

# The January Crisis in Kazakhstan?

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## Key Points

- While the January protests in Kazakhstan initially began as a demonstration of public dissatisfaction, they were likely used by certain actors to achieve their own purposes.
- President Putin seems to be the biggest winner with his strategic message, “the savior of Kazakhstan” and the one who “deals the cards” in the post-Soviet bloc.
- The January riots in Kazakhstan were probably part of Russia’s broader campaign to improve its influence over Central Asia.
- History will also judge President Tokayev whether his decisions were justified and dictated by the *raison d'état* and concern for the citizens, or if it was a battle for the throne in competition with former President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

## Overview

On January 2, 2022, people took to the streets to protest high fuel prices in Zhanaozen and Aktau, major cities in the Mangystau region of western Kazakhstan. Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) doubled its price from an equivalent of 11 to 23 cents (USD). Two days later, on January 4, the demonstrations spread across the country to Almaty, Atyrau, Aktobe, Uralsk, Taraz, Shymkent, Kyzylorda, Karaganda and to the capital of Nur-Sultan. Some governments buildings were torched and there was significant damage and destruction, especially in the inner cities of these locations. On January 5, the president imposed a two-week state of emergency, ending January 19, in three regions: Mangystau, Almaty and Nur-Sultan. Mr. Tokayev also ordered law enforcement agencies to “open fire without warning”.<sup>1</sup> On the same day, the president accepted the resignation of the entire governing cabinet. Its members should serve until a new cabinet is formed.<sup>2</sup> To meet one of the protesters’ demands, some price caps were introduced, including the LPG price, which has returned to the pre-protest levels. Allegedly, the president fired the ex-president’s nephew from the post of the Deputy Head of the Security Council, and later he took over the function of the Head of the Council, thus divesting Nursultan Nazarbayev of the post.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eloise Barry, “Kazakhstan Is Facing Its Most Dramatic Political Upheaval in 30 Years. Here's What to Know”, *TIME*, January 6, 2022, Kazakhstan Protests: What to Know | Time, (accessed on January 7, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The TASS Agency, “Kazakh president accepts government’s resignation — decree”, *TASS Russian News Agency*, January 4, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1383927>, (accessed on January 5, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Meiramgul Kussainova, “Former Kazakh president’s nephew dismissed from National Security Committee”, *Anadolu Agency*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/former-kazakh-president-s-nephew-dismissed-from-national-securitycommittee/2476029>, (accessed on January 17, 2022).

Initially, the police were used to disperse the crowds, but when the situation deteriorated President Tokayev requested assistance of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on January 5 by using Article 4 of the Treaty to launch a counter-terrorist operation. As a result, more than two thousand CSTO troops were deployed across the country, with most of them from Russia, then from Belarus, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. On Friday, Jan 7, Armenia decided to send about 70 soldiers.<sup>4</sup> The rapid and effective deployment proved the high degree of mobility of the CSTO forces, as they were deployed within two days (on January 6-7) to the different destinations across the country. On January 6, Kazakhstan's former chief of the National Security Committee (*rus. Комитет Национальной Безопасности – КНБ*) was detained over treason. After talks between Jinping and Tokayev on January 7, China declared its readiness to assist the Kazakh government both financially and militarily, while stating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) was prepared to counter terrorism. In total, the clashes left 225 dead, including 19 security personnel. Reportedly, one of them was decapitated.<sup>5</sup> There were approximately 800 police and servicemen injured and about 5,800 people were detained, along with a sizable number of foreigners. On January 8, President Tokayev stated that the situation was under control.

### **Assessment**

**Why did this happen now?** The price increase came into force on Jan 1. However, the trend began in January 2019 with the phased transition to electronic trading for LPG. The idea was to gradually end the subsidizing of prices for domestic fuel consumers and to allow the market to dictate prices instead.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it wasn't much of a surprise for the citizens. Instead, it could be a pretext to fuel the already ignited public discontent against those who pursue their own goals beyond the living standard of Kazakhs, and to achieve those goals in the shadow of aggressive crowds.

Over the past years, Kazakhstan seemed to be overlooked by international attention, giving the impression of a stable and dynamically developing country with its multi-vector foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> The situation in Ukraine, which has recently become even more heated, has caused the interest in Kazakhstan to weaken even further. The second week of 2022 proved to be particularly important for diplomacy. Several high-level meetings were held in Geneva, Vienna, and Brussels, mainly in three fora: Moscow-Washington, Russia-NATO, and RussiaEU. The agenda included work on the Kremlin's newest non-expansion security pact with NATO, including the Ukraine crises, and Russia's ban on the presence of western troops in Central Asia.

**Was it orchestrated or was it purely a domestic riot?** The Kazakhs have reasons to be dissatisfied and heartbroken. Over the years, the sins of the administration become more visible to the society – kleptocracy, nepotism, and income inequality are well known to Kazakhs. Although Kazakhstan is an oil-rich country, the

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<sup>4</sup> Marek Grzegorzczak, "What is the CSTO? And what exactly is it doing in Kazakhstan?", *The Emerging Europe*, January 7, 2022, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/what-exactly-is-the-cstos-role-in-kazakhstan/>, (accessed on January 9, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian staff and agencies, "Kazakhstan authorities raise death toll from unrest to 225", *The Guardian*, January 15, 2022, Kazakhstan authorities raise death toll from unrest to 225 | Kazakhstan | The Guardian, (accessed on January 17, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan explainer: Why did fuel prices spike, bringing protesters out onto the streets?", *eurasianet*, January 4, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-explainer-why-did-fuel-prices-spike-bringing-protesters-out-onto-the-streets>, (accessed on January 7, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Szymon Wiśniewski, "Wielowektorowa polityka zagraniczna. Czyli czego możemy nauczyć się od Kazachstanu", *Nowy Ład*, September 4, 2020, <https://nlad.pl/wielowektorowa-polityka-zagraniczna-czyli-czego-mozemy-nauczyc-sie-od-kazachstanu/>, (accessed on September 23, 2021).

minimum wage is less than the equivalent of around \$100 a month, and oil sale revenue doesn't necessarily reach people's pockets.<sup>8</sup>

The second postulate of the demonstrators is said to have been to disempower former president Nursultan Nazarbayev once and for all: "the old men must go!", as the crowds shouted. The former president ruled the country for nearly 30 years, and even if he resigned as president in 2019 and as leader of the ruling party in 2021, it is believed that the current president – Mr. Tokayev, was handpicked by him and Mr. Nazarbayev ruled from behind. Antipathy towards the former president is related to Kazakhs' dissatisfaction with the growing Chinese presence in the country. Kazakhstan's sizable debt to China, the growing number of Chinese initiatives, the prevalence of Chinese products, the massive outflow of Kazakh oil to China on adverse terms, as well as the repressions of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, strengthen Kazakh society's fear of Chinese expansion.<sup>9</sup> The recent riots have targeted Mr. Nazarbayev, who is seen as the main culprit for the "selling out" of the country to Beijing. **Who is behind it, and what is the goal?** Analyzing the actions, behavior, and narration of the various players, one may conclude that the unrest in Kazakhstan was used to advance their own interests, which was not necessarily in line with the *raison d'état* or dictated by the improvement of living conditions and well-being of the people of Kazakhstan. President Tokayev accused "foreign figures" of inciting unrest and the protesters of being financially motivated coup plotters.<sup>10</sup> The President ordered an extensive investigation. At the same time, there is a quite frequent opinion among experts and journalist that Mr. Tokayev used the riots to get rid of the former President Nazarbayev.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the power struggle and other issues that divide the two politicians, they have different tribal backgrounds, and this should not be excluded from the analysis of the January crisis' motives. Mr. Nazarbayev belongs to one the most important southern clans, the *Šapyrašy*, while Mr. Tokayev belongs to the smaller, poorer, and therefore less important *Kushik* clan.<sup>12</sup> As the protests spread, President Tokayev saw his opportunity to dispose the former governor of his power, together with his clan brothers. Presumably, some of the commanders of the armed forces and security forces, as well as some other people in power, remained loyal to the former president. Some significant forces were recruited to violently expand the demonstrations in Almaty and in other vital places across the country.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Mr. Tokayev found himself in situation where there was no other option but to ask President Putin for help.

Seemingly, President Putin is the biggest winner of the latest events in Kazakhstan, "a savior of Kazakhstan", and defender against a "foreign-backed terrorist uprising", as he self-proclaimed on January 10 and assured leaders of

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<sup>8</sup> Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan explainer: Why did fuel prices spike, bringing protesters out onto the streets?", *eurasianet*, January 4, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-explainer-why-did-fuel-prices-spike-bringing-protesters-out-onto-the-streets>, (accessed on January 7, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Temur Umarov, "What's Behind Protests Against China in Kazakhstan?", *The Carnegie Moscow Center*, October 30, 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/80229>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> AFP, "Kazakh leader rejects talks, tells forces to 'shoot to kill'", *Gulf Times*, January 10, 2022, Kazakh leader rejects talks, tells forces to 'shoot to kill' ([gulf-times.com](http://gulf-times.com)), (accessed on January 13, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Putz, "Kazakhstan's Tokayev Orders Troops to 'Shoot to Kill Without Warning'", *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2022, Kazakhstan's Tokayev Orders Troops to 'Shoot to Kill Without Warning' – The Diplomat, (accessed on January 10, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Pekka Hakala, "Venäläinen historioitsija yhdistää tekstissään Kazakstanin levottomuudet klaanien valta-taisteluihin ja mielen-osoittajien järjestelmälliseen värväämiseen", *Helsingin Sanomat*, January 9, 2022, Venäläinen historioitsija yhdistää tekstissään Kazakstanin levottomuudet klaanien valtataisteluihin ja mielenosoittajien järjestelmälliseen värväämiseen - Ulkomaat | HS.fi, (accessed on January 11, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

other ex-Soviet states that a Moscow-led alliance would stand for them as well.<sup>14</sup> He made his point regarding his area of influence through a successful military intervention.

The Russian parliament (*Duma*) proposed to deploy peacekeepers in Kazakhstan on a permanent basis. The use of the CSTO alarmed the public and some governments. It also ignited a verbal scramble between Secretary Antony Blinken and Minister Sergei Lavrov over how both the U.S. and Russia are using their “peacekeepers” and for what purpose. Some journalist and experts also noted that the State’s border integrity is at stake. As the CSTO troops flood the country to “stabilize” the situation, one potential outcome is very relevant – the use of domestic turmoil in Kazakhstan as a pretext for Russia’s conquest of the northern territories. Russian’s revanchism is hardly a secret, and even if Moscow's power status has been centralized over Ukraine, Russian nationalists have never shied away from believing that a significant chunk of northern Kazakhstan belongs to Russia.

The possibility of inspiring other countries by the protests in Kazakhstan is not without significance among the CSTO states. The problems underlying public discontent are common in the post-Soviet bloc, including Russia.

The rapidly rising prices of staple commodities goods are reflected in growing social resentment and the potential for protest is high. Through the violent and ruthless use of CSTO forces to solve an internal problem, President Putin’s signal may also be aimed at curbing potential protest in his own country and in the countries within the scope of his power ambitions. It is believed that President Putin often communicates certain issues through the mouth of President Lukashenko, who recently named Uzbekistan as another target country for 'terrorist attacks', among the post-Soviet republics.<sup>16</sup> This might suggest that the January crisis in Kazakhstan was part of a larger campaign by President Putin to improve Russia's position in Central Asia.

A fugitive banker – Mukhtar Ablyazov, a man with several criminal convictions, including life in prison, has recently proclaimed himself the leader of the opposition and protests in Kazakhstan.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely, though, that a person with a criminal record such as Mr. Ablyazov, including embezzlement of public funds, would be able to calm Kazakh’s hearts and lead them to be bright, democratic, and prosperous future. It is more likely Mr. Ablyazov is another who would like to use the opportunity to achieve personal goals.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Former Russian MP, Mr. Ruslan Balbek, members of Daesh and Gülenist Terrorist Groups (FETÖ) were behind the riots. Mr. Balbek bases his theory on their modus operandi – brutal killings and absurd demands. The strength of his arguments has yet to be examined in the course of the investigation. More wellfounded, though, is that a mastermind behind the riots likely used proxies as the enablers who, while blending into the

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<sup>14</sup> Tamara Vaal, “Putin Claims Victory in Defending Kazakhstan From Revolt”, *Reuters*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-01-10/kazakhstan-detains-7-939-people-over-unrest>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Evgeny Finkel, Janetta Azarieva, Yitzhak Brudny, “Kazakhstan reminds Putin what he really needs to fear”, *The Washington Post*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/06/kazakhstan-is-reminding-putin-what-he-really-needs-fear/>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> The TASS Agency, “Kazakh crisis may occur in Uzbekistan, if lessons aren’t learned, warns Lukashenko”, *TASS Russian News Agency*, January 10, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1385763>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Daily Sabah with agencies, “Kazakh dissident Ablyazov casts himself as leader of mass protests”, *Daily Sabah*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com>.

<sup>18</sup> Antonio Alonso Marcos, “Mukhtar Ablyazov: from criminal to opposition’s democratic leader?”, *The Diplomat*, May 22, 2018, <https://thediplomatinspain.com/en/2018/05/mukhtar-ablyazov-from-criminal-to-oppositions-democratic-leader/>, (accessed on January 13, 2022).

crowds and fueling rage of the mobs, were able to achieve the mastermind's goals, whatever they were.<sup>19</sup> The use of the proxies alone is obviously not a new tactic and, unfortunately, it cannot be unambiguously determined who the mastermind was behind it, as a practice as such is attributable to both Russia and the West.<sup>20</sup> Apprehension of Mr. Karim Masimov – the former chief of KNB based on accusations is that he facilitated the spread of disorder and the seizure of key government buildings, including the *KNB* headquarters – the most secure facility in the country. Also, the *KNB* had overlooked militant camps in mountainous areas and the withdrawal of security forces from the area of Almaty Airport before protesters took control.<sup>21</sup>

During the ongoing unrest, there were reports of price turmoil in the cryptocurrency (specifically Bitcoin<sup>22</sup>, as Kazakhstan is the world's second-biggest crypto-mining country after the U.S.<sup>23</sup>) and fossil fuels markets.<sup>24</sup>

Speculators around the world are willing to seize any opportunity for financial gain. Among press reports and journalistic conjectures, this sounds rather arbitrary, but at this stage this hypothesis cannot be ruled out and it should be investigated to what extent such an action could have taken place on the occasion of the protests in Kazakhstan. Some crude oil prices are reported to have jumped sharply<sup>25</sup> during the January protest in Kazakhstan. Some journalist report that production at Kazakhstan's biggest field, *Tengiz*, as well as some crucial lines of communications were disrupted by contractors supporting protesters. The majority (75%) of the *Tengiz* production is owned by U.S. enterprises (Chevron Texaco – 50%, and ExxonMobil – 25%).<sup>26</sup> It is not that clear, though, whether it was related to the situation in Kazakhstan or what the real impacts were, if any. During the years of its independence, Kazakhstan has attracted hundreds of billions USD worth of foreign investment (FDI) from more than 120 countries.<sup>27</sup> In order to investigate the motives and originators of the riots, it should be

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<sup>19</sup> Daily Sabah with agencies, "Daesh, Gülenists behind riot in Kazakhstan: Former Russian MP Balbek", *Daily Sabah*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/daesh-gulenists-behind-riot-in-kazakhstan-former-russian-mp-balbek>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Finian Cunningham, "U.S. Proxy War Against Russia in Ukraine: The Afghanistan-Syria Redux Option", *The Strategic Culture Foundation*, December 18, 2021, U.S. Proxy War Against Russia in Ukraine: The Afghanistan-Syria Redux Option — Strategic Culture ([strategicculture.org](http://strategicculture.org)), (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Daily Sabah with agencies, "Kazakhstan's ex-domestic intelligence chief detained over treason", *Daily Sabah*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakhstans-ex-domestic-intelligence-chief-detained-over-treason>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Bitcoin prices decreased approximately 13% during the riots in Kazakhstan (i.e., from January 1 till January 10, 2022), *Google Finance*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.google.com/finance/quote/BTC-USD>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Simon Long, "From a Birkin bag to bitcoin: Kazakhstan's protests in six objects", *The Economist*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/01/12/from-a-birkin-bag-to-bitcoin-kazakhstans-protests-in-six-objects>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Crude oil prices increased approximately 5% during the riots in Kazakhstan (i.e., from January 1 till January 6, 2022), *oilprice.com*, January 12, 2022, <https://oilprice.com/oil-price-charts/>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> AFP, "Oil prices jump over Kazakhstan unrest, while uranium less affected", *France24*, January 9, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220109-oil-prices-jump-over-kazakhstan-unrest-while-uranium-less-affected>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Ron Bousso, "Output at Kazakhstan's Tengiz oilfield being restored gradually – Chevron", *Reuters*, January 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/output-kazakhstans-tengiz-oilfield-being-restored-gradually-chevron-2022-01-09/>, (accessed on January 12, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> By staff report in BUSINESS, "Kazakh Government Changes Up Investment Policy Approaches to Attract New Investors Amid Pandemic", *THE ASTANA TIMES*, October 5, 2020, <https://astanatimes.com/2020/10/kazakh-government-changes-up-investment-policy-approachesto-attract-new-investors-amid-pandemic/>, (accessed on September 23, 2021).

remembered that countries including the U.S., the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France, as well as Russia and China, have their own vested interest in Kazakhstan – once invested, needs to be protected.

**Recommendations**

- Analyze the motives of the January riots.
- Based on this analysis, increase or bolster security cooperation with Kazakhstan to gain more influence in Central Asia region.