

Kazakhstan: Crossing a New Frontier?

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The largest former Soviet republic in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, has never witnessed scenes like these: on 2 January, massive protests erupted in the west of the country in response to an increase in the price of liquid petroleum gas. Within a matter of days, a wave of protests had engulfed the entire country. According to official figures, there have been nearly 10,000 arrests and 225 deaths over the course of the unrest. The situation in the country has since abated, but what happens next? Albert Scharenberg spoke with Marlies Linke, director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's office in Almaty, about the background to the protests and the future of the country.

The last time Kazakhstan made the news in Germany because of large-scale protests was in 2011 when striking oil workers in Zhanaozen were gunned down. Now the most recent protests have also broken out there. The consensus is that an increase in the price of liquid petroleum gas was what triggered the protests — and in one of the most oil-rich parts of the country. What role do resources such as gas and oil play in the Kazakh social contract?

Resources like gas, oil, coal, and uranium play a pivotal role in Kazakhstan. Oil and gas exports are the most important sources of revenue for the resource-rich country and serve to build up reserves of foreign exchange. As such, they are of significant strategic value. The energy sector also attracts the most foreign direct investment. The oil industry provides much-needed jobs and, together with the products it offers, acts as a driving force for other sectors of the economy.

As for gas, a resource that typically occurs alongside deposits of crude oil, it is not merely a question of exports, but also of plans to provide 56 percent of the country's population with gas, used in heating for example, as an energy base by 2030.

In Kazakhstan, many means of transport are powered by liquid petroleum gas. This means that when the price of gas doubles — as was announced at the beginning of this year — inflation also increases. This is because the total cost for other goods requiring transportation and for related services will also be affected.

As I mentioned, the oil and gas sector are of strategic importance. But I should add that Kazakhstan enjoys close ties with foreign countries precisely because of the energy sector. The exploitation of energy sources is often technologically complex, and foreign know-how and capital — Western as well as Russian or Chinese — is brought in. A number of the production sites are, at least in part, in foreign hands, so issues such as how Kazakh or international employers deal with the organization of work on site also play a part. Earlier protests conducted by oil workers brought to the fore the fact that Kazakh workers did not consider their pay or working and living conditions to be equal to those of their colleagues at these sites who were from foreign countries, such as China, for example.

The social divide, already palpable in recent years, has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This means that any increase in the price of fuel is immediately felt — particularly in western regions of the country, where most of the natural gas is mined, but which also happens to be the part of the

country where all other goods have to be transported to. This is why first sparks flew in that region.

Many journalists are comparing events in Kazakhstan with the colour revolutions that took place in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and last year in Belarus. Does the comparison hold in your opinion?

In many media outlets, including the Russian media, the comparison has deliberately been made in order to point the finger in a specific direction — towards the West, as if foreign countries were responsible for the disturbances. Kazakhstan's geostrategic position would seem to suggest that international actors have a heightened interest in developments in the region.

Yet there is considerable scope for discontent in Kazakhstan itself. As I mentioned earlier, the issue of social inequality has not been sufficiently addressed in recent years. And this can also be seen in the efforts to engender more opportunities to participate in the process of shaping society, which are driven by a relatively small portion of the population.

At the moment, however, there does not appear to be any group or information centre that brings together the various demands in the country. As Gulmira Ilyeuv, the president of the centre for political research *Strategia*, has noted, protests typically have leaders who are responsible for presenting demands and entering into negotiations. Yet this has only been the case in the western region of Mangystau.

Some observers have also pointed out that in the first week of January there were “armed bandits” on the streets of Kazakh cities, and that President Tokayev called in troops from member countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to fight them. Is this true?

In part. During the first week of January, there were three distinct and quite disparate groups of people who took to the streets. In the first few days, demonstrators could be seen in different cities expressing their views on the economic and social conditions of the country. These demonstrations brought together not only workers but also groups of single mothers, for example, who had already spearheaded protests in the past. These demonstrations were mostly peaceful.

After 5 January, however, things changed, and armed groups appeared that were clearly well-prepared. The images emerging from different cities throughout Kazakhstan, especially Almaty and Taldykorgan, painted a very different picture. Within a very short space of time, these groups had attacked strategic buildings and sites. The third group, which took to the streets in days that followed, consisted of looters and marauders. This has also been confirmed by my colleagues in Kazakhstan.

It was against this backdrop that the government deployed both Kazakh security forces and, as you said, units from the CSTO. But they were not simply deployed to fight the armed bandits; they were brought in to secure strategic sites. The CSTO is made up not only of Russia, but a number of other member states as well. The greater part of the contingent sent by the allies consisted of 1,500 Russian special forces, but it also included 200 special forces from Tajikistan, 150 from Kyrgyzstan, and 100 each from Armenia and Belarus. These troops were specifically brought to the most strategically important sites. The Almaty-2 power station was guarded by Kyrgyz troops while Russian units were deployed to secure the airport and TV tower at the same location.

Foreign troops were deployed because President Tokayev could no longer be sure of the loyalty of Kazakh troops and thus called on the alliance for help. It was the largest deployment of the CSTO to date. The mission was ended on 19 January, and the troops were subsequently withdrawn. There is

some debate in Kazakhstan as to whether this was a smart move on Tokayev's part; the question, of course, is whether he had any alternative at all.

You identified three different groups of actors that were active during this period. Setting the third group aside, is there any indication that there were links or contact of any kind between the first, peaceful group and the second, more militant one?

So far, there does not appear to be a clear connection. But in some cities discussions were held between demonstrators from the first group and security forces, which did not descend into violence. In light of this, it's safe to assume that the anti-establishment sentiment did not generally boil over into a will to take up arms and behave in an aggressive manner. Observers do not see any direct correlation between the social and economic demands and the arrival of armed and prepared groups, which effectively characterized the middle of the first week in January and wreaked havoc in Almaty in particular. Instead, they see this more as an attempt to destabilize and bring down the Tokayev government.

These groups were likely backed by both domestic and international forces, but I would caution against claiming that they were primarily brought in from abroad. The fact is that there are ample reasons for protest within the country itself. I already referred to the social divisions in terms of energy resources, and in certain elite circles there is always a concern with securing access to and control over how resources are distributed in the country.

As a concession to the protestors, President Tokayev dismissed the former long-term prime minister and "father of the country", Nursultan Nazarbayev, from his last post as chairman of the National Security Council. Is this a significant move? Is a reshuffling of the political elite now taking place?

Yes. Certain family members of Kazakhstan's first president have occupied positions of influence in recent years that have enabled them not only to accrue power but to amass corresponding material resources, some of which they moved offshore. In the first week of January, 26 private jets are reported to have left Kazakhstan, allegedly transporting these individuals abroad. There are discussions as to whether the health of the first president is the reason for the emergence of armed individuals in opposition to the current government. Nazarbayev had not been seen in public since 27 December, and people began to wonder about the state of his health. Doubts as to whether he was physically capable of exerting any influence over current events led to questions of a change in the country's political constellation, which could then lead to a weakening of his hitherto loyal entourage. In other words, these are conflicts of loyalty. Nazarbayev did not appear in public again until 18 January.

How is the mood in the country now, in the wake of the events of the first week of January?

For one thing, a physical clean-up is currently being undertaken to rid Almaty of any signs of the clashes. All visible traces of the disturbances are being cleared away. One question is what will be done with the city's main administration office, which was badly affected. It is not currently clear if it can be saved or if it will have to be demolished.

Apart from that, there is of course a great deal of discussion about the events themselves. It is becoming apparent that several narratives will likely come to coexist. One narrative is the official one, which focuses on the state and state actors. At the same time, however, civil society actors are seeking to ensure their own experience of the events in question be upheld and presented as a counterpoint to the official state narrative

Expectations and hopes for change are currently fairly high, as the country has never seen such violent protests in the entire period since it gained independence. President Tokayev hopes to present plans for change, which will take effect as of September. As I see it, the crucial question is whether the social and economic problems will be addressed in real terms in the coming months. How many more opportunities will be opened up for citizens to participate in the process of shaping society? How will the tools for achieving this be developed, what kinds of spaces will be created? It is worth bearing in mind that expectations are high, while the timeframe is relatively narrow. People want to see that things are genuinely improving.

Of course, we know that fundamental changes to a society need to be well organized if they are to be successful. Take the issue of democratic elections. If different actors are to take part, they need to be able to present themselves and campaign in the lead-up to the election. The same applies to other issues — in particular economic ones. As I see it, there are serious challenges facing President Tokayev, and it remains to be seen whether he will find the strength and resources with which to tackle them. One should not start from good intentions in this regard, but from concrete actions and hard facts, which in their turn require appropriate financial support. President Tokayev has suggested that those who have amassed a substantial amount of material wealth in the last few years should contribute part of their income to a fund, but it is debatable whether this will solve the socio-economic problems that have accumulated over the years.

Renewing and regenerating the country requires, on the one hand, a balance that guarantees stability and, on the other, the courage to explore new measures and approaches with actors who see themselves as citizens and who want to assume an active role. Anybody concerned with Central Asia knows that this part of the world has seen civil wars that have caused considerable suffering among the populations affected and have caused significant damage to the economies and societies of the countries involved. As such, my hope for all citizens of Kazakhstan is that, following the events of the first week of January, things can develop towards achieving a peaceful and equitable outcome for everybody who lives here, regardless of which group they belong to.

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