

Kazakhstan: Transition, but not much change

Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of Kazakhstan for nearly 30 years, announced his intention to step down in March 2019. With Nazarbayev's backing, former senate speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was elected to replace him in June. Although Nazarbayev is no longer president, he retains considerable power, and in the short term at least his successor is not expected to undertake major reforms.

Kazakhstan's success story: prosperity and stability, but poor human rights

In December 1991, when Kazakhstan became the last of the former Soviet republics to declare independence, its future did not look bright. In a [referendum](#) held earlier in the year, Kazakhs had voted overwhelmingly (by 95 %) to preserve the Union; this, and the presence of a large [Russian minority](#) – at 40 % of the population, almost outnumbering ethnic Kazakhs – raised questions about the viability of the new country. Economically, separation from Moscow was disastrous, with the country's economy shrinking by 40 % in the early 1990s.

A quarter-century later, the situation looks very different. Avoiding the turbulence that has shaken neighbouring countries, Kazakhstan is a politically stable, harmoniously multi-ethnic nation. Rapid growth has made it a prosperous upper-middle income country, ahead of Russia in per capita GDP at purchasing power parity. Spectacular progress has been made in reducing the [poverty rate](#) (just 2.5 % in 2017, down from nearly 50 % in 2001) and unemployment. To a large extent, the country owes its economic success to some of the world's largest oil reserves; however, as the situation of neighbouring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan shows, abundant natural resources do not in themselves guarantee prosperity. Kazakhstan was able to [attract](#) the foreign investment needed to tap into its hydrocarbon potential thanks to political stability and regulatory reforms that, according to the [World Bank](#), have made it one of the world's 30 best countries in which to do business, up from 86th place in 2006.

Kazakhstan retains close ties with Russia; it is a leading member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation military alliance, both organisations headed by Moscow. However, it has managed to avoid over-dependence by cultivating relations with other partners. In 2017, it became the first Central Asian country to sign an [Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement](#) with the EU, Kazakhstan's main trading and investment partner. In 2013, the Kazakh capital, Astana, was the venue for Chinese president Xi Jinping's [launch](#) of the New Silk Road, since re-named the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI); Kazakhstan is now a key participant, and its geographical location on trading routes connecting China to Europe has given the landlocked country a new strategic importance. Kazakhstan's successfully diversified foreign policy has enabled it to become an important international player: it has held the rotating presidency of several international organisations (such as the [OSCE](#) in 2010), is hosting negotiations on the political future of Syria, and in 2017 and 2018, it sat on the UN Security Council.

Long-time president Nursultan Nazarbayev leaves a mixed legacy

Some of the credit for these achievements belongs to Nazarbayev, the country's first and, until his March 2019 [resignation](#), only, president. However, his legacy is not entirely a positive one. Above all, he has been criticised for authoritarian rule. Nazarbayev and his Nur Otan party undoubtedly enjoy overwhelming public support, but his status as the country's undisputed leader also reflects the lack (according to [OSCE observers](#)) of free or fair elections, as well as heavy restrictions on opposition parties and the [media](#).

On the economic front, over-dependence on oil – which continues to account for nearly [two-thirds](#) of exports, despite attempts at diversification – has made the economy highly vulnerable to oil price volatility (for example in 2015 and 2016, when Kazakhstan only narrowly escaped recession). A weak private sector and the dominance of large state companies [limits](#) productivity, and hence also economic growth; admittedly, some efforts are now being made to advance the country's long-delayed [privatisation programme](#). Despite impressive socioeconomic progress, many Kazakhs still feel they have been left

behind. In February 2019, the deaths of five children in a house fire while both parents were out working sparked [protests](#) over inadequate state support for families, prompting Nazarbayev to fire the government.

Nazarbayev announces his resignation

Given Nazarbayev's advanced age (he was 78 at the time) and his February 2019 enquiry to the Constitutional Court on the powers he would retain after resigning the presidency, his [resignation](#) on 19 March 2019 did not come as a complete surprise. Two days later, senate speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev became interim president, in line with the constitution.

After Nazarbayev nominated Tokayev as presidential candidate of the ruling Nur Otan party in April, the outcome of the June 2019 election was never in doubt. As in previous Kazakh elections, OSCE monitors were highly [critical](#), pointing out serious restrictions on peaceful protests and critical voices, low-key campaigning, and numerous irregularities in the vote count, including ballot-box stuffing.

Even so, the 2019 election was more competitive than the preceding vote in 2015, won by Nazarbayev with nearly 98 % of the vote, and a 95 % turnout. The [field](#) of seven candidates – a record for Kazakh presidential elections – included the country's first ever female candidate as well as an unusually outspoken government critic, Amirzhan Kosanov. Also unusual was the scale of [protests](#) – some of the largest Kazakhstan has ever seen, with thousands of participants denouncing sham elections and calling for a boycott. Both Tokayev's winning majority (71 %) and voter turnout (78 %) were low by Kazakh standards.

Kazakhstan's new-old president?

In many respects, [Tokayev](#) is well qualified to lead the country. He has served both as prime minister and foreign minister; he has also been UN deputy secretary-general, has numerous international contacts, and speaks several foreign languages including Russian, English and Chinese.

All the same, the question arises of whether Tokayev will really be in charge. Even though Nazarbayev is no longer president, he retains enormous formal and informal [influence](#). He still holds the life-long status of [Leader of the Nation](#), awarded him in 2010, and continues to head the Nur Otan party, as well as the powerful Security and Constitutional Councils. One of Tokayev's first [actions](#) as interim president was to rename the country's capital Nur-Sultan, in honour of Nazarbayev, and he has promised to consult his predecessor on key decisions. Some see him as no more than a [placeholder](#), preparing the way for Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga (now elevated to Tokayev's former position as senate speaker) to continue the dynasty in a few years' time.

While a radically new direction seems unlikely under Tokayev, there are some tentative signs of change. Although the police response to pre-election protests was heavy handed, with hundreds of arrests, the authorities' willingness to allow a more open field of candidates signals modest progress towards greater political pluralism. A National Council, including some government critics, was established in June 2019 to discuss political reforms, followed in July by an unprecedented [pledge](#) by Tokayev to investigate torture allegations in a Kazakh prison. Some have [dismissed](#) such developments as mere window-dressing, but they could also be interpreted as signs that the post-Nazarbayev period will bring greater openness to human rights concerns. In September 2019, Tokayev [called](#) for a stronger parliament and more competitive elections; he also [defended](#) freedom of expression, insisting that peaceful protests should be allowed (however, police handling of anti-China [demonstrations](#) later that month showed no signs of change).

Another possible area of innovation is social policy; perhaps with the February 2019 protests in mind, Tokayev's inaugural [speech](#) after the June 2019 election acknowledged the country's 'acute social problems', promising 'serious changes to our social policy'. Following through on these declarations, Tokayev has since signed a [decree](#) ordering nearly US\$1 billion of debt relief to help half a million low-income borrowers pay back their debts.

EU-Kazakhstan relations. As Central Asia's largest and wealthiest country, Kazakhstan is a key partner for the EU. The 2017 [Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation agreement](#), which is the EU's first agreement of its type in the region, is provisionally applied pending full ratification. The EU is Kazakhstan's main trade and investment partner, but it has also voiced serious human rights concerns: the **European Parliament's** March 2019 [resolution](#) was highly critical, pointing to the growing number of political prisoners, as well as restrictions on civil society organisations, trade unions and the media.

