



Feature Article  
January 2, 2024

## Two years later: Kazakhstan's January events

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*In January 2022, Kazakhstan experienced its most serious internal crisis since independence. Popular protests over energy costs turned into riots that in turn took on the shape of an attempted coup d'état that required President Tokayev to request support from the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Kazakhstan's outlook appeared bleak. While some elements of the January events are still being investigated by the Kazakh law enforcement, the overall picture of what happened is clear. Overall, however, the events led to a gradual purge of older elements within the state institutions, a further distancing from Russia, and a redoubling of the overall reform process in the country.*

As 2021 ended, the world was emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic and watching as Russia massed tens of thousands of troops on the border with Ukraine. While that would lead to Russia's unprovoked aggression on that country less than two months later, a crisis erupted in early January in Kazakhstan, a country otherwise known for its stability. Protests

against energy price hikes in western Kazakhstan spread and grew, and suddenly turned into riots. According to the investigation conducted by the Kazakh law enforcement, the violent coup attempt was orchestrated with the involvement of high-ranking officials and members of organized crime groups. The latter aggressively targeted state institutions in



Almaty Akimat Building. Via [Wikimedia](#).

Almaty, the country's largest city. By January 5, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev appealed to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to provide peacekeeping forces to help stabilize the situation. They did so in short order, which enabled Kazakh law enforcement to defeat the armed groups and prevent further bloodshed.

Outside Kazakhstan, this turn of events was viewed as an ominous sign. The deployment of Russian-led peacekeeping forces has historically not proven to lead to positive results, as evidenced by the quip that it usually leads to Russia "keeping the pieces."<sup>1</sup> The move was interpreted as a step toward a Russian assertion of influence over Kazakhstan, and as a transformation of Kazakhstan in a more repressive direction.<sup>2</sup> Western observers in particular viewed events in Kazakhstan overwhelmingly through the lens of the situation in Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, these fears have not panned out. In fact, the opposite happened. The Russian-led CSTO troops left Kazakhstan within two weeks without firing a single shot.

Rather than shelving his reform agenda, President Tokayev doubled down on it, which resulted in a gradual purge of older elements within the state institutions. And Kazakhstan, at great cost to its relations with Moscow, refused to endorse Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

### The January Events

A hike in the price of natural gas entered into force on January 1, and led to popular demonstrations that started on January 2 in western Kazakhstan. These 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.

Almaty saw the largest protests since the anti-Soviet protests in 1986. The protests began peacefully and appear to have been started by disparate groups including the *Oyan Qazaqstan* grouping, formed in 2019, as well as nationalist

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<sup>1</sup> Uwe Halbach, "The Regional Dimension: Georgia and the Southern Caucasus after the War," in Hans-Henning Schröder, ed., *The Caucasus Crisis: International Perceptions and Policy Implications for Germany and Europe*, Berlin: SWP Research Paper, No. 9, 2008, p. 21; Diana Janse, "Georgia and the Russian Aggression," SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security in Eastern Europe, no. 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> See eg headlines in major newspapers, "Amid Crisis, Kazakhstan's Leader Embraces Russia," *New York Times*, January 8, 2022 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/europe/kazakhstan-russia.html>); "Kazakhstan Crisis Shows That Russia Still

Trumps China's Power in Central Asia," *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2022. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/kazakhstan-crisis-shows-that-russia-still-trumps-chinas-power-in-central-asia-11641842588>)

<sup>3</sup> See, for example Lena Surzhko Haned, "In Kazakhstan, Russia follows a playbook it developed in Ukraine," *The Conversation*, January 7, 2022. (<https://theconversation.com/in-kazakhstan-russia-follows-a-playbook-it-developed-in-ukraine-174505>) Slawomir Sierakowski, "What Kazakhstan Means for Ukraine," *DGAP*, January 13, 2022. (<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/what-kazakhstan-means-ukraine>)

groups.<sup>4</sup> Protesters tended to be males in their twenties to forties, with considerable representation of unemployed youth, migrants from other areas of Kazakhstan, and a sprinkling of the urban middle class.<sup>5</sup> As protests got larger, they were met with tear gas and stun grenades. Clashes emerged between police and protesters. Crowds stormed the offices of the mayor's office and the presidential residence in the city. Significantly, police did not receive backup, and were subsequently reported to retreat.

President Tokayev ordered a nationwide state of emergency from 01:30 AM the same night. Meanwhile, the composition of the protests appeared to change: according to eyewitnesses, new groups of people joined the protests,<sup>6</sup> including "hundreds of rough-looking aggressive men,"<sup>7</sup> many of whom were armed. Protests in Almaty grew increasingly violent on January 5, as people appearing to belong to criminal gangs and radical religious groups joined the protests. These new, more violent protesters took the lead in attacking and setting

on fire government offices. They also attacked police and took over a local National Security Committee (NSC) building, which was "left virtually unguarded," and looted the weapons stored in it.<sup>8</sup> They seized Almaty airport, where airport security detachments reportedly left the building shortly before armed men arrived to take control.<sup>9</sup> Widespread looting followed and hundreds of law enforcement officers were wounded, and up to 18 killed.<sup>10</sup> Large numbers of protesters were killed and wounded.

By early afternoon of January 5, President Tokayev spoke on national television to say that authorities would respond to violence with "maximum toughness." He also announced that Nursultan Nazarbayev, the former President of Kazakhstan was no longer the Chairman of the National Security Council, and that he had himself taken that position.<sup>11</sup> By evening, Russian and Kazakh news agencies reported that the Collective Security Treaty Organization approved a request from Kazakhstan to send "peacekeeping forces for a

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<sup>4</sup> 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/>.)

<sup>5</sup> Mazorenko, "On the Ground in Kazakhstan's Protests: What Really Happened?"

<sup>6</sup> 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-kazhstane-revoljucija-bunt-ili-gosperevorot/a-60401290>)

<sup>7</sup> Nargis Kassenova on Twitter January 7, 2022.

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

<sup>8</sup> Tadeusz Giczan, "Kazakhstan: a Hijacked Protest," January 14, 2022. (<http://waidelotte.org/kazakhstan-a-hijacked-protest/>.)

<sup>9</sup> Weisskopf, "Протесты и Беспорядки в Казахстане: Революция, Бунт Или Госпереворот?" [Protests and Unrest in Kazakhstan: Revolution, Riot or State Coup?"]

<sup>10</sup> "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>)

<sup>11</sup> Disclose.tv on Twitter, January 5, 2022. (<https://twitter.com/disclosetv/status/1478715166313398275/photo/1>)

limited period of time.”<sup>12</sup> Authorities temporarily lifted a nationwide internet blackout for a televised announcement to this effect.<sup>13</sup> In addition, that evening, news reports emerged that Karim Massimov had been removed from the position as Head of the National Security Committee. Violence in Almaty continued as armed protesters exchanged fire with riot police being deployed in the city.

The CSTO contingent of 2000 people was deployed in Kazakhstan in the morning of January 6, tasked with guarding key infrastructure and government facilities. Russian troops arrived by air, followed by forces from Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. President Tokayev stated in a televised address that day that the “constitutional order has largely been restored in all regions of the country.” He also announced that he had ordered Kazakh troops to shoot at armed attackers without warning, describing them as “bandits and terrorists.” Peaceful protests continued in Zhanaozen and Aktau.<sup>14</sup> However, in the city of Taldykorgan, 20 protesters dressed in camouflage uniforms

attacked a pre-trial detention center but were repelled.

Well-known organized crime figure Arman Dzhumageldiyev was arrested in Almaty and accused of being among the leaders of the violence.<sup>15</sup> There were numerous media reports with allegations of who was involved in organizing the riots. Media reports emerged that Samat Abish, nephew of former President Nazarbayev and First Deputy Head of the NSC, had been detained in Almaty. His dismissal was made official on January 17, but he remained at large.<sup>16</sup> Various media sources spoke in more detail of allegations involving Abish and his brother Kairat Satybaldy, connecting them to radical religious movements as well as organized criminal groups supposedly under their informal command.<sup>17</sup>

### Aftermath and Remaining Questions

In the aftermath of the January violence, differing accounts have emerged to explain exactly what happened. Some of these can be classified as outlandish – such as the theory that President Tokayev orchestrated the violence in order to be able to conduct a “coup”

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<sup>12</sup> Sergei Sumlenny on Twitter, January 5, 2022.

(<https://twitter.com/sumlenny/status/1478807667560828935/photo/1>)

<sup>13</sup> Natalia Krapiva, “Timeline: Kazakhstan Internet Shut-downs and Protests.” *Accessnow*, 12 Jan. 2022.

(<https://www.accessnow.org/kazakhstan-internet-shut-downs-protests-almaty-timeline-whats-happening/>)

<sup>14</sup> 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/>)

<sup>15</sup> 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>)

to rid the government of the influence of the old guard. Aside from lacking evidence, this theory contrasts with the emphasis by Tokayev during his entire career of treasuring Kazakhstan's independence and international image.

As for the government of Kazakhstan, it first argued that the mostly peaceful protests were hijacked by terrorists, but later the government nuanced this narrative to name a combination of religious extremists and criminal groups that sought to take power in the country. Kazakh law enforcement, following the investigation into the January events, explained that organized criminal groups hijacked peaceful protests as an attempt at a coup d'état. According to their findings, these protests were co-opted by organized criminal groups with the intent of destabilizing the country. This co-option was characterized by a marked shift from initial peaceful demonstrations to widespread violence and chaos, pointing towards a well-orchestrated plan executed with precision. Further investigations revealed a blend of internal and external elements in the orchestration of this unrest. Law enforcement officials noted the involvement of both local and foreign instigators, indicating a complex network that sought to exploit the protests for ulterior motives. Among the alleged perpetrators were high-ranking officials and members of organized crime groups, suggesting a collusion that transcended typical criminal activities. This revelation pointed towards an attempt to undermine the state's stability. The authorities also emphasized the

sophisticated use of technology and social media by the perpetrators to organize, mobilize, and execute their plans. This modern approach to orchestrating unrest, the authorities alleged, demonstrated a high level of planning and coordination among the various groups involved. Law enforcement agencies underscored the challenge this posed, as it required a nuanced and technologically adept response to counter the spread of misinformation and to track down the orchestrators. In response to these events, Kazakh law enforcement agencies undertook a series of measures aimed at restoring order and holding those responsible accountable. These measures included widespread investigations, arrests, and trials of suspected individuals involved in orchestrating the violence. The government also initiated reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of the protests, such as economic grievances, while strengthening the legal and institutional framework to prevent such events in the future.

Following the investigation into the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, former National Security Committee Chair Karim Massimov and his deputies were convicted on several charges. Massimov was sentenced to 18 years in prison on charges of high treason, abuse of power, and actions aimed at violently seizing power. The trial was classified and conducted behind closed doors. Alongside Massimov, his former deputies, Anuar Sadykulov and Daulet Yergozhin, were also convicted. Sadykulov received a 16-year sentence, and Yergozhin was sentenced to 15 years for their roles in the

events. Additionally, another former NSC Deputy Chair, Marat Osipov, was sentenced to three years in prison.

By contrast, an opposing narrative has been put forward by certain activist groups, which lay the blame for the events on the government. This narrative points to the lack of evidence for an invasion of thousands of foreign extremists. It also alleges that excessive force was used by law enforcement, particularly on January 4-5 in Almaty. It points to the classified nature of the most important trials against alleged masterminds of the events, most notably those of former NSC Head Karim Massimov and his deputies, as putting into question the government's good faith. In addition, many critics point to a number of individuals that appear to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and were subjected to harm by police or who disappeared. Even these critics, however, acknowledge the sudden retreat of security forces from key state property both in Almaty and other cities, which made the seizure of such property all the easier for the rioters.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan and their aftermath, it is crucial to analyze both the government's public statements and the actions they undertook in response to the crisis. The government's initial narrative primarily focused on the involvement of unidentified radicals and extremists in the unrest. However, a closer look at the immediate decisions taken

by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev reveals a more complex picture.

One of the most significant actions taken by President Tokayev was the dismissal of Nursultan Nazarbayev from his influential position as the lifetime chair of the National Security Council. This move was a clear departure from the previous power structure and signaled a significant shift in the political landscape of Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev had been a dominant figure in Kazakh politics, serving as the first President of Kazakhstan from its independence until 2019, and continuing to wield considerable influence even after stepping down from the presidency.

The arrest of Karim Massimov, a close confidant of Nazarbayev, along with several of his deputies, further underscored the complexity of the situation. Massimov was seen as a key figure within Nazarbayev's inner circle. His arrest, therefore, foreshadowed distancing of President Tokayev's administration from the old guard associated with Nazarbayev.

In this regard, in the weeks that followed the January events, changes were also made to the country's security apparatus. On January 18, Nursultan Nazarbayev appeared publicly in a video statement to express full support for President Tokayev. The same day, Samat Abish, the NSC's first deputy chairman and a nephew of Nazarbayev's, was formally relieved of his duties. Defense Minister Murat Bektanov was also relieved of duties on January 19, the day that the last CSTO troops

left Kazakhstan. Mr. Abish was initially referred to as a “person of interest” in the investigation of the January events but came to be treated as a suspect only in September 2023.<sup>18</sup> His brother Kairat Satybaldy was detained in March 2023. The authorities said at the time they are investigating him over possible involvement in “crimes undermining the security of the state.” The stated reason for his arrest, however, and subsequent conviction is embezzlement at the expense of Kazakhtelecom, the state-controlled telecoms operator.<sup>19</sup>

These actions suggest that the January events were not only about addressing the immediate unrest but also about navigating the complexities of power transitions and internal political dynamics in Kazakhstan. The removal of Nazarbayev from the National Security Council and the arrest of Massimov and his deputies indicated a realignment of power structures within the country. In this context, it's important to consider President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's announcement of the “New Kazakhstan” initiative. This initiative represented a significant step towards political reform and transformation in the country. “New Kazakhstan” was introduced as a concept aimed at addressing some of the deep-rooted issues that led to the January events, signifying a commitment to progressive

change and modernization. In essence, while the January 2022 events were a catalyst for immediate action, they also opened the door for broader, more long-term reforms aimed at reshaping Kazakhstan's political landscape and addressing the underlying causes of discontent among its population.

Once it became clear that the coup attempt failed, the President's main priority was to return the country to normality and consolidate control over the state – and in particular over the security services. Recognizing the pivotal role of the security services in maintaining state stability, President Tokayev initiated a comprehensive restructuring of these agencies. This move was aimed at ensuring their effectiveness in upholding national security. The restructuring included changes in leadership, operational protocols, and their overall mandate to prevent any future threats to state stability.

What, then, of the connection between the security services that were in charge prior to the January events and the alleged criminals and extremists? The connection between criminal and religious radical milieus is a well-known one that scholars of Islamist mobilization in Central Asia can trace back to the late Soviet era. As scholar Vitaly Naumkin has noted,

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<sup>18</sup> Chris Rickleton, “Will A Nazarbaev Relative Stand Trial Over Kazakhstan's 'Bloody January'?” *RFE/RL*, September 26, 2023. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-nazarbaev-trials-january-2002/32609855.html>)

<sup>19</sup> Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan: Net Tightens around Nazarbayev Clan as Nephew Arrested.” *Eurasianet*, March 13, 2022. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-net-tightens-around-nazarbayev-clan-as-nephew-arrested>)

organized crime and political extremism are essential components of the activities of militant Islamists in the region. Income from drug trafficking, hostage taking, looting, and so on helps fund extremist groups. Extremism in turn creates more favorable conditions for criminal groups because it destabilizes society and exerts pressure on governments.<sup>20</sup>

This relationship, termed the “crime-terror nexus,”<sup>21</sup> is complemented by another: the crime-state nexus, in which corrupt elements in the security sector assert influence over organized criminal groups, which are used to in turn assert control over various economic assets, and as manpower to intimidate contenders for power.<sup>22</sup> In the worst case, connections exist between extremist, criminal and state actors – generating a situation with serious consequences for political stability and development.

State Counselor Erlan Karin in January 2023 outlined the perhaps most concise official explanation for the January tragedy: “reactionary forces took advantage of initially peaceful protests,” and their main goal was to “reverse the ongoing reforms and maintain the old order.”<sup>23</sup> This explanation suggests that the

unrest was not merely a spontaneous outburst of public discontent but was manipulated by elements resistant to change within the country. The characterization of these elements as “reactionary forces” implies that certain groups or individuals were actively working against the government's reform agenda. These forces, as per this narrative, sought to exploit the public's grievances – initially triggered by issues such as fuel price hikes – to instigate broader unrest. The goal, as outlined by Karin, was to derail the process of modernization and reform that the government had been pursuing and to preserve the status quo that favored them.

This interpretation aligns with President Tokayev's actions following the unrest, particularly his moves to consolidate control over the government and the security services. By reasserting his authority and initiating reforms, Tokayev appeared to be directly challenging the forces that sought to maintain the old order.

In this context, the arrest and conviction of Karim Massimov, the former head of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee,

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<sup>20</sup> 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](https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/shared/2003_06-naum.pdf))

<sup>21</sup> Tamara Makarenko, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism,” *Global Crime*, vo. 6 no. 1, 2004, 129-145.

<sup>22</sup> For a broader discussion of the link between state institutions and organized crime in Central Asia focusing on

weaker states in the region, see Svante E. Cornell, “The Narcotics Threat in Greater Central Asia: From Crime-Terror Nexus to State Infiltration?” *China and Eurasia Quarterly*, vol. 4 no. 1, 2006, pp. 37–67. ([https://isdpc.eu/content/uploads/publications/2006\\_cornell\\_the-narcotics-threat-in-greater-central-asia.pdf](https://isdpc.eu/content/uploads/publications/2006_cornell_the-narcotics-threat-in-greater-central-asia.pdf))

<sup>23</sup> Assel Satubaldina, “One Year On from the January Tragedy in Kazakhstan,” *Astana Times*, January 6, 2023. (<https://astanatimes.com/2023/01/one-year-on-from-the-january-tragedy-in-kazakhstan/>)



and his associates can be seen as a critical aspect of this narrative. His arrest and the charges against him suggest that he was perceived as a key player among the reactionary forces that Karin referred to.

Outside of Kazakhstan, in particular, the case of Karim Massimov has garnered considerable attention, as a result of allegations that he has been held in solitary confinement with a rapidly deteriorating health condition. The fact that detailed evidence for Mr. Massimov's guilt has not been publicly presented has been seized upon by critics of the Kazakh government and human rights organizations to accuse the government of Kazakhstan of arbitrary detention and political retribution.<sup>24</sup> Following Massimov's sentencing, the new Deputy Head of the KNB did not provide prospects that the full story would be shared with the population. Marat Kolkobayev explained that "the case is top secret, I think there will be no complete information."<sup>25</sup>

The transformation of political structures in Kazakhstan led to the introduction of the "New Kazakhstan" initiative, which later became "Just and Fair Kazakhstan." It became a pivotal moment in Kazakhstan's political evolution, marking a departure from the old power

dynamics. This process is outlined in the next section.

### **Doubling Down on Reforms**

Following the tragic events of January 2022, President Tokayev doubled down on his reform agenda and launched a further package of reforms in March 2022 that he claimed would lay the ground for a "New Kazakhstan."<sup>26</sup> The reform agenda was put to a referendum in June that year. These reforms were, among other, intended to change Kazakhstan's super-presidential system of government, including by strengthening the powers of parliament. They also revised the electoral system to open up for greater popular participation in politics and reform the judiciary system to make it more accessible to the population.

A major reform was the introduction in November 2022 of a Constitutional Court, to which individual citizens have the right to appeal directly. Of President Tokayev's four nominees to the court, two came from a non-traditional background – individuals from civil society that do not have a past in official state bodies but in academia, and moreover both have extensive publications in Western

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<sup>24</sup> See eg. Letter of the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Alice Jill Edwards, April 13, 2023. (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27996>)

<sup>25</sup> "Did Samat Abish get out of the way? And how will the case of Karim Massimov be declassified?" KazTag, May 16,

2023. (<https://kaztag.kz/en/news/did-samat-abish-get-out-of-the-way-and-how-will-the-case-of-karim-massimov-be-declassified>)

<sup>26</sup> See Svante E. Cornell and Albert Barro, "Kazakhstan's June Referendum: Accelerating Reform," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 31, 2022. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13720>)

academic and policy journals.<sup>27</sup> In its first year in office the Court reviewed a considerably higher number of cases than the previous Constitutional Council had done over a similar time period.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, a series of amendments were signed into law.<sup>29</sup> These sought to strengthen the powers of parliament as opposed to the presidency, and strengthen regional institutions versus central state powers. For example, the parliament's powers to audit the executive bodies were increased, while the president's prerogative to dismiss provincial governors was limited.

Two particular facets of electoral reform in Kazakhstan have been implemented and begun to change the political landscape in the country. The first is the election of rural *akims* (mayors) and the second is the shift in parliamentary elections. The shifts at the local and regional level are the most significant. Up until recently, the system of local government in Kazakhstan was highly centralized, with power in district and rural areas being an extension of the executive system.<sup>30</sup> After President Tokayev acknowledged the strong

popular support for rural *akims* to be elected rather than appointed, gradually the government has rolled out reforms to shift to elected *akims*. 1,668 *akims* of villages, settlements, rural districts, and towns of district significance had been elected by August 2023. 57 percent were new to the position, with an average age of 45 years – indicating a rejuvenation of local government.<sup>31</sup> In his September 2023 address to the nation, Tokayev announced that this reform will be expanded to heads of districts and cities of regional significance. This suggests the government is feeling emboldened to expand rather than contract the experiment with direct elections to regional executive bodies.

The elections of rural *akims* seemed to generate significant attention within the society. A diverse group of candidates emerged from distinct professional spheres, including economists, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and agriculturalists.

Kazakhstan's March 2023 parliamentary elections took place under a new electoral system, where 70 percent of seats were

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<sup>27</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Four Years On: An Update on Kazakhstan's Reforms," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 24, 2023. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13771>)

<sup>28</sup> Elvira Azimova, "Kazakhstan's Transformation Through Political Reforms and Constitutional Amendments," *Asia Law Portal*, August 24, 2023. (<https://asialawportal.com/kazakhstans-transformation-through-political-reforms-and-constitutional-amendments/>)

<sup>29</sup> Svante E. Cornell and Albert Barro, "Kazakhstan's June Referendum: Accelerating Reform," *Central Asia-Caucasus*

*Analyst*, May 31, 2022. (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/220531-FT-Kazreferendum.pdf>)

<sup>30</sup> Malika Toqmadi, "Kazakhstan," in Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2021*. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/nations-transit/2021>)

<sup>31</sup> "Seven Regions of Kazakhstan Elect 17 Rural Mayors," *Astana Times*, August 15, 2023. (<https://astanatimes.com/2023/08/seven-regions-of-kazakhstan-elect-17-rural-mayors/>)

allocated on the basis of proportional party lists, and the remainder in single-member districts. The threshold to parliament had been reduced to 5 percent instead of 7 percent. A larger number of political parties contested the election and gained representation in parliament. Five parties gained representation, winning between five and eleven percent of the vote, while the ruling Amanat Party received 54 percent (but also swept overwhelming majority of single-member constituencies, thus ending up with a comfortable majority).

In February 2022, the government adopted a new anti-corruption policy and announced measurable targets to reach by 2026, which, significantly, depend on the scoring of international governmental and non-governmental entities. For example, Kazakhstan aims to obtain 47 points on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (the 2022 score was 36 points.) It seeks to reach the 74<sup>th</sup> percentile on the World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index (the score for 2022 was 58.) More ambitious, perhaps, is the aim to reach the 57<sup>th</sup> percentile in terms of the Bank's Voice and Accountability index, where Kazakhstan presently ranks at the 19<sup>th</sup> percentile.<sup>32</sup>

The more specific initiative taken to address corruption in the aftermath of January 2022 has been efforts to recover assets illegally acquired and invested abroad. This is in great part a response to the anger in society at the massive resources that small elements of the elite appropriated since independence and stashed away abroad. In recovering stolen assets, Kazakhstan has partnered with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, as well as the World Bank's Stolen Assets Recovery Initiative. These institutions both helped Kazakhstan with best practices and facilitated contacts with authorities in offshore jurisdictions.<sup>33</sup> In May 2023, the government announced the creation of a special committee under the prosecutor general to deal with asset recovery, and in July the president signed a specific law "On the return of illegally acquired assets to the state." This legislation targets individuals with assets over approximately \$100 million, and facilitates the channeling of recovered assets to a Special State Fund earmarked for the financing of socio-economic projects such as schools and hospitals.

### Foreign Policy

The January 2022 CSTO intervention led to widespread fears that Russian influence would rise in Kazakhstan, and that the country would

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<sup>32</sup> "Anti-Corruption Agency Implements Crucial Measures to Reduce Corruption Risks, Return Illegally Withdrawn Assets," *Astana Times*, October 19, 2022. (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/10/anti-corruption-agency-implements-crucial-measures-to-reduce-corruption-risks-return-illegally-withdrawn-assets/>)

<sup>33</sup> Baurzhan Kurmanov, "Stolen Asset Recovery: Experience of Kazakhstan," UNODC Expert Meeting on asset return, Nairobi, 28-29 November 2022. ([https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/NairobiEGM2022/Session\\_VI\\_-\\_Baurzhan\\_Kurmanov.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/NairobiEGM2022/Session_VI_-_Baurzhan_Kurmanov.pdf))

now effectively toe the Russian line in international affairs. Indeed, parallels were drawn to how Belarus had effectively lost much of its foreign policy autonomy and found itself in Russia's orbit following the August 2020 disputed election in that country. And there is substantial evidence that leaders in Russia itself expected Kazakhstan's leadership to show gratitude by supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. However, nothing of the sort happened. If anything, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated a rift between Kazakhstan and Russia.

While Astana has been careful to maintain cordial relations with Moscow, Kazakhstan has refused to vote with Russia in international bodies, has committed to abiding by the Western sanctions regime on Russia, and has delivered humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Not staying at that, President Tokayev remains the sole leader of a post-Soviet state to publicly explain to Vladimir Putin his opposition to the Russian policy, explaining that his country will not recognize what it considers to be "quasi-state" entities in eastern Ukraine.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, if Russia expected the January 2022 events to make Kazakhstan's leadership more subservient to Moscow, the exact opposite

dynamic seems to have occurred. Compared to his predecessor, it is clear that President Tokayev is more attuned to the opinions in Kazakh society. Kazakh society, in turn, has changed a lot in thirty years. The most resounding change is the demographic shift – in 1989, 38 percent of Kazakhstan's population consisted of ethnic Russians, whereas the figure today is 15 percent. Meanwhile, a young post-Soviet generation of lower- and middle-class Kazakhs has emerged that is much more nationalist than previous generations. There has also been a rediscovery of Kazakh history, including into the politically induced famines of the 1930s which contributes to shifting opinions of Russia among segments of Kazakh society.<sup>35</sup> Steps such as the opening of Soviet KGB archives and the rehabilitation of victims of Communist repression are part of the changing view of history in the country.<sup>36</sup>

It should be emphasized that President Tokayev's reforms are gradually opening up for the expression of society's views, a process that in any case is taking place as a result of technological innovations that are virtually impossible to hinder. As a result, particularly given the reaction in Kazakh society to the CSTO intervention, it was in fact imperative for

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<sup>34</sup> "Kazakhstan Does Not Recognize Quasi-State Entities – President Tokayev," *inform.kz*, June 18, 2022. ([https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-does-not-recognize-quasi-state-entities-president-tokayev\\_a3945894](https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-does-not-recognize-quasi-state-entities-president-tokayev_a3945894))

<sup>35</sup> Rudolf A. Mark, "The Famine in Kazakhstan: Historical Reappraisals," *Osteuropa*, vol. 54 no. 12, 2004, pp. 112-130. For an example of recent Kazakh research, see K.A. Yensenov et. al., "History of Famine in Kazakhstan

(1931-1933)", *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology*, vol. 17 no. 6, 2020, 622 - 633.

<sup>36</sup> Baktygul Chynybaeva, "Kazakhstan Opens Secret KGB Archives Amid Moves Toward Decolonization In Central Asia," *RFE/RL*, November 12, 2023. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-opens-kgb-archives-russian-criticism/32681381.html>)

President Tokayev, following the January events, to assert his independence in foreign policy affairs in order to safeguard his credibility in Kazakh society. In short, if forced to choose between Russian positions and the priorities in Kazakh society, there should be no doubt that President Tokayev will choose the latter.

Russia, in turn, appears to have chosen to use the stick rather than the carrot, which further exacerbated the situation. Not only did Russian state media go on a rampage against Kazakhstan for refusing to endorse the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow also on several occasions closed the pipeline that exports most of Kazakhstan's oil through Russian Black Sea ports. The trumped-up reasons cited for this ranged from alleged "environmental violations," alleged storm damage in the port of Novorossiysk, and World War Two-era mines allegedly discovered in the port. Such actions had profoundly counter-productive effects, leading to the alienation of segments of Kazakhstan's society that had otherwise been positively disposed towards Russia. A May 2023 poll indicated that almost a third of respondents' views of Russia had worsened as a result of the Ukraine war, while less than 5 percent reported their views of Russia had improved. While most Kazakhs are neutral

toward the war, only 13 percent support Russia, while over 21 percent support Ukraine.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's leadership has sought to expand relations with China, Türkiye, Gulf states, the EU and the United States. It has also continued to support the strengthening of regional cooperation among Central Asian states. Concretely, President Tokayev ordered his government to work to diversify Kazakhstan's transport routes to reach world markets following Russia's intermittent closure of the CPC pipeline carrying Kazakhstan's oil to international markets.<sup>38</sup> In sum, Kazakhstan has moved to further assert its independence since the tragic events of January 2022.

## Conclusions

The tragic events that have come to be known as "January events" in Kazakhstan have made an indelible mark on the country's modern history. There are a number of lessons to be derived from this that have broader significance beyond Kazakhstan's borders.

First, this was a crisis that took everyone by surprise, but in retrospect perhaps it should not have. While the specific developments in January 2022 could perhaps not have been foreseen, the existence of different power

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<sup>37</sup> "Kazakhs increasingly wary of Russia's belligerence, poll shows," Reuters, May 17, 2023. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/kazakhs-increasingly-wary-russias-belligerence-poll-2023-05-17>)

<sup>38</sup> Svante E. Cornell and Brenda Shaffer, "A New Spring for Caspian Transit and Trade," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 17, 2023. (<https://cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13770-a-new-spring-for-caspian-transit-and-trade.html>)

centers in the country for several years was a cause for concern.

Kazakhstan from 2019 to 2022 existed in a form of limbo, with two rivaling centers of formal authority, but where informal authority was largely understood to rest with the entourage of former President Nazarbayev. But on January 5, 2022, President Tokayev's resolve to assert authority served as an indicator that both domestically and internationally, the legitimate President of the country must also assert authority over informal power-brokers. The tug-of-war between informal and formal power-brokers is a phenomenon well-known across the young states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, but developments in Kazakhstan indicate that the balance by necessity will shift in the direction of formal institutions of power. Simply put, the January crisis is a clear indication of the dangers of allowing informal

power-brokers to continue to resist, passively or actively, the gradual institutionalization of power in the hands of the formal political authority.

As we pass the two-year mark following the "January events", Kazakhstan has clearly returned to stability and continued to embark on a path of reform. But the country continues to be exposed to geopolitical and economic threats, not least stemming from its dependence on Russia for the export of its most valuable commodities. For the reform agenda to continue and for Kazakhstan to gradually diversify its economic links to the outside world, Kazakhstan and its neighbors will need the active support of its partners abroad.

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