

# Were the Kazakhstani protests predictable?

Wednesday 26 January 2022, by [LARUELLE Marlene](#), [O'LOUGHLIN John](#), [TOAL Gerard](#) (Date first published: 20 January 2022).

**The recent violent protests in Kazakhstan are still reverberating, despite the [Russian-led intervention force's recent withdrawal](#). It is now evident that they were **not a singular unified phenomenon**. Rather they were a cascade of entwined events, beginning with regional [grassroots protests](#), then jumping spontaneously to all major cities, and escalating in Almaty into spectacular violence and [an apparent failed attempted coup](#) by disaffected elements of the elite surrounding former president Nursultan Nazarbayev.**

Protest events were geographically dispersed, without unifying slogans or national coordination structures, and violent in outcome in only certain locations, most prominently when organized criminal forces hijacked the Almaty protests. Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev claimed to see the hidden hand of unnamed actors, including Islamists, and pronounced the protestors "terrorists." It will take time to get a complete picture of the protest events and their geography, and of the connections between the street protests and the alleged palace coup. But was the greatest civil disturbance in the history of independent Kazakhstan really unforeseeable? Our research suggests not.

We organized one of the last in-person face-to-face surveys in Kazakhstan just before the coronavirus pandemic. This nationally representative sample survey with 1,200 adult respondents was conducted by a leading national polling firm, between December 2019 and January 2020. The survey was part of a [larger research project on geopolitical attitudes](#) in select neighboring states of the Russian Federation, and involved survey research also in Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine as well as some breakaway disputed territories. Most of the questions we asked were the same in all locations so it is possible to compare attitudes across countries. Our surveys were almost all complete when the global pandemic hit, and face-to-face polling was no longer possible. Belarus and now Kazakhstan have experienced significant political upheaval since our survey research was completed. Is it possible to tell from our research findings that there would be trouble in Belarus and then Kazakhstan? Not exactly: no survey is a crystal ball into the future. But our data shows considerable discontent among Kazakhstani citizens even before the pandemic upended normal life. Here are five clear indicators of these concerns.

## **1. Economic issues were the most cited problem**

Our survey asked respondents to list the three biggest problems in Kazakhstan in order of priority. The question was an open one so we had to group the responses into categories afterwards. We ended up using four categories: problems related to the economy, to political rights and ethnic problems, to state services, and to corruption. This question allowed us to identify the most cited problems as well as the problem listed most frequently as the number one problem in Kazakhstan. We found that economic problems (unemployment, inflation, and low wages) were the most cited. For the whole sample, 94 percent indicated that these concerns ranked in their top three; the proportion reached 99 percent in the Almaty city sample.

## **2. Corruption was close behind, and specific to certain geographic regions**

Analysts too often treat Kazakhstan as just one big unified space, yet this large country has very distinctive regions associated with economic specializations and nationality concentrations. Unlike other surveys that we conducted in post-Soviet countries, demographic differences are not as evident in the Kazakhstan data. Belarus, for example, showed dramatic differences in political choices across age groups. This regional pattern matters because the recent protests began in the oil-and gas rich region of western Kazakhstan before jumping to the former capital and biggest city, Almaty, and elsewhere. In examining the problem question regionally, we found that corruption was listed as the number one problem in two regions across Kazakhstan — the north, including the capital Nur-Sultan, and the south — and tied with economic problems in the west. Overall 49 percent of the sample mentioned corruption as one of the three biggest problems (see the figure for regional details).

## **3. There was widespread dissatisfaction with public services; not so much with political rights**

Strong dissatisfaction was also evident with the quality of government services (healthcare, provision, education availability and costs, low pensions), with 62 percent listing it as a problem. However, there was not much attention to political rights and ethnic issues in their various forms for one-third of the sample. Political rights and ethnic issues include worries over free elections, property claims, gender equality and ethnic discrimination. This does not imply these issues were not important to people just that they were not at the forefront of their everyday concerns. Respondents in Almaty were more likely to nominate political and ethnic problems than those elsewhere in the country.

## **4. Just over a third viewed the Kazakhstani political system as the best**

Asked what would be the best political system for Kazakhstan, only 36.9 percent chose the current Kazakhstani system, while 25 percent picked the Soviet system. A more modest number preferred Western democratic systems (around 14 percent) and less than 6 percent the current Russian political system. Demographic analysis showed that poorer people and the less educated tended to prefer the Soviet system. This approximate one-third preference for the Soviet system is the same as in Belarus but the support of the local political system is significantly larger than in Belarus (only 15 percent) where the Western democratic system was picked by 32 percent.

## **5. Presidential trust was low**

The survey was done less than a year after Nazarbayev stepped back from the presidency that he occupied since 1991 and gave formal control to current president Tokayev. To counter social desirability bias we used a survey technique called a list experiment to probe citizens' trust in their president. This is an indirect way of asking about trust: given a list of institutions (without mentioning any name), respondents indicate how many they trust. By randomly switching out the presidency in lists of institutions, we can estimate general trust in the presidency. The results were particularly low: an overall average of 24.3 percent trusted the president, and in the western regions the level was at 0 percent. Other regional percentages were north (including Nur-Sultan) 17.7, Almaty city 25.9, east-center 19.6 and the south at 52.4. We found similar low levels of trust in the political leadership in Belarus using the same question format just before the presidential election and subsequent mass protests there.

Political protests are not like science experiments, with predictable outcomes when certain elements mix. Specific events, local conditions, communication, organization and leadership all matter in

providing an initial spark and subsequent diffusion and momentum. Nevertheless, background attitudes shaped by deteriorating economic conditions and everyday experience with state services and corruption matter a great deal. The presidential transition of 2019 in Kazakhstan coincided with a significant uptick in political protests in that year before the coronavirus pandemic hit. Just as in Belarus, conditions were ripe for anti-government protests. While the outcome was a reassertion of control by the autocratic center in both cases, the attitudes that literally fueled the protests — recalling that spiking liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices provided the initial spark — are not likely to have disappeared.

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