

Chaos and crackdown in Kazakhstan: What next?

Protests erupted in Kazakhstan on 2 January 2022 and quickly span out of control, resulting in multiple deaths and several days of chaos. Although initially triggered by a fuel price hike, the unrest points to deeper causes of discontent, including poverty, inequality and frustration at the lack of political change. A Russia-led peacekeeping mission has helped to restore order, but could also compromise Kazakh independence.

What is happening in Kazakhstan?

After Ukraine's 2014 [Revolution of Dignity](#), Armenia's 2018 [Velvet Revolution](#), fraudulent elections and opposition protests in [Belarus](#), and political turmoil in [Kyrgyzstan](#), Kazakhstan is the latest post-Soviet country to be hit by unrest. On New Year's Day 2022, the government [lifted](#) the price cap on liquefied petroleum gas, the fuel most commonly used by Kazakh drivers, causing its price to almost double overnight. On 2 January, initially peaceful protests broke out in Zhanaozen, a city in western Kazakhstan, and soon spread to Almaty, former capital and still the country's largest city.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev quickly [responded](#) by dismissing the government, and ordered the new administration to reinstate fuel price caps. Despite this, protests continued to escalate, with mobs storming government buildings in Almaty. [Denouncing](#) protestors as 'terrorists' and 'bandits', Tokayev [rejected](#) international calls for dialogue, and ordered police to shoot to kill. Over 160, including 16 security officers, were [killed](#) in increasingly violent clashes, and as of 11 January, nearly 10 000 had been arrested. During the protests, internet access was [blocked](#) for several days, flights from Almaty were cancelled, and large parts of the economy shut down.

On 6 January, Tokayev requested support from the [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO), the Russia-led military alliance founded in 1992 to which Kazakhstan also belongs. Over 2 000 CSTO peacekeepers were deployed. After a few days of rioting, the government now appears to be back in control, and an [uneasy calm](#) has returned to the streets of Almaty.

What caused the protests?

Since the country's 1991 independence, former President Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled with an iron fist for nearly 30 years. After his retirement in 2019, his ally Tokayev took over the presidency in a stage-managed [transition](#), but with Nazarbayev maintaining considerable influence behind the scenes. One of the most stable and – thanks to huge [exports](#) of oil, uranium and other natural resources – prosperous countries in the post-Soviet region, Kazakhstan appeared to be less at risk of unrest than its central Asian neighbours. However, even if the January 2022 protests came as a surprise, they are not unprecedented. The worst previous violence was in 2011, when brutal repression of an oil workers' strike killed at least [16 people](#). There were more major protests in [2016](#) following planned reforms allowing foreigners to buy land; in February [2019](#) after the deaths of five children in a house fire were blamed on inadequate welfare for poor families; and in March of the same year when newly elected president Tokayev [renamed](#) the country's capital Nur-Sultan after his predecessor.

The fact that violence continued to escalate after the withdrawal of fuel price rises – the initial trigger for protests – points to deeper causes. Kazakh officials claim that protestors were [well prepared](#) and coordinated, and spoke [foreign languages](#). However, they have not specified further who the organisers might be. In the past, such incidents were often [blamed](#) on exiled banker and former government minister Mukhtar Ablyazov, who leads the opposition Democratic Choice for Kazakhstan movement. Ablyazov himself has [called](#) for western intervention, and acknowledged that he has contacts with protestors, but there is no convincing evidence of foreign involvement. Another theory, also as yet unproven, is that rival pro-Tokayev and pro-Nazarbayev [factions](#), and/or [criminal gangs](#) were behind the violence.

Protests also reflect long-standing [discontent](#) with the status quo. Double-digit [inflation](#) has eroded living standards, and many have lost [jobs](#) due to the pandemic. Perhaps it is no coincidence that young men,

among the worst affected by unemployment, also made up the vast majority of protestors in Almaty. Their grievances are exacerbated by the wealth of the elite, none more so than Nazarbayev and his family, which is reported to have spent at least [US\\$785 million](#) on real estate purchases in Europe and the US since 2000. Like the March 2019 protests at the start of Tokayev's presidency, the current unrest may point to [frustration](#) at the lack of real political change. At that time, Tokayev [promised](#) a 'listening state' and a multi-party political system, but the exclusion of genuine opposition parties from the March 2021 parliamentary [elections](#) – won overwhelmingly for the sixth consecutive time by Nur Otan, the party founded by Nazarbayev – highlighted the lack of progress to democracy. While Tokayev has made some efforts to assert his independence – for example by [removing](#) Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga, seen as a possible future president, from her position as Senate chair in May 2020 – he is still often perceived as a mere [puppet](#) of his predecessor. For this reason, anger was mainly directed at [Nazarbayev](#), with protestors calling on the 'old man' to leave, and demolishing statues of him.

What are the implications for Kazakhstan's future?

In the absence of [leaders](#) or a clearly stated agenda, the protests never had much chance of forcing political change. If anything, they may have strengthened Tokayev's position by allowing him to [neutralise](#) Nazarbayev and his supporters. The latter include former prime minister Askar Mamin – now replaced by ex-Finance Minister [Alikhan Smailov](#) – and intelligence chief Karim Masimov, who has since been [arrested](#) on suspicion of treason. Nazarbayev himself, who has not appeared in public since the protests broke out, was also sidelined, with Tokayev taking over as Security Council chair on 5 January.

On 11 January, Tokayev [called](#) for more equal sharing of the country's wealth, for example through new taxes on mining companies. Yet while such initiatives may go some way towards addressing the economic causes of discontent, the precedent of other post-Soviet countries where protests have occurred – such as Belarus – suggests that political concessions are [unlikely](#).

Tokayev's request for CSTO peacekeepers could backfire. Until now, Kazakhstan has carefully avoided over-dependence on Russia by building strong ties with other regional players: in 2015, it became the first central Asian country to sign an [enhanced partnership and cooperation agreement](#) with the EU, and it is also a leading participant in China's [Belt and Road Initiative](#). The prolonged presence of (essentially Russian) foreign troops could jeopardise this multi-vector foreign policy. It could also prove [unpopular](#) domestically; strong suspicion of foreign influences was previously highlighted by the 2016 land reform protests. In view of these risks, the deployment will only be short-term, with peacekeepers due to leave within two weeks.

For [Russia](#), Kazakhstan's crisis is both a threat and an opportunity. Unrest could threaten Moscow's interests in the country, such as the Baikonur space-rocket launch site and a large ethnic Russian minority. With Russian armed forces already [thinly stretched](#), the peacekeeping mission could be an unwelcome distraction from more strategic interests such as Ukraine. On the other hand, the mission could help to draw Kazakhstan closer into Moscow's orbit. Since November 2020, Russian peacekeepers have been deployed to [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), and a second peacekeeping mission will reinforce Russia's role as regional security guarantor. Moreover, the mission is the CSTO's first ever intervention (the Nagorno-Karabakh mission, which is taking place outside the internationally recognised territory of a CSTO state, is exclusively Russian), and as such could give the alliance some much-needed credibility.

International reactions

Unsurprisingly, **Russia** has sided with Tokayev, [echoing](#) his narrative that the protests are the result of foreign meddling – a [necessary condition](#) for CSTO intervention given that the alliance's remit does not extend to purely domestic threats. **China** has also [denounced](#) interference by external forces. For his part, **US** Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who [comments](#) that 'once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave', is [demanding](#) an explanation of the rationale for CSTO involvement, and criticises Tokayev's shoot-to-kill order. A [statement](#) by the **EU's** High Representative calls for peaceful resolution of the crisis, condemns the violence, and urges the Kazakh authorities to respect freedoms of assembly, of expression, and of the media. Similar calls for restraint and dialogue come from [European leaders](#), including French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, as well as the [OSCE](#) and UN Human Rights Commissioner [Michelle Bachelet](#).

