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Developments in Kazakhstan 2022: Causes and Consequences

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Introduction

In January 2022, mass protests arose in Kazakhstan due to an increase in gas prices for cars, which instantly covered almost the entire country. From the initial demands of the demonstrators in Zhanaozen in the southwest of the country they quickly transformed into anti-government ones: the protesters demanded the resignation of the government, a change in the current political regime and the departure of the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The willingness of the Kazakh

authorities to make concessions and satisfy part of the demands did not stop the protests: they expanded significantly both quantitatively and geographically and in a short time the protest was marginalized and transformed into pogroms and looting, especially in the city of Almaty in southern Kazakhstan.

As a result, the security and the armed forces were unable to restore order and ensure security, and on January 5, president of

Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev turned to the CSTO (The Collective Security Treaty Organization) with a request to help overcome the “terrorist threat”. CSTO troops arrived in Kazakhstan on January 6 to carry out “a peacekeeping mission”. In parallel, the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursurtan Nazarbayev, left the post of head of the Security Council, which he was supposed to head for life, and handed it over to Tokayev. Also, arrests and removal from power of persons close to Nazarbayev began.

The rapid development of events in traditionally stable Kazakhstan, protests against the well-known and authoritative politician - the first president, leader of the nation Elbasy Nursultan Nazarbayev - the rapid intervention of Russian troops under the umbrella of the CSTO “peacekeeping forces”, as well as the actual removal of Nazarbayev and his proxies from power raises a number of questions. Why did the protests take place right now, who led them, how will the intervention of Russian troops under the auspices of the CSTO affect the development of the military-political and international situation in the region, and what consequences will they have for regional security?

Overview of the development of Kazakhstan after the collapse of the USSR

After the collapse of the USSR, Kazakhstan remained a closed post-Soviet country for a long time. The political regime, according to the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), is authoritarian, while according to the constitution, Kazakhstan “asserts itself as a democratic state.” In Kazakhstan, all the elements inherent in democratic political systems have been created and are functioning: three branches of power, the election of the head of state and parliament deputies, free and independent media, etc. However, in practice, the elections in Kazakhstan were not transparent, and each time the permanent leader Nazarbayev won with 80-98% the media refrained from criticizing him and his family members. In all spheres, the influence of propaganda gradually increased with the praise of the first president, his merits in creating the state, maintaining peace and stability, and a wise multi-vector foreign policy. Opposition politicians were either persecuted or squeezed out of the country.

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In economic terms, Kazakhstan has shown steady growth. Thanks to the export of energy and mineral resources to Russia, the EU and China, Kazakhstan soon became a regional leader, and was able to provide sufficient funds to the budget. Against this background, a significant part of the profits was accumulated in the Samruk-Kazyna Joint Stock Company, which was originally intended to support the state and develop business. Thanks to this, Kazakhstan has formed a fairly good and developed social policy: quite high pensions, social support programs, scholarships for studying at Kazakh universities and abroad, assistance to big families, etc. This allowed the authorities, on the one hand, to keep politics closed to society and inclusive only for the current political elite, and, on the other hand, to “buy” the relative loyalty of society with social initiatives.

This aspect subsequently gradually formed a protest potential in society: despite social assistance, society felt deceived, cut off from influencing political processes, both in the country and locally, the oligarchs continued to monopolise state subsoil, the influence of the state on the economy remained monopolistic, its diversification was not carried out, and business did not develop.

The strategic importance of Kazakhstan in the context of Russia, China and the Central Asian republics

In addition to internal problems, Kazakhstan was in a difficult geopolitical situation. From the north Kazakhstan borders with Russia, to the east with China, in the south there are Central Asian neighbors, and further to the south Afghanistan. The political leadership, realizing that in order to maintain security and stability, it is necessary to create friendly and predictable relations with neighbors, primarily with Russia and China, set a course for the implementation of a multi-vector policy. As a result, this made it possible to form a certain balance of relations, in which the influence of one player was compensated by the influence of another.

Russia has become an important political, economic and military-political partner of Kazakhstan.

As a result, Russia has become an important political, economic and military-political partner of Kazakhstan, while China has become a vital investor in the oil and gas industry of Kazakhstan and one of the main markets for Kazakhstani products. Relations with the West developed due to Nazarbayev’s desire

to maintain good relations with the US, and also due to the importance of the European market for Kazakhstan. After the launch of the Chinese initiative The Belt and Road Initiative – BRI, Kazakhstan acquired a new geopolitical significance - as an important element in the transport and logistics' chains on the way of transporting goods from China to Europe. In 2013, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced the launch of the BRI in the capital city of Kazakhstan - Astana (in 2019 renamed to Nur-Sultan) and Kazakhstan has become a kind of “gateway” to Europe for Chinese land transport routes. In addition, Kazakhstan maintained friendly relations with Turkey, which in recent years have begun to intensify and expand within the Organization of Turkic States. The so-called Central Asian integration, which assumed closer relations between Kazakhstan and the countries of Central Asia, also received a new impetus. However, Russia has remained the main player in Kazakhstan, for which Kazakhstan is important based on several aspects.

Firstly, this country is viewed by Russia as a zone of Moscow's exclusive influence in the post-Soviet space. In Moscow's mindset, Kazakhstan must remain a completely controlled and loyal country, with a political regime similar to Russia's, which will allow the Kremlin to effectively manage Kazakhstan.

Secondly, Kazakhstan is the only “window” for Russia to enter the countries of Central Asia. Unfriendly relations with Kazakhstan would “cut off” other countries of Central Asia from Russia.

Thirdly, Kazakhstan is a fairly large market for Russian goods. With the help of the EAEU (The Eurasian Economic Union), Russia firmly tied Kazakhstan to itself economically and politically, expanded its goods to the Kazakhstan market, leaving its market closed to Kazakhstani producers. Fourthly, Kazakhstan is one of the countries that are natural barriers to radical Islamism from Afghanistan to Russia, so strengthening military ties with Kazakhstan allows Russia to identify threats from Afghanistan in advance and neutralize them at an early stage. Therefore, Russia continued to form a loyal political elite of Kazakhstan, a pro-Russian society, the deepening of Kazakhstan's dependence on the Russian economy, transit routes, and the security system, despite the fact that Nazarbayev understood the risks posed by Russia and tried to pursue a multi-vector policy.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced the launch of the BRI in the capital Astana in 2013.

The EAEU and the CSTO played a crucial role in achieving these goals. The EAEU made it

possible to create a common economic space that worked to realize Russia's economic interests in expanding into the markets of partner countries, as well as to deepen Kazakhstan's economic and political dependence on Moscow. The CSTO, despite its inefficiency in terms of collective security, played a role: the formation of a common military and military-political agenda, the expansion of Russia's military products to the Kazakhstan market, the deepening of Kazakhstan's dependence on Russian military equipment and training of military personnel. Russia was important to Kazakhstan, both in terms of economy and security. Russia is the main economic partner, the route of transportation of goods from Kazakhstan to the EU passes through Russia, it is the main supplier of military equipment for the Armed Forces of Kazakhstan, a counterweight to the influence of China, the main direction of educational migration of Kazakhstani youth, etc.

Kazakhstan's view of Russian military intervention in Ukraine

After the annexation of Crimea and the armed aggression of Russia in the east of Ukraine in 2014, Kazakhstan found itself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, Russian propaganda, which had a serious position in Kazakhstan with the help of its media, actively

disseminated narratives about the "Banderites", the "Maidan organized by the United States", the "civil war in Ukraine", the legality of the "return of Crimea", etc. On the other hand the leadership of Kazakhstan understood that the situation in Ukraine was provoked by Russia, and assessed the possibility of repeating a similar scenario in the northern regions of Kazakhstan with a large percentage of the Russian population. In this regard, Kazakhstan needed to find a position that would ensure predictable and friendly relations with Russia, the impossibility of repeating such a scenario in Kazakhstan and at the same time not becoming completely dependent on Russia. An acceptable formula for Kazakhstan was found: Kazakhstan takes a neutral position on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, but votes against Ukrainian resolutions on Crimea, and even offered its own negotiating platform to resolve the conflict.

Russian-Ukrainian conflict has become an obstacle to the development of Kazakh-Ukrainian relations.

The second problem is that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has become an obstacle to the development of Kazakh-Ukrainian relations. Over the period 2014-2021, the trade turnover between the countries decreased by 20-

30% annually while, the implementation of a number of projects in mechanical engineering, aircraft construction, and military-technical cooperation was stopped.

The reason for this was: blocking of Ukrainian exports from Ukraine to Kazakhstan through the territory of Russia since 2016, and blocking of Kazakh coal export to Ukraine, Russia's displacement of Ukrainian products from the Kazakhstani market by introducing EAEU customs tariffs and replacing Ukrainian products with Russian ones, an unspoken ban on the part of Russia on the development of military-technical ties between Kazakhstan and Ukraine. The Ukrainian and Kazakh sides tried to overcome these challenges. On the part of Ukraine, attempts were made to organize alternative routes for goods and energy pipelines bypassing the territory of Russia, through the Caspian Sea, but these attempts did not bring any results.

Nazarbayev system of government, transfer of the presidency to Tokayev

Over the years of his rule, Nazarbayev managed to build a fairly effective vertical of power in terms of management, which allowed him to control all branches of power, reduce the influence of the opposition to zero and control all areas of the country's economy. The

presidential vertical became fundamental in all the processes of the country, the economy was either state-owned or quasi-state, the most profitable sectors were controlled by Nazarbayev's associates or members of his family. The government has always been "tame" and "scapegoat" in case of need to shift the blame on someone for a miscalculation in certain cases. However, in the last 15 years, Nazarbayev began to realize the need for a peaceful, calm transfer of power to a successor who would ensure the safety of Nazarbayev and his family after leaving the power. In the expert community, there were different assessments of who could be a possible candidate: from Nazarbayev's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, to Imangali Tasmaganbetov. However, due to the closed political system, no one knew exactly who would be the next president.

Nazarbayev began to realize the need for a peaceful transfer of power to a successor.

Simultaneously, Nazarbayev built a system that would allow for a smooth and controlled transfer of power to a successor, but retaining alternative levers of government. For this purpose, the status of Elbasy - the Leader of the Nation was created, which provided for lifelong immunity to Nazarbayev and his family members. In addition, Nazarbayev was the

head of the ruling Nur-Otan party, the leader of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, the head of the Security Council, which he retained for life. Additional “safeties” were Nazarbayev’s confidants. According to local experts, former Prime Minister Karim Massimov was an “observer” of the security sector, Nazarbayev’s son-in-law Timur Kulebayev in the economy, and Dariga, Nazarbayev’s daughter in politics.

Thus, after the successor came to power, Nazarbayev retained other levers of control, which, in the event of force majeure, would allow Nazarbayev to stabilize the situation, remove him from the power system - and allow himself, or through his proxies, to return the control over the country if needed. In 2019, the transit of power was launched - Nazarbayev announced his resignation, Nazarbayev’s protegee Tokayev won the presidential election. After coming to power, Tokayev demonstrated complete loyalty to his mentor. On election day he proposed to rename the capital Astana in honor of the first president. In his statements he always emphasized the outstanding role and authority of the first president, and the consistency to his course. This formed in the media and expert discourse the point of view that Nazarbayev remained the real leader of the country, and Tokayev a devoted and insolvent technical president, intended to temporarily rule the country. However, according to the

events of 2022, we see that these estimates turned out to be erroneous.

What led to the protests of 2022, and what course the country will choose in the future

Developments in Kazakhstan should be considered in terms of three elements that are present, that interact with each other and are catalysts for each other. The first is mass protests that arose due to an increase in gas prices. The second is the inter-elite struggle for power, the third is external influence from Russia in the form of the introduction of CSTO troops into the country. Let us look into these elements. The protests in Kazakhstan arose for a number of reasons, the main one being the closed political regime. Despite the relatively high economic performance and social policy, Kazakhstani society was actually cut off from political life, was little interested in politics, because it believed that it did not have any tools to influence the government and really participate in the political processes of the country.

Former PM Karim Massimov was arrested on suspicion of high treason.

For many years, on the one hand, this ensured the monopolist position in power of the current political elite, but on the other hand, it gradually led to an increase in distrust and a negative attitude towards the authorities on the part of society. A gap has formed between the authorities and society, which, in the context of an unexpected increase in gas prices, the “half-heartedness” and incompleteness of the reforms announced by Tokayev, the corruption of the old political elite, the monopolistic influence of the oligarchs, and the lack of election of regional elites, led to a conflict between society and the government. As a result of this, we observed the rapid politicization and radicalization of socio-economic protest, insults towards the first president of Kazakhstan, and even the overthrow of his monument in the city of Taldykorgan. The second element - the inter-elite struggle is visible now: Tokayev has received all the powers of government, Nazarbayev at the time of writing this article is in information isolation, his relatives and close associates are removed from their posts. For example, former PM Karim Massimov was arrested on suspicion of high treason, the heads of corporations, Nazarbayev’s son-in-law Timur Kulebayev, Dimash Dosanov, Kairat Sharipbayev were dismissed from their posts.

Conclusion

In this regard, we can conclude that the protests resulted in: the reconfiguration of the country’s power in favor of Tokayev, the establishment of Tokayev’s control over all state structures, including all branches of government, law enforcement agencies and special services, and the country’s financial assets, removal of Nazarbayev, his family and associates from political life and removal from control over the country’s economic assets. The third element - external influence from Russia, was demonstrated by the fact that under the umbrella of the CSTO, Moscow supported Tokayev in the intra-elite struggle. Perhaps this aspect is key in the situation. Now we can say with confidence that Russia has significantly increased its influence on the military-political leadership of Kazakhstan. In connection with the provision of assistance from Russia, it will firmly tie the Kazakh authorities to Russia and bring significant threats to the sovereignty of Kazakhstan. It is likely that Moscow will put forward a number of demands for its “services”. The main ones can be: Kazakhstan’s rejection of a multi-vector policy in favor of Moscow, reducing ties with the US and NATO, refusal to switch to the Latin script of the Kazakh language, a significant increase in the status of the Russian language, creation on the basis of the EAEU of supranational bodies of political control,

transfer of strategic companies to Russian business, deepening energy dependence by building a Russian nuclear power plant on the territory of Kazakhstan, a more pro-Russian stance on Crimea and participation of the Kazakh armed forces in military operations of the Russian Federation abroad.

It is obvious that Russia is modernizing and transforming its approaches to the gradual formation of a new system of international relations “USSR-2.0”, using the corresponding vulnerabilities of each object of influence, and under the guise of a “peacekeeping operation” has taken up the creation of a new “Allied State” with Kazakhstan. The result of mass protests in Kazakhstan was the reconfiguration of power in favor of Tokayev, the establishment of full control over all processes in the country by him, as well as the removal of Nazarbayev and his

family from power. Russia’s assistance in this process has significantly increased Moscow’s influence on Kazakhstan and its leadership, in connection with which one should expect an increase in authoritarian tendencies in domestic politics and a more pro-Russian vector of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy.

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