

An incident on the Kazakh-Chinese border

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On 31 May, the Kazakh government announced that the charred bodies of fourteen soldiers had been found in a burnt watchtower in the mountains close to the Kazakh-Chinese border. The only surviving soldier (a 19 year old ethnic Russian) was found several days later next to the watchtower, suffering from shock. The government's first reaction was to brand this incident a terrorist attack (this was the opinion of President Nursultan Nazarbayev the day after the bodies were found). However, the final official interpretation is murder committed by the Russian soldier whilst in a state of a 'mental blackout'. The case is mysterious, and it is difficult to hat exactly happened. The version presented by the government (the most convenient politically) is being treated sceptically even in Kazakhstan. It may even be said that a campaign in defence of the soldier has unfolded; relatives of some of the victims do not believe that he is guilty, and a TV newsreader, who was working for a popular private television station with nation-wide coverage, quit his job declaring that he was unwilling to take part in government propaganda.

Commentary

- Regardless of what happened on the border, this incident is unprecedented. If this was an organised terrorist attack (which cannot be ruled out; the details of the incident which have been revealed suggest some similarity to attacks launched by terrorists trained in Pakistan's Waziristan), this poses an immense challenge to Kazakhstan's security. In turn, if this was an attack by a lunatic, this incident adversely affects the image of the security structures. In any case, what happened on the border is certainly making China anxious, because border security is a top priority issue for it in the context of a possible destabilisation of the situation in Xinjiang (the problem of Uyghur separatism). China is also interested in stability in Kazakhstan itself, since this country is its most important economic partner in Central Asia, and co-operation with it is also expected to stabilise Xinjiang.
- The developments on the border are also disturbing since they fit in with the entire sequence of armed incidents in which people were killed that have taken place over the past year in Kazakhstan (including the terrorist attacks in Atyrau in October last year, the liquidation of terrorist groups near Almaty, the violent suppression of the strikes in Zhanaozen in December last year, and the accusations of the political opposition being accused of terrorism in March this year); all this is happening against a background of growing social tension. The cases mentioned above have called the efficiency of the

agencies in charge of state security into question, while the pressure the public is putting on the apparatus in charge of security and the government (criticism of police activity unprecedented so far in Kazakhstan) and the unclear expectations from the ruling class with regard to the law enforcement agencies (one expression of which were the prison sentences imposed in May this year on some of the policemen engaged in suppressing the protests in Zhanaozen for 'abuse of power') all give rise to questions about the level of the morale in the security structures.

- The atmosphere of the struggle against terrorism – which had also been used in internal political rivalry – has been intensifying in Kazakhstan over the past few months. The continuation of existing social tension in the country, combined with the incompetence of the government demonstrated recently, will pose a threat to stability of Kazakhstan. Order and security for citizens has so far formed the main pillar on which the respect for the president and the ruling class was based. These values were also the foundations of the economic successes and stability seen in the country so far.