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Events in Kazakhstan's Almaty of January 2022 – Grass-root Revolt or Terrorism Inspired Insurgency?

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Abstract

While the world in March 2022 is immersed in yet another military conflict on the territory of ex-Soviet Union, the Year of the Tiger started to show from its very beginning that solving various disputes is fastest through means of violence, and its subsequent suppression by means of power. This time it was on the territory of Kazakhstan, and the cause for outbreak of violence in Almaty and elsewhere between January 5 and 7, unseen in this magnitude so far in Kazakhstan, may have been benign in its nature – ever growing prices of fuel, exponentiated by ever expanding poverty gap in Kazakh society.

However, the instantaneous and extremely tough measures taken by the country's leadership – coupled with immediate involvement of military forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization – indicated that much more than a mere overruling of popular dissent was at stake, and in order to attain its objective to silence the opposition, a clear and robust message had to be sent across.

Kazakhstan, in its 30 years of independence, has probably not been utterly immune to various types of disputes stemming from uneven distribution of wealth – certainly a long-term rule by one and only Nursultan Nazarbaev brought some “guarantees” of stability – but the extend of chaos, public disruption and the amount of blood spilled during the countermanding of rebellion indicates that the relatively peaceful period of country's post-Soviet development may be over and the oil and uranium rich nation needs to contend with both foreign interference as well as internal changes.

The events classified by some as insurgency, by some as a terrorist attempt to overthrow the local or perhaps even national government, and by some as a trivial fight between the tribal clans aiming at control of the nation's riches and the future, may have lasted not long – everything happened almost as unexpectedly and swiftly as a squall coming out of nowhere – but were a testimony to the fact that the political and economic status quo in any of the post-Soviet republics is not a long-term matter, and instead it can change at a whim of those having an access to both means and desires to alter the established ways. This article examines the vari-

ous viewpoints of both the possible causes of Almaty events of January 2022, as well as future ramifications for security status in the region, and perhaps also beyond.

Mentre il mondo nel marzo 2022 è immerso nell'ennesimo conflitto militare sul territorio dell'ex Unione Sovietica, l'Anno della Tigre ha iniziato a mostrare fin dall'inizio che la soluzione di varie controversie è più veloce attraverso la violenza, e la sua successiva soppressione per mezzo del potere. Questa volta si trovava nel territorio del Kazakistan, e la causa delle proteste ad Almaty il 5 gennaio potrebbe essere stata di natura benigna – prezzi sempre crescenti del carburante, a causa del divario di povertà sempre crescente nella società kazaka.

Tuttavia, le misure istantanee ed estremamente dure prese dalla leadership del Paese – insieme al coinvolgimento immediato delle forze militari dell'Organizzazione del Trattato di sicurezza collettiva – ha indicato che era in gioco molto più di un semplice annullamento del dissenso popolare, e per raggiungere il suo obiettivo di mettere a tacere l'opposizione, doveva essere inviato un messaggio chiaro e forte.

Non si può dire che il Kazakistan, nei suoi 30 anni di indipendenza, sia stato immune da vari tipi di contenziosi derivanti dalla distribuzione diseguale della ricchezza – certamente un governo a lungo termine di un solo e solo Nursultan Nazarbaev ha portato “garanzie” di stabilità – ma indica l'estensione del caos, il disordine pubblico e la quantità di sangue versato durante la revoca della ribellione che il periodo relativamente pacifico dello sviluppo post-sovietico del Paese potrebbe essere terminato e la nazione ricca di petrolio e uranio deve fare i conti sia con l'interferenza straniera che con i cambiamenti interni.

Gli eventi classificati da alcuni come ribellione, da alcuni come tentativo terroristico di rovesciare il governo locale o forse anche nazionale, e da alcuni come una banale lotta tra i clan tribali che mirano al controllo del futuro della nazione, potrebbe essere durato non a lungo – tutto accadde quasi inaspettatamente e rapidamente come una burrasca proveniente dal nulla – ma erano una testimonianza del fatto che lo status quo politico ed economico in una qualsiasi delle repubbliche post-sovietiche non è una questione a lungo termine, e invece può cambiare per un capriccio di coloro che hanno accesso sia ai mezzi che ai desideri di alterare i modi stabiliti. Questo articolo esamina i vari punti di vista di entrambe le possibili cause degli eventi di Almaty del gennaio 2022, così come le future ramificazioni per lo stato di sicurezza nella regione, e forse anche oltre.

Keywords

Kazakhstan, Central Asia, Terrorism, Insurgency, Regional Security, Coup d'état

1. Introduction – Mixed Signals as to the Underlining Causes of the Countrywide Revolt

Although the majority of Kazakhstan's population (being constitutionally a secular state) follows a non-denominational Islam (over 70%), the country has a considerable Slavic populace, and hence more than a quarter of the nations' inhabitants following Eastern Orthodox Christianity usually remains in a festive mode well into mid-January (Orthodox Christmas and the New Year falling onto January 7 and January 14, respectively). It was therefore with a rude awakening for many to witness utter disorder followed by a lack of securi-

ty forces' response to apparent attack on both administrative and general city's buildings and properties in the morning of January 5 in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city and, until 1997, the nation's capital. And it was even more appalling to consequently witness the crashing of the dissent with brute military force including the troops brought in from abroad. The city and most other parts of Kazakhstan came to watch events unprecedented in the country to date, and dubbed "Bloody January", the affair faded away little less than two weeks later, following a swift CSTO military intervention and uncompromising re-taking of control of Almaty before any noticeable shockwaves reached the capital Nursultan.

For most of the international observers, the news about street protests unrolling into armed attacks on city's municipality office as well as widespread marauding and attacks on property, did not have a point of reference – why Almaty, why Kazakhstan, and why so early into the new year – these were the questions asked. While it was definitely too early to understand what was happening, roughly four possible directions (each being beneficial to some as a theory, or detrimental to some in narrative) were being presented across international social media and news platforms:

1.1 Theory of direct Russian involvement, including orchestrating the revolt and subsequent sending in the CSTO troops

The immediate call of Kazakhstan's president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to turn to military forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization was essentially interpreted (amid already heightened tension around building up of Russian armed forces close to Ukrainian borders) as Russians most likely rehearsing the entry of its troops into Ukraine, with Almaty being an easy and useful "training material". Therefore the attention seemed to have shifted towards the actual entry of CSTO troops onto the territory of Kazakhstan, rather than the revolt and public chaos themselves.

1.2 Theory of Western interference as a prelude to new episode of Great Power conflict

Another theme that immediately found a number of grateful followers (resonating with the distant topic of Great Game played by Western powers in the region of Central Asia for centuries), that is was Western intelligence operation trying to destabilize the Russian Eastern front. In some of the early announcements of president Tokayev, it even seemed that he was referring to interfering Western elements as those causing the havoc in his homeland – which also was a useful narrative for Tokayev already becoming, by necessity, closer to Russia.

1.3 Theory of internal power struggle, visible only to those within the system

Mindful of the country's tribal past, where each "khan" or "bey" had its place and all "games" had to be played according to their wealth and power distribution, many immediately seized on the notion that it could well be the former president Nursultan Nazarbaev himself bankrolling and orchestrating the revolt. Several factors seemed to have been in favor of this theory – as Nazarbaev is frail and sick, he understands once he is dead his eldest daughter will not only not become the president (claimed as an original agreement between Nazarbaev and Tokaev at time of "temporary" handing over the country's rule to Tokaev in 2019) – and therefore he needed to "speed up" the handover back to original "first family's" hands. A number of analyses appeared online, articulating all Nazarbaev's foreign properties (amassed wealth during his 30-year-reign, that is), as well as domestic resources and assets that will be in the interest of Nazarbaev clan to "protect".

1.4 Terrorism inspired insurgency and outright attempt of coup d'état

Quite from the onset of the Almaty events, president Tokaev made sure to divert all attention to both foreign elements inciting the insurgency accompanied by looting as well as domestic "terrorists" that were promptly taken off the streets and detained in unpublicized locations. The government officials made certain references to Islamic radicals playing a role, as well as the role of citizens of neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (some sources mentioning as many as 20,000 foreign "fighters" taking part in the events), but solid empirical evidence is yet to be obtained – although anyone familiar with the Central Asian region realities will understand that likelihood of rogue fundamentalists' participation, wanting to take advantage of a possible power, is real.¹

¹ Author attempted to corroborate allegations of involvement on part of Kyrgyz and Uzbek nationals – as some news outlets reported Kazakhstan's government stance that "thousands" of armed foreign terrorists were behind the Almaty insurgency. In the wording of some of these assertions, a certain attempt to accuse respective governments in sanctioning the riots in Almaty, although Kyrgyzstan in question is itself a member of CSTO and subsequently took actions supporting the incumbent Kazakh government in suppressing the violent dissent. Involvement of a state actor Uzbekistan in clandestine support of insurgents is also unlikely – given both the political neutrality of Uzbekistan that seems to play an integral part in its current government's approach to international issues, as well as clear support of Uzbekistan's leadership to president Tokaev. Nevertheless, on part of Kyrgyzstan, a former presidential adviser was consulted – who not only refuted claims that "thousands of Kyrgyz citizens may have been involved" – for one,

As with most of the geopolitical and socioeconomic issues distinctive to Central Asian region, it is probably a mix of all above – only the time will tell, but no conflict in this region goes unutilized by the multitude of players and stakeholders. Author will not be touching upon the issue of influence of Turkey in this essay, but it can be imagined that as part of Turkey's Pan-Turkism movement – at times bordering at vividly expressed desires to revive the Ottoman Empire – Turkey does have her own position and intentions, and it would only be a matter of time when the country's aspirations would crystallize in a form of direct involvement.

Let us examine some of these theses as both to their likelihood as well as consequent impact on further development of Kazakhstan's geopolitical vectors – and what lessons can be drawn not only for Kazakhstan's elites and grass-root population, but also for the country's neighbors.

2. Precursory Occurrences of Popular Dissent in Kazakhstan's History

In the 30 years of country's independence, Kazakhstan managed to stay away from mainstream political violence, in stark contrast from its neighbors Kyrgyzstan (regular mass protests and uprising claiming a heavy toll on both human lives and property) and to some extent Uzbekistan (with occurrences of violence close to ethnic cleansing towards the fall of the Soviet Union in Fergana Valley, and the notorious 2005 Andijan massacre). Kazakhstan's post-Soviet period of development does not also compare to that of Tajikistan, engulfed in a full-fledged civil war that dragged for 5 years between 1992 and 1997. The country's composition and interaction with the internation-

citing the ongoing border closure measures related to COVID restrictions (and therefore a physical inability of Kyrgyz citizens to enter Kazakhstan for the purpose of either orchestrating or participating in the insurgency); for two, the actual individuals who may have been arrested in Almaty carrying Kyrgyz identification were proven to be bystanders “being in a wrong place at a wrong time” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan even asked for these individuals to be located in detention and released immediately); and for three, Kyrgyz nationals being already too busy with complaints against their own government and incumbent president Sadyr Japarov's inability to take the country out of an economic impasse. On part of Uzbekistan, a former long-term ambassador of its Foreign Ministry, active in the region of post-Soviet Union, commented that currently the Uzbek authorities control strictly involvement of its citizens abroad in unsanctioned or outright illegal activities (referring to practice of curtailing of any Uzbek citizen, suspected in general radicalism, in his travel abroad), and if there were any Uzbek nationals involved in Almaty riots as deliberately deployed insurgents, they would have absolutely nowhere to go or return. Besides, any publicly available information on the identities of those killed in action or detained was limited, and in general not sought after by the international community.

al community based on abundance of natural resources does not also come close to the political, economic and social anatomy of Turkmenistan, deeply lingering in a North Korea-style of isolationism and utter disregard for most concepts of civil society.

While the regular suppression of opposition figures and human rights activists in Kazakhstan is not rare, the only major violent incident that had roots in deepening social divide caused by rising inequalities among the populace is so-called Zhanaozen massacre of December 2011, when anywhere from 15 people upwards were killed by riot police with orders to shoot to kill during unrest on the country Independence Day. The protests came about as a direct consequence of Zhanaozen strike among oilfield workers earlier in May and consequent dismissal of about 1,000 employees of Ozenmunaigas oil field, and in January 2022 it was again Zhanaozen in Mangystau region along the Caspian shore where the inhabitants took to the streets protesting increasing prices of essential products and fuel, corruption and human rights abuses. Although in 2022 the demonstrations in Zhanaozen and nearby Aktau proceeded without masses resorting to violence, the rest of the country took a different path and as a result of direct deployment of domestic military and CSTO special forces, hundreds of Kazakh citizens lost their lives.

While the objective of this discourse is not to dwell into issues of Islamic radicalism, uncertainties created by unstable Afghanistan in Taliban hands, as well as long history of various extremist elements making their way into every aspect of life in Central Asian region do make Islamic factor the one that needs to be reckoned with. As Baizakova and McDermott note:

Kazakhstan, being the most stable and safe country in the region, witnessed a series of alleged extremist terrorist acts since 2011. The number of Islamic activists has grown, particularly in rural areas. As an official response to that, Kazakhstan continues to improve its legislation on combating terrorism and extremism. However, since this experience of domestic “political violence” in 2011-12, the country has suffered no major incidents.²

3. Recapitulation of January 5 Events in Almaty

We refer to the events in Almaty as of “January 5 Events” because this was the day when the relatively peaceful protests already taking place for 2-3 days, suddenly became gravely violent, and in striking contrast to local masses calling for betterment of their livelihoods new groupings appeared almost out of nowhere and started pillaging the city. While most of the city’s population was

² Baizakova Z. and McDermott R.N. (2015), *Reassessing the Barriers to Islamic Radicalization in Kazakhstan*, pp. xi-xii.

not able to either comprehend the timing or grasp the full extent of sudden riots and armed looting, the subsequent numerous reports by international journalists entering Almaty through Nursultan (operations at Almaty airport were suspended on January 5, amidst the destruction of its facilities such as ATMs and duty free shops) within the next 3-4 weeks indicate, that not all inhabitants of the city had knowledge of violent disturbance being planned or being in the stage of execution. Initial protests originating on January 2 in the city of Zhanaozen, which witnessed oil sector workers' strike in 2011, quickly spread not only to Almaty, but most of regional administrative centers around Kazakhstan. While the earliest displays of dissent did try to draw attention to steep increases in prices of essential goods, with a particular attention to liquefied gas used as a fuel, very soon the protests grew into political outcry, and then loud slogans disappeared and instead a full-fledge armed violence took to the streets. In the major address to the nation by the president Tokaev on January 7 (primarily in Russian language), he was quick to call the perpetrators "terrorists, armed bandits and criminals", referring to "20,000 individuals armed, highly specialized and prepared in terrorism and urban warfare", arising from both foreign and domestic ranks. The insurgents' "preparedness" apparently displayed itself also in prompt dissemination of fake news and media manipulation (the country-wide landline internet access was disconnected immediately in the aftermath of January 5 tolls on the streets of Almaty, but reinstated by January 7). The president, while agreeing to placing a price cap on liquefied gas for next 6 months, dismissed any notion of "negotiating" with the insurgents, and instead ordered to shoot to kill anyone resembling an armed protester, with the need to "utterly destroy" the enemies. Referring to CSTO troops, including 3,000 Russian paratroopers already deployed on January 6, he elaborately thanked leaders of Armenia (currently holding chairmanship of CSTO), Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – all participating in "restoring law and order in Kazakhstan", and then went on expressing exceptional gratitude to Russian president Putin, for adhering to principles of collective security. He also mentioned leaders of China, Uzbekistan and Turkey, as well as United Nations, as being thankful for their support of legitimate Kazakhstan government.

I believe Tokaev's mention of China and Uzbekistan warrants some elaboration – by January 6, when the CSTO military intervention was already imminent, signals were received that prior to consulting CSTO leadership and Putin himself, Tokaev spent time speaking with both Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev, apparently voicing a request to consider to send in their respective armed forces to quell the growing armed dissent. Reportedly, both foreign leaders politely declined the request – China ostensibly wary of the fact that a Chinese military intervention cracking down

on nominally Muslim Kazakhs may not go down well with the West, already regularly criticizing China's approach to their domestic "Uighur problem". President of Uzbekistan, well aware of the fact that his tenure from 2016 to date has been marked with international success in attracting foreign investments into Uzbekistan, gradual full opening of the country to the world as opposed to years of his predecessor's seclusion, and gaining a reputation of being neutral enough not to encroach upon his neighbors' affairs, also rejected the idea of his country's forces getting involved in clearly Kazakhstan's internal strife – and perhaps did even remember the international uproar caused by Uzbek special security forces gaining notoriety for effectiveness for their "take no hostage" approach in liquidating a 2005 revolt in Andijan.³

It was by January 3, when some of the regular inhabitants of Almaty (who may have been joined by people from neighboring villages) took to the streets in solidarity with their Zhanaozen compatriots, criticizing mainly the current economic course of the country's leadership reflected in decreasing standards of life. While about 20 protesters were arrested on January 3, another 100 of local inhabitants participating in the mass dissent were detained on January 4. It should be noted that most of the social media calls to gather publicly up to that time were encouraging explicitly peaceful protests, without reference to any violent outburst of emotions. The several thousands of predominantly young people that took to the streets were mostly shouting economic slogans, with understandably underlining tones that the current government needs to take steps for improvement. By January 4 night, however, the masses of people essentially paralyzed the main road arteries of the city, and clashes with law enforcement started to take place. Through the multitude of footages that made it onto internet before the landline connections were severed indicate that the leaders heading the groupings in the crowds are heard to call for "resolution of issues through discussions" and explicitly instructing "not to touch each other" and "not to damage any cars in the way", as well as "not to burn anything". Obviously wary of the possible methods of police and law enforcement forces, many protesters also caution not to engage in violence because "tomorrow they [the government] will accuse us [the protesters] of inciting violence and destruction". At the same time, with the largest crowd gathering on the square in front of the city's municipality administration, nobody from the city's administration even attempted to come forward and start a dialogue, although the crowd was heard calling for the region's governor to come out (which shortly changed into calls for the governor to be sacked). The law enforcement did start to apply smoke grenades and tear gas and the

³ The fact of President Tokaev's approach to China and Uzbekistan at the onset of the crisis being provided by an intelligence source.

crowds started to disperse. The presence of youngsters on the streets of Almaty continued into morning of January 5, when apparently the police in riot gear, many of them positioned on the roofs of police stations, tried in vain to diffuse accumulated mass of people, with possible application of fire arms resulting in injuries and deaths among the demonstrators. The mob then started to move onto critical government buildings, such as Almaty office of National Security Committee or local police academy – and by that time, the law enforcement personnel started to withdraw, or outright run away. Sometimes before the noon of January 5 the most violent attacks started to take place, and some of the footages clearly shows the change in groups' objectives as well as behavior.

In early hours of January 5, president Tokaev, having declared emergency situation in Almaty (in addition to Mangystau Region on the Caspian Shore), spoke in a televised address, noting no preparedness to compromise on public order. He dismissed the Cabinet, and swiftly took over as the Chairman of the Security Council replacing Nursultan Nazarbaev. One of the most notable additional moves was a dismissal and subsequent arrest of several prominent commanders of the feared National Security Committee (KNB), including its chairman Karim Massimov, an ethnic Uyghur and long-time staunch supporter of Nursultan Nazarbaev, having served also as his Prime Minister. Massimov, who was outright accused of preparing the coup d'état, and is apparently awaiting trial for high treason, was during Nazarbaev rule often mentioned as a possible successor in country's presidency.

By accounts of Almaty inhabitants – who initially shared the events as they saw it either on the streets or from their windows with their relatives living abroad, who in turn were able to shed some light on what was happening (those living inside Almaty, even mainly economic if contacted from abroad, would simply not talk to strangers – the extent of arbitrary arrests and risk of being killed was just too big) – the strangest phenomenon during early afternoon hours of January 5 (after the initial clashes of protesters with local police) was a sudden utter absence of law enforcement tackling the riots as well as fire brigades needed to extinguish burning cars and other property. Riots in their commencing stages in early morning grew violent, with an attack on Almaty municipal office and presidential residence, and there have been numerous accounts of police officers' corpses lying on the pavements – decapitated. The mass of protesters, by now indistinguishable whether locals or “foreign” then went about the city almost systematically, looting shops, banks, local press offices and trading centers, also making their way into many of the office buildings and TV station, simply destroying or burning everything in their path – the locals brave enough to film the scenes of marauding themselves were starting to question whether the looting has anything in common

with initial protests. It was only in the morning of January 6 when police together with Kazakh military already receiving support from CSTO troops went onto sweeping operation through the city, indeed firing into crowds and more or less attaining the order. By January 7, as a result of systematic “counter-terrorism operation” however, the “20,000 foreign and domestic terrorists” disappeared from the sight and the city, and the toll of over 200 dead⁴, 500 gravely injured, 2,000 detained without their relatives knowing where, and roughly USD 100 million in property damages loomed over the country as a stark contrast vis-à-vis the country’s 30 years of relative quietness and stability.⁵

By morning of January 6, the Almaty residents took to the Republican Square of the city again, this time appealing to the authorities with their assertion that those who looted and pillaged the properties the day before were never present in the initial protests highlighting the economic inequities impacting most of ordinary citizens of the country, and that those calling for improvement of living standards did not participate in widespread stealing and vandalizing of the city assets. They also pleaded with the president Tokaev to withdraw the army (presumably referring also to CSTO forces), but by some accounts, special forces opened fire into these crowds towards that evening. Some of the footages confirming these claims made it to the international social media, and on the morning of January 7, blood was splattered over the square, with people realizing that some of their relatives lost their lives. On the same day, during the televised speech, president Tokaev confirmed that he had ordered to “shoot to kill without warning shots”, and that the military operation launched in the city the day before was in fact a “counter-terrorist operation”. In fact, most of the Kazakh human rights activists that have been voicing their criticism of both Nazarbaev and Tokaev regimes for some time, agree that the largest human toll came about as the result of January 6 and 7 suppression of peaceful protests (that came out to the streets to negate their involvement in January 5 pogroms), and that the “terrorism” charges were brought up in order to justify live firing at 30,000 plus of Almaty residents on those two days.

Although the images of “Almaty burning” were the primary ones making it to the world press, most of Kazakhstan’s regional centers fell to chaos and violence during January 4-6 period. In contrast to city of Almaty, the adminis-

⁴ Most of them civilian population of the city (also including two decapitated law enforcement recruits), although human rights activists claim the toll is higher – they have tried so far in vain to gain access to the full list of dead citizens, pressing the authorities to publish their names. The activists also suspect that in this metropole, some of the people who lost their lives did not even purposefully participated in demonstrations.

⁵ Summary of footages with commentaries, as well as immediate estimates by both local and foreign press corps in the immediate aftermath of January 5-7 events.

trative center of Almaty Region, Taldykorgan (some 270 km to the north-east of Almaty), saw more rudimentary display of protests by the local population during January 4-5, whereby the local statue of Nursultan Nazarbaev was not only demolished, but the upper part of the statue hanged by its head in front of municipality office. The local detention center was attacked as well as there was an attempt to break into National Security Committee's office, and the course of events took more violent form right from the onset of demonstrations. In the city of Talas in the south, on the border with Kyrgyzstan, a local mob stormed a police station, pillaging the station's supply of firearms. The events in this administrative center of Jambyl Region were described more as pogroms rather than demonstrations, leaving at least 15 dead by January 5. In the third most populous city of Shymkent, itself one of the main industrial centers of Kazakshtan on the border with Uzbekistan (some 700 km west of Almaty and mere 120 km north of Tashkent), the violence started to be demonstrated at night between January 5 and 6, after the local protesters resorted to setting few police cars on fire. On the morning of January 6, the city woke to burnt down exhibition center, looted Turkistan Palace as well as a shopping center – all this in the midst of blood and spent cartridges on the streets. The rice production center of Kyzylorda city and pre-Second World War capital of Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (more than 1,000 km to the west of Almaty), saw more of anti-Nazarbaev display of both protests and violence (both the city's court house and headquarters of Nur Otan, Kazakhstan's ruling political party⁶ were set on fire), and the active shooting lasted for several hours on January 5, amidst relatively early retreat of local police forces unable to hold off the masses. The city of Aktobe, the largest conglomerate in western Kazakhstan near Russian border, city of Uralsk on the western (i.e. European) side of the Ural river, Caspian harbor and petrochemical city of Atyrau, north-eastern conclave of Semey that has served prior to 1989 as a nuclear testing site (and until 2007 known as Semipalatinsk), mining and metallurgical center of Ust-Kamenogorsk in Eastern Kazakhstan, have all witnessed similar events, mostly starting off as protests in support of Zhanaozen citizens, and eventually escalating into clashes with local police. Interestingly enough, the city of Zhanaozen where the initial Kazakh protests started on January 2 and one-time nuclear power plant location city Aktau on the Caspian shore, were the only one where the protesters did not resort to violence, with their primary demand being return to pre-1993 Constitution and resignation of the incumbent president Tokaev, and by January 8, when most other Kazakh megalopolises were literally on fire, the

⁶ As a ruling political party led by president Tokaev, renamed to Amanat at the end of January 2022, after replacing Nursultan Nazarbaev as its chairman.

dissent has faded away. Explicitly peaceful protests in Zhanaozen and Aktau, without local police resorting to any restrictive measures, did however notice the attempts of agent-provocateurs to stir up commotion, which apparently did not succeed.⁷

4. Plausibility of Deliberate Involvement by Russia, Covered by “Mandate of CSTO”

By “involvement”, separate issues should be understood – either complicity in stirring up the initial events themselves that inevitably lead to CSTO intervention, or seizing upon an opportunity to showcase the CSTO and Russian military muscle in crushing a local rebellion. There are three main factors contributing to this theory, each remaining as a fact, rather than hypothesis:

- a. The speed with which president Tokaev turned to Russian president Vladimir Putin with a request to engage the articles of collective security to swiftly quell the “terrorist insurgency designed as coup d’état”.
- b. The speed with which Putin and CSTO agreed to “assist” Kazakhstan in countering the insurgency and the composition of “peacekeeping forces” of CSTO itself.⁸

For points a. and b., it should be noted that Articles of collective security stipulate deployment of CSTO forces on its member’s territory in the case of foreign invasion, not to suppress domestic protests, however violent they may have been. The insurgency also did not pose a threat to territorial integrity of Kazakhstan – all forms of protests were either aimed at changing the current economic status quo or to potentially cause a disruption within the governing circles in order to bring about a drastic change.⁹ It is rather clear, that in order

⁷ By a number of accounts of Kazakh diaspora living in Russia and United Arab Emirates, referring to their interaction with relatives in Kazakhstan.

⁸ CSTO, having been established 30 years ago as a “collective security instrument” and after 2002 functioning as explicitly military alliance, currently counts Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as members, but during its history Georgia, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan were also temporarily attached to the body. There are 3,600 active military troops ready for peacekeeping operations, in addition to over 20,000 of so-called Collective Rapid Reaction Force ready to be deployed upon request of a member state, and it is understood that up to 85% of this military body consists of members of Russian armed forces. It is also understood that depending on the magnitude of needed deployment, additional numbers from respective regular armed forces can be drawn.

⁹ By such standards, Kyrgyzstan would need to be inviting CSTO troops to counter its regular domestic turmoil, which almost every time borders on open insurgency and by end-result they always resemble a full-fledged coup d’état – the country’s president almost always gives in and resigns. In fact, during the so-called Second Kyrgyz Revolution of April 2010, then interim president Roza Otunbayeva did voice a need to call in CSTO forces (the mass protests, with

to invoke the article for immediate deployment of CSTO troops into Kazakhstan, president Tokaev resorted to emphasizing involvement of “foreign fighters” in particular in Almaty insurgency, and there was little time for anyone to analyze who these “foreign fighters” may be, and nobody was questioning the plausibility of territorial integrity threat.¹⁰

Broader approach can also be taken in analysis of an almost immediate reaction by Putin to send in the CSTO troops led by Russian armed forces – Kazakhstan during Nazarbaev rule did not represent a model vassal nation that would be nodding to Moscow’s directives – and given its vast natural resources that could be well traded internationally in all directions, the country took often independent, at times even pro-Western positions. In other words, whoever planned, orchestrated and executed the Almaty insurgency knew that Russia will take notice, or perhaps even Russia will seize the opportunity to ingratiate Kazakhstan’s incumbent leadership into tighter economic and political bond.

c. Appointment of Russian Armed Forces Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov as the head of CSTO peacekeeping forces in Kazakhstan in January 2022.

For those following carefully involvement of Russian Armed Forces in the region of post-Soviet Union, as well as other “hot spots”, notably in the Middle East, the mere mention of General Serdyukov should ring a distinct bell – he fought in the First Chechen War of 1994 – 1996, and he was a deputy brigade commander of Russian forces in Kosovo, participating also in the standoff between Russian and NATO forces at Pristina airport in June 1999. But more importantly, this is the individual who led Russian armed forces in March 2014 in Crimea and commanded Russian troops in breakaway part of Ukrainian Donbass in August 2015. Furthermore, Syria conflict observers would remember him as the Commander of Russian troops deployed to Syria, for the period of April to September 2019. The apparent career of this 60-year-old Russian army star so far culminated in leading the CSTO troops entering Kazakhstan this January, and it may not be far from the possible

elements of nationalist clashes with local Uzbek diaspora, resulted in internal displacement of several hundreds of inhabitants, and result-wise had graver repercussions than January 2022 events in Kazakhstan). Vladimir Putin, during that time fulfilling the role of Prime Minister, declined CSTO intervention, referring to the lack of foreign involvement in the Kyrgyz uprising. It can be safely said that Kyrgyzstan in the eyes of Russia does not represent a nation whose position would endanger Russia’s geopolitical objectives in the region, and therefore whatever internal turbulence persistently prevails, it can be left up to the Kyrgyz citizens to handle.

¹⁰ By the same token, Prime Minister of Armenia, currently holding the chairmanship of CSTO, was directly criticized for not “inviting” the CSTO forces to subdue Azerbaijan’s troops entering the Nagorno-Karabakh – although technically Nagorno-Karabakh is not an Armenian enclave, but internationally unrecognized independent Republic of Artsakh.

truth that a military cadre of this caliber and experience would be left out of ongoing Russian army operations in Ukraine. In every case, quelling of Kazakhstan dissent was important enough to Vladimir Putin to deploy the best of his best, and conclusions can be drawn from this consideration.

Therefore, in retrospect of Russian military incursion into Ukraine on February 24, we may want to extrapolate, that Russia's involvement in rapid reaction to Almaty events may have meant involvement in both preparation of the insurgency overwhelming the many of Kazakhstan's cities, as well as subsequent "attentive" response to artificially created crisis.

5. Theory on Terrorism Inspired Insurgency and Outright Attempt of Coup d'état

As outlined in the previous paragraphs, the speed with which president Tokaev came to conclusions that "terrorists originating in foreign land" are the major element of January insurgency designed to both "destabilize the country and depose the legitimate leadership", as well as the speed with which Russian president Putin reacted in dispatching CSTO troops, do partially answer whether the whole affair was of recognized terrorists' making. Perhaps the recent trend of blaming any nefarious circumstance first to terrorism, and then trying to explain what the specific empirical evidence is, was applied this time as well. In every case, hastily accepted presumption even before the full events unfolded made way for drastic curbing of the popular rebellion, and the major take away for all players involved will most likely be that regime of president Tokaev will hold onto control of the country's affairs without compromise.

6. Internal Power Struggle(s) as the Most Probable Cause

One of the indications that the riots developing into armed insurgency could have been prepared and executed by Nazarbaev supporters with former president's tacit (or perhaps even explicit) agreement, was that many of the protesting were shouting anti-Tokaev and anti-current government slogans – although any political observer would have known by now that any discord and dissatisfaction in economic status quo is more of a result of Nazarbaev's 30-year rule, rather than president Tokaev's 2-year period of presidential administration. Some of the cities involved in mass protests did seem to direct their anger at Nazarbaev (attacking his statues, tearing down the name plates, calling his name out) – but this was perhaps because Tokaev did not manage to install his personality cult (yet), and the city streets are not named after To-

kaev nor there are multiple statues of the incumbent president. As evidence of Tokaev seizing on the notion of possible Nazarbaev-instigated insurgency are the facts that the incumbent himself replaced Nazarbaev in the post of Head of National Security Council (initially awarded to Nazarbaev as a position for life) and immediately not only sacked but also arrested Karim Massimov – the head of Kazakh intelligence until January 2022 and long term loyal prime minister under Nazarbaev (Massimov himself an ethnic Uighur). Some observers also note the fact, that given the several hundreds of billions (anywhere between 300 and 600) that Nazarbaev managed to amass for his family during his 30-year tenure, Tokaev may feel he has not grasped the true potential as “commander-in-chief” as yet, and considers it is time for Nazarbaev clan to be disconnected from the socio-economic life in Kazakhstan. If the message of the rebellion, on the other hand, was to show to Tokaev that Nazarbaev clan is not ready to leave the cushy posts within both constitutional bodies as well as state business conglomerates, then Tokaev had to point to himself as “new sheriff in town”. In every case, Tokaev is obviously not ready to leave.¹¹

President Tokaev came out of the January conflict, potentially disastrous not only to him but also to the stability of the whole Central Asian region, as an experienced crisis manager, who stood his ground and quickly restored “law and order”. Faithful to the centuries-long notion that most conflicting situations in Central Asia need to end with parties at least “saving a face”, Nazarbaev, who did not make a public appearance until almost end of January, in a televised speech confirmed that during all this tumultuous month he was in the capital Nursultan, did not leave the country and since 2019 has been “enjoying his well-deserved retirement”. He also did not forget to remind the public, that at time when he left the post of the first president of Kazakhstan, he handed over all powers to Kassym-Jomart Tokaev, the only legitimate president and nation’s leader today. Most likely echoing the not-so-secret rumors around the world that the January events were a result of bloody stand-off between Tokaev and Nazarbaev clans, he even volunteered to validate that “there is no conflict in this country” and “that any rumors

¹¹ The back-room discussions with most of the political analysts engaged in Central Asian region will reveal, that absolutely everybody understands that Nursultan Nazarbaev was not ready to leave in 2019 would it not be for his declining health. While in the cultures of the “East”, a male successor is prepared, all of Nazarbaev’s children are females, and with immediate propelling of his eldest daughter Daryga, the nation could have an uneasy time to absorb the choice. Therefore it is more or less accepted as the reality that Nazarbaev handed over the rule to Tokaev with explicit understanding of both parties that Nazarbaev clan’s political and business interests would be untouched, and perhaps they would even grow in scope. What is more, there may have been an agreement between the two gentlemen that after some time, Daryga would “ascend to the throne”, which apparently did not happen.

regarding this conflict are baseless”. He did not go onto explaining, however, why his closest family members till January holding either high constitutional offices or influential economic positions, are nowhere to be seen or heard.¹²

The question of whether all family business around Nursultan Nazarbaev, including the political and economic influence the first president’s close family members yielded until January 2022, would be liquidated by Tokaev as a possible scenario in the near future may be another topic for discourse. The unilateral dismissal of Nazarbaev from the posts of both Security Council and ruling political party Nur Otan chairmanships by Tokaev is a powerful message to Tokaev’s opponents and allies alike, and at the end of the whole January affair, it is Tokaev who undoubtedly strengthened his position at home and abroad.

7. Deliberations as for Western Interference as a Prelude to New Episode of Great Power Conflict

Central Asian region itself was the place that gave the world the notion of Great Game – essentially referring to centuries-long antagonism between the Russian Tsar and British Empire, so the continuous involvement by Western powers in many of the happenings of Central Asia holding some significance for their geopolitical control is understandable. Ariel Cohen, in his treatise on Kazakhstan’s development in post-Soviet era, outlines the notion of “New Great Game”, gaining new vectors to contend with for Kazakhstan’s leaders:

Competition among the global actors in the Caspian and Central Asian regions has prompted many analysts to compare the situation with the “Great Game” – a confrontation between the Russian and British empires for influence in Central Asia in the 19th century. In the 21st century, however, more players are competing for presence in the region. In order to maintain

¹² His eldest daughter Daryga, member of the Kazakh Mazhilis (parliament), and at time of her father’s retirement rumored to take over as the nation’s president, does not attend parliamentary sessions anymore. Daryga’s second husband Kairat Sharipbaev (although the official marriage has never been confirmed) holding until January 15, 2022 the post of a chief executive at natural gas pipeline operator QazaqGas has resigned. Another Nazarbaev’s son-in-law, married to the former president’s second daughter Dinara, Timur Kulibaev, resigned as chairman of Atameken, Kazakhstan’s National Chamber of Entrepreneurs and the main business lobby group, on January 17. Samat Abish, Nazarbaev’s nephew and second in command of the all-powerful intelligence agency – National Security Committee – was also dismissed on January 17. Nazarbaev’s another son-in-law, husband of his youngest daughter Aliya, Dimash Dosanov, resigned as a chief executive of state oil pipeline conglomerate KazTransOil, on January 15. As of end of January 2022, all of Nazarbaev’s daughters, with their respective families, are reported to be either in the United Arab Emirates or Turkey.

a balance of external interests, Kazakhstan has chosen a path of transparency concerning the country's foreign policy. Over the years Nazarbayev, regardless of the geopolitical climate at the time, has undertaken Eurasian integration initiatives, as well as consulting with the political leadership in Moscow, Washington and Beijing on all important projects in the oil and gas sector. This multi-vector policy course has thus far prevented a single global political player from achieving complete hegemony over Central Asia.¹³

Should we examine the actual geopolitical vectors taken by Nazarbaev in his 30 years in power, indeed as a wise "clansman" he had to court both those in the West (mainly USA and EU), as well as the power centers of the East (Russia and China). Economically, given the vast natural resources mainly in oil and uranium (but not limited to), it was the Western world that benefited from the utilization of this wealth. At one time, Japanese companies controlled 30% of all uranium mining aimed at supplying Japan's multiple nuclear power plants with sustainable source of fuel. In oil sector, from as early as 1993, Chevron Texaco and ExxonMobil held 75% of the Tengiz oil field in Caspian Sea, developing it jointly with Kazakh and Russian counterparts. Another major breakthrough for Western interests came when between 1996 and 2003 Chevron, Mobil, Shell and BP joined the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, transporting oil from Kashagan oil field to world markets. Nazarbaev was clearly important to the West, and as with many similar individuals controlling vast resources, the West not only did not comment on periodic human rights abuses and persecution of political opposition within Kazakhstan, but often lent a willing hand to quell dissent within Nazarbaev surroundings.¹⁴

Although the Panama Papers in 2018 revealed a multitude of offshore wealth related to Nazarbaev clan, during January 2022 events in Kazakhstan when whereabouts of Nazarbaev himself as well as his extended family were unknown, the Western media limited themselves to highlighting some real estate held by Nazarbaev family overseas, without particular deliberations on his stance towards the country-wide uprising.

¹³ Cohen A. (2008), *Kazakhstan: The Road to Independence – Energy Policy and the Birth of a Nation*, p. 84.

¹⁴ One of the many telling examples would be the story of Nazarbaev's eldest daughter Daryga's first husband Rakhat Aliyev (himself a one-time heavyweight of Kazakh intelligence and political elite) who concluded his career by ambassadorship to Austria, but after criticism of his father-in-law, he suddenly found himself accused and convicted of various crimes in absentia, and subsequently died "by suicide" in an Austrian detention jail in 2015.

8. Scarecrow of Terrorism in the Region during the Weeks that Followed

The “Siege of Almaty”, if the roughly two-week long events can be called – referring to the initial insurgency and subsequent swift response from both restructured Kazakh internal security forces and CSTO troops, seemed to have left the people’s minds very quickly in its aftermath. Just as unexpectedly the incident occurred at the beginning of the year, by the end of January 2022 most of the region and the world was focused on other issues, mainly on the build-up of Russian armed forces along the Ukrainian borders. The Almaty events were in fact more reminiscent of Kazakhstan’s politically volatile neighbor – Kyrgyzstan – where as recently as in October 2020 (dubbed “Third Kyrgyz Revolution”) the mass violent protests in the capital Bishkek aimed at alleged parliamentary election votes rigging resulted in subsequent resignation of then president Sooronbay Jeenbekov. The Kyrgyz nation has grown accustomed to regular popular revolt, by many seen as legitimate display of democracy in action, so the January insurgency in Almaty was not seen as something extraordinary – although it surprised those who viewed Kazakhstan as a politically stable Central Asian state.

However, it perhaps benefits mentioning two issues, both occurring in Kyrgyzstan in the coming weeks of January, where the explanation was in part attributed to possible terrorism, although in extend and implications for the country and the region did not have such wide ranging effect as the Almaty events.

8.1 Issue 1 – Widespread unexpected blackout affecting Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on January 25

On Tuesday January 25, southern Kazakhstan (including its largest city Almaty), northern Kyrgyzstan (including the capital Bishkek) and most of Uzbekistan (including the capital Tashkent) reported power outages that affected not only the electricity networks, but also all other utilities such as gas and water supply, in addition to most of the critical infrastructure (in particular in Uzbekistan). While most of the media outlets reported “emergency imbalances” and outlined some of the technicalities of the current electricity grid system in Central Asia¹⁵, it was faster and more telling to actually ask some of the affected cities’ residents on their notion of what happened. While Almaty and Bishkek experienced black-outs lasting not more than 4-5 hours, Tashkent for example was affected for almost 24 hours, and because of non-functioning gas and water supplies in addition to electricity, inhabitants

¹⁵ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/blackouts-strike-kazakhstan-kyrgyzstan-and-uzbekistan>.

quickly rushed to empty the local supermarkets of most essential goods, mainly bottled water. The first hurried conclusion, given the scale of power outage across three major countries of Central Asia, was “terrorism”, although very quickly the most plausible technological causes were being discussed over the media.¹⁶

8.2 Issue 2 – Mass protests in Bishkek aimed at freeing the recently detained public activists

Between January 25 and 27, masses took to the streets of Bishkek in protest of a journalist Bolot Temirov and Kyrgyz traditional bard singer Bolot Nazarov being detained – who were subsequently under the public pressure released. Both Temirov and Nazarov were initially arrested on charges related to alleged illegal narcotics possession, but the protesters quickly deduced that the recent Temirov’s broadcast about Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov and the head of the country’s State Committee for National Security, Kamchybek Tashiev, (accusing both of high profile corruption) were the real reasons for detention. The protests, although this time they did not grow into storming into official administrative buildings as in October 2020, were loud enough to be heard across the region, but somehow got lost in international press coverage. Since the State Committee for National Security’s (de facto both an intelligence and counter-intelligence KGB-style apparatus) main activities focus on countering narcotics trade across the region and terrorism (very often two areas intricately linked as one financing the other), to many it was clear that by accusations related to drug charges the government wants to subconsciously invoke another perception of “terrorism threat”. Instead, the protesters in support of detainees, actively voiced a need to immediately dis-

¹⁶ The author’s long-time government contact in Bishkek commented the temporary energy loss to four possible causes:

- An act of terrorism on the territory of Kazakhstan within a critical infrastructure point (presumably in electricity supply grid) lead not only to instant black-out locally, but also affected the networks across three countries
- A technological fire at an unidentified power station in Uzbekistan lead to wide-spread blackout (this theory apparently explaining why Tashkent was affected for prolonged period of time) – this possible cause was even coupled by a short video circulating social media allegedly showing the fire – although as usually is the case, the video does not specify the exact location, time or even the fact that it is a power station
- A deliberate act of switching off the electricity supply on part of Turkmenistan lead to wide-spread blackout. One of the reasons as to why Bishkek was able to limit the power outage to several hours the contact mentioned the proper functioning of both Kemin hydro power plant and Datka-Kemin electricity power line launched in 2015, effectively making sure that the local power is restored quickly.

miss Kamchybek Tashiev, as well as Minister of Interior Ulan Niyazbekov, and the protests' vigor allegedly even made the president Japarov consider the pros and cons of such high-level dismissals. At the end, however, the officials remained in place and Japarov was later seen travelling to Beijing Olympics instead. It is beyond doubt though, that Almaty events of January made the incumbent Kyrgyz leader think twice about possible launching of power mechanisms to suppress the dissent, and resolved to free the detainees and thus even indirectly admit that the charges were fabricated. It also shows the region's sensitivity to mass displays of dissent, and in Kyrgyz case, not wanting to repeat the scale of disapproval – similar to that which brought the current president to power.

9. Conclusions

One conclusion that can be drawn with certainty is that the chain of events in Almaty and country-wide Kazakhstan between January 2 and 5 quickly got out of general population's hands and the whole affair grew from a household dissent into violent armed insurgency, being suppressed likewise with arms and violence. If the initial meetings were organized and brought about by the general population protesting steep rise in fuel prices and other essentials, the country's power elites speedily classified the uprising as “terrorist insurgency leading to coup d'état” and dealt with it accordingly. As far as city of Almaty, as the center of CSTO intervention, is concerned, it is understood that many participants in the violent riots were brought in from neighboring villages immersed in poverty (possibly paid for their participation), and some elements of foreign involvement was confirmed. One of the questions asked by many is that why Almaty was chosen as the main stage of these events – in relation to other parts of the country (apart from artificially constructed capital city Nursultan) – as Almaty has always been prospering by any Central Asian standards, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why the city's residents faced difficulties in understanding the scope of both dissent as well as government's reaction.

Another common observation is – if the aim of the “foreign terrorists” was indeed the a coup d'état – then why the capital Nursultan was left out of the “action” and the protests concentrated mainly on industrial and commercial centers around the country.

As part of the “New Great Game” discourse, many of the lessons from January events in Kazakhstan can be drawn regarding the new West-East standoff today, bordering at the commencement of full-fledged World War III. Giving some weight to the plausibility of active Russian involvement from the onset of country-wide attempt for uprising in Kazakhstan, it may perhaps merit to mention that this time it was the “Russian Empire” which launched the

preemptive “strike”, in order to keep the West at bay. The Western powers, it seems, took notice, but were again caught off guard less than two months later, this time much closer to their geopolitical domain.

Combined with situation in Ukraine in February 2022, and with yet again emerging military clashes amidst stand-off in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, there seems to be a growing pattern for solving the accumulated political and economic issues in the area of post-Soviet Union – use of brute force from the very beginning of a conflict, with little regard for ordinary citizens who are always caught in the middle, and who are reduced to solving existential problems, rather than those played in high geopolitics.

In retrospect of the very beginning of this year, and the world having lived through March that continuously brings a graphic reminder of the surrounding universe, the events in Almaty were nothing but a mild awakening into the new geo-political realities of 21st century. Power methods prevail over diplomacy as a solving medium. Violence is applied from the outbreak of any conflict as the means to subdue challenges to status quo. Blood needs to be spilled in order to remember what is at stake and what values the humankind gradually leaves behind in its quest for imaginary control.

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