

# **STEPPE CHANGE: HOW RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE IS RESHAPING KAZAKHSTAN**

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## **SUMMARY**

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine came as an additional shock for Kazakhstan, which had already experienced serious domestic unrest in January 2022.
- Kazakhstan has consistently distanced itself from Russia's aggression and diversified its relationships with various countries, while preserving its bilateral relationship with Moscow.
- The war has further highlighted the need for political reforms in Kazakhstan, yet complicated the government's ability and willingness to implement them.
- Kazakhstan is now cautiously navigating political change both domestically and in its foreign policy.
- The EU has shown interest in engaging more with Kazakhstan. It can help the country to overcome this critical juncture by encouraging and supporting its genuine domestic transformation.

# Introduction

Kazakhstan experienced a year of shocks and change in 2022. In early January, the country was shaken for five days by widespread protests and unrest. The protests started over sharp hikes in fuel prices, but quickly swept up a range of other domestic issues, growing violent in the former capital and biggest city of the country, Almaty. Scenes of chaos in Almaty were met with brutal repression from the government. To help quell the protests, Kazakhstan's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, called for an intervention by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – a Russian-dominated military alliance of six former Soviet republics.

Back then, this call was widely seen by observers in Kazakhstan and beyond as an act of allegiance to Moscow. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has been one of Moscow's closest and most reliable allies in the post-Soviet space and is part of all the regional organisations Russia has initiated in the region. It is one of the few former Soviet countries where the Russian language enjoys an official status and is still used by a vast majority of the population. Some saw the CSTO's intervention as a prelude to Kazakhstan's greater alignment with Russia and the end of its multi-vector foreign policy. But the balanced positions expressed by the Kazakhstani authorities after Russia's invasion of Ukraine generated some hope in the West that the country would distance itself from Russia.

The war in Ukraine has had significant repercussions for Kazakhstan's society, changing the country's geopolitical standing and catalysing a shift in the way many Kazakhstani people see their own identity and Russia. It also created additional challenges for the government, which was attempting to pass political reforms and respond to the population's socio-economic demands in light of the protests. These reforms would increase the government's popular legitimacy and its ability to withstand possible outside pressures and assert its sovereignty. The geopolitical uncertainty triggered by the war could explain the very cautious approach adopted by the Kazakhstani authorities over the last months as it attempts to balance change with stability domestically, and to reduce Kazakhstan's dependency on Russia while preserving the political relationship with Moscow. [1]

Since its independence, Kazakhstan has become one of the heavyweights of the region, both in terms of its economy – with its real GDP ranking as one of the highest in the post-Soviet space – and in terms of its active and diversified foreign policy. Its huge reserves of natural resources, including hydrocarbons, as well as uranium, coal, and various ores and rare metals, along with a relatively business-friendly environment (Kazakhstan ranks 25<sup>th</sup> globally in the World Bank's "ease of doing business" database) have attracted numerous European

companies to the country. The European Union is the biggest foreign investor in Kazakhstan, accounting for almost half of the country's total foreign direct investment. It therefore has a direct interest in closely following the developments in the country. Kazakhstan's political trajectory – be it marked by stagnation, renewed instability, or genuine political change – will have consequences for its relationship with the EU, and for the wider region, including other countries of the former Soviet Union, not least Russia, which will have to review its approach to the region if Kazakhstan takes a more assertive course.

This paper explores the changes that occurred in Kazakhstan's domestic and foreign policy throughout 2022. It assesses to what extent the government has distanced itself from Moscow since the beginning of Russia's war on Ukraine and the effects of the war on Kazakhstan's foreign policy. It then considers how much change there has been in Kazakhstan's domestic politics and how observers should understand the government's actions since January 2022. Finally, it explains what the EU should expect and how it can sustain Kazakhstan's ambitions for change.

## A major geopolitical shock

### Kazakhstan's foreign policy balancing act

The government's immediate response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine reassured many in the West, who were concerned that the January 2022 events, referred to as 'Bloody January' in Kazakhstan, would bring the country closer to Russia. As early as 28 March, the deputy foreign minister, Roman Vasilenko, announced that Kazakhstan did not wish to "find itself behind a new iron curtain", underlining that the country had no intention of being aligned with Russia and risking being subjected to Western sanctions. In a public discussion with Vladimir Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, Tokayev made it very clear that his country remained committed to the principle of territorial integrity and therefore would not recognise the 'quasi-states' of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Kazakhstan's diplomacy has constantly reaffirmed this position. Tokayev has been in contact with Volodymyr Zelensky on several occasions since February 2022. Most recently, speaking to his Ukrainian counterpart on 16 February 2023, Tokayev underlined Kazakhstan's commitment to "a diplomatic solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict based on the United Nations Charter and universally accepted international law principles", and mentioned Kazakhstan's humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, two clear indications that Kazakhstan is distancing itself from Russia's war. While Moscow's closest allies – notably Belarus – voted against the major UN General Assembly resolutions on Russia, Kazakhstan abstained from the

votes. Although it did not vote in support of these resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan's abstention should be understood as a lack of support for Russia, given its close relationship with Moscow. A number of Russian journalists and politicians certainly understood Kazakhstan's position this way, issuing aggressive statements, which the Russian authorities were always careful to deny. One Russian member of parliament, Konstantin Zatulin, explicitly raised questions about Kazakhstan's future territorial integrity, stating, "if we have friendship ... then no territorial questions are raised. But if that does not exist, everything is possible. As in the case of Ukraine." The Russian media pundit, Tigran Keosayan, even accused Kazakhstan of "ingratitude" and warned it could "face the same consequences as Ukraine".

Despite these actions, both the Kazakhstani and the Russian governments have continuously displayed their shared desire to continue bilateral cooperation, and have intensified bilateral contacts during 2022. Kazakhstan remains highly dependent on Russia for its exports, with 80 per cent of its oil exports transiting through the Russian pipeline system. It also relies heavily on supplies from Russia, most notably food but also refined oil products for instance. Furthermore, Russia retains strong levers of influence in the country through the presence of numerous ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking communities, as well as through the broadcasting of Russian media, diffusion of Russian films and literature, and ties between Russian and Kazakhstani businesses.

At the same time, however, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kazakhstani government has tried to develop its relations with other partners, including China. This has fed the anachronistic narrative that Central Asia is the theatre of a 'great game' between large global powers, in which a rapprochement with China necessarily implies a decrease in Russia's influence. The fact that Xi Jinping paid his first visit abroad after the covid-19 pandemic to Astana was therefore widely viewed through the prism of this great power competition, with little if any attention paid to Kazakhstan's own foreign policy agenda. In fact, Kazakhstan has not only maintained relations with Moscow, it has also strengthened its ties with Turkey, as well as other countries of Central Asia and the Caspian region, including Iran and other Gulf countries. Tokayev visited Qatar in June 2022, Saudi Arabia in July 2022, and the United Arab Emirates in January 2023. All these trips were opportunities to discuss investment and infrastructure projects in order to reduce Kazakhstan's dependency on Russia. In some instances, as with Turkey, Tokayev agreed on far-reaching security and military-industrial cooperations, including the production of Turkish drones in Kazakhstan and intelligence-sharing. Kazakhstan has also intensified contacts with the EU, both with its institutions as well as with some member states, for example concluding ambitious agreements on the supply of oil and the joint production of hydrogen with Germany, and cooperation projects in

the fields of energy, transport, and the agri-food industry with France. Visiting Astana, the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, underlined the strategic importance for the EU of developing its relations with Kazakhstan, including in areas such as critical raw materials and renewable energies.

The war in Ukraine has given Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy a new meaning: originally its main purpose was to put the country on the international map and attract foreign investors, but now its focus is to enable Kazakhstan to reduce its dependency on Russia. While there has been no real decrease in Russia's influence in Kazakhstan, nor necessarily an increase in another regional power's influence, the government has adopted a clear hedging strategy to maximise its geopolitical benefits and strengthen its own sovereignty.

## The war's impact on Kazakhstan's economy

The war in Ukraine has exposed Kazakhstan's vulnerabilities to the Russian economy. In the first two weeks of the conflict, Kazakhstan's currency, the tenge, lost 20 per cent of its value against the dollar, accompanying the initial fall of the rouble. Russia's suspension of certain exports to the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union in order to secure its own market, announced on 10 March, had an immediate impact on the prices and availability of a number of basic foodstuffs in Kazakhstan, demonstrating the country's heavy dependency on its neighbour. Russia suspended its pipelines that transit Kazakhstan's oil exports four times during 2022 – a move that was widely interpreted as a reaction to Kazakhstan distancing itself from Russia's invasion of Ukraine (although some observers suggested the suspensions may have in fact been a reaction to Western sanctions, and a way to hurt Western companies exploiting Kazakhstan's oil fields in the Caspian Sea).

The war's actual economic impact on Kazakhstan has been quite ambivalent: on the one hand, the rise in prices for a number of imported products (food, consumer goods, gas, and refined oil products) has a direct impact on the population's purchasing power, and therefore potentially on the social situation. In December 2022, inflation exceeded 20 per cent over one year, which was the highest increase in the last 25 years. Growth also slowed to 3.4 per cent in 2022, from 4.1 per cent in 2021. On the other hand, Kazakhstan's exports to Russia increased by 22 per cent in the first ten months of 2022, which raised suspicions that Kazakhstan was being used to circumvent some of the Western sanctions despite its assurances to the contrary. High oil and gas prices also had a positive impact on the country's trade balance. Kazakhstan could also benefit from the relocation of a number of foreign companies which have been forced to leave the Russian market. Nevertheless, the uncertainties resulting from the regional geopolitical context will likely, overall, continue to weigh on the country's

economy.

## Kazakhstan's response to Russian immigration

Another visible consequence of the war in Ukraine has been the arrival of many Russian nationals to Kazakhstan. This happened in two waves: in February and March 2022, Russians who were opposed to the war, described as mostly young and qualified from rather privileged social backgrounds, arrived in Kazakhstan; then in September, after the announcement of partial mobilisation in Russia, several tens of thousands of young Russian men from all social backgrounds fled to Kazakhstan to avoid the draft. No official figures are available on the number of Russians who have settled in Kazakhstan since the beginning of the war. At the end of November 2022, Kazakhstan's minister of labour and social protection, Tamara Duisenova, quoted the figure of 400,000 arrivals since September. However, this only takes into account the second wave of arrivals and does not indicate the number of Russian nationals who remained in Kazakhstan, rather than transited through the country to other destinations or eventually returned to Russia.

At first, the authorities were very positive about the arrival of Russian nationals, stressing that Kazakhstan should take in people who are in difficulty in their country of origin, and that the people arriving were essentially a well-educated workforce that would contribute to the country's economic growth. However, opinion polls show that the population's perception is more equivocal: 38 per cent are opposed to the reception of this population. Two main reasons seem to equally explain this reluctance: the fear of rising prices and rents for 31 per cent of the respondents (among the 18-29 age group, 47 per cent held this view) and the fear that these migrants might be infiltrated by supporters of the 'Russian world' who could destabilise the country for 30 per cent. Conversely, 27 per cent of respondents were in favour of giving shelter to Russians fleeing the mobilisation and the vast majority of them (77 per cent) mentioned the duty to offer hospitality to people in difficulty. On 31 December 2022, the government modified the rules concerning visa-free circulation between Kazakhstan and other countries of the Eurasian Economic Union, making it impossible for people to stay for more than 90 days over half a year without an employment contract or another official justification for their stay, including study or family reunification. This will probably make it more difficult for a high number of Russian *relokanty* to remain in Kazakhstan.

## Opposing views about the war among the public

The divisions of opinion on Russian immigration to Kazakhstan reflect the wider polarisation of Kazakhstani society regarding the war itself. According to a poll conducted in several

Central Asian countries by the Central Asia Barometer, 28 per cent of Kazakhstanis attribute the main responsibility for the war to Russia, 19 per cent to Ukraine, and 10 per cent to the United States.

### In your view, who is mainly responsible for the situation in Ukraine?

In per cent

■ Russia 
 ■ Ukraine 
 ■ Both Ukraine and Russia 
 ■ US 
 ■ NATO 
 ■ Europe/the EU  
■ Other 
 ■ Refused 
 ■ Don't know



Source: Central Asia Barometer data, Central Asia, spring 2022, available at <http://www.ca-barometer.org>  
 ECFR · ecf.eu

Another survey, conducted in Kazakhstan in March and November, gives an indication of the evolution of public opinion regarding the war. While only 10 per cent of respondents supported Ukraine in March 2022, 22 per cent did so in November; conversely, the proportion of respondents supporting Russia fell sharply from 39 per cent in the spring to 13 per cent at the end of the year, while 59 per cent held a neutral position between the two parties.

### Which side of the conflict do you support? In per cent

■ Ukraine 
 ■ Russia 
 ■ Neutral 
 ■ Difficult to answer



The results of the two surveys cannot be directly compared as the methodologies of the surveys were different. Full details about methodology can be found in the source.

Source: Bureau for Express Monitoring of Public Opinion DEMOSCOPE, [March 2022](#) and [November 2022](#).  
 ECFR · ecf.eu

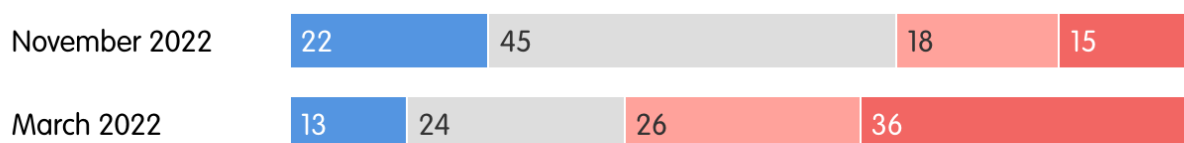
According to the same survey, 22 per cent of respondents consider that Russia is waging a war of conquest in Ukraine (compared to 13 per cent last spring) and 18 per cent that it is fighting against NATO (26 per cent in the spring), while 15 per cent adhere to the Russian discourse



that Russia’s war is fighting ‘Nazis’. Although clear divisions remain among the Kazakhstani public, the dynamic is therefore evolving towards more support for Ukraine and more distance from the Russian narrative about the war.

### Which of the following options most accurately describes what is happening in Ukraine? In per cent

■ Russia is waging a war against Ukraine with the aim of its further annexation ■ Russia is at war fighting “Nazis” ■ Russia is at war with Western countries and NATO ■ Difficult to answer



The results of the two surveys cannot be directly compared as the methodology of the surveys and formulation of the responses were different:  
 November 2022: Russia is waging a war against Ukraine with the aim of its occupation and further annexation / Russia is at war with Western countries and NATO on the territory of Ukraine / Russia is conducting a special military operation against the Nazis in Ukraine / I find it difficult to answer.  
 March 2022: Russia’s war with Ukraine with a view to its further annexation / Russia’s war with Ukraine to prevent the deployment of NATO troops there / Russian military operation against the Nazis in Ukraine / Difficult to answer.

Source: Bureau for Express Monitoring of Public Opinion DEMOSCOPE, [March 2022](#) and [November 2022](#).  
 ECFR · ecf.eu

The most significant factors in explaining these divisions are age and sources of information. Twenty-three per cent of 18-24 year-olds support Ukraine and 6 per cent support Russia, compared to 14 per cent and 34 per cent respectively among the over 60s. Most young people use the internet as a source of information, while the older generation likely rely more on the television, including on Russian channels. Russian television channels attract a large audience in Kazakhstan: 18 per cent of the poll’s respondents indicated them as a source of their information on the war in Ukraine, while 25 per cent said they watch Kazakhstani television channels.

The generational difference in these views is linked to differences in historical experiences. While the older generation grew up in the Soviet Union and do not necessarily question Moscow’s dominance in the post-Soviet space, younger people have always lived in an independent country and are less inclined to accept it. They also have more knowledge about



traumatic episodes of Soviet Kazakhstan's history, including the forced settlement of Kazakh nomads at the end of the 1920s, which led to a massive famine and the death of about one-third of the Kazakh population. This episode, which had little coverage in Soviet historiography, echoes the Ukrainian *Holodomor* – the great famine that killed millions in Ukraine in 1932-1933. This reinforces the identification of younger people from Kazakhstan with their Ukrainian counterparts.

As a result, a new form of national consciousness has emerged, which questions the colonial dimension of Russian imperial and Soviet policies vis-à-vis Kazakhstan, among the young urban middle class. Until now, many of these young people often spoke Russian rather than Kazakh and consumed a lot of Russian media and cultural products. Now, they are increasingly using the Kazakh language, looking for Kazakh-speaking content, and discussing their country's national identity, which had previously been a largely marginal debate, limited to some Kazakh-speaking intellectual circles since 1991. Kazakhstani businessmen installed Kazakh yurts – the traditional dwelling of Kazakh nomads and a central element of the Kazakh traditional way of life – in a number of Ukrainian cities to provide warmth to Ukrainians affected by energy shortages. The so-called yurts of invincibility were a vivid illustration of the reinvention of Kazakh national symbols in the context of the war in Ukraine. Beyond this, aid for Ukraine was also collected in a number of Kazakhstani cities, and demonstrations were organised in Almaty against the war. The fact that they were authorised by the government speaks volumes about Kazakhstan's position regarding the war.

Divisions among the public also reflect the importance of access to information to the views of the Kazakhstani population, and explain the criticisms addressed to the Kazakhstani government for its refusal to limit the broadcasting of Russian television channels in the country. This was despite the fact that the Russian media control body, Roskomnadzor, does not hesitate to demand the removal of certain content by Kazakhstani news websites. Under these conditions, some people in Kazakhstan are concerned about the influence that Russia retains over a part of society and the consequences that this influence could have for national security: Russia could well be able to turn some segments of the population against others, or against the government, if it decided to, and the country may have only limited capacity to defend itself in such a scenario. The Kazakhstani authorities have tried to set a number of examples in the country to avoid controversies about the war spreading: in August 2022, a couple living in northern Kazakhstan was convicted for supporting separatism; Russian artists openly supporting the war in Ukraine have been barred from performing in the country; and in early 2023, a member of parliament was excluded from his party and deprived of his mandate because of his openly pro-Russian stance. But limiting the broadcasting of Russian channels is probably seen as one step too far, and the government has remained very cautious

to not antagonise Russia and give it pretexts to claim that the rights of the Russian-speaking community in Kazakhstan are violated.

The war in Ukraine has not significantly transformed Kazakhstan's foreign policy – which has continued to follow a multi-vector approach, though with an increased attention to reducing the country's dependencies on Russia, while preserving its relationship with Moscow. But it has changed the society itself, giving birth to new debates about national identity, as well as new divides and fears of increased polarisation. The very cautious approach adopted by the Kazakhstani government, insisting on principles of international law but being careful not to antagonise Russia, can be explained by the high sensitivity of this issue domestically.

## Unrest at home

The war in Ukraine came as an additional shock for a society that was already deeply traumatised by the events of 'Bloody January'. The part that Russia played in these events, through the CSTO intervention to support Tokayev, made it clear that Russia continues to play a central role in Kazakhstan's domestic politics. As some Kazakhstani experts and civil society activists put it: the future political trajectory of Kazakhstan will be heavily determined by the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Political change is more likely if the Kazakhstani government is not able to rely on Moscow's support in the event of a Russian defeat. A victorious Russia would, on the contrary, try to entrench its grip on the region by consolidating the political status quo, in Kazakhstan and elsewhere. In light of the war, the reforms are therefore even more pressing. But the war will also likely complicate progress at home: against the backdrop of a polarised society that is wary of rising prices due to the geopolitical context, the government may find it even harder than before to respond to the population's discontent.

The January 2022 events have mostly been described as resulting from the convergence of three different strands: a social and economic protest triggered by a brutal increase in fuel prices in western regions of the country; political dissent against the lack of citizens' participation in political decisions and justice; and an intra-elite feud contesting Tokayev's position as the head of state. The discontent was not new; deep socio-economic frustrations had been bubbling in the population for several years and had led to recurrent protests. The political grievances also built on movements born in 2019 to protest former President Nursultan Nazarbayev handing over power to Tokayev, which was seen back then as a way to stage a democratic process while ensuring the continuation of Nazarbayev's rule through the appointment of a hand-picked successor.

As early as 11 January 2022, Tokayev promised full transparency on the events of the previous days, as well as future political reforms and more social justice. But the brutal repression of

protests tainted Tokayev's attempts to reassure the public that he had heard their demands. More than a year after 'Bloody January', there is still little clarity about the events. Competing narratives have emerged, with the government describing the events as a "coup" attempt, while political and human rights activists underline the genuine social frustrations and demands for political change. They insist on the need for full transparency about the repression of peaceful protests and accountability for the perpetrators, and increasingly question the reformist intentions of the government.

A poll published in February 2023 made clear that, though a plurality of respondents adhere to the official narrative about the events (which were described as a "provocation organized by some political forces to seize power" by 37.9 per cent of respondents), a majority does not trust the information disseminated by official sources about these events (53 per cent either "rather distrust" them or "don't trust [them] at all") and they are highly critical of the government's actions. A total of 39.3 per cent reported that they had not seen any political change since January 2022 but still expect some change to happen, while 24.7 per cent considers any political change unlikely. Over the last year, political change has indeed been slow, but Tokayev seems intent to continue implementing the reforms he announced.

Three criteria can help measure the extent of domestic changes: the efforts to deliver transparency and justice about the events of 'Bloody January'; the extent and nature of the political reforms adopted since then; and finally the turnover among Kazakhstani political elites, including appointments in the administration and public companies.

## Limited transparency on 'Bloody January'

Soon after Tokayev's address on 11 January, the general prosecutor of Kazakhstan, Berik Asylov, disclosed that 238 had been killed and more than 4,500 injured in the protests, though these figures were disputed by a number of witnesses and observers, and no details were given about the circumstances of the deaths. One year after 'Bloody January', the authorities indicated that 142 of the 238 had been killed after violating the curfew imposed on 5 January and that six people had died in custody in the aftermath of the protests.

Given the chaos which prevailed, particularly in Almaty, during the 5 and 6 January, establishing the whole truth would be difficult. But human rights organisations have pointed to the authorities' unwillingness to shed light on these events, which they believe is due to the possibility that questioning the responsibility of the security forces may alienate them from Tokayev. Failing loyalty for Tokayev in parts of the security apparatus may have contributed to his decision to call for the CSTO's intervention and it is therefore likely that he will try to retain the support he does have by sparing the apparatus as a whole, while still trying to

accommodate the demands for transparency. Lawsuits have been brought against some members of the security forces following allegations of torture connected to the January unrest – authorities’ reports differ on how many – but only a limited number have been brought to court so far. In January 2023, two police officers from Almaty were convicted on torture charges and sentenced to three years in prison. This decision was seen as a first step towards ending the impunity of the security services, but human rights organisations have stressed that no systematic work is being carried out to evaluate the actions of the security forces during the events and to bring perpetrators to account. In some instances, victims and their families have been asked to withdraw their complaints in exchange for amnesty for their deceased relatives and the promised financial compensation for their loss. The authorities have presented the law granting amnesty to participants in the January events, which should benefit more than 1,000 protesters who have already been convicted, as an expression of mercy for the perpetrators of the violence. Yet it also serves to draw a line under the events and remove the need for further investigations, and is unlikely to satisfy public demands for transparency.

On 23 December 2022, Tokayev unveiled a monument to the victims of ‘Bloody January’ and described the events as “a time of trial” for the people of Kazakhstan, when “the foundations of [Kazakhstan’s] statehood were under threat”. On 8 January 2022, the former head of Kazakhstan’s national intelligence agency (the KNB), Karim Masimov, was detained on charges of high treason. A year later, during a parliamentary hearing devoted to the ‘Bloody January’ events, the general prosecutor made clear that Masimov was considered the main organiser of an attempted coup. His trial started on 18 November 2022 behind closed doors, which prevents him from disclosing information that could implicate other actors, including those among Nazarbayev’s entourage. This will likely fail to satisfy the public’s demands for transparency and will continue to taint the authorities’ management of the aftermath of Bloody January.

## Half-hearted reforms

The protests in January 2022 took place in the context of an ongoing genuine demand for political change. In his address on 16 March 2022, Tokayev acknowledged the “long-standing public demands for radical changes” and presented a comprehensive programme of measures to modernise the country’s political system and establish a “new Kazakhstan”, which he described as “an effective state with a strong civil society”. In a not-so-implicit criticism of the drifts that took place under his predecessor’s rule, which included nepotism and widespread corruption to benefit Nazarbayev’s entourage, he described a set of constitutional amendments and other political reforms. These were essentially aimed at

depersonalising the presidential institution so that there is a clear differentiation between the president as a person and as an institution. They also shifted the balance of power among state institutions to strengthen the parliament and the re-established constitutional court, and enhanced local governance.

Some of these reforms were passed, the most visible of which being removing the articles devoted to the “father of the nation” – that is, Nazarbayev – from the constitution, which eventually led to the annulation of the law on the first president. This law was adopted in 2000 and granted a number of lifelong privileges to the former head of state. The constitutional amendments were adopted during a referendum in June. In September, Tokayev announced snap presidential elections for 20 November 2022, along with an additional change to the constitution to extend the presidential term to seven years and remove the possibility to serve two successive terms. This prompted some observers to describe the June referendum as a test or even a rehearsal of the early presidential election.

However, by the time the presidential election was announced, little progress had been made on other important political reforms, such as the registration of new political parties. The announced revision of the electoral law was promulgated on 5 November, shortly before the election, but entered into force only in January 2023; far from allowing more transparency of the electoral process, it limits the possibilities for polling and electoral observation, raising concerns among civil society. Only two new political parties have been registered since March (and none had been by the time the election was held), while some 15 other parties – including opposition movements – have been denied registration for years. Announcing and holding the presidential election before conducting political liberalisation, and with little advanced notice, was seen as a way to pre-empt any credible opposition from taking part. As a matter of fact, none of the four other presidential candidates enjoyed any popular support or even fame, and the election campaign was conducted as a mere formality, without any real competition. Despite his call for a “new Kazakhstan”, Tokayev seems to have largely repeated the typical methods of his predecessor, who systematically called for snap elections to avoid any real, well-prepared challenge to his own re-election.

On 20 November 2022, Tokayev secured his re-election with 81.3 per cent of the votes and a turnout of 69.4 per cent. But to many observers, the way he was re-elected further discredited his own promises for political change, and therefore nurtured part of the public’s frustration. There are various ways to explain this discrepancy between his promises and actions. Firstly, although Tokayev’s own political culture – marked by his experience as a diplomat, including in the UN framework – makes him probably more open than many in his generation, he is nevertheless cautious about political liberalisation. After protests tainted his election in 2019, and then his reputation in January 2022, he may have wanted to obtain visible electoral

support to ensure his adversaries could not contest his legitimacy. Secondly, with his previous term due to end in 2024, he likely felt the need to give himself more time to enact the promised social, economic, and political reforms. Finally, there was a risk that his adversaries from Nazarbayev's entourage could seize on the unrest to try to prevent his re-election in 2024, or that the social and economic impact of the war in Ukraine could undermine his chances. Holding an early presidential election could have been intended to reduce these uncertainties and political risks.

With the renewal of half of the members of the senate on 14 January 2023 and the early election of the lower house of parliament, the Majlis, held on 19 March 2023, it seems the first chapter of institutional reforms announced after January 2022 is over. The Majlis election was marked by a low turnout of just 54 per cent – almost ten percentage points lower than for the previous elections in 2021 – which already had a historically low turnout. Six political parties out of the seven allowed to take part reached the 5 per cent threshold to enter the new parliament, including the newly registered Respublika party and the long-time opposition Nationwide Social Democratic Party, whose elected members of parliament became the first from the party since its initial registration in 2007. Some independent candidates were elected in single-mandate constituencies. Yet a number of well-known opposition figures were denied the right to candidacy and others criticised the unfair campaigning conditions. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe electoral observation mission noted that the election saw increased possibilities for competition, but underlined significant shortcomings in the counting of votes. Some independent and opposition candidates denounced irregularities and refused to recognise the outcomes of the vote, calling for a rerun. Overall, with around 53 per cent of the votes and 23 out of 29 single-mandate constituencies, the ruling party Amanat (a rebranding of Nazarbayev's Nur Otan) secured two-thirds of the seats in the Majlis, holding 63 seats out of 98. Tokayev announced a new chapter in reforms after the elections, and it remains to be seen whether this next chapter will be marked by more political liberalisation or a mere consolidation of the existing system.

## A cautious replacement of elites

On 5 January, Tokayev appointed a number of close allies to key positions in the presidential administration and the security services, including the secretary of state, the head of the presidential administration and his first deputy, and the director of the KNB and his deputies. At the same time, he reappointed almost the same government as before, with one of the few new appointments being Alikhan Smailov as prime minister.

Throughout 2022, Tokayev replaced half of the ministers who were in office in January 2022. However, in most cases, ministers were replaced by their deputy or at least by someone who



had spent most of their career in the same branch of the administration. This cautious replacement could be an attempt to reassure senior officials about the extent of the changes to be expected or to form a technocratic elite, within which functions are acquired through competence and no longer through proximity to political power. (These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.)

Tokayev also carried out a large-scale replacement of senior staff, starting with the security forces in January and February, and continuing with members of the executive branch of the regional governments – many of which were renewed before the summer – and ministries and agencies in charge of economic and social policies. This gives a clear idea about his priorities: after securing the loyalty of the security apparatus, the second step was to establish links with the local level and give the public a sense of proximity to the executive branch of the government, and then further focus on economic development and a more effective social policy.

Alongside the replacement of these officials, Tokayev began a gradual transformation of large public enterprises, starting with a progressive reshuffling of the Samruk-Kazyna fund, which previously owned the country's main public enterprises. At the end of January 2022, the government passed a reform to reduce the fund's senior management by half and decrease the number of companies it controls. This reduced the influence Nazarbayev's son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev, retained in the fund through some of his associates holding senior positions even after he had resigned from its senior management back in 2011. Nazarbayev's other sons-in-law, who ran two companies belonging to the Samruk-Kazyna group, were dismissed, and Kulibayev stepped down as president of the country's main entrepreneurs' organisation, the Atameken Union. The fate of Nazarbayev's sons-in-law illustrates a more general trend, whereby Nazarbayev's relatives were dismissed or had to step down from official positions they had before January 2022 and, in some instances, to return to the state some of their business assets. Other examples include Nazarbayev's nephew, Samat Abish, who was dismissed from his position as second-in-command in the KNB; and his eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, who left her seat as a senator. The youngest daughter, Aliya Nazarbayeva, had to give up her company, which collected environmental taxes on all imported vehicles and provided her with considerable but highly unpopular revenues.

Other relatives of the former head of state not only had to give up their assets, but faced legal proceedings. Another one of Nazarbayev's nephews, Kairat Satybaldy, suspected of having been one of the instigators of the January events, was sentenced in September to six years in prison for embezzlement at the expense of the telephone operator, Kazakhtelekom (in which he had already relinquished his shares back in March 2022). The businessman, Kairat Boranbayev, whose daughter married a grandson of Nazarbayev, was detained in March and



is also being prosecuted for suspected embezzlement. Finally, an investigation was opened into suspicions of extortion by Nazarbayev's brother, Bolat Nazarbayev, who is said to hold one of the country's largest fortunes (notably from shares in the Kazakhmys mining company, but he is also said to have controlled the country's main marketplaces, as well as the bulk of revenues from the Khorgos border port, through which most trade with China transits).

Tokayev's treatment of Nazarbayev's relatives is said by some observers to send a signal that if they stay out of politics, they will be able to retain some of their business interests. Other observers expected him to continue stripping them of their assets once he was re-elected. It is not clear whether this strategy is designed to reform the system, or if Tokayev intends to adapt it in order to exercise power in the same way Nazarbayev did before him. In any case, these elites still control a large share of Kazakhstan's economy and thus retain the capacity to block the functioning of the country. By signalling through the prosecution of some of the elite that he has the capacity to threaten their positions, without attacking many of the old elite head on, Tokayev avoids raising their opposition while satisfying the expectations of the population. In order to consolidate his power and carry out his announced modernisation of the state, he seems ready to accept at least a temporary form of compromise with the old elite.

However, most political observers agree that Tokayev is forced to rely on existing staff because he does not have his own network within the elite. This probably helped him succeed Nazarbayev in 2019, as he was seen as dependent on the former president and his entourage and therefore loyal to them. Since January 2022, Tokayev has relied on a small number of close allies. The state secretary, Erlan Karin – a political scientist who has advised Tokayev since the early 2000s and headed the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, which is attached to the presidency from 2014 to 2017, and the public radio and television company until 2019 – is said to be the most influential. Others include former diplomat and long-time associate to Tokayev, Murat Nurtleu, who headed the presidential administration after January 2022 and was appointed as foreign minister following the March 2023 parliamentary election; and the deputy head of the presidential administration and former minister of the economy, Timur Suleimenov, a US-trained finance expert with experience in the private sector, who served as a member of the Eurasian Economic Commission from 2012 to 2017. These people now occupy key positions in the political system. Other positions were assigned to senior technocrats on the basis of their experience, but this could also ultimately strengthen their loyalty to Tokayev and thus his own political edge.

While the changes made since January 2022 indicate a willingness to change the functioning of the political system and answer some of the population's demands, the extent of actual change remains limited and Tokayev's motivations and desire for change remain unclear. The limited political change since January 2022 can be explained by Tokayev's caution and limited

margin for manoeuvre due to domestic constraints (first and foremost the need for him to establish his own power base in the system) as well as from the repercussions in Kazakhstan of Russia's war against Ukraine. However, the elections organised in November 2022 and March 2023 were characterised by similarities with previous elections rather than change, despite the stated goal of making them a step towards a "new Kazakhstan". In any case, the population's demands for change do not seem to have been met so far with decisive steps towards reforms on the part of the government.

## Recommendations for the EU

The January 2022 protests and the war in Ukraine have left Kazakhstan in a precarious position, which requires bold policy change alongside a very cautious approach both domestically and in terms of foreign policy. With its clear position on the war in Ukraine and its active diplomacy, Kazakhstan is now clearly on the geopolitical map for most Europeans, and the EU has shown interest in engaging more with the country. However, in devising its policy towards Kazakhstan, the EU should avoid three main traps:

- Firstly, it should not overestimate the willingness or the ability of the Kazakhstani government to distance itself from Russia: even if it were willing to do so, there are a number of objective factors that lead it to have a very cautious approach vis-à-vis its northern neighbour. Kazakhstan should not be pushed into making choices which could endanger its own stability.
- Secondly, it should not underestimate the obstacles towards political change: the slow pace of reforms and the likely limited ambitions of the government in terms of democratisation may generate frustration among parts of the public. But many observers consider that Tokayev is aware of the public's expectations for change and willing to deliver, though the tendency over the last months has been to aim for quick-fixes and populist measures.
- Finally, the EU should not consider Kazakhstan only through the prism of great power competition. Kazakhstan has built ties with various international partners since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and deepened the meaning of its multi-vector foreign policy. The EU would be mistaken to think that the country would come under Chinese influence if Russian influence declines. Kazakhstan has agency and uses it to develop international partnerships. This means that the EU is only one of many possible partners and should build and use its edge smartly.

The EU actually has edge: it is Kazakhstan's biggest trading partner and foreign investor; it

enjoys a rather positive image among the Kazakhstani people, especially among younger generations; it has influence as a norm-setter on a number of issues of direct interest for Kazakhstan (including trade and environmental issues); and it can provide expertise and technical assistance in areas where Kazakhstan urgently needs it. On this basis, the EU should devise the following approach towards Kazakhstan:

## Take Tokayev's reforms seriously

The EU should take President Tokayev at his word on his reformatory intentions and insist, in bilateral meetings between EU member states and Kazakhstan as well as those between Kazakhstan and EU institutions, on the need to carry out reforms and establish functioning state institutions before the end of his mandate. These should include the need for his successor to be designated in a competitive election and not be appointed before being elected. There should be no blank cheque, but some understanding that reversing the shortcomings and abuses of nearly three decades of his predecessor's rule may not happen overnight.

## Insist on transparency

The need for transparency on the events of January 2022 and accountability should continue to be an important message. Complete transparency will probably be difficult to achieve, but government agencies should be able to work with civil society organisations to document the various cases as clearly as possible. The EU could also insist on the need for further cooperation between civil society organisations and government agencies to enhance the space for citizens' information and political participation. The EU-Kazakhstan annual dialogue on human rights could offer an avenue to convey these messages.

## Focus on judicial reform

The judicial system carries great weight at various levels: it should be the main instrument for fighting corruption as well as increasing accountability; and a functioning judiciary is key to give citizens a sense of justice and thus increase their trust in institutions. The re-establishment of a proper constitutional court through the constitutional amendments adopted in June is a first step in this direction. Promoting the rule of law is one of the priority areas for EU cooperation with Kazakhstan between 2021 and 2027. This cooperation should focus specifically on the reform of the judiciary. The EU should offer expertise and technical assistance to the Kazakhstani government to carry out a broader reform of the judiciary. It has a direct interest in doing so, as a functioning and transparent judiciary is key to protecting EU

companies' investments in the country.

## Support a new social and economic strategy

The Kazakhstani authorities need to address the important social and economic demands of the population not only through one-shot charity or populist measures, but by devising a proper strategy regarding key areas like housing, education, healthcare, and transport. In these areas, previous governments have focused on grand prestige projects, marred by widespread misappropriation. Given the demographic challenges the country will continue to face, with very dynamic population growth in the southern regions and a population decrease in the north, as well as rapid urban migration to cities such as Almaty and Astana, these issues need to be addressed urgently and in a systematic manner. The EU and its member states could use their bilateral instruments of cooperation with Kazakhstan to provide advice and assistance on these issues and help Kazakhstan define and carry out a consistent strategy.

## Promote access to independent media

The EU should support independent media and civil society organisations that give access to information regarding the war in Ukraine, as well as EU and Western policies in this context. The online media outlet from Kyrgyzstan, *Kloop*, has begun an initiative to organise trips for Central Asian journalists to Ukraine. The EU and its member states could support similar initiatives for Kazakhstani journalists, given the importance of fighting Russian disinformation in the country. A focus on generating and spreading trusted local information in Russian as well as Kazakh languages is key in this regard.

## Engage with Kazakhstan on international issues, including the implementation of sanctions

Given Kazakhstan's geopolitical situation and its willingness to affirm distinct foreign policy positions, the EU and its member states should engage in regular, deepened political dialogue on international issues and regional crises with the country. This would increase the EU's understanding of Kazakhstan's positions, allow both to share insights about the positions of various regional stakeholders, and help keep Kazakhstan committed to a rules-based international order. The EU should also make it clear that it expects Kazakhstan to act as a responsible partner and not help Russia bypass EU sanctions. The EU could offer assistance to Kazakhstan to put the necessary monitoring mechanisms in place, provided Kazakhstan clearly commits to not giving Russia back-channels to EU sanctions.

## Conclusion

Change is under way in Kazakhstan, both domestically and in its geopolitical standing. The two sides are interrelated: the outcome of the war in Ukraine will fundamentally determine Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia and its other international partners, but also its ability to conduct social, economic, and political reforms. Conversely, these reforms are a prerequisite to building a more stable, fair, and transparent political system, thus reducing the possibilities for external actors, including Russia, to take advantage of Kazakhstan's domestic vulnerabilities. The EU can help Kazakhstan to overcome this critical juncture by encouraging and helping it towards genuine domestic transformation.

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[1] The findings of this policy brief are based on a series of interviews conducted by the author with leading experts, journalists, and NGOs, as well as members of the public and people close to decision-makers during a field trip to Almaty and Astana between October and November 2022. Not all sources agreed to be personally quoted.

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