

## Russia–Kazakhstan Relations and the Tokayev–Nazarbayev Tandem

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### Abstract

After nearly 30 years in power, Nursultan Nazarbayev's decision to stand down on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 2019 as president of Kazakhstan took many observers by surprise. The former prime minister and speaker of the Kazakh Senate, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, took up the post of acting president as constitutionally designated, and then won an extraordinary presidential election in June 2019, which was marred by opposition protest demanding fairer elections and political reform. But the transition is one in which little has changed in the short to medium-term. Nazarbayev still holds power through a series of extra-constitutional and constitutional positions and his informal power and influence is all encompassing. Moreover, Tokayev is committed to maintaining Nazarbayev's policies, especially as they pertain to Kazakh–Russian relations and the broader foreign policy agenda of 'multi-vectorism'. Within that agenda, however, there remain significant tensions in Kazakh–Russian relations, especially as they relate to questions of security and Russian soft-power. One important legacy of the Kazakh model of presidential transition is the extent to which it represents an exemplar for other post-Soviet authoritarian leaders to follow whereby they give up the office of president, but not power.

### The Nazarbayev–Tokayev Transition: Stability and Continuity

The clearest thing to note about Kazakhstan's transition from Nazarbayev to Tokayev is that very little has changed or will change in the short to medium-term. Nazarbayev may have left the presidency but he has not left power. Nazarbayev continues to hold the title of *Elbasi*, leader of the nation, remains head of the *Nur Otan* (Light of Fatherland) party, is the lifelong head of the National Security Council, he still represents Kazakhstan on the world stage, and continues to possess far reaching powers to appoint ministers and leading state officials.<sup>1</sup> Nazarbayev's position is much like that of the Roman Emperors as described by Edward Gibbon: 'although the sovereign of Rome, in compliance with an obsolete prejudice, abstained from the name of the King, he possessed the full measure of regal power'.<sup>2</sup>

If stability and continuity are the bywords of the transition, then what was the purpose of the transition? Nazarbayev had been seeking to move on from the presidency for some time; his age and securing his legacy the principle reasons for doing so. There had been rumours that the transition had been planned for 2014, but had been scuppered by Russia's annexation of Crimea. Nazarbayev could not move on with such potential instability and conflict in a nearby region. Kazakhstan shares

a 6800-kilometre border with Russia and has a sizeable ethnic Russian population who are citizens of the Kazakh state. There were fears that should Nazarbayev resign in 2014 Kazakhstan could be next in line to see its territorial integrity questioned by Russian great power play in the region. The death of long-serving Uzbek president Islam Karimov in 2016 sharpened Nazarbayev's focus on his mortality and the need to secure his legacy as Kazakhstan's great national leader, a modern-day Atatürk. Slowly the plan was put in place. In 2017, the president went on TV to announce constitutional reform which sought to divest powers from the president to the prime minister and parliament, while Nazarbayev's position was to be refashioned as the 'supreme arbiter' overseeing defence, security and foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> A year later in March 2018 legislation was passed through the *Mazhilis* (parliament), which made Nazarbayev chairman of Kazakhstan's National Security Council for life and also elevated the body from an advisory to a constitutional status.<sup>4</sup> The on-going crackdown of political opposition, independent media, journalists and social media sites during this time created a sterile political environment, which sought to minimise any threat to political stability while the Nazarbayev regime enacted its carefully choreographed transition plan that unfolded with Nazarbayev's resignation live on TV on the eve

1 Lillis, J. (2019) 'Nazarbayev Takes Back Control', *Eurasianet*, 21 October. Accessed 20 January 2020; Sputnik (2019) 'Mudryi politik': kak otreagirovali na otstavky Nazarbayeva v stranakh SNG', *Sputnik*, 19 March. Accessed 20 January 2020

2 Gibbon, E. (1995[1776]) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Volume 1. London: Penguin Books. p. 147.

3 Pistan, C (2017) '2017 Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan: increasing democracy without political pluralism?' *Constitution.net*, 28 March. Accessed 21 January 2020

4 Uraliev, S. (2018) 'Zakonoproekt x pravom pozhiznenno vozglavalat' Sovbez', *Radio Azattyk* 5 February. Accessed 21 January 2020

ning of 19<sup>th</sup> March 2019 and Tokayev taking the oath of office the following day. Arguably, Nazarbayev and Tokayev are operating in a loose tandem. Tokayev takes responsibility for domestic economic and social policy, while Nazarbayev floats above domestic politics as the ‘supreme arbiter’, directing broader state strategy as it pertains to the international sphere, and to some extent the domestic sphere too. Effectively, Nazarbayev has abdicated himself from frontline responsibility for Kazakhstan’s economic and social problems. Instead he is bathing in the spotlight of the international stage, promoting Kazakhstan’s economic and political interests abroad.

### **Tokayev and the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy**

Tokayev was the rational choice to replace Nazarbayev. He lacks charisma, is dependable and safe. With Tokayev there would be no ruptures, no surprises and no quick move towards democratic reform which would jeopardise Nazarbayev’s legacy of stability or relations with Russia. The meagre tilt towards political reform Tokayev has promised regarding the registration of political parties and the right to free public assembly attest to the fact he is not going to rock the boat.<sup>5</sup> Such reforms represent only an incremental effort to liberalise the politics of the country. Thus, Tokayev represents not a coloured revolution, but rather a ‘beige transition’. And Tokayev, as Nazarbayev’s replacement, is perhaps the best-case scenario for the interests of the Russian government. The rumours that Nazarbayev had even consulted with Putin over his plans for succession were somewhat confirmed by the official reporting of a telephone conversation between the two leaders prior to Nazarbayev’s resignation.<sup>6</sup> Tokayev was a known quantity to Russian officials. His long career in Kazakhstani politics, serving as Foreign Minister (twice), Prime Minister, Chairman of the Kazakh Senate (twice) as well as Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, means he had experience of working with Russian foreign policy makers. From the outset, the new president, Tokayev, was viewed from the perspective of senior Russian politicians as a ‘safe pair of hands’ and someone ‘who will

continue the course laid down by the first president of Kazakhstan.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Tokayev’s first international visit two weeks after taking up the reins of the presidency was to Moscow to meet with Putin. At the meeting Tokayev declared that he was committed to guaranteeing ‘the continuity of the policy of the First President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as to continue working on the comprehensive and active development of Kazakhstan–Russian cooperation’.<sup>8</sup>

It should be no surprise that Tokayev will continue to follow Nazarbayev’s so-called ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy whereby Kazakhstan seeks to balance ties with Russia and China (and to some extent the US and Europe) underpinned by a drive to integrate Kazakhstan into global and regional markets.<sup>9</sup> Aside from Nazarbayev’s continued presence and oversight of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, Tokayev was largely responsible for drawing up the ‘multi-vector’ policy during his first stint as Foreign Minister from 1994 to 1999 and the idea remains fundamental to Kazakhstan’s current Foreign Policy Concept.<sup>10</sup> From the outset of taking up the presidency, Tokayev has been keen to reassure Russian officials that Russia remains at the heart of Kazakhstan’s ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy. In his first speech as president Tokayev noted that he would give additional impetus to the development of bilateral cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan.<sup>11</sup> When he met with Putin in April Tokayev declared that he would do everything to reinforce the ties between Russia and Kazakhstan and emphasised the ‘special relationship’ between the two countries.<sup>12</sup> In his speech at the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi in October 2019, Tokayev lavishly praised Russia as a ‘great state’ and that ‘in the modern world no key problem, be it global or regional, can be solved without the constructive participation of Russia’.<sup>13</sup>

Such an approach by Tokayev is rational given Kazakhstan’s geographic, historical, economic and cultural ties with Russia. Sharing such a long contiguous border and with 4 million ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan, Tokayev (and Nazarbayev) will continue to hold close to Russia in order to ‘prevent all possible

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- 5 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2019) ‘Kazakh President Suggests Reforming Rules On Protests, Political Parties’, 20 December 2019. Accessed 7 February 2020
- 6 UAwire (2019) ‘Nazarbayev called Putin before resignation’ UAwire, 25 March. Accessed 21 January 2020
- 7 Sputnik (2019) ‘Mudryi politik’: kak otreagirovali na ostavky Nazarbayeva v stranakh SNG’, Sputnik, 19 March. Accessed 20 January 2020
- 8 Akorda (2019) ‘Meeting with Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation’, Akorda, 3 April. Accessed 20 January 2020
- 9 Kassenova, N. (2019) ‘The Elections and Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy: Continuity But For How Long?’ PONARS Eurasia 25 June. Accessed 21 January 2020
- 10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2014) ‘Foreign Policy Concept for 2014 – 2020 Republic of Kazakhstan’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Accessed 21 January 2020
- 11 Startsev, O. (2019) ‘Kursom elbasy’, Versia, 2 December. Accessed 20 January
- 12 Efe (2019) ‘Tokayev pledges to do “everything possible” to strengthen ties with Russia’, Efe, 3 April. Accessed 21 January 2020
- 13 Kuyanshbek, K. (2019) ‘Lavrinya mezhdu Kitae i Rossei. Tokayev i ego slova o Tsentral’noi Azii’, Radio Azattyk October 9. Accessed 21 January 2020 <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-tokayev-about-central-asia-russia-china/30206917.html>

threats from the Russian side'.<sup>14</sup> No doubt Russia's swallowing up of Crimea and the on-going conflict in Donbass continues to loom large in Kazakh foreign policy thinking in terms of any Russian threat to its security and territorial sovereignty. It perhaps explains Tokayev's remarks in December 2019 that in Kazakhstan they don't consider what happened to Crimea as annexation.<sup>15</sup> The Tokayev–Nazarbayev tandem is unlikely to imbalance relations with Russia. Thus, the duo will ensure Kazakhstan remains a key ally, partner and supporter of Russia. The strategy has produced some immediate returns. Trade between the two countries continues to grow, reaching \$13.6 billion for the first 9 months of 2019, an increase of \$2 billion from 2018,<sup>16</sup> driven partly by both countries' membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, an organisation in which Russia dominates.<sup>17</sup> But Russia has also signalled a willingness to build a nuclear power plant in the Almaty region, something Kazakh officials have long sought.

## Russian–Kazakhstan Foreign Policy Tensions

Nevertheless, any assessment of Russia–Kazakhstan relations in this period of transition needs to consider points of on-going tension,<sup>18</sup> and the fact that the relationship is not based simply on Kazakhstan slavishly following the will of Russian interests.<sup>19</sup> First among these tensions is the extent to which Russian influence brings into question Kazakhstani sovereignty. This appears notably in material and security terms by way of the large Russian ethnic minority in Kazakhstan. The Russian ethnic minority, while gradually decreasing, continues to provide Russia with leverage over Kazakhstan in terms of questions of security.<sup>20</sup> Second, there have been concerns in Astana, and the broader public sphere in Kazakhstan, regarding Russia's broader cultural influence. Russian-language broadcast and written media is perceived as dominating Kazakhstan's media space. Local journal-

ist Sergei Duvanov has claimed Russian media resembles a 'fifth column', which Kazakhstans are 'forced to eat'.<sup>21</sup> Russian media in Kazakhstan is largely loyal to Astana and the Nazarbayev regime, but it tends to disseminate an anti-Western position, something Nargis Kassenova suggests sits uneasily with Astana's commitment to 'multi-vectorism'.<sup>22</sup> When Kazakhstan is seeking to face all directions and present an outward facing posture to other major world powers, a domestic media space dominated by Russian anti-Western polemics is a source of frustration to Kazakhstani officials. Countering Russian soft power has entailed a more robust Kazakhstaniization of the state via discursive nation-building efforts through TV programmes and films,<sup>23</sup> a law extending the amount of Television programmes which are required to be nationally produced,<sup>24</sup> the further promotion of the Kazakh language (and English too) and the long-promised shift from a Cyrillic to a Latin alphabet.

In the short to medium term, the Tokayev–Nazarbayev tandem will continue to pursue a dual strategy of involvement in two integrative projects: The Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EEAU had been a long-held dream of Nazarbayev's, but the slow pace of its development, and difficulties which are being faced in integrating frameworks and regulations of very different economies, alongside Russia's dominance and occasional unilateral approach to decision-making within the organisation, will serve to be a base for future tensions between Kazakhstan and Russia.<sup>25</sup> In the meantime, Kazakhstan continues to build ties with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and through the investment it is receiving as a consequence of BRI. Neither Kazakhstan's participation in the SCO, nor BRI is likely to undermine Kazakhstani–Russian relations. Russia adopts a more careful approach to relations with China than it does with Kazakhstan's Western allies. Moreover, China does not present any

- 14 Kuyanshbek, K. (2019) 'Laviruya mezhdz Kitaem i Rossei. Tokaev i ego slova o Tsentral'noi Azii', Radio Azattyk October 9. Accessed 21 January 2020 <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-tokayev-about-central-asia-russia-china/30206917.html>
- 15 Nemtsova, Z. (2019) 'My ne nazyvaem to, chto proizoshlo v krymy anneksiei', Deutsche Welle, 4 December. Accessed 21 January 2020
- 16 Startsev, O. (2019) 'Kursom elbasy', Versia, 2 December. Accessed 20 January
- 17 Bhutia, S. (2019) 'Russia dominates Eurasian Union trade. Here are the numbers' Eurasianet, 18 October. Accessed 22 January 2020
- 18 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'Relations with Russia and China' in Kazakhstan Tested by Transition. Chatham House Report. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- 19 Laruelle, M., Royce, D. and Beysembayev, S. (2019) 'Untangling the puzzle of "Russia's influence" in Kazakhstan, Eurasian Geography and Economics, 60, (2): 211–243.
- 20 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'Relations with Russia and China' in Kazakhstan Tested by Transition. Chatham House Report. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs., p. 89.
- 21 Toguzabaev, K. (2014) 'Rossiiskie SMI v Kazakhstane posle Kryma', Radio Azattyk, 26 November. Accessed 22 January 2020
- 22 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'The Elections and Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy: Continuity But For How Long?' PONARS Eurasia 25 June. Accessed 21 January 2020
- 23 Isaacs, R. (2018) Film and Identity in Kazakhstan: Soviet and post-Soviet Culture. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.
- 24 Zakon.kz. 'V Kazakhstane vveden v deistvie Zakon RK O telegravioveshchani' Zakon.kz. 12 March. Accessed 23 January 2020
- 25 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'Relations with Russia and China' in Kazakhstan Tested by Transition. Chatham House Report. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 94.

ideological or normative threat in Kazakhstan like US or European partners who are seeking to promote political reform. While greater Chinese investment is a boon to Kazakhstan's growth prospects and further integration into the broader regional economy, it is also a source of domestic tension, with anti-Chinese attitudes on the rise in Kazakhstan. Largely this has been directed at Chinese workers in the oil industry, but there is also considerable public disquiet regarding the stories of ethnic Kazakhs being held in Chinese internment camps in Xinjiang.

It is important, however, to remember that Russia-Kazakhstan relations are not just a one-way street. It is true that Russia is highly influential in Kazakhstan not least because of geographic, demographic and cultural reasons, but also at the same time Russia needs Kazakhstan. Since relations with Ukraine are at an all-time low, Russia needs a reliable supporter in the former Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is Russia's number-one ally in the region. Thus, as much as Tokayev may feel the need to offer cloy words and sentiments from the outset of his presidency towards Russia and Putin, Russian policy makers would do well to keep the Kazakhs on-side. Demographic and cultural shifts over the decades to come will see Russia's soft power decrease in Kazakhstan. It will then become the economic and material benefits of Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia which will matter most. If they fail to materialise in sufficient number then Moscow could see Kazakhstani support for Russian interests and policy wither.

### Concluding Remarks

In the short to medium term, the 'beige transition' from Nazarbayev to Tokayev changes little both domestically and internationally. At home, Tokayev is promising some modicum of political reform regarding the right to freedom of assembly and the ability for organ-

isations to register as political parties. But this does not provide the necessary radical changes required to transform the authoritarian system in Kazakhstan. Moreover, Nazarbayev remains powerful and the key decision-maker in terms of broader state strategy. Internationally, such limited domestic reform in Kazakhstan suits Moscow. Kazakhstan will continue a foreign policy which is aimed at balancing the interests of Russia, China and other key players. But close ties with Russia and the Putin regime will remain sacrosanct for the meantime.

Perhaps the greatest significance of Nazarbayev's half-departure is the new constitutional model it provides authoritarian leaders as they seek to leave office, but remain influential and ultimately in power. Such efforts have been described by scholars as a form of charismatic routinization.<sup>26</sup> This is the process whereby political leadership premised on the sheer magnetism, charisma and personality of a leader is transferred into the political institutions of the state. This is the model Nazarbayev is trying to pursue, but while ostensibly institutions like the presidency and parliament are formally supposed to hold power, in fact ultimate power resides informally in the personality of Nazarbayev and the extra-constitutional positions he has created for himself as 'leader of the nation' and life chair of the National Security Council. One can't help but think the way in which Nazarbayev has managed to maintain influence and control in Kazakhstan despite leaving the office of president is influencing Putin's recent proposals for constitutional change. Putin's desire to establish a management structure for running the country in which he is less directly involved, but at the same time floating above it as the 'supreme arbiter' are evidently inspired by the model put in place by Nazarbayev in 2019. This form of 'authoritarian diffusion' will perhaps be the most significant legacy of Kazakhstan's 'beige transition'.

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26 Isaacs, R. (2015) 'The Routinization of Charisma in Central Asia: The cases of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan'. *Studies in Transition States and Societies*, 7 (1): 58–76.

## ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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