



Feature Article
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Learning from Kazakhstan's January Crisis

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In January 2022, Kazakhstan went through an unprecedented crisis. While it was since overshadowed in the eyes of the world by the events in Ukraine, Kazakhstan's crisis marked a turning point in the country's history and will have considerable implications for Central Asia. This analysis of the events and their implications, building on an attached chronology of events, concludes that while the initial peaceful public protests were the result of socio-economic frustrations that had long been building in the country, the violent turn of events was the result of a premeditated effort to unseat President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. While the exact nature of this challenge remains unclear, what is clear is that it resulted from resistance to Tokayev's reform agenda among the forces that benefited from the political and economic system he sought to reform. While the crisis raised concerns regarding Kazakhstan's future course in both domestic and foreign policy realms, evidence thus far suggests the contrary: President Tokayev has redoubled his commitment to reform and to the country's sovereignty and independence, promising to build a "New Kazakhstan." As the U.S. and EU recalibrate their regional strategies in the wake of the war in Ukraine, learning the right lessons from Kazakhstan's January crisis will be of utmost importance.

In January 2022, Kazakhstan experienced an unprecedented crisis. The crisis was resolved relatively fast, and was soon overshadowed by the shocking developments in Ukraine. Still, the events in Kazakhstan were highly consequential, and deserve a more thorough treatment than they have received. Going forward, as

Kazakhstan's partners in the West reassess their policies toward Eastern Europe and Central Asia, a solid analysis of the events in Kazakhstan must be at the basis of these policies. That is the purpose of this paper.

A hike in the price of natural gas led to popular demonstrations that started on January 2 in

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western Kazakhstan, and grew rapidly both in scope and focus. They soon spread to other parts of the country and increasingly gained a political character. By January 4, demonstrations in Almaty escalated. They soon changed character and included violent attacks on state institutions. The next day, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev requested assistance from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, which promptly dispatched a force to guard key locations and institutions.

While the government's primary focus was to quell the unrest, its response has been multi-faceted. By reversing price hikes and promising to

deal with the serious economic inequalities in Kazakhstan, the government has acknowledged the legitimate nature of the grievances behind the protests that swept the country. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's leaders

have denounced the violence against state institutions on January 4-6, and blamed it on a nebulous terrorist conspiracy. It has also targeted high officials in the country's security sector either for negligence or for fomenting the unrest with the aim of staging a coup d'état. In perhaps the main impact of these events, President Tokayev has also led an effort to reduce the influence of former

President Nazarbayev's family and associates in the country's politics and economy, while promising to hasten the speed of political reforms in the country.

The crisis occurred at a time of unprecedented tension in regional affairs. It took place only months after the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and erupted in the middle of the Russian preparation for war in Ukraine. As such, it has understandably come in the shadow of this unprecedented and unprovoked attack on a peaceful country. What is more, the events in Kazakhstan – not least the CSTO intervention – has been interpreted in the light of Russian actions in

Ukraine. This would be a mistake: it seems clear that the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan broke with the precedent of Russian interventions in the former Soviet Union. Unlike many previous cases, Moscow did not appear

to have planned it, and withdrew from Kazakhstan after the situation stabilized.

The crisis in Kazakhstan is consequential also because it took place at a time when the country had embarked on a path of reform just as Central Asian states were seeking to build structures of regional cooperation. In other words, the regional states, and Kazakhstan in particular, had



President Tokayev speaking to the nation, March 16, 2022.

sought to build up the region from within, with a view to avoiding being the object of divide-and-rule strategies of larger powers surrounding them, particularly China and Russia. Such constructive steps are nevertheless dependent on a stable security situation, something that appears elusive at present, given the Russian belligerence and the significant questions concerning America's presence in the region.

Going forward, understanding the dynamics of Kazakhstan's January crisis will be important for Western policy-makers that will seek to support forces of reform and regional cooperation in Central Asia. This report aspires to assist in that endeavor. It does so first by a brief chronology of events, followed by an analysis of the implications of the crisis for Kazakhstan's social development, its elite politics, as well as its foreign policy – and ends with an overview of lessons Kazakhstan's partners might draw from these events.

Conclusions and Implications

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the crisis in Kazakhstan, conclusions that must also be viewed in the context of the war in Ukraine. These conclusions pertain to separate realms: the events themselves, Kazakhstan's model of development, the CSTO operation and Kazakhstan's foreign policy in the light of the Ukraine war, the steps taken following the events, and

implications for U.S. and European policy toward Kazakhstan.

Conclusions Concerning Kazakhstan's Social Evolution

The January events in Kazakhstan must be separated into two categories: first, the spontaneous public protests that emerged in the west of the country; and second, the violent riots targeting state institutions that began in Almaty on January 4. While the original demonstrations were a result of growing public frustration, the riots that attacked government institutions – and the questions surrounding the law enforcement response – appear to have been a function of elite infighting.

The root causes of the protests that started in western Kazakhstan and spread across the country are to be found in rapidly mounting public dissatisfaction. For most of the past decade, the rhetoric of Kazakhstan's leadership – including its ambition to be among the top 30 developed countries in the world – has not been matched by the perceived reality of much of the country's population. Quite to the contrary, while Kazakhstan saw uninterrupted improvement in standard of living in the 2000s, this is no longer true. Since 2013, GDP per capita has decreased from ca. \$13,000 to \$9,000.¹ While GDP per capita is by no means an adequate measure, the steep decrease is telling of a new situation.

¹ World Bank data available at (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=KZ>).

Dissatisfaction was rising in parallel to information technology making it increasingly difficult to control information flow in the country. This meant that the lavish lifestyle of Kazakhstan's richest people became increasingly ostentatious and known, as did the reports of financial shenanigans involving the families of top leaders.

This dissatisfaction mirrored a bifurcation of Kazakhstan's social development. On one hand, a well-educated liberal urban elite emerged, which populates many government offices and the private sector. While these are important agents of change, they are a relatively small constituency. On the other hand, there emerged a much larger, less educated segment of the population that is much more nationalistic and less liberal in inclination. This group includes workers in the oil and minerals industries, migrants from rural areas to secondary cities, and unemployed youth. It is no coincidence that protests have repeatedly started in the west of Kazakhstan, where the oil wealth is being extracted but where living standards have not improved significantly.

Thus, Kazakhstan's restiveness is a function of *relative* rather than absolute deprivation. Until about 2014, the rich were getting richer, but the poor were also seeing improving living standards. As long as that was the case, public frustration remained under control. But from 2014 onward, the broader population saw a worsening of

their living standards, while the rich seemed unaffected or even appeared to thrive.

As the Oxus society has reported, close to half of the public protests in Central Asia in 2020-21 were happening in Kazakhstan.² President Tokayev was very much aware of this growing social dissatisfaction, which is an important reason why Tokayev was furiously seeking to push economic and political reforms in the country: he was aware that only serious reform could maintain the stability of the country and the continuity of the political system. But as will be seen, other influential forces did not appear to share this analysis.

The protests that emerged in early January targeted the political/economic system of present-day Kazakhstan. Interestingly, they targeted Nazarbayev and his family directly, with the most significant chant uttered across the country being "old man, leave." They did not for the most part target Tokayev; neither, importantly, did protesters express support for Tokayev.

Conclusions Concerning Kazakhstan's Elite Politics

The escalation of violence late on January 4 differed markedly from the earlier protests. It has been widely reported that a different type of protesters emerged: individuals and groups that appeared to belong to criminal networks, were considerably more aggressive, and targeted

² "Revolution and Rising Discontent: An Update on the Central Asia Protest Tracker." *The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*,

January 29, 2021. (<https://oxussociety.org/revolution-and-rising-discontent-an-update-on-the-central-asia-protest-tracker/>.)

government buildings and institutions. Yet the appearance of these groups was not met with a strong police response. Quite to the contrary, government forces reportedly melted away in the face of this challenge. Given what we know about Kazakhstan's security sector, it is highly unlikely that such a challenge against the state could emerge spontaneously without being identified by the security structures, and it is similarly unlikely that law enforcement would simply melt away in the face of such a challenge. However, following the pattern across the region, one would expect significant criminal gangs to be under the informal control of influential power-brokers, including in the security structures themselves.

In spite of the size of Kazakhstan's law enforcement structures, President Tokayev saw himself compelled to appeal to the CSTO for assistance to stabilize the situation. Given the fact that President Tokayev is the person who is the most closely associated with the country's multi-vector foreign policy, such a step could not have been taken lightly. The only plausible reason for this decision is that he was uncertain of the loyalty of the leadership of the security structures and law enforcement agencies in the most critical of moments. In other words, President Tokayev had to appeal to outside support because he feared that a coup was being plotted and executed against him.

President Tokayev came to power in a managed succession, with a lack of clarity on exactly what the arrangement was. He was selected in part because he did not have a large patronage pyramid under his own control. At the time, it was assumed that President Nazarbayev and interests closely associated with him considered this important, as they assumed Mr. Tokayev would be unable and unwilling to challenge their informal power positions. Mr. Tokayev would have some power while Mr. Nazarbayev would retain a veto power, and the networks around him – the family, but also other forces associated with him – would safeguard their interests.

Unclear from the start, the distribution of power appeared to change over time. Only months after Mr. Tokayev took office, an amendment was introduced in October 2019, which guaranteed Mr. Nazarbayev a veto right over key appointments including the head of the National Security Committee, the general prosecutor, the central bank chief, and regional governors.³ That move came after Mr. Tokayev had launched political reforms, and publicly questioned large infrastructural projects launched before he came to office, including a China-linked light rail project in the country's capital. This move led analysts to point to differences between Tokayev's reformist camp and forces close to Mr. Nazarbayev.

Similarly, the resignation of Mr. Nazarbayev was immediately followed by the election of his

³ Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Nazarbayev Takes Back Control." *Eurasianet*, October 21, 2019. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-nazarbayev-takes-back-control>)

daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva as Speaker of the Senate, the position Tokayev had previously held, which put her next in line for the Presidency. But in May 2020, Ms. Nazarbayeva was dismissed from the position by Mr. Tokayev and left the Senate entirely, only to be elected to the lower chamber of parliament again in January 2021 as a regular member.

Crucially, the partial transfer of *formal* political power was not accompanied by any transfer of *informal* political and economic power. As a result, President Tokayev had to contend with the informal system of merged political and economic power that is characteristic of post-Soviet societies. That system, in turn, inherently is extremely reluctant to change. Experience from other post-Soviet countries suggests that change takes place either through revolutionary change that destroys the entire informal system of power, as in Georgia in 2003; or through the consolidation of formal and informal power in the hands of a leader determined to bring change to the system, as in Uzbekistan after 2016. Against this background, the emergence of a rift between President Tokayev's camp and the forces benefiting from the *status quo* was practically guaranteed.

On President Tokayev's side was the growing part of the Kazakh elite that realized that the system needed to change both for the sake of the country and the sake of its own survival; this group tended to be younger and concentrated in the parts of the state bureaucracy exposed to the outside world, and the educated emerging young leaders of the country, spread across government

agencies, state-owned companies, and the private sector. On the other side was the elite that sat at the top of the pyramids of patronage that emerged during the Nazarbayev era. This included parts of Nazarbayev's family but extended far beyond it to other tycoons and high-level bureaucrats. It tended to be older and shaped by the Soviet era, and prominently represented in the security services and law enforcement.

Questions surround the role of former President Nazarbayev. Mr. Nazarbayev, now 81 years old and clearly ailing, has in the past faced serious challenges reigning in his extended family. Various parts of the family have at times competed for the control of economic assets, providing ample indication that the family is not a single entity but a group beset by fierce internal rivalries. Mr. Nazarbayev has been the final arbiter of these disputes and has at numerous occasions been forced to apply serious pressure to enforce his will. Given that managing the family was a challenge for Mr. Nazarbayev when he was younger and indisputably in charge of the political system, it stands to reason that his ability to be the arbiter of such disputes weakened with time. Particularly after his official retirement, the various branches of the family, as well as his extended network, likely acted with increased independence, and did not necessarily inform Mr. Nazarbayev of their actions, or follow the advice or instructions of the patriarch.

Meanwhile, it is clear that influential forces – very likely including parts of Mr. Nazarbayev's family and network – were actively obstructing

President Tokayev's reform efforts. A key change in focus developed after Mr. Tokayev acceded to the presidency: Mr. Nazarbayev had focused almost exclusively on economic reforms, repeatedly uttering the phrase "economics first, politics later." President Tokayev, by contrast, understood that political reform (particularly focusing on the rule of law and anti-corruption, but also gradual efforts to provide more voice for the population) was necessary for Kazakhstan's future and the survival of the political system. But repeatedly, President Tokayev's reform initiatives were watered down in parliament, or saw implementation lagging by the executive.

These rifts almost certainly laid at the center of the intra-elite dimension of the January crisis. Exactly how the tensions between the President and his opponents boiled over is not clear, and to determine who did what is, for now, the realm of speculation. But it is beyond doubt that the New Year's unrest triggered (and was perhaps triggered by) a confrontation within the elite. Because of the opacity of Kazakhstan's informal politics, the exact identity of the perpetrators is not clear. Former Nazarbayev advisor Yertysbayev blamed "reactionary and conservative forces from the Nazarbayev clan," a description that could well prove correct.⁴ By his actions if not by his direct words, President Tokayev pointed fingers toward the Nazarbayev family, and specifically toward those in control of the

security forces, who appear to have failed to respond to violent challenge to the government in Almaty.

The case of Karim Massimov remains perplexing. Mr. Massimov was one of Kazakhstan's most well-known statesmen, and was one of the key interlocutors of Kazakhstan's external partners for many years. His relationship to President Tokayev had historically appeared cordial, though the two men were not known to be close. In addition, it should be noted that Mr. Massimov was already at the helm of the KNB when Tokayev was reportedly being bugged using the Pegasus software, something that may have changed their relationship. Immediately following the CSTO intervention, Mr. Massimov was detained on suspicion of treason, and subsequently blamed for planning a coup. Yet the government has yet to present detailed evidence against Mr. Massimov, and President Tokayev in his March 16 speech to the nation noted that the investigation into the events remains classified. The case could well continue to generate concern among Kazakhstan's external partners.

President Tokayev has adopted a complex position in explaining the events that took place in Kazakhstan. On the basis of his public statements, his position appears to have three parts. First, President Tokayev acknowledges the spontaneous and legitimate nature of peaceful protests against the LPG hike, as well as against the

⁴ "Nazarbayev and Tokayev Discussing Redistribution of Assets: The Guardian." *Akipress*, January 18, 2022. (https://akipress.com/news:667057:Nazarbayev_and_Tokayev_discussing_redistribution_of_assets__The_Guardian/)

rampant inequality in the country. Second, he blames certain high officials of a combination of dereliction of duty and a deliberate effort to topple him. Finally, he has also blamed “international terrorists” for being behind the violence. The second and third parts of this position are not necessarily contradictory. But the government has yet to present any detailed evidence of an international terrorist plot, much less identified what origin these terrorists had, or what ideology they adhered to.

While credible information of the participation of Islamist extremists in the violence has indeed emerged, it does not appear to be of a scale that could have threatened the security of the government. These deficiencies gave ground to skeptics to question President Tokayev’s narrative both at home and abroad. A closer analysis of the President’s actions after January 4 suggest that he has acted against internal forces rather than against external ones, indicating the enemy was primarily internal rather than external. It is not, however, inconceivable that the internal enemy could have used external forces or individuals in order to achieve their goals. Greater clarity in this matter can only be reached once investigation results are presented.

For now, the situation and the information available lead to the conclusion that President Tokayev is unwilling or unable to publicly declare the true identity of his adversaries and publicize the full nature of the challenge to his authority. This is likely the case because the President seeks to avoid an all-out confrontation with his opponents, and seeks to renegotiate the balance of

economic and political power in the country. In order to avoid further instability, President Tokayev appears to allow his opponents, and particularly members of the Nazarbayev network, a way to save face and to exit the system and perhaps the country. Meanwhile, while President Tokayev has moved decisively to strip former President Nazarbayev of his actual political power, this does not mean negating the former President’s legacy or indeed his historical role as founder of modern Kazakhstan. President Tokayev has sought to balance continuity and change since taking office. While the balance between the two has decisively shifted toward change, particularly following President Tokayev’s March 16 announcement of political reforms, President Tokayev continues to maintain a modicum of continuity, which means allowing Mr. Nazarbayev to retain a ceremonial role.

Conclusions Concerning the CSTO Operation and Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy

The Russian-led CSTO intervention is unique both for Kazakhstan and the CSTO, which has never deployed a similar mission before. It is also counter-intuitive. Messrs. Putin and Nazarbayev had a close working relationship, with Mr. Nazarbayev known as one of the few world leaders that Mr. Putin actually listened to. Mr. Nazarbayev’s reluctance toward political reform also aligned more with Mr. Putin’s instincts than did President Tokayev’s reformist efforts, which would transform Kazakhstan in a direction that deviates considerably from the “Putinist” model of political control relying on a “power vertical” and large-scale repression.

As seen above, Mr. Tokayev's appeal to the CSTO was a measure of last resort. On Moscow's side, the decision to support President Tokayev is logical although perhaps counter-intuitive. From Moscow's perspective, a successful coup could have exacerbated the unrest in Kazakhstan, at worst ushering in a potentially revolutionary scenario or civil conflict. In other words, the coup-plotters could have triggered further unrest and the demise of the regime itself. Now that it is clear that Moscow's focus during this time was squarely on the preparation of its invasion of Ukraine, it is safe to conclude this would not have been a welcome development for the Kremlin. President Tokayev, on the other hand, represented continuity of the regime. Besides, the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan was a major PR coup for President Putin, who has sought to portray it as an organization that could help regional leaders withstand both domestic and outside threats to their power.

Inevitably, the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan was viewed in the West against the background of Russia's preparation for war in Ukraine. While this is a natural reaction, it also appears misplaced. The crisis in Kazakhstan presented Moscow with an opportunity for a quick public relations stunt, but was also a potential irritant that could disturb Kremlin designs that were focused entirely on Ukraine. The alternative theory – that President Tokayev and the Kremlin somehow jointly conspired to rid the President of his domestic opponents – must be dismissed as outlandish. With what we now know about Russian intentions in Ukraine, this was not the timing for

an adventure in Central Asia. And from the perspective of Kazakhstan, the damage to the country's reputation of stability and independence would rule it out.

Conclusions Concerning the Impact of the War in Ukraine

The political and economic implications of the war in Ukraine for Kazakhstan will be considerable. From a political perspective, the war has led to pressure from Russia, Ukraine and the West on Kazakhstan to take sides. Kazakhstan has thus far refused to do so, and instead maintained a neutral stance. While many expected Russia to “cash in” on the “debt” owed by Kazakhstan to Moscow by obtaining an endorsement, Kazakhstan has refused to express support for Russia's invasion. It has abstained at United Nations votes on the conflict, offered its good offices to help resolve the conflict, and sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Media reports also suggest Kazakhstan turned down Russian requests for Kazakhstani troops to join the fighting, but the veracity of such claims have not been confirmed.

Economically, Kazakhstan is already seeing the effects of the war. The country is paying a price for its close economic integration with Russia within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union. The Western sanctions on Russia, just as was the case from 2014 onward, will reverberate not just in Russia but also in Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia. Specifically, Kazakhstan will find it difficult if not impossible to continue to use Russia as a transit corridor for overland trade to Europe, and will need to reroute such trade across the Caspian and Caucasus. Similarly,

Kazakhstan faces difficulty exporting its oil from the Russian port of Novorossiysk. The Caspian Pipeline Consortium, through which 75 percent of Kazakh oil is exported, has been exempted from U.S. sanction on Russian oil; still, buyers have at least initially been reluctant to purchase Kazakh oil at Russian terminals, and the export of oil at Novorossiysk has been curtailed, including because of an alleged accident at the pipeline's Black Sea terminal.⁵ The increase of the price of oil may in part make up for any reduction in volumes. But conversely, the economic fallout will hit Kazakhstan's population through currency depreciation, loss of trade opportunities and loss of jobs. This will prove an additional and unwanted challenge to the reforms being pursued in the country.

Conclusions that Kazakhstan's Western Partners Might Draw

The crisis in Kazakhstan underlines the importance of a diplomatic, economic and security presence in Central Asia. Surrounded by great and regional powers, Central Asian states have sought to build regional cooperation in order to avoid being the objects of regional politics and of divide-and-rule tactics, in which they are played out against each other by the larger powers. The two largest states – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – have been leaders in this process, including signing a declaration of an allied relationship in December 2021. These processes, along with Kyrgyzstan's increasingly constructive foreign

policy approach, are important in the development of Central Asia as a zone of stability, with security provided increasingly from within the region as opposed to from without by outside powers.

The United States and the European Union have been encouraged by the development of regional cooperation as well as the reform agenda launched in particular in the region's two largest states. It remains unclear how these processes will be affected by Kazakhstan's January crisis. Some suggest that Kazakhstan is now indebted to Russia, something that might doom both its reform agenda and its willingness to focus on a process of regional cooperation in which Russia is not included. However, there is no indication yet that this is the case, and in fact there is considerable evidence to the contrary. Moreover, the United States and Europe have the ability to influence the choices made by the leadership of Kazakhstan, and continue to support the constructive processes in the region.

President Tokayev strongly wedded his political identity to the reform process from the moment he took office. Since the January crisis, he has strengthened this commitment, promising much deeper changes to the political system and to Kazakhstan as a whole. While there has been much skepticism among Western experts of his intentions or ability to implement reforms, President Tokayev now appears to have strengthened his authority over the political system. That in turn

⁵ "ExxonMobil defends purchase of Russia-loaded Kazakh crude on US sanctions guidance," *Hellenic Shipping News*, March 14, 2022.

(<https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/exxonmobil-defends-purchase-of-russia-loaded-kazakh-crude-on-us-sanctions-guidance/>)

should provide him with a stronger position to implement reforms, while the forces that opposed them have been weakened. He appears to take this seriously: while his moves to remove Nazarbayev family members from key positions in the country's economy were widely noted, the fact that he also removed his own family members from similar positions is less well known outside Kazakhstan.⁶

If the United States and the EU want Kazakhstan to implement reforms, this is the time to actively support the process, not least through the concrete provision of expertise and assistance.

As the U.S. and EU engage in support for Kazakhstan's reform process, this will provide Western partners with a strong platform to also engage Kazakhstan on issues of concern regarding the January events. Importantly, however, Western powers should not expect Kazakhstan to be forthcoming on such issues of Western interest unless Western powers are actively engaged with the government on matters central to its agenda.

As for the prospects of regional cooperation, the worsening security situation around Central Asia has, if anything, been a factor strengthening the consultation among regional leaders. That said, it is important to recall that the previous effort to develop Central Asian cooperation twenty years ago came to an end because Russian President

Vladimir Putin demanded to join the Central Asia Cooperation Organization first as an observer and then as a full member. In 2005, he proposed to merge that organization with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc), thus putting an end to Central Asian cooperation for a decade.⁷ In years that followed, however, the model of Central Asian states meeting jointly with foreign powers gained strength, as such consultative meetings took place with Japan, the EU, the United States, Russia, South Korea, and more recently also with India and China. Only from 2018, however, have they met in this format without any extra-regional powers. It is easy to imagine a scenario in which the Kremlin, following the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan and its invasion of Ukraine, tries to strongarm the Central Asians once more to prioritize Eurasian integration (led by Russia) over Central Asian cooperation. Much will doubtless depend on Moscow's fortunes in the Ukrainian campaign; and while Russia has caused immeasurable destruction there, at the time of writing the performance of the Russian military was widely considered underwhelming. If, as is likely, Moscow becomes mired in an extended quagmire of its own making in Ukraine, this could have the opposite effect of strengthening the resolve of Central Asians to develop their cooperation and strengthen Central Asian stability. Here, too, the Central Asian states

⁶ Svyatoslav Kaspe, "Kazakhstan: What it Was, What it Means," GIS Reports Online, March 3, 2022. (<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/kazakhstan-protests/>)

⁷ For further detail see S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Corne, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia*, Washington:

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, November 2018, pp. 28-30. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/resources/1811CA-Regional.pdf>)

will be looking for support from the outside to balance any Russian demands.

Kazakhstan's leaders, like those in the rest of the region, harbor strong concerns about the extent of Western attention to the region. The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan was a watershed event, but should be seen simply as the culmination of a long period of U.S. disengagement. The lack of attention to the region goes back to the late years of the George W. Bush Administration, when efforts to save the situation in Iraq from a debacle led to a shift in both aid and political attention from Central Asia to the Middle East. Under President Obama, the U.S. announced it would withdraw from Afghanistan without consulting with, let alone reassuring, Central Asian states. While the withdrawal did not happen, the Obama Administration announced a "pivot" to Asia that clearly did not include *Central Asia*. Matters were somewhat improved by the end of the Obama years, when the U.S. – at Kazakhstan's urging – introduced the C5+1 mechanism of consultations with Central Asian states, making the U.S. one of the last external powers to do so.

The Trump Administration introduced new strategy documents both regarding America's global policies and Central Asia more specifically, while also welcoming Presidents Nazarbayev and Mirziyoyev to Washington. The National Security and National Defense Strategies focused on great power competition, thus lending greater

importance to Central Asia. In January 2018, the U.S. and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue, and the two sides have met regularly at the level of Deputy Foreign Minister.⁸ But because of the chaotic nature of the Trump Administration and its inability to follow up on its own priorities, little happened in concrete terms. The Biden Administration has done little more than continue to hold virtual meetings in the C5+1 format, and engagement with Kazakhstan on security matters has been lacking. Meanwhile, the U.S. has allowed the position of U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan to remain vacant since October 2021, without nominating a successor.

The U.S. response to the January events was not reassuring: while Secretary of State Antony Blinken criticized the CSTO deployment and President Tokayev's "shoot-to-kill" order, which Kazakh officials argue has been much-misinterpreted, there has not been much in terms of high-level engagement with Kazakhstan since the January unrest. While this is understandable in light of the situation in Ukraine, it is also symptomatic of U.S. policy at this time. Still, on April 11 a visit by Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights Uzra Zeya in the Kazakh capital took place, which inaugurated the U.S.-Kazakhstan High-Level Dialogue on Human Rights and Democratic Reforms.

EU and U.S. interests with regard to Kazakhstan align. Unlike the U.S., however, the EU has a

⁸ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Strong and Unique: Three Decades of U.S.-Kazakhstan Partnership*, Washington: Central Asia-

Caucasus Institute, 2021, pp. 140-142. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13428>)

more organized policy process with regard to Central Asia as well as Kazakhstan specifically. The EU strategy towards Central Asia, released in 2019, is more detailed and comprehensive, and the EU has a review process that on a bi-yearly basis evaluates its relationship with Central Asia, including EU Council conclusions. Moreover, the EU has a dedicated Special Representative for Central Asia. With regard to Kazakhstan, the EU has an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, an instrument that provides the basis for EU cooperation with and assistance to the country. In reacting to the crisis, the EU was also visibly more active. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell made several statements on the crisis, but more importantly the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel, held a virtual meeting with President Tokayev on January 10. This was followed by a visit to the Kazakh capital by EU Special Representative for Central Asia Terhi Hakala. The EU has an experienced Lithuanian diplomat heading its Delegation to Kazakhstan.

Looking ahead, it must be a priority for the U.S. to appoint an experienced ambassador to Kazakhstan. It would also seem natural for the EU and U.S. to build on the significant transatlantic coordination that has taken place over Ukraine to also coordinate their approaches to Central Asia,

and specifically their support for Kazakhstan's reform process.

In this context, a key area would be Western support for the reform of Kazakhstan's security institutions. President Tokayev has already removed the leadership of these institutions, but wholesale reform may be needed to turn these institutions into modern entities that serve the people rather than an unaccountable state within a state. Among Kazakhstan's partners, only Western states and possibly Turkey and Japan could provide the assistance needed for security sector reform.

Finally, the U.S. and EU will need to consider measures to alleviate the effect on Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region more broadly of the Western sanctions on Russia. How this should be done must be negotiated with Central Asian partner, but it is imperative that the West not be indifferent to the economic downturn that is beginning to take place in the region.

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Chronology of Events

March 19, 2019

President Nursultan Nazarbayev unexpectedly resigns from office. Following the Constitution, Speaker of the Senate Kassym-Jomart Tokayev is appointed interim president. In his place, Dariga Nazarbayeva is appointed Speaker of the Senate.

June 9, 2019

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev is elected President of Kazakhstan.

September 6, 2019

President Tokayev convenes the First meeting of the National Council for Public Trust.

October 9, 2019

President Tokayev issues a presidential decree stipulating that former President Nazarbayev's consent is required for key personnel appointments.

November 29, 2019

The second consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders is held in Tashkent. Kazakhstan is represented by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev in his capacity as "Elbasy (Leader of the Nation)."

December 20, 2019

At the second meeting of the National Council for Public Trust, President Tokayev announces a first package of major political reforms, and speaks of

"overcoming the fear of alternative opinions."⁹

March 16, 2020

President Tokayev announces a State of Emergency to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

May 2, 2020

Dariga Nazarbayeva is dismissed from her position as Speaker of the Senate and from the Senate itself.

September 2, 2020

President Tokayev uses the occasion of his State of the Nation address to announce a second package of political reforms.

November 26, 2020

The Nur-Otan Party presents its electoral list for upcoming parliamentary elections, including Dariga Nazarbayeva as a candidate for the *Mazhilis*.¹⁰

January 15, 2021

At the opening of the parliament, President Tokayev announced the launch of a third package of political reforms.

July 20, 2021

A consortium of international watchdogs and media outlets release the names of figures internationally that had been monitored on their smartphones through the NSO Pegasus software. Whereas most

⁹ For more detailed analysis of these and subsequent reforms, see Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr and Albert Barro, *Political and Economic Reforms in Kazakhstan under President Tokayev*, Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, November 2022. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13430>)

¹⁰ Zhanna Shayakhmetova, "Nur Otan Party Presents Its Electoral Program, Announces Final Candidate List for Majilis Election." *The Astana Times*, 26 Nov. 2020. (<https://astanatimes.com/2020/11/nur-otan-party-presents-its-electoral-program-announces-final-candidate-list-for-majilis-election/>)

targets of the software in other countries were oppositional figures, in Kazakhstan the list includes key government officials, most prominently President Tokayev himself. The eavesdropping apparently occurred in 2018, before he was elected President. Other political leaders included on the list were Askar Mamin, Prime Minister since February 2019, and Bakhytzhan Sagintayev, Prime Minister from 2016-2019. While the government dismisses these allegations, it is widely concluded that it is the country's security service, the KNB, that has eavesdropped on the high officials in question.

July 30, 2021

The office of President Tokayev announces the dismissal of Head of the State Security Service, Kalmukhanbet Kasymov. Kasymov had served in the position for a year, previously serving as Head of the Ministry of Interior for eight years. His dismissal is reported to be connected to the Pegasus revelations a week earlier.¹¹

August 6, 2021

The leaders of five Central Asian states meet in Avaza, Turkmenistan, for a third consultative meeting. Kazakhstan is represented by President Tokayev.¹²

August 30, 2021

The United States completes a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, ending a twenty-year presence in the country.

November 28, 2021

At the Congress of the Nur-Otan Party, Mr. Nazarbayev proposes to elect President Tokayev as the ruling party's next leader, implying his support for Tokayev's candidacy in the next presidential elections scheduled for 2024.

December 6, 2021

During a state visit by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, he and President Tokayev sign a "declaration of allied relations," upgrading the bilateral ties from that of a strategic partnership to that of an alliance.¹³

January 1, 2022

As a result of a phased transition to electronic trading for Liquid Propane Gas and the ending of subsidies for this fuel, LPG prices almost doubled in the western regions of Kazakhstan where demand for LPG for automotive use is high.

January 2, 2022

In the morning of January 2 residents of the city of Zhanaozen in Mangistau region came out to protest the increase in prices for LPG. Dozens of people joined a rally and blocked roads in the city center.¹⁴

¹¹ "Kazakhstan: Dismissal of President's Security Detail Linked to Pegasus?" *Eurasianet*, July 30, 2021. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-dismissal-of-presidents-security-detail-linked-to-pegasus>.)

¹² "The Consultative meeting of heads of the Central Asian states was held in Turkmenistan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, August 6, 2022. (<https://turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/post/56235/consultative-meeting-heads-central-asian-states-was-held-turkmenistan-2>)

¹³ Assel Satubaldina, "President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev Visits Kazakhstan to Sign Declaration of Allied Relations." *The Astana Times*, 7 Dec. 2021. (<https://astanatimes.com/2021/12/president-of-uzbekistan-shavkat-mirziyoyev-visits-kazakhstan-to-sign-declaration-of-allied-relations/>)

¹⁴ Маркиян Олийарник, "Протесты в Казахстане: Главные События Января 2022 Года." [Protests in Kazakhstan: The main events of January 2022'], *Заборона*, 6 Jan. 2022. (<https://zaborona.com/ru/bunt-ili-revolyucziya-v-kazahstane-vspyhnulli-protesty/>.)

By evening, President Tokayev wrote on Twitter noting that citizens “have the right to publicly express their demands to local and central authorities,” but urged them not to disturb public order.¹⁵

January 3, 2022

Protests continue in Zhanaozen. Residents gathered and camped in the city square overnight. Police officers were present but did not intervene.¹⁶ President Tokayev instructed law enforcement agencies to prevent violations of public order and urged demonstrators to be “responsible and ready for dialogue.” Prime Minister Askar Mamin said the government would “take action on the situation in Zhanaozen.” The government committed to implement a “package of measures to regulate the price of liquefied petroleum gas,” and the Agency for the Protection and Development of Competition launched an investigation into price fixing against the owners of gas stations.¹⁷ Meanwhile, a government commission headed by Deputy Prime Minister Eraly Togjanov was formed to address the socio-economic situation in Mangystau region.

Also, in the coastal city of Aktau 90 miles west of Zhanaozen in Mangistau region, a group of protesters showed up at the Yntymaq Square in front of the city administration building and proceeded to

set up tents and yurts for an encampment.¹⁸ By evening, an estimated 6,000 demonstrators were at the square. Governor Nurlan Nogaev visited the rally and reminded the crowd that the Kazakh government had reduced the price of gas and that the Agency for the Protection and Development of Competition had launched an antitrust probe into gas suppliers for a suspected price collusion; he urged the protestors to maintain public order and suggested that they hold a constructive dialogue with the authorities.¹⁹

Reports of arrests emerged from the cities of Nur-Sultan, Aktobe and Almaty where the Republic Square and Astana Square were closed off and security officers deployed.

January 4, 2022

Despite police efforts to block main thoroughfares and large squares, Almaty sees the largest protests in the past 35 years. Meanwhile, internet disruptions affecting mobile services were identified at approximately 8:30 PM local time, resulting in a big drop in traffic at 10 PM.²⁰

These protests begin peacefully and are reported to have been started by disparate groups including the *Oyan Qazaqstan* grouping (formed in 2019) as well

¹⁵ Qasym-Jomart Tokayev on Twitter, January 2, 2022.

(<https://bit.ly/3DfEi3p>)

¹⁶ “Акимов должен выбирать народ!” Протест в Жанаозене: от призывов снизить цены до политических требований” [‘Akims must be elected by the people!’ Protest in Zhanaozen: from calls to reduce prices to political demands], Radio Azattyk, January 3, 2022. (<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-zhanaozen-rally-gas-prices/31637309.html>)

¹⁷ “Акимов должен выбирать народ!” January 3, 2022.

¹⁸ Saniyash Toyken, “Правительство в Отставку!” и ‘Шал, Кет!’ В Актау и Жанаозене Продолжились Митинги.” *Радио*

Азаттык, [“Government to Resign!” Rallies Continued in Aktau and Zhanaozen.] January 4, 2022.

(<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31638526.html>.)

¹⁹ Alan Kozhakhmetov, “Нурлан Ногаев Вышел к Митингующим в Актау.” *Главные Новости Казахстана*, Tengrinews, 4 Jan. 2022. (https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nurlan-nogaev-vyishel-k-mitinguyuschim-v-aktau-458163/.)

²⁰ Natalia Krapiva, et al. “Timeline: Kazakhstan Internet Shutdowns Aim to Crush Protests, Ide State Violence.” *Accessnow*, 12 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.accessnow.org/kazakhstan-internet-shutdowns-protests-almaty-timeline-whats-happening/>.)

as nationalist groups. These groups had traditionally been hostile to each other.²¹ In addition, the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, an unregistered opposition party, called for a rally in central Almaty. Protesters tended to be males in their twenties to forties, with considerable representation of unemployed youth, migrants from other areas of Kazakhstan, and to a lesser extent the urban middle class.²²

As protests get larger, they are met with tear gas and stun grenades. Clashes emerge between police and protesters. Crowds storm the offices of the *akimat* and the presidential residence in the city. Police in the city do not receive backup, and subsequently are reported to retreat.

By late January 4, President Tokayev orders a state of emergency in Mangistau and Almaty from 01:30 AM the same night. Meanwhile, the composition of the protests appears to change. According to eyewitnesses, new groups of people join the protests,²³ including “hundreds of rough-looking aggressive men,”²⁴ many of whom are armed.

January 5, 2022

Protests in Almaty grow increasingly violent. New arrivals to the protests include people appearing to

belong to criminal gangs, as well as people appearing to belong to radical Islamic groups. The new, more violent protesters take the lead in directing attacks on government offices, setting them on fire. During the day, they also attack police, set up barricades, and take over the KNB building, which was “left virtually unguarded,” looting the weapons stored in it.²⁵ Protesters seize Almaty airport and take control of five aircraft. It is reported that airport security detachments left the building 40 minutes before it is taken over by armed men.²⁶ Widespread attacks on banks, stores, and restaurants take place, resulting in a rampage of looting. Hundreds of law enforcement officers are wounded, up to 18 killed, and at least one is beheaded.²⁷ Deaths and wounded among protesters are numerous as well. The groups engaging in combat with law enforcement appear well-prepared, including using walkie-talkies for communications, indicating a preparedness for communications blackouts.²⁸

In the morning of Jan. 5, President Tokayev accepts the resignation of the government. It continues to serve as a caretaker government.

Mid-day, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov states that “Kazakhstan had not requested Russian help to

²¹ Dmitriy Mazorenko, Almas Kaisar, “On the Ground in Kazakhstan's Protests: What Really Happened?” *OpenDemocracy*, 27 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/what-really-happened-kazakhstan-protests-january/>)

²² Mazorenko, “On the Ground in Kazakhstan's Protests: What Really Happened?”

²³ Anatoliy Weisskopf, “Протесты и Беспорядки в Казахстане: Революция, Бунт Или Госпереворот?” [Protests and Unrest in Kazakhstan: Revolution, Riot or State Coup?] *Deutsche Welle*, 12 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.dw.com/ru/protesty-i-besporjadki-v-kazahstane-revoljucija-bunt-ili-gosperevorot/a-60401290>)

²⁴ Nargis Kassenova on Twitter January 7, 2022.

(<https://twitter.com/KassenovaNargis/status/1479663457997922304>)

²⁵ Tadeusz Giczán, “Kazakhstan: a Hijacked Protest,” January 14, 2022. (<http://waidelotte.org/kazakhstan-a-hijacked-protest/>)

²⁶ Weisskopf, “Протесты и Беспорядки в Казахстане: Революция, Бунт Или Госпереворот?” [Protests and Unrest in Kazakhstan: Revolution, Riot or State Coup?]”

²⁷ “Officer Beheaded, Protesters Killed in Kazakhstan's Worst Protests Since Independence.” *ABC News*, ABC News, 6 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-06/apn-kazakhstan-unrest/100743000>)

²⁸ Giczán, “Kazakhstan: a Hijacked Protest.”

deal with protests,” and emphasizes the importance that no one from the outside interferes in Kazakhstan.²⁹

By early afternoon, President Tokayev speaks on national television. While saying the authorities would respond to violence with “maximum toughness,” he also states that Nursultan Nazarbayev was no longer the Chairman of the National Security Council, and that he had himself taken that position.³⁰ This would, as is required by the Constitution, be ratified by parliament in February.

By evening, Russian and Kazakh news agencies report that the Collective Security Treaty Organization has approved a request from Kazakhstan to send “peacekeeping forces for a limited period of time.”³¹ Authorities temporarily lift a nationwide internet blackout for a televised announcement to this effect.³² In his capacity as Chairman of the CSTO’s Collective Security Council, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan issues a statement on behalf of the organization.³³

Also in the evening of Jan. 5, news reports emerge that Karim Massimov has been removed from the position as Head of the National Security Committee and replaced by Ermek Saginbayev. Meanwhile, violence in the city continues as armed protesters

exchange fire with riot police that is being deployed in the city.

January 6, 2022

In the morning, the CSTO operation begins to deploy in Kazakhstan, tasked with guarding key infrastructure and government facilities. Russian troops arrive by air, followed by forces from Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakhstan’s Interior Ministry issues a statement stating that Almaty police has launched a “mop-up operation” in several parts of the city. Police spokeswoman Saltanat Azirbek tells state news channel Khabar-24 that twelve police officers were killed and 353 injured, and that 2,000 people had been arrested.

The government also announces a 180-day price cap on vehicle fuel and a moratorium on utility rate increases.

CSTO general secretary Stanislav Zas tells Russia’s RIA-Novosti news agency that the full contingent of peacekeepers would number about 2,500.

Protestors remain in the Aktau town square on January 6, while an estimated 6,000 people protested in Zhanaozen. Prosecutor General Gizat Nurdauletov and state secretary Yerlan Karin state that

²⁹ “Kremlin Warns Against Outside Interference in Kazakhstan.” *Reuters*, 5 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kremlin-warns-against-outside-interference-kazakhstan-2022-01-05/>)

³⁰ Disclose.tv on Twitter, January 5, 2022. (<https://twitter.com/disclosetv/status/1478715166313398275/photo/1>)

³¹ Sergei Sumlenny on Twitter, January 5, 2022. (<https://twitter.com/sumlenny/status/1478807667560828935/photo/1>)

³² Natalia Krapiva, “Timeline: Kazakhstan Internet Shutdowns and Protests.” *Accessnow*, 12 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.accessnow.org/kazakhstan-internet-shutdowns-protests-almaty-timeline-whats-happening/>)

³³ Meduza on English on Twitter on January 5, 2022. (https://twitter.com/meduza_en/status/1478842077333045248)

they “guarantee that none of the local activists will be persecuted”.³⁴

On January 6, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterates Washington’s “full support for Kazakhstan’s constitutional institutions and media freedom and advocated for a peaceful, rights-respecting resolution to the crisis.”³⁵

January 7, 2022

Authorities briefly restored internet access starting at around 08:50 AM local time, followed up with another shutdown approximately three hours later.

President Tokayev states in a televised address that the “constitutional order has largely been restored in all regions of the country.” He also announces that he had ordered troops to shoot without warning, calling protesters “bandits and terrorists.” He goes on to thank Russia for helping to establish order. Russia’s Defense Ministry states that more than 70 planes are bringing Russian troops into Kazakhstan and that they are helping to control Almaty’s airport.³⁶

Peaceful protests continue in Zhanaozen and Aktau,³⁷ and the Kazakh government announces that seven additional policemen had been killed in

Almaty. In the city of Taldykorgan, 20 protesters dressed in camouflage uniforms, try to attack the pre-trial detention center but are repelled.

Russian and Kazakh military forces jointly take control of Almaty airport, the Russian Consulate General and a number of other facilities.

Well-known organized crime figure Arman Dzhumageldiyev, known to have been in Turkey until the protests, is arrested in Almaty, and accused of being among the leaders of the violence targeting government institutions after giving fiery speeches to protesters as government buildings burnt.³⁸

Media reports that Samat Abish, nephew of Nazarbayev and Deputy Head of the KNB, is allegedly detained in Almaty, but the information is not confirmed. Only on January 17 is his dismissal made official.³⁹ Kazakh social media is also rife with speculation that Nazarbayev, together with his daughters and their families, has left the country, but these reports are not confirmed.

Former Nazarbayev advisor Yermukhamet Yertysbayev states that training camps for armed militias had existed for several years in the mountains of eastern Kazakhstan, and that the KNB had

³⁴ “Residents of Kazakhstan Continue to Come Out to Mass Rallies in Centers of Their Towns.” *Хартыя’ 97*, 6 Jan. 2022. (<https://charter97.org/en/news/2022/1/6/450122/>)

³⁵ Navbahor Imamova, “Kazakh Unrest Seen Boosting Russia at US Expense.” *VOA*, Kazakh Unrest Seen Boosting Russia at US Expense, 12 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/kazakh-unrest-seen-boosting-russia-at-us-expense/6394402.html>)

³⁶ Olzhas Auyezov, “Kazakh President Gives Shoot-to-Kill Order to Quell Protests.” *Reuters*, 7 Jan. 2022, (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakh-president-says-constitutional-order-has-mostly-been-restored-2022-01-07/>)

³⁷ Mary Ilyushina and Amy Cheng, “Kazakhstan President Gives Shoot-To-Kill Order Against Protesters, Dismissing Calls for

Negotiations.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 7 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/07/kazakhstan-russia-protests-csto/>)

³⁸ Ivan Nechepurenko and Andrew Higgins, “In Kazakhstan’s Street Battles, Signs of Elites Fighting Each Other,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2022. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/world/asia/kazakhstan-protests.html>)

³⁹ “Samat Abish Relieved of The Post of 1st Deputy Chairman of National Security Council.” *Kazinform*, 17 Jan. 2022. (https://www.inform.kz/en/samat-abish-relieved-of-the-post-of-1st-deputy-chairman-of-national-security-council_a3886731)

known about this but concealed the information.⁴⁰ He does not specify what type of militias these purportedly were.

Various media sources speak in more detail of allegations involving Samat Abish and his brother Kairat Satybaldy. Satybaldy had previously served in the KNB but moved into business; he had long been alleged to be a sympathizer of Salafi Islam and informal leader of radical Islamist movements in the country, and of having established training camps for them in the mountains of Kazakhstan's south.⁴¹ The arrested crime boss Dzhumageldiyev is reputed to be close to former Satybaldy.⁴² Similarly, Abish had been connected to the world of criminal groups that organize around martial arts clubs.⁴³ The linkage between martial arts and organized crime is a common feature in the post-Soviet world,⁴⁴ and these circles overlap with radical Islamist groups at least since the late 1980s.⁴⁵

January 8, 2022

Small anti-government protests in the city of Zhanaozen continued.⁴⁶ Law enforcement agencies report having detained over 4,400 people who participated in the riots.⁴⁷

In the early morning, it is reported that Karim Massimov, the recently ousted head of the KNB, was detained on suspicion of treason.⁴⁸

The Agency for Protection and Development of Competition launched an investigation into 180 sellers of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), the department's press service announced.⁴⁹

January 9, 2022

The interior ministry estimates property damage from the riots at about \$198 million. It reports that more than 100 businesses and banks were attacked and looted and about 400 vehicles destroyed.⁵⁰ It also reports that more than 2,200 people had sought

⁴⁰ Mark Episkopos, "What's Really Behind the Unrest in Kazakhstan?" *The National Interest*, January 7, 2022. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what%E2%80%99s-really-behind-unrest-kazakhstan-199243>) Yertysbayev's interview was originally with Russian outlet RBC. (<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/07/01/2022/61d863399a7947dc8c6e8e6c>)

⁴¹ Jeyhun Najafov, "Former head of Kazakhstan's special services answers Azeri Daily's questions: 'Law enforcement agencies stepped aside in anticipation of Nazarbayev's command'", *Azeri Daily*, January 17, 2022. (<https://azeridaily.com/news/65271>)

⁴² Danil Kislov, "Террористический транзит," [Terrorist Transit] *Fergana News*, January 7, 2022. (<https://fergana.site/articles/124571/>); Alexander Gabuev et. al., "What's Happening in Kazakhstan?" *Carnegie Moscow*, January 20, 2022. (<https://carnegie-moscow.org/commentary/86224>)

⁴³ Diyas Takenov, "Sport and Masculinity in Kazakhstan's Nation-Building." *The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*, September 8, 2021, (<https://oxussociety.org/sport-and-masculinity-in-kazakhstans-nation-building/>)

⁴⁴ Carl Schreck, "Blood Sport: The Rise of Russia's Gangster Athletes." *RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, May 9, 2016. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/blood-sports-rise-of-russia-gangster-athletes/27722386.html>)

⁴⁵ Vitaly Naumkin, "Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Working Paper, 2003, p. 11. (https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/shared/2003_06-naum.pdf)

⁴⁶ Stuart Greer, "Small Protests Continue as Kazakh Government Tightens Grip." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 8, 2022. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/zjanaozen-kazakhstan-protest/31645367.html>)

⁴⁷ "Kazakhstan Police Detain Over 4,400 People in Riots." *TASS Russian News Agency*, January 8, 2022. (<https://tass.com/world/1384977>)

⁴⁸ "Kazakhstan Detains Former National Security Chief on Suspicion of Treason." *Reuters*, January 8, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakhstan-detains-former-national-security-chief-suspicion-treason-2022-01-08/>)

⁴⁹ "Kazakhstan Launches Investigation Into 180 Sellers of LPG." *TASS*, January 8, 2022. (<https://tass.com/world/1384969>)

⁵⁰ "Kazakhstan: More Than 160 Killed, 5,000 Arrested During Riots." *Al Jazeera*, January 9, 2022. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/9/more-than-5000-arrested-since-riots-erupted-a-week-ago>)

treatment for injuries, including about 1,300 security officers were injured.⁵⁰ The office of Kazakhstan's president said that in total 5,800 people had been brought to police stations. The health ministry said in total 164 people, including two children, had been killed. It also specified that 103 people had died in Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty.

Interior Minister Erlan Turgumbayev held a press conference, stating that "today the situation is stabilized in all regions of the country ... the counter-terror operation is continuing in a bid to re-establish order in the country."⁵¹

Three deputy chairmen of the KNB – Marat Osipov, Anuar Sadykulov, and Daulet Yergozhin were dismissed.

January 10, 2022

The government declared a day of mourning for the victims of the violence. Kazakhstan's Interior Ministry reported that a total of 7,939 people had been brought to police stations across the country. The KNB stated that the situation in the country had "stabilized and is under control."⁵² President Tokayev labeled the protests a "coup attempt." The government stated that "foreign-trained Islamist radicals" were among those who had attacked

government buildings and security forces in the past week and that police had now detained almost 8,000 people to bring the situation under control.⁵³

In a virtual meeting with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, President Tokayev stated that "I have no doubt that it was a terrorist attack. A well-organized and prepared act of aggression against Kazakhstan with the participation of foreign militants. They are mostly from Central Asian countries, including Afghanistan. There were also militants from the Middle East. The goal was to form a zone of controlled chaos in Kazakhstan [followed] by forceful seizure of power. That is why, the counter terrorism operation has been launched in Kazakhstan."⁵⁴

Internet services returned to Kazakhstan's largest city following a five-day blackout.⁵⁵

In an online meeting of the CSTO, President Tokayev stated that order had now been restored in Kazakhstan and called the protests over.⁵⁶ He announced that the CSTO had completed its mission in Kazakhstan and would begin withdrawing from the country on January 13 and would be fully withdrawn in the next 10 days.⁵⁷ At the same meeting, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed the

⁵¹ "Kazakhstan: More Than 160 Killed, 5,000 Arrested During Riots." *Al Jazeera*, January 9, 2022.

⁵² Dasha Litvinova, "Nearly 8,000 Detained in Kazakhstan Over Violent Protests." *Associated Press*, January 10, 2022. (<https://apnews.com/article/kazakhstan-europe-national-security-terrorism-2c026ecb00584aba668f320d4482d0f1>)

⁵³ "Kazakhstan Blames Foreign-Trained Islamic Radicals for Unrest." *South China Morning Post*, January 10, 2022. (<https://www.scmp.com/news/world/russia-central-asia/article/3162811/kazakhstan-blames-foreign-trained-islamic-radicals>)

⁵⁴ "Kassym-Jomart Tokayev holds bilateral talks with President of the European Council Charles Michel," *akorda.kz*, January 10, 2022. ([https://www.akorda.kz/en/kassym-jomart-tokayev-hold-](https://www.akorda.kz/en/kassym-jomart-tokayev-hold-bilateral-talks-with-president-of-the-european-council-charles-michel-100312)

[bilateral-talks-with-president-of-the-european-council-charles-michel-100312](https://www.akorda.kz/en/kassym-jomart-tokayev-hold-bilateral-talks-with-president-of-the-european-council-charles-michel-100312))

⁵⁵ "Kazakhstan Unrest: Internet Returns to Almaty Following a Five Day Outage." *BBC News*, January 10, 2022. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59927267>)

⁵⁶ "President of Kazakhstan Says He Has Weathered Attempted Coup d'Etat." *Reuters*, January 11, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/president-kazakhstan-says-he-has-weathered-attempted-coup-detat-2022-01-10/>)

⁵⁷ "Kazakh President Announces CSTO Troop Withdrawal, Criticizes Predecessor." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, January 11, 2022. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-detains-10000-unrest/31648618.html>)

CSTO had defended Kazakhstan from what he described as a “foreign-backed terrorist uprising,” and promised leaders of other ex-Soviet states that the CSTO would protect them too.⁵⁸

January 11, 2022

In a speech to Parliament, after having presented a new Prime Minister, Alikhan Smailov, Tokayev promised new accelerated reforms. Moreover, he acknowledged public discontent over income inequality and criticized his predecessor Nazarbayev as well as his family and associates. Tokayev noted that “a layer of wealthy people, even by international standards” had emerged thanks to his predecessor, and announced that he would end the role of a lucrative monopoly recycling company, Operator ROP, known to be controlled by one of Nazarbayev’s daughters.⁵⁹

President Tokayev presented a new government. Nine out of twenty ministers were replaced, but the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Interior remained in their posts.

January 13, 2022

Former Deputy Chairmen Sadykulov and Yergozhin of the KNB were detained on suspicion of attempted violent seizure of power through violence.⁶⁰

January 14, 2022

Kanysh Izbastin, nephew of President Tokayev, resigns from his position of First Deputy Chairman of the Board of Baiterek Holding, “in order to engage in social activities.”⁶¹

January 15, 2022

Sovereign wealth fund Samruk-Kazyna announces that Kairat Sharipbayev resigned from the position as Chief Executive of the state oil pipeline company KazTransOil, and that Dimash Dossanov resigned from the position as Chief Executive of natural gas pipeline operator QazaqGaz. While their relationship has not been publicly confirmed, Sharipbayev is known to be married to Dariga Nazarbayeva, a fact confirmed by Nazarbayeva’s son on social media. Dossanov is married to Aliya Nazarbayeva.⁶²

The Prosecutor General’s Office announces that 225 people died during the protests in the country, of which 25 were security officials.

January 17

Former Deputy Chairman of the KNB Samat Abish is officially relieved of his duties.

Through a statement on the website of the Atameken National Chamber of Entrepreneurs, Timur Kulibayev announces his resignation as Chairman

⁵⁸ Tamara Vaal, “Putin Claims Victory in Defending Kazakhstan from Revolt.” *Reuters*, January 10, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakhstan-detains-7939-people-over-unrest-2022-01-10/>)

⁵⁹ Chris Rickleton, “Kazakhstan’s Green Economy: Greenbacks for the Nazarbayevs?” *Eurasianet*, June 16, 2021. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstans-green-economy-greenbacks-for-the-nazarbayevs>)

⁶⁰ “Two Former Deputies of Ex-Chairman of National Security Committee of Kazakhstan Detained.” *APA*, January 13, 2022. (<https://apa.az/en/cis-countries/two-former-deputies-of-ex->

[chairman-of-national-security-committee-of-kazakhstan-detained-365848](https://www.kazakhstan.gov.kz/en/press-releases/2022-01-13/kanysh-izbastin-resigns-as-the-first-deputy-chairman-of-the-board-of-baiterek-holding))

⁶¹ “Kanysh Izbastin Resigns as the First Deputy Chairman of the Board of Baiterek Holding.” Baiterek Holding, January 13, 2022. (<https://baiterek.gov.kz/en/pr/news/kanysh-izbastin-resigns-as-the-first-deputy-chairman-of-the-board-of-baiterek-holding>)

⁶² “Kazakh Ex-Leader’s In-Laws Leave Key Energy Sector Jobs.” *Euronews*, January 16, 2022. (<https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/16/us-kazakhstan-nazarbayev-family>)

of the organization. Kulibayev is married to former President Nazarbayev's daughter Dinara.

January 18

Former President Nursultan Nazarbayev appears for the first time since late December. In a released video, Nazarbayev affirms that he is in Kazakhstan, firmly supports President Tokayev, refers to himself as a "pensioner" and strongly rejects any notion of intra-elite conflict in Kazakhstan.

January 19

Russia's Defense Ministry announces that all Russian troops have withdrawn from Kazakhstan.

Minister of Defense Murat Bektanov is fired from his position and replaced by Deputy Interior Minister Ruslan Zhaqsylyqov. President Tokayev criticizes Bektanov for a "lack of leadership" and laments that because Kazakhstan was unable to use its army, "we were forced to resort to outside help."⁶³ On February 21, Bektanov is formally charged with dereliction of duties.⁶⁴

The *Mazhilis* (lower chamber of parliament) approves the removal of former President Nazarbayev from the post as Chairman of the National Security Council and the role as Chairman of the Assembly of Kazakhstan's People.⁶⁵

January 24

President Tokayev, in a meeting with senior businessmen, urges them to change the system of Kazakhstan's economy, and cites the oft-repeated figure that only 162 people own half of Kazakhstan's wealth, adding that half of the population makes less than the equivalent of \$1,300 per year.⁶⁶

January 25

President Tokayev fires several dozen high officials in key state companies under Samruk-Kazyna management, including 78 employees of Kazmunaigas, 46 of Kazatomprom, 32 of national railway company Kazakhstan Temir Zholi, and the Head of Kazakhstan Development Bank.⁶⁷

January 28

At an extraordinary congress of the Nur-Otan party, Nursultan Nazarbayev resigns from the post of Chairman and replaced by President Tokayev in a unanimous vote.

February 2

Through an amendment to the law on the First President of Kazakhstan, both houses of parliament strip Nazarbayev of his lifetime appointments, and on the Senate's urging, the *Mazhilis* endorses the

⁶³ "Kazakhstan President Fires Defence Minister Following Protests." *Euronews*, January 19, 2022. (<https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/19/kazakhstan-president-fires-defence-minister-following-protests>)

⁶⁴ "Kazakhstan Detains Ex-Defense Minister for Inaction During Unrest." *Aljazeera*, February 21, 2022. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/21/kazakhstan-detains-ex-defence-minister-for-inaction-during-unrest>)

⁶⁵ "Kazakh President Replaces Defense Minister, Parliament Removes Nazarbayev from Lifetime Posts." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 19, 2022. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-toqaev-ousting-nazarbaev/31661748.html>)

⁶⁶ "Kazakhstan Begins to Break Up Political Family Cronyism as Business Reforms Start." *Silk Road Briefing*, January 24, 2022. (<https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/01/24/kazakhstan-begins-to-break-up-political-family-cronyism-as-business-reforms-start/>)

⁶⁷ "Another Nazarbayev Head Rolls as Kazakhstan's Tokayev Steps up Purge after Mass Unrest." *Bne IntelliNews*, January 26, 2022. (<https://www.intellinews.com/another-nazarbayev-head-rolls-as-kazakhstan-s-tokayev-steps-up-purge-after-mass-unrest-232967/>)

removal of Nazarbayev's veto right over key matters of domestic and foreign policy.⁶⁸

KazAgroFinance JSC announces that Kanysh Izbastin is resigning from his post as Chairman of the Board of Directors.⁶⁹

February 24

Former Deputy Chairman of the KNB Osipov is placed in pretrial detention.⁷⁰

February 25

President Tokayev dismisses Interior Minister Yerlan Turgumbayev following an investigation into allegations of torture, with prosecutors investigating the death of six people subjected to "unlawful interrogation techniques."⁷¹

March 1

At the 22nd Congress of the Nur-Otan Party, the party is renamed Amanat, which in Kazah means

the legacy of ancestors and a mandate for future generations.

March 2

Dariga Nazarbayeva is officially relieved of her position as a member of the Mazhilis upon her own request.

March 13

Kairat Satybaldy, another of Nazarbayev's nephews, is arrested on suspicion of "crimes undermining the security of the state."⁷²

March 16

President Tokayev delivers a State of the Nation Address, in which he proposes new political reforms that would, in his words, change the country's constitutional system from "superpresidential" to a presidential system with a significantly stronger parliament.

⁶⁸ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan: Parliament Strips Nazarbayev of Lifetime Sinecures." *Eurasianet*, February 2, 2022. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-parliament-strips-nazarbayev-of-lifetime-sinecures>)

⁶⁹ "Tokayev's Nephew Stepped down from Post of Top Management of State-Owned Company." *КазТАГ: Казахское Телеграфное Агентство*, February 3, 2022. (<https://kaztag.kz/en/news/tokayev-s-nephew-stepped-down-from-post-of-top-management-of-state-owned-company>)

⁷⁰ "Another Former Deputy Chief of Kazakh Security Committee Arrested Over January Unrest." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Another Former Deputy Chief of Kazakh Security Committee

Arrested Over January Unrest, February 24, 2022. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-arrest-security-committee-january-unrest/31720430.html>)

⁷¹ "Kazakh Interior Minister Sacked Amid Police Torture Investigation." *Reuters*, February 25, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kazakh-interior-minister-sacked-amid-police-torture-investigation-2022-02-25/>)

⁷² Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Net Tightens around Nazarbayev Clan as Nephew Arrested." *Eurasianet*, March 13, 2022. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-net-tightens-around-nazarbayev-klan-as-nephew-arrested>)