

## Tokayev's *Perestroika*. Kazakhstan in the face of internal and external challenges

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On 5 June Kazakhstan held a constitutional referendum. Almost 80% of the voters (on a turnout of 68%) supported the adoption of a package of amendments that covered more than a third of the articles of the Basic Law (a total of 56 amendments were introduced). The declared goal of these reforms is to move the country from a 'super-presidential' system to a presidential republic in which the dominant position of the head of state is curbed by a strong parliament. The aim is to improve the management of the country and, in the strategic perspective, to strengthen Kazakh statehood. The fact that a new constitution was not adopted, but the existing one was modified, indicates that despite the wide range of changes, the intention of its creator – President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – is not to build a new system, but to try to rebuild the existing one – a form of '*perestroika*'.

The impetus for the reform was the deep crisis – the most serious in the history of independent Kazakhstan – which occurred at the beginning of 2022. Public protests, which turned into large-scale riots, revealed the weakness of state structures; they were shown to be unable to channel the tensions within the elites or counteract the strength of the informal systems which had paralysed the decision-making processes, and also demonstrated the destructive potential of the *de facto* dual power: the powers of the head of state were limited by the prerogatives of the former – 'first' – president Nursultan Nazarbayev, which gave him, and in practice his entourage, a mandate to influence current politics. Tokayev managed to stabilise the situation with the help of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) – which sent a military contingent – and by purging the most disloyal of the cadres. As a consequence, he managed to limit the influence of the group most closely associated with the former head of state (which in fact constituted a competitive centre of power) and strengthened his own position. To prevent similar crises in the future, he developed a package of constitutional reforms, the assumptions of which he presented in mid-March. The war in Ukraine became an important context for its introduction. Admittedly Kazakhstan is linked to Russia by ties of alliance, but it does not want to get involved in the conflict and has declared its support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. In this respect, the formal liquidation of the 'dual power' (e.g. by removing references to the first president from the Basic Law) may make it more difficult for Moscow to play on tensions within Kazakhstan.



## Four days that shocked the country

The crisis began with unrest triggered by an increase in LPG prices of almost 100%. The first protests took place on 2 January this year in Zhanaozen, in the west of the country. Despite their initially spontaneous and limited nature, they revealed the deep and multi-level nature of the social, economic and political problems that Kazakhstan was facing. The price rises were only a catalyst for the explosion of many years of growing discontent, the main causes of which were the corruption, lawlessness and incompetence of officials, the lack of prospects for people from outside the elite, and finally a low standard of living, compared to the aspirations which had been aroused. The opposition movement did not bring forth any obvious leaders; but apart from the withdrawal of the price increases, the demonstrators also demanded the resignation of the government – including the former president Nazarbayev, who personifies the entire governing system and its pathologies. After leaving office in March 2019, Nazarbayev retained the post of head of the Security Council, among other titles; in the opinion of the demonstrators, it was he – having ruled the country for three decades, and then retained a number of political prerogatives – who was to a great extent responsible for the current situation.<sup>1</sup>

In the days that followed, the protests spread across the country and turned violent (clashes with the police took place, public administration buildings were stormed,

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shopping centres were looted). It remained unclear what role the National Security Committee (NSC) played in these incidents. This body was controlled by people who were very closely related (literally, in some cases) to the former president. This group, which had been highly autonomous within the ruling system, had a particularly substantial influence; it seems that they even harboured ambitions to completely take over Nazarbayev’s political legacy. According to one version of the events, which is difficult to confirm but still credible, in many cases NSC officers remained passive at the very least. The most likely intention was to show that the present rulers were failing to cope with the situation, thus strengthening the position of the group in question, and then – perhaps – allowing them to take complete control of the state. Tokayev was thus faced with the need to calm down the radicalising citizens on the one hand, and to personally confront part of the old regime on the other.<sup>2</sup>

President Tokayev’s actions went along three lines. First, he complied with the demands of the protesters by ordering a revision of LPG prices (they were frozen), sacking the government and depriving Nazarbayev of the chairmanship of the Security Council.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, he started the process of replacing senior staff at the NSC. Thirdly, not trusting his own law enforcement structures, he asked for help from the CSTO, which decided to carry out a so-called ‘anti-terrorist operation’.<sup>4</sup> The first of its troops (in which Russians clearly predominated) arrived in Kazakhstan on 6 January, which calmed the situation immediately: it showed the elites that Tokayev enjoyed Moscow’s support, and also intimidated the public (although the mission, which ended on 19 January, was technically intended

<sup>1</sup> See K. Strachota, ‘Protests escalating in Kazakhstan’, OSW, 5 January 2022, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>2</sup> See W. Górecki, ‘Kazakhstan: work starts on dismantling the Nazarbayev system’, OSW, 21 January 2022, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>3</sup> This took place on 5 January. The amendments revoking Nazarbayev’s lifetime presidency in the *Mazhilis* Security Council (the lower house of parliament) were adopted on 19 January.

<sup>4</sup> See K. Strachota, ‘Kazakhstan: the CSTO intervenes, the protests pacified’, OSW, 10 January 2022, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl). Since the CSTO may only provide assistance to member states in the event of an external threat, the narrative was adopted that ‘dormant’ terrorist forces inspired by radical Islam had previously been brought into the country; this group, allegedly numbering ca. 20,000 people and supported by a group of ‘traitors’ from the NSC, were supposed to have been behind the riots. This version is extremely unlikely.

to protect strategic facilities rather than carry out policing functions).<sup>5</sup> This allowed a pacification process to take place. According to official data, a total of 227 people were killed in the riots, including 19 members of the law enforcement agencies.

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President Tokayev’s domestic position. This proved him to be a skilful tactician: not only did he manage to stay in power, but he also significantly weakened the group which had been working against him within the broader ruling camp. At the same time, however, the crisis revealed the scale of the system’s dysfunctionality and the related need for changes: the essence of the ‘dual power’ had been Nazarbayev’s position as the supreme arbiter who strove to maintain balance within the elite, but it turned out that he was no longer able to play the role of the system’s keystone. To an extent, this resembled the situation in which the former head of state had found himself a decade earlier. In December 2011, a workers’ strike in Zhanaozen which lasted several months was brutally put down, and 15 people were killed (we should recall that Tokayev decided to make concessions to the protesters). The then government, led by Nazarbayev, came to the conclusion that social stability could be ensured by satisfying the material needs of the population, which they actually tried to bring about (the increase in LPG prices ten years later was in fact perceived as the government breaking that unwritten agreement). At the same time, the events in Zhanaozen became the impulse for a limited series of reforms aimed at improving, strengthening and modernising the state – Nazarbayev’s version of ‘*perestroika*’.<sup>6</sup> However, this programme – which even so was far from being coherent and consistent – was not implemented.

### Repression...

While stabilising the situation after the January crisis, Tokayev did not avoid the use of repression, but did so to only a limited extent, targeting disloyal representatives of the elite rather than the public (apart from the suppression of the riots). Many reports show that over the following weeks, for example, conditions for running small and medium-sized enterprises improved significantly, and the corruption and arbitrary behaviour of officials dropped off noticeably. This signalled a will to implement institutional reforms.

The first wave of purges, involving people with political, business and family ties to the former president, began as early as 5 January. First, the head of the NSC and former prime minister Karim Masimov was dismissed and then arrested; then his deputy Samat Abish (Nazarbayev’s nephew) was sacked. Tokayev also dismissed the minister of defence, Murat Bektanov, who had held the office for several months (he was then arrested on suspicion of failing to fulfil his official duties). In the next few weeks, those sacked or otherwise obliged to resign included Kairat Sharipbayev, president of the board of QazaqGaz and (according to media reports) the partner of Nazarbayev’s eldest daughter Dariga (who herself resigned as a parliamentary deputy, and her son’s father-in-law left his post as head of the Central Election Commission); Dimash Dosanov, president of the board of directors of KazTransOil and the husband of the ex-president’s youngest daughter Alia; the billionaire Timur Kulibayev, head of the Atameken National Chamber of Entrepreneurs and the husband of Nazarbayev’s middle daughter Dinara

<sup>5</sup> It was in Moscow’s interest to calm the situation down quickly. On the one hand, it wanted to test its CSTO contingent (and at the same time demonstrate its effectiveness), and on the other to end the mission before the planned invasion of Ukraine, in order to avoid involvement on two fronts. The fact that Kazakhstan thus contracted a ‘debt of gratitude’ towards Russia was probably another important factor.

<sup>6</sup> See A. Jarosiewicz, ‘Perestroika – the Nazarbayev way. Crisis and reforms in Kazakhstan’, OSW, Warsaw 2016, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

(he also resigned from the board of directors of Russia's Gazprom). Finally, Kairat Satybaldy (the ex-president's nephew and Abish's brother) and his ex-wife were arrested on charges of embezzlement.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the detainees' guilt or innocence – which still remains to be proven in court – these moves were aimed at neutralising the opposition within the elite by depriving it of political influence

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and limiting its financial assets. This latter objective was helped by the establishment of the *Qazaqstan Halqyna* fund (Kazakh: 'for the people of Kazakhstan'), which is mainly funded by companies and private persons associated with Nazarbayev.<sup>8</sup> We should presume that (as in Georgia after the 'rose revolution' of 2003), anyone who makes a sufficiently high payment to it may have the legal proceedings against them withdrawn, be permitted to leave the country along with some of their assets, etc.

The process of settling individual scores did not apply to Nazarbayev himself (nor could it have done, because he was formally protected by law as the country's first president). Tokayev remained in touch with his predecessor and mentor; for example, Nazarbayev flew in his own plane to the Diplomatic Forum in Antalya (11–13 March), demonstrating that the visit was not private in nature. Nor was there any attempt to deprive the former head of state of his personal property, which proves that he still retains a protective 'umbrella'. At the same time, however, his successor continued to deprive him of further prerogatives: after his dismissal as head of the Security Council, Nazarbayev also lost the chairmanship of the Assembly of Nations of Kazakhstan, and earlier, of the ruling party (as a symbolic gesture, its name was changed from Nur Otan to Amanat). This 'de-Nazarbayevication' was symbolically brought to an end by an amendment to the law concerning the first president and removing all references to his person from the constitution.

### ...and reforms

On 16 March, Tokayev delivered a speech in which, on the one hand, he summarised his actions to date, and on the other, announced a far-reaching reform of the system. In his statement, he referred several times (without naming names) to "famous, high-ranking people" who were allegedly guilty of treason. He also mentioned the failure which these "enemies" had suffered. In the main part of his speech, he presented a programme for departure from the 'super-presidential' model, which, as he portrayed it, had been justified during the initial stage of the country's development, but which no longer functioned in the face of new challenges. The list of necessary reforms he mentioned resulted in an extensive package of constitutional amendments being prepared over the next month. On 29 April, the president announced that he would hold a referendum on adopting them.<sup>9</sup>

The new measures, which were finally approved on 5 June, are intended to improve the management of the state and its functioning, through the decentralisation of the decision-making processes (for example, the president can no longer personally overrule the ordinances of local authorities), limiting opportunities for abuses and corruption, ensuring wider social representation in parliament (lowering the electoral threshold, introducing a mixed electoral system, making it easier to register political parties). The death penalty was also definitively abolished (a moratorium on its execution had been in force since 2003, and it had been deleted from all articles of the Penal Code at the end of 2021).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. A. Kozyreva, 'Страх и ненависть в Семье. Разгром клана Назарбаева в режиме реального времени', Фергана, 18 March 2022, [fergana.agency](http://fergana.agency).

<sup>8</sup> Information about donations: 'Доноры', *Qazaqstan Halqyna*, [qazaqstanhalqyna.kz](http://qazaqstanhalqyna.kz).

<sup>9</sup> 'Токаев предложил провести референдум по поправкам в Конституцию', Фергана, 29 April 2022, [fergana.agency](http://fergana.agency).

However, these changes (apart from the last-mentioned) are mostly ‘technical’ in nature and can hardly be expected to translate into real democratisation of the political system as a whole in the immediate future (some of them are listed in the Appendix).<sup>10</sup>

It is noteworthy that despite the wide range of changes introduced, the president decided to amend the current constitution by means of a referendum, and not to adopt a new one. It appears that he intended to emphasise the continuity of the state’s institutions, while at the same time cutting himself off from the previous method of exercising power – and from Nazarbayev himself as the creator of this system. One element of this continuity, in fact, is the person of Tokayev himself, who comes from the wider Nazarbayev elite, and belonged to the old system in the broader sense (albeit not to the ‘family’ of the former head of state).

### Further away from Moscow?

The constitutional reforms in Kazakhstan coincided with the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In his speech on 16 March Tokayev referred, without offering any details or opinions, to the “unprecedentedly tense” international situation, i.e. the war and the confrontation between Russia & the West, in which China is also involved. He devoted the end of his speech to discussing the threats involved and how best to defend against them. In particular, he pointed to the economic consequences of the crisis, including breaks in production and trade chains. Among the resulting challenges for the country, he mentioned the potential costs related to sanctions (by which he implied those imposed on Russia), the risk that the local currency (the tenge) could depreciate, and the possible threat to food security. As for the steps his government could take, he mentioned the appointment of a crisis management team and limiting the export of foreign currencies, among other possible measures. He also warned that the alternative to the reforms was stagnation, which *in extremis* could lead to the loss of the country’s paramount virtue – its independence.

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country in a difficult situation (especially after Moscow, using the CSTO mechanism, had helped Tokayev stabilise the situation, thus making him its symbolic debtor and displaying its instrumental force). On the one hand, both countries share close alliance ties which translate into significant bilateral trade (especially regarding Kazakh imports). Kazakhstan is also a member of all the post-Soviet integration formats: the Commonwealth of Independent States, the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union. Moreover, its second largest neighbour in terms of area is China, which is presently pro-Russian. On the other hand, Kazakhstan has long positioned itself as a promoter of dialogue and understanding (the Astana format, its presidency of the OSCE in 2010), and is strongly integrated with the world global economy: the country’s largest trading partner remains the European Union as a whole (exports from Kazakhstan, especially energy resources, play a decisive role here; see the Appendix). As a result, the government may be afraid of derivative sanctions based on those imposed by the EU & US on Russia and has taken steps to prevent them.

Due to the above-mentioned state of affairs, Kazakhstan remains open to Russian business, seeing an opportunity for measurable profit in cooperation with it (such as the possibility of Russian citizens setting up companies there). Recently, however, a requirement was imposed that anyone who wants

<sup>10</sup> For the full list of adopted changes, see ‘Какие поправки в Конституцию Казахстана выносятся на референдум’, Уральская неделя, 7 May 2022, [uralskweek.kz](http://uralskweek.kz).

to open an account in a Kazakh bank and obtain a Mastercard or Visa credit card must have a job or permanent residence.<sup>11</sup> Tokayev's actions show that he is trying not to infringe the vital interests of any of the biggest players (the West, China and Russia). A quick reaction only arises when Kazakhstan itself is threatened: for example, the day after restrictions on exports of Russian oil by tankers were imposed, it was reported that the brand name of the Kazakh oil thus exported onto global markets from Russian ports had been changed to prevent any ambiguity.<sup>12</sup>

The state's attitude towards the war in Ukraine should be described as a cautious 'wait and see' approach. This is particularly note-

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worthy considering the scale of Kazakh-Russian ties and the CSTO intervention in January this year. Tokayev is distancing himself from Moscow, as was already evident in his 16 March address.<sup>13</sup> However, he is taking care not to do any real damage to the relationship; admittedly Kazakhstan has recognised the territorial integrity of Ukraine (because this is the position which has been adopted by the international community),<sup>14</sup> but on 7 April he voted in the UN General Assembly against suspending Russia's membership of the Human Rights Council. Such caution is dictated by concern not only to maintain balance in relations with the world's main capitals, but also for internal stability: it is estimated that about a third of Kazakhstan's citizens share the Russian point of view on the war.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the Kazakh government's consent to demonstrations of support for Ukraine seems to be selective, and the detention of people using the 'Z' symbol in public is mostly for show. It seems that the sum of the Kazakh authorities' 'anti-Russian' actions, such as the cancellation of the parade on 9 May 2022 (under the pretext of budget difficulties) goes beyond the traditional manoeuvring between Russia, China and the West; it has created a new quality, and Kazakhstan is now further away from Moscow than it was four months earlier. However, this is not an irreversible process.

## Conclusions

The president has managed to both stabilise the situation after since the January crisis and maintain an independent policy in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The preparation and implementation of the constitutional reform proves that, after the period of 'dual power', he has taken real control over the state and freed himself from the limitations of the system built by Nazarbayev and the influence of his closest circle. Doubts, especially in the long run, might only be raised concerning the loyalty of the bureaucratic apparatus (it is difficult to assess what influence Russia has on it, or to what extent this group is loyal to the state and to what extent to individual leaders of informal, e.g. clan structures). At the same time, Tokayev remains the political 'son' of his predecessor: he cares about maintaining the continuity of the state's institutions, and the corrective actions he has taken resemble the 'Nazarbayev *perestroika*'.

<sup>11</sup> 'Rosjanie rzucili się, by wyrabiać karty w Kazachstanie. Banki zaostają zasady', *Business Insider*, 26 May 2022, [businessinsider.com.pl](https://www.businessinsider.com.pl).

<sup>12</sup> 'Казakhstan переименовал марку своей нефти из-за санкций против России', *Эхо Кавказа*, 4 June 2022, [ekho-kavkaza.com](https://ekho-kavkaza.com).

<sup>13</sup> Referring to the January crisis, Tokayev downgraded the importance of the CSTO contingent: "We must not underestimate the important role of the peacekeeping mission, but in the end we defeated the bandits with our own strength." In this way, he made it clear that the country did not owe Russia a debt. For the entire speech, see 'Послание Главы государства Касым-Жомарта Токаева народу Казахстана', 16 March 2022, [akorda.kz](https://akorda.kz).

<sup>14</sup> Interview given by the deputy head of the presidential administration Timur Suleimenov for the Euractiv website on 29 March in Brussels: G. Gotev, 'Kazakh official: We will not risk being placed in the same basket as Russia', [Euractiv.com](https://euractiv.com), [euractiv.com](https://euractiv.com).

<sup>15</sup> В. Половинко, 'Десоветизация. Из-за войны в Украине Москва теряет поддержку Казахстана', *The Insider*, 15 April 2022, [theins.ru](https://theins.ru). Ethnic Russians account for almost 20% of the country's population, and some Kazakhs, especially in Almaty, do not know their mother tongue, or know it poorly, and use the Russian language on a daily basis.



In the long-term, strategic dimension, the aim of Tokayev's reforms is to strengthen Kazakhstan's statehood and its development, and to improve state structures in the short-term perspective. 'Tokayev's *perestroika*', then, is another attempt at 'de-privatising the state' (depriving the informal structures guided by particular interests of the power to influence the decision-making processes) and dismantling the previous system, the keystone of which was Nazarbayev (although he himself will probably remain personally 'untouchable'). The reforms' character demonstrates a will to democratise the political system and increase the protection of human rights, although the new regulations do not guarantee any further changes in this respect. Certainly, however, the final abolition of the death penalty and the establishment of a Constitutional Court, accessible to individual citizens, is a step towards Western standards – as is the introduction of rules restricting the president's family from profiting from his power. All this strengthens the legitimacy of the current ruling team. It is still unclear how much credit of trust the citizens have granted to Tokayev; nevertheless, there is no doubt that he has earned it after the events of January and the subsequent 'breakout into independence'.

Moscow's neo-imperial aspirations pose a constant challenge to Kazakhstan. In the past, representatives of the Russian establishment – mainly parliamentarians, but also President Vladimir Putin – have repeatedly questioned the territorial integrity of the country, claiming that it is an artificial creation, and stating that its northern provinces should belong to Russia. After the invasion of Ukraine, such statements may be perceived by Kazakhstan as scarcely-veiled threats and announcements of possible military intervention. Under the new circumstances, the country is trying to maintain good relations with Moscow, offering a stable neighbourhood and upholding its current obligations; at the same time, however, it has been strengthening its attitude towards Moscow. From Tokayev's point of view, however, it is essential to avoid direct involvement in the Ukrainian conflict while being assertive about one's interests. The sum of the actions his government has taken seems to have distanced Kazakhstan from Russia (and China) and brought it closer to the West, but no unequivocal declarations or sudden turns should be expected here. In this dimension too – albeit in much more dramatic circumstances, which have *de facto* undermined the sense of the continued existence of the post-Soviet integration formats in their present form – the president is following the path set by his predecessor.

## APPENDIX

### List of selected constitutional changes approved in the referendum on 5 June 2022

#### President:

- may not belong to a political party;
- members of his close family cannot hold managerial positions in state administration or state-owned enterprises.

#### Parliament:

- the number of deputies for the *Mazhilis* (lower house) has been reduced from 107 to 98;
- MPs are elected in a mixed system (previously they had been exclusively elected by a majority system).

#### The justice system:

- a Constitutional Court has been established (previously there was a Constitutional Council, but citizens could not submit individual motions to it: now they can);
- the death penalty has been removed from the constitution.

## Kazakhstan's trade in 2021

In 2021, Kazakhstan's largest trading partner was the European Union as a whole. It accounted for 29.4% of Kazakhstan's foreign trade, i.e. €26.1 billion (Russia accounted for 18.2% and €20.5 billion; China 15.9% and €17.9 billion).

Exports exceeded €52.9 billion, of which EU countries accounted for €20.7 billion (39%), China €9.9 billion (18.8%), and Russia €5.5 billion (10.4%).

Imports amounted to €35.9 billion. Russia's share is €12.7 billion (35.5%), China €6 billion (16.6%), and the EU €5.5 billion (15.3%). Kazakhstan's important partners also include South Korea, Turkey, Uzbekistan, India, Switzerland, the US and Japan.

Source: 'European Union, Trade in goods with Kazakhstan', European Commission, 10 May 2022, [ec.europa.eu](https://ec.europa.eu).