

Western Kazakhstan – the costs of economic success

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A series of events in western Kazakhstan over recent months has shown a significant increase in social tensions and the growing threat to this region's stability. A strike by strategic oil sector employees, the biggest of its kind since 1991, has been going on in Mangistau since May; as a consequence, the state holding company KazMunaiGaz forecasts an annual decline in oil production of 8.4%. Meanwhile, a number of incidents have taken place in the Atyrau and Aktobe regions, attributed to radical Islamic groupings which had not previously been active in Kazakhstan; these acts include a suicide attack on security headquarters in Aktobe in May, the murder of two policemen in the western part of the region in July, and two explosions in Atyrau on 31 October. Responsibility for the explosions in Atyrau (including one in the vicinity of the regional administration building, albeit without casualties) was claimed by a little-known Islamic organisation called the Soldiers of the Caliphate.

Western Kazakhstan (735,000 km², population 1.66 million), which is over a thousand kilometres from the political centre of the country, is the region where the bulk of the oil and gas industry is concentrated – the industry which has been driving economic development throughout the country. At the same time, due to the region's dynamic – albeit uneven – economic development and the mass influx of *oralmandar* (ethnic Kazakhs from other former Soviet republics and China, Mongolia, and Afghanistan), it is the part of the country which has seen the biggest social changes over the last two decades.

Commentary

- Dynamic economic development, awakened material aspirations (the highest salaries in the country are paid there) and the alienation of the immigrant population all make western Kazakhstan the region most susceptible to social tensions and the development of radical organisations. Central government control over the region is made more difficult by distance and the state of the transport infrastructure.
- Both the mass strikes and the problem of Islamic extremism are new phenomena for the government, and Astana cannot cope with them. The measures taken (massive layoffs, arresting the strikers and their supporters, an information blockade, tightening up religious legislation) have proved to be ineffective.

- The prolonged strikes, and the emergence of the phenomenon of religious extremism – previously unknown in Kazakhstan, although present in other countries in the region – could bring measurable financial losses to the country (due to the strike) and undermine the country's carefully constructed image as a place free of internal tensions and any risk of destabilisation. Events in the western part of the country also pose an internal political problem: they call the effectiveness of the current social policy into question, and could be exploited by interest groups within the ruling elite, as they compete for influence and the future inheritance of President Nazarbayev.