tselinograd, Ust-Kamenogorsk. This allowed for objective competitions among Kazakhstani athletes. As a rule, rock climbing and mountaineering clubs existed at physical education institutes, which brought many new young athletes whose enthusiasm gave new development to Kazakhstani rock climbing. Up until 1987, rock climbing did not have clear criteria for holding competitions at the international level and remained a "know-how" for Soviet athletes⁹. In 1987, with the creation of the UIAA Climbing Committee, the first official climbing disciplines were formulated for holding official international competitions: speed climbing and difficulty climbing. Already in 1988, the first official world cup in the history of rock climbing was held, in which Soviet athletes Kairat Rakhmetov and Natalia Kosmacheva won in speed climbing, and French athletes won in difficulty climbing. These were the last successes of athletes from the USSR before its collapse.

Until 2006, rock climbing remained within the legal framework of the International Mountaineering Federation UIAA, which did not give rock climbing independence. In 2007, the IFSC was created - the International Federation of Sport Climbing, which created a trend for the formation of rock climbing federations around the world. However, the Republican climbers took a different path and created in 2006 the FAiS - the Federation of Mountaineering and Rock Climbing, which united the two sports under one organization. Until now, Kazakhstan does not have an independent Federation of Sport Climbing, which complicates the tracking of regulatory and reporting documents. Unfortunately, there is no centralized resource with data on competitions and their participants, which complicates the analysis of Republican competitions. An excellent example of the development of sports in the post-Soviet period can be the establishment of the Federation of Sport Climbing and Mountaineering, based on the leadership position of the President of the Federation. The first president of the Federation of Sport Climbing and Mountaineering was Zhunusov Baglan - he headed the federation from 2006 to 2010. He is a representative of the oligarchy and the elite class of the 1990s. In the past, he headed the National Bank of Kazakhstan and the corporation "Kazakh Kagazi". Baglan Zhunusov is also a strong climber with many ascents in the past, that is, he has a direct relationship with the federation. Upon becoming president, he founded a private rock climbing club "Skala" in the city of Almaty, which he still owns. Since 2010, there has been a conflict between Baglan Zhunusov and the country's elites, which has escalated into political pressure: corruption investigations and a forced move to London^{10 11}. A traditional method of an autocratic regime to oust the unwanted, which can be observed everywhere¹².

The next president of the federation was Kazbek Valiyev, a publicist, scientist and public figure. One of the strongest climbers in the world, a participant in the first successful USSR expedition to Everest in 1982. Unlike the previous president of the Federation of Sport Climbing and Mountaineering, he did not have large financial assets, which probably affected the intensity of the federation's development. Valiyev was the president of the federation from 2010 to 2017. As an associate of Zhunusov, Baglan continued his development trajectory and during his forced move, he led the Skala club. Kazbek Valiyev was the last president of the Federation of Sport

⁹ Batyrbekov et al., *Development of Sports Tourism on the Territory of Kazakhstan for the Development of a Healthy Lifestyle among the Younger Generation on the Example of Rock Climbing*.

¹⁰ tengrinews.kz, "Активы бывших руководителей заморожены по обращению Kazakhstan Kagazy."

¹¹ "Как экс-директор Kazakhstan Kagazy отказался от гражданства РК."

¹² Tanneberg, *The Politics of Repression Under Authoritarian Rule*.

Climbing and Mountaineering, who had practical experience of climbing. After that, Nurali Aliyev assumed the post of president. His main characteristic is "grandson of Nazarbayev". Being a relative of the most influential person in the country, members of the federation had a feeling that big positive changes would begin, but this did not happen. The Federation of Climbing and Mountaineering became a way to demonstrate the social policy of Nurali Aliyev. Considering that mountaineering and rock climbing are not national or mass sports, the presence of a representative of the state elite in its leadership demonstrates the desire of Nazarbayev's management system to be everywhere. Nurali Aliyev has never been involved in rock climbing or mountaineering. Since 2023, Shokanov Nursultan, a deputy, political and public figure, and chairman of the state chamber of entrepreneurs, has assumed the post of president. Shokanov Nursultan has never been involved in rock climbing. Since his work in the federation cannot yet be assessed in the long term, we cannot judge the motives of the new leader.

In comparison with international experience of research of development of rock climbing in different regions, rock climbing has no special conditions and differences. Geographical location becomes a significant factor influencing development of rock climbing in Kazakhstan. In sport rock climbing, Kazakhstan did not initially have a better or worse conditions compared to other countries. The trend of changes in the country's leadership reflects general changes in the structure of the country's leadership and society. Starting from the first oligarchs who invested in certain areas of society with their own businesses and connections, to those close to political leaders who earn their own political points. A method for assessing such changes can be done by analyzing the results of international competitions in individual disciplines, for example, in sport climbing. The International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) was founded in 2007 and included 57 member federations from all over the world. Today, the IFSC has 80 member federations. This number of members is not large for an international federation, which speaks to the exclusivity of the sport and that rock climbing is not practiced all over the world. There are reasons for this: the high cost of equipment and gear, the complexity of the infrastructure, the complexity of sports training. The first official World Climbing Championships in 1991 had 98 participants (69 men and 29 women), while in 2023 the same World Championships had 225 (125 men and 100 women). The number of participants has more than doubled. Such data may indicate not only increased competition at the international level, but also an increase in the number of participants from individual IFSC member members.

Kazakhstani sport climbing international competition results

Kazakhstani rock climbers began performing in the international arena in 1991. At that time, most of them were still graduates of the Soviet school of mountaineering, which affected their specialization and most of them did not show success. All the results of Kazakhstani athletes in adult and youth international competitions are presented in Tables 2 and 3. In total, Kazakhstani athletes have become prize winners of the World Championships 4 times, but there is not a single world champion. The first Kazakhstani prize winner of international competitions was Kairat Rakhmetov from Almaty, who took 3rd place in speed climbing in 1991. There are even fewer results among adult athletes at the World Cups, where Rishat Khaibullin became a prize winner only once in 2023. The most valuable victory of recent years for Kazakhstani rock climbing was 2nd place in the qualifying tournament for the 2024 Olympic Games for Amir Maimuratov, which gave him a ticket to participate. The Asian Championships among adults turned out to be a more successful platform for the performances of Kazakhstani athletes, where they won 12 medals, including 2 gold medals. Among adult rock climbers in international competitions, only Alexander Nigmatullin has won gold. The most successful Kazakhstani

athlete in terms of prize places is Ulzhabayeva Tamara with 6 medals. Of all the winners of international competitions, only 3 remain active athletes: Rishat Khaibullin, Amir Maimuratov and Ulzhabayeva Tamara. It is noteworthy that out of 18 medals, 14 were won in the discipline of speed climbing, and only 4 medals in other disciplines: 1 – all-around; 1 – bouldering; 2 – difficulty. This allows us to judge that Kazakhstani rock climbing has a clear sports specialization in the direction of a single discipline.

Children's competitions in rock climbing for our Republic began in 2009 with the Asian Championship held in Almaty. In the youth world championships, Kazakhstani athletes have only 3 medals, one of which is gold and belongs to Bokanov Sayat for the competition among juniors in speed climbing. Most of the international medals were won by young Kazakhstani climbers at the youth championships of Asia. A total of 53 medals were won, of which: 15 are gold; 21 are silver; 17 are bronze. Of all the young athletes from Kazakhstan, only three athletes were able to win medals among adults - Rishat Khaibullin, Amir Maimuratov and Bokanov Sayat. Considering the youth international performances of Kazakhstani athletes, one can note the small number of victories and prize places at the youth world championships. The only gold medal belongs to Bokanov Sayat. The number of victories at the Asian championships does not compare with the world championships. The number of medals from the youth Asian championships is 50. The most successful competition for young Kazakhstani climbers was the home Asian championship in Almaty - 17 medals of which 5 were gold. The largest number of medals in junior international rock climbing for Kazakhstan was brought by Marlenova Asel - 6 medals, including one from the junior world championship. All medals from the junior world championships were won in the discipline of speed climbing. At the junior Asian championships, medals were won in all three disciplines, namely: 39 - speed climbing; 12 - lead climbing; 2 - bouldering.

Having conducted an analysis and plotted a graph of the performances of Kazakhstani athletes during the period of independence of our Republic (Figure 2), one can notice some peculiarities. There is no clear correlation between the number of medals won at youth and adult international competitions. It is possible that it is incorrect to judge any relationship due to the small number of victories by adult athletes, but even with the existing number, there are clearly visible peaks of success for young athletes in 2009, 2012 and 2017, while adult athletes do not have any clearly defined peaks of victories. This indicates a lack of mutual influence between youth and adult sport climbing. There is no clear correlation between the number of medals won at youth and adult international competitions. It is possible that it is incorrect to judge any relationship due to the small number of victories by adult athletes, but even with the existing number, there are clearly visible peaks of success for young athletes in 2009, 2012 and 2017, while adult athletes do not have any clearly defined peaks of victories. This indicates a lack of mutual influence between youth and adult sport climbing. The number of international prize places has a clear negative trend, which is confirmed by the logarithmic curve. The critical moment was the inclusion of a set of awards in the program of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, which in turn increased competition in sport climbing. The graph shows a sharp decline in the number of victories after 2017. It is also worth noting 2020 and 2021 due to restrictions on holding competitions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From 1991 to 2009, Kazakhstani athletes took part in competitions, but without winning prizes.

Kazakhstani sport climbing international competition analyse

Increased competition in international competitions, especially in the context of selection for the Olympic Games, is a natural process in the development of sport climbing. The norm in this case will be the simultaneous development and maintenance of positions in both adult and children's competitions. Competition is growing not even in the number of participants in the

competitions, but in the increase in the quality of selection of individual federations. Increasing the prestige of sport climbing contributes not only to sports selection, but also to the development of regional federations as a whole. This process cannot be the reason for the decrease in the effectiveness of Kazakhstani athletes in itself, but only in combination with other reasons. We have previously found that the general situation in the Olympic disciplines for Kazakhstan is normal. There are no obvious changes in the results and number of victories. This means that the decline in results in sport climbing is not a consequence of general trends in Kazakhstan. Accordingly, the reasons for the decline in results must be sought within the organization of sport climbing in Kazakhstan. The conducted analysis shows the disappointing state of Kazakhstan sport climbing today. Successes in the international arena have been systematically declining since 2009, and the inclusion in the 2020 Olympic Games program had an even more negative impact on the results of Kazakhstan climbers. On the one hand, increased competition equally affects teams from all countries, and on the other hand, this indicates the impossibility of competing at a high level in the international arena. Kazakhstan rock climbing has a lot to do, as overcoming the negative trend in the conditions of active growth of international competition is a very difficult task. The directions for finding a way out of the difficult situation must be sought within the system of training of Kazakhstani athletes. Given the presence of Olympic athletes and past successful experience of performing in competitions, there is every chance to correct the negative trend. A deep analysis is required not only of sports training but also of the organizational structure of Kazakhstan rock climbing.

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Table 1. Kazakhstan Olympic Medals Count in Modern History

№	Sport (summer or winter)	Gold, n	Silver, n	Bronze, n	Total, n
1	Boxing (S)	7	7	10	24
2	Athletics (S)	2	1	2	5
3	Wrestling (S)	1	5	11	17
4	Weight lifting (S)	1	4	6	11
5	Judo (S)	1	2	3	6
6	Cross country skiing (W)	1	2	1	4
7	Cycling (S)	1	1	0	2
8	Modern Pentathlon (S)	1	0	0	1
9	Swimming (S)	1	0	0	1
10	Shooting (S)	0	2	2	4
11	Gymnastics (S)	0	1	0	1
12	Biathlon (W)	0	1	0	1
13	Karate (S)	0	0	2	2
14	Taekwando (S)	0	0	1	1
15	Figure skating (W)	0	0	1	1
16	Freestyle skiing (W)	0	0	1	1
17	Speed skating (W)	0	0	1	1
	Total	16	26	41	83

*using the data from national Olympic committee: <https://olympic.kz>.

Table 2. Results of Kazakhstani Rock Climbers in Adult International Competitions

Year	Event, Venue, Discipline	Place	Name of athlete
World championships			
1991	Speed Climbing World Championships, Frankfurt, Germany	3	Kairat Rakhmetov
2009	World Speed Climbing Championships (10m), Chuning, China	2	Aleksandr Nigmatullin
2011	Speed Climbing World Championships, Arco, Italy	3	Tamara Uljabaeva
2019	World combined Championships, Hachioji, Japan	3	Rishat Khaibullin
World cups			
2023	Speed Climbing World Cup, Chamonix, France	2	Rishat Khaibullin
Other international competitions			
2024	2024 Olympic Speed Climbing Qualifying Round, Budapest, Hungary	2	Amir Maimuratov
Asia championships			
2009	Asian Speed Climbing Championships, Chuncheon, South Korea	1	Aleksandr Nigmatullin
		3	Mikhail Yakimenko

			3	Dinara Irsalieva
2010	Asian Speed Climbing Championships, Jakarta, Indonesia		1	Aleksandr Nigmatullin
2012	Asian Speed Climbing Championships, Leye, China		2	Sayat Bokanov
			3	Tamara Uljabaeva
			3	Alexey Molchanov
2013	Asian Championship, Tehran, Iran	Lead	2	Elena Grunyashina
			3	Tamara Uljabaeva
		Bouldering	3	Tamara Uljabaeva
		Speed	3	Tamara Uljabaeva
2015	Asian Speed Climbing Championships, Ningbo, China		2	Tamara Uljabaeva

*using the data from IFSC web-site: <https://www.ifsc-climbing.org>.

Table 3. Results of Kazakhstani Rock Climbers at Youth International Competitions

Year	Event, Venue, Discipline		Place	Name of athlete
World Youth Championships				
2010	Youth World Speed Climbing Championships, Edinburgh, UK		1	Sayat Bokanov
2016	Youth World Speed Climbing Championships, Guangzhou, China		3	Asel Marlenova
2022	Youth World Speed Climbing Championships, Dallas, USA		3	Damir Toktarov
Asian Youth Championships				
2009	Asian Youth Championship, Almaty, Kazakhstan	Lead	3	Alexandr Karklinaitis
			2	Rishat Khaibullin
			1	Dina Dudnik
			2	Jana Molchanova
			2	Anastasia Bryakina
			3	Alexandr Kim
		Speed	1	Anton Shepotko
			3	Aleksandr Devyateryakov
			1	Anauar Egeubayev
			2	Anastasia Bryakina
			1	Jaina Myrzakhanova
			2	Julia Popova
			3	Nadezhda Bryakina
			1	Ksenia Streltcova
			2	Sabina Khaibullina
3	Evgeniya Gutak			
2	Azamat Esimkhan			
2011	Asian Youth Championship, Singapore, Republic of Singapore	Speed	2	Erasil Murat
			3	Jaina Myrzakhanova
			3	Vladimir Arkhipov
		Lead	3	Raushan Kenjiakhmetova
			1	Elena Grunyashina
2012	Asian Youth Championship, Ramsar, Iran	Lead	3	Alexey Panfilov
			3	Elena Grunyashina
		Speed	1	Amir Maimuratov
			2	Igor Ryabov
			3	Erasil Murat
			3	Raushan Kenjiakhmetova
			1	Asel Marlenova
1	Elena Grunyashina			

			2	Ksenia Streltcova
			3	Jazira Myrzakhanova
2013	Asian Youth Speed Climbing Championships, Surabaya, Indonesia	Speed	1	Gleb Kogai
			2	Asel Marlenova
			3	Elena Grunyashina
		Lead	2	Roman Kostyakov
			3	Alimzhan Myrzabekov
			1	Elena Grunyashina
			2	Alimzhan Myrzabekov
2015	Asian Junior Speed Climbing Championships, Putrajaya, Malaysia	1	Asel Marlenova	
		3	Margarita Agambaeva	
		1	Andrei Yurin	
2016	Asian Youth Championship, Tehran, Iran	Speed	2	Beknur Altynbekov
			2	Margarita Agambaeva
		Bouldering	1	Asel Marlenova
2017	Asian Youth Championship, Singapour, Singapour Republic	Speed	2	Asel Marlenova
			2	Andrei Yurin
			2	Margarita Agambaeva
			2	Adeliya Utyasheva
			2	Omar Almatov
			3	Beknur Altynbekov
			Lead	1
		Bouldering	2	Margarita Agambaeva

*using the data from IFSC web-site: <https://www.ifsc-climbing.org>.

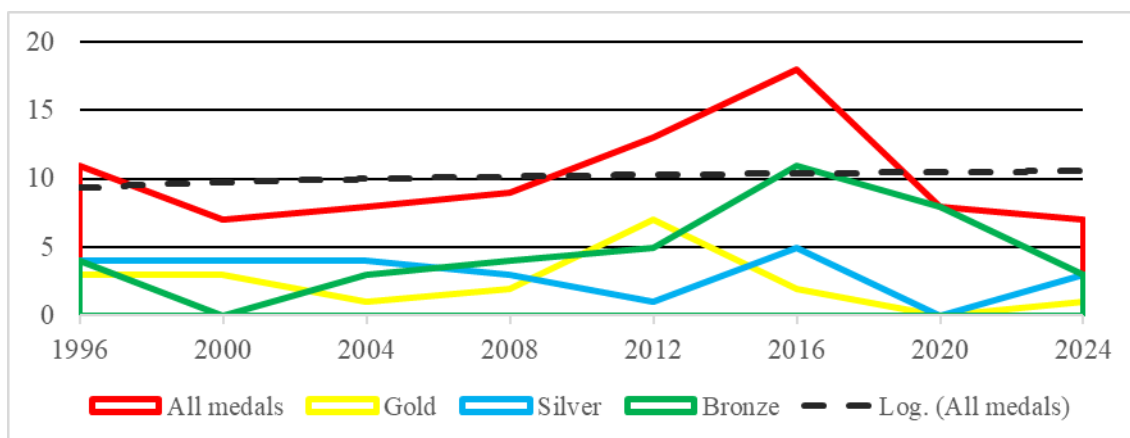


Figure 1. Results of Kazakhstani athletes at the Summer Olympics

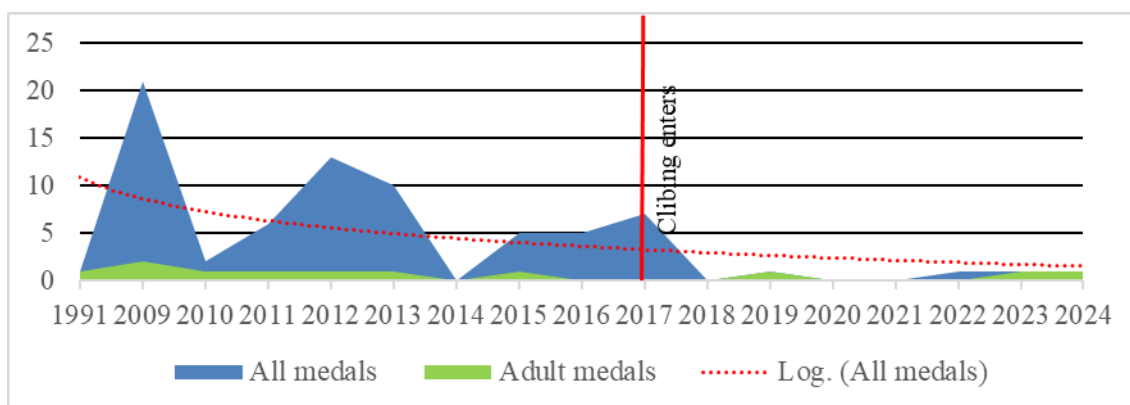


Figure 2. Results of Kazakhstani Sport Climbers on International Competitions

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