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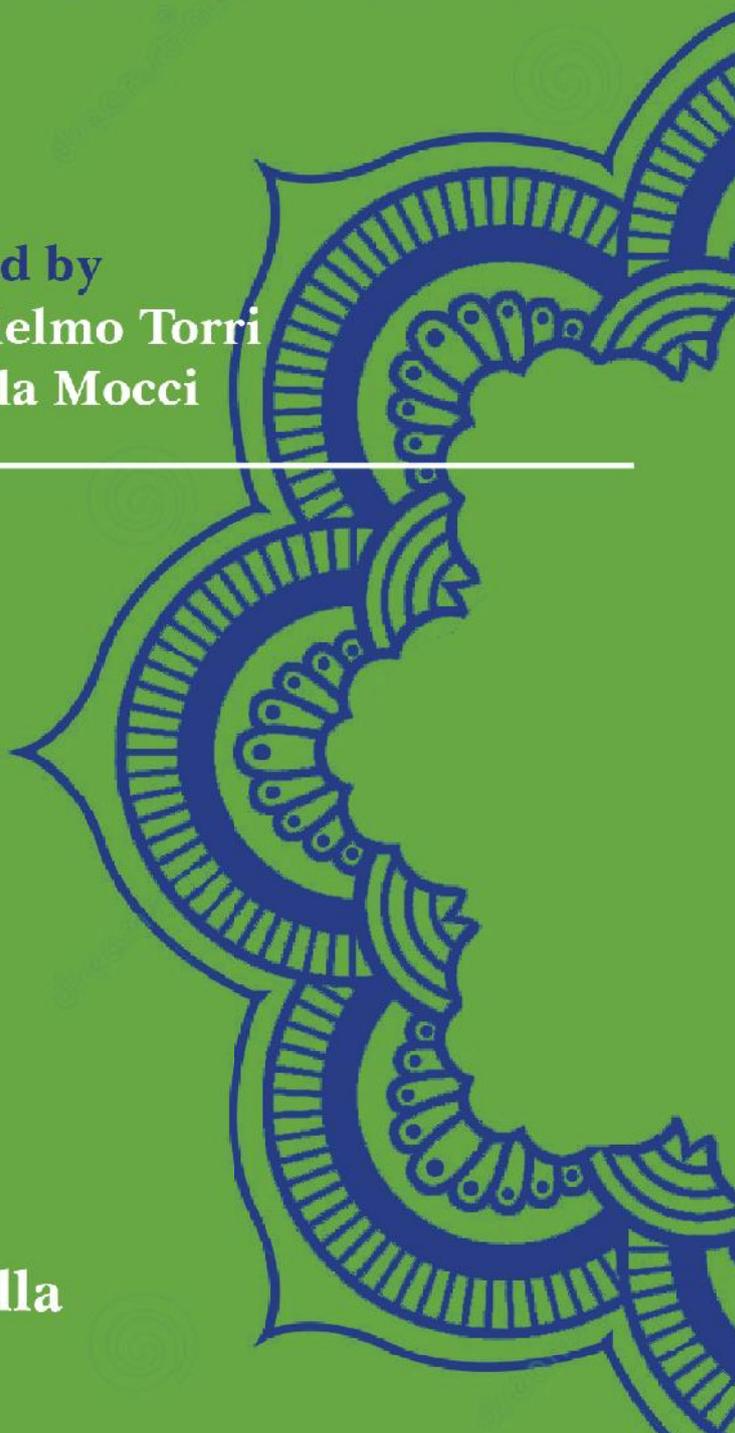
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## The End of the Obama Era in Asia

Edited by  
Michelguglielmo Torri  
and Nicola Mocchi

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KAZAKHSTAN 2015-2016: BALANCING REGIME STABILITY AMIDST LOCAL  
AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES\*

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*Twenty-five years after independence, Kazakhstan is still under the rule of its first President, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The biennium 2015-2016 confirmed the continuity of the process of stabilization of the political system started in the previous years. These were also years of challenges to the stability of Nazarbayev's regime, namely the persistence of the economic crisis, the emergence of visible popular discontent, and events allegedly connected with the much-feared threat of Islamic terrorism. This paper argues that, in this period, the authoritarian leadership of Kazakhstan maintained a stable grip on power thanks to an increased use of less repressive and more sophisticated authoritarian tools, such as control of new media as well as the use of institutions and official discourse to seek legitimacy. Far from being a novelty in the style of Nazarbayev's rule, the underplaying of repression in favour of legitimation has intensified in the last two years. This more sophisticated form of authoritarianism is analysed both at the national and international level. Internationally, in fact, the regime continued to pursue an active foreign policy in order to portray itself as moderate, stable and effective. It is argued that this strategy was aimed at boosting the legitimacy of the regime at home, while making it recognized as a reliable ally at the international level.*

*1. Introduction*

2016 marked twenty-five years of Kazakhstan's independence. The President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, began the celebrations on 30 November 2015 with his annual Message to the Nation, a traditional end-of-the-year address where he reminds the people of Kazakhstan of past achievements and warns them about the challenges that lie ahead. This Message accurately identified the local and global challenges that Kazakhstan struggled with in 2015 and would eventually face in 2016. On the one hand,

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global economic trends, such as sluggish growth and low oil prices, further damaged the country's already troubled economy and ended up threatening societal stability too. Almost prophetically, the president also warned against the ever-increasing threat of religious-based terrorism, a threat that became close to reality in Aktobe in June 2016. Finally, Nazarbayev pointed at the difficulty of interacting with an international sphere characterized by «harsh competition between regional and global power centres».<sup>1</sup> Squeezed between Russia and the West, and observing the situation in Syria with concern, Kazakhstan had to balance the difficult regional configuration with its global ambitions in the last biennium.

This paper demonstrates that the leadership of Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime dealt with these challenges in continuity with the efforts of stabilization started in the previous biennium (2013-14).<sup>2</sup> It did so by applying and further refining the soft authoritarian tools that have become a defining characteristic of its rule. Kazakhstan has first been defined as a «soft authoritarian» regime by Edward Schatz, to underline the contrast between Nazarbaev's rule and that of other Central Asian dictators.<sup>3</sup> Schatz's definition includes a full «toolkit»: the use of repression in a targeted and limited manner; the reliance on patrimonial networks; and the regime's efforts to dominate discourse-making through media control and discursive persuasion and framing.<sup>4</sup> In the light of the prevalent approach in explaining authoritarian stability, which sees authoritarian regimes having to balance between the three pillars of repression, co-optation and legitimation, it could be said that Kazakhstan relies most heavily on the second and, in particular, the third pillar.<sup>5</sup> Repression, while never absent, is kept at a low-intensity level and conducted in a targeted and sophisticated manner.<sup>6</sup> This way, the regime effectively stifles protest and constrains opposition, while

1. Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Kazakhstan v Novoi Globalnoi Real'nosti: Rost, Reformy, Razvitie', 2016 Message to the People of Kazakhstan, 30 November 2015 (<http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-30-noyabrya-2015-g>).

2. Fabrisi Vielmini, 'Kazakhstan 2013-2014: Surviving Internal Difficulties, Facing External Challenges', *Asia Maior XXV*, 2014 'Engaging China/Containing China', by M. Torri and N. Mocchi (eds), I libri di Emil, Bologna 2015.

3. Edward Schatz, 'The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan', *Comparative Politics*, Issue 1, No 2, 2009, pp. 203-222. On soft authoritarianism see also Gordon Paul Means, 'Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore', *Journal of Democracy*, Issue 7, No 4, 1996, pp. 103-117.

4. Edward Schatz, 'The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit', Edward Schatz & Elena Maltseva, 'Kazakhstan's Authoritarian «Persuasion»', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Issue 28, No 1, 2012, pp. 45-65.

5. Johannes Gerschewski, 'The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes', *Democratization*, Issue 20, No 1, 2013, pp. 13-38.

6. On different levels of authoritarian repression, see: Lucan. A. Way, & Steven Levitsky, 'The dynamics of autocratic coercion after the Cold War', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Issue 39, No 3, 2006, pp. 387-410.

reducing the number of violent crackdowns that would further enrage the population or provoke international criticism.<sup>7</sup>

Legitimation indeed takes a central place in the stability of Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime.<sup>8</sup> Since independence, the leadership has sought popular approval through the creation and maintenance of an image of benevolent ruler fostering economic wealth, promoting societal harmony, and building a stable, effective and internationally recognized state.<sup>9</sup>

This is mostly done through the promotion of certain frames in the official discourse.<sup>10</sup> A first frame relates to performance, or output, legitima-

7. The third pillar, co-optation, is by no means insignificant, as the regime is also made stable by a complex network of patrimonial relations. Elites are connected to the centre by multiple ties, concerning business relations, administrative posts and political careers. Sally Cummings, 'Kazakhstan: power and the elite', London, New York: *IB Tauris*, 2002. However, in the evolution of Kazakhstan towards a soft type of rule, those networks are somehow constant, while legitimation's role grows at the expenses of hard repression. Therefore, this paper does not deal with the dimension of elite dynamics. Nevertheless, a few notes should be made. The most notable change in the higher spheres has been the appointment of Dariga Nazarbayeva, the president's first daughter, to Senate Spokesperson, in the summer of 2015. This has generated rumours about her preparing to succeed her father, as the Article 48 of the Constitution states that the Senate Spokesperson acts as interim President in case of the leader's incapacitation. It should be said, though, that Nazarbayeva unsuccessfully tried to get the presidency earlier; also, there are a number of other eligible candidates, including the deputy prime minister Imangali Tasmagambetov. For an overview of the most important changes see: 'Kazakhstan: Rearranging Chairs on the Ship Astana', *Eurasianet*, 14 September 2016.

8. Legitimation defines the process through which a political leadership makes claims to justify its rule. It is a one-sided, leadership-centred view, which cannot and does not aim to assess whether the process is successful in creating legitimacy, which is the true «belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate one for the society». Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy', *American political science review*, Issue 53, No 01, 1959, p. 77.

9. Edward Schatz, 'Access by accident: Legitimacy Claims and Democracy Promotion in Authoritarian Central Asia', *International Political Science Review*, Issue 27, No 3, 2006, pp. 263-284. Edward Schatz & Elena Maltseva, 'Kazakhstan's Authoritarian «Persuasion»'. Adele Del Sordi, 'Legitimation and the Party of Power in Kazakhstan', in Joachim Ahrens, Martin Brusis and Martin Schulze Wessel (eds.), *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, pp. 72-96, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Christian Von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, 'Comparing Legitimation Strategies in Post-Soviet Countries', in Joachim Ahrens, Martin Brusis and Martin Schulze Wessel (eds.), *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, pp. 18-46, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

10. Schatz borrows the concept from the literature on Social Movements. The analysis of frames in the official discourse enables researchers to see how ruling elites engage in «reality construction», selectively emphasizing information for a given purpose. Edward Schatz, 'Access by Accident', p. 268.

cy.<sup>11</sup> This has first of all a material aspect: the riches obtained from tapping the country's natural resources are used to maintain extensive redistribution policies and organize large-scale events aimed at building popular consensus.<sup>12</sup> Through framing, the leadership also discursively appropriates the country's achievements and seeks to transform the popular satisfaction about the provision of public goods into approval for the regime.<sup>13</sup> The second fundamental legitimating frame is international recognition. In the difficult decade of the 1990s, political instability and economic crisis made it impossible to rely on performance. Then, «the elite chose to base its legitimacy claim on external recognition inward to domestic audiences», engaging in intense diplomatic and international activity with the goal of presenting the leadership as professional and deserving of support in front of the domestic audience.<sup>14</sup> This strategy is materialized in Kazakhstan's numerous efforts in seeking membership in international organizations, facilitating mediation processes and promoting unilateral initiatives.<sup>15</sup> Finally, legitimation in Kazakhstan has an institutional dimension, which serves to «buttress, channel and at times provide a substitute for the popular support deriving from international recognition and a strong economic performance».<sup>16</sup> Elections and the party of power perform this role, translating generic satisfaction for the government's work in periods of strong economic growth into explicit political support, and substituting for it in periods of recession by becoming providers of input legitimacy.<sup>17</sup>

In this paper, legitimation frames, their institutional dimension, and the overall soft authoritarian nature of the Kazakhstani regime will serve as analytical tools for explaining the developments in the Kazakhstani domestic and international politics in the last two years. In particular, I am going to analyse how the authoritarian leadership of Kazakhstan has dealt with the

11. The terms «output» or «performance legitimacy» define the achievement of a high level of prosperity and stability. See David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, New York: Wiley, 1965; Fritz W. Scharpf, *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

12. Elena Maltseva, 'Framing a welfare reform: the social benefits reform in Russia and Kazakhstan', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Issue 58, No 3, 2016, pp.229-256. Laura L. Adams & Assel Rustemova, 'Mass spectacle and styles of governmentality in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Issue 61, No 7, 2009, pp. 1249-1276.

13. Government effectiveness and legitimacy are, as Lipset pointed out, separate categories. However, the delivery of goods and services may be used as a legitimation strategy through appropriate framing. Leslie Holmes, 'Legitimation and Legitimacy in Russia Revisited', in Stephen Fortescue (ed.) *Russian Politics. From Lenin to Putin*, pp. 101-126, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 106.

14. Edward Schatz, 'Access by accident', p. 270.

15. Edward Schatz & Elena Maltseva, 'Kazakhstan's Authoritarian «Persuasion»'; Adele Del Sordi & Emanuela Dalmasso, 'Religious foreign policy as nation branding: the cases of Morocco and Kazakhstan', Forthcoming 2018.

16. Adele Del Sordi, 'Legitimation and the Party of Power in Kazakhstan', p. 72.

17. *Ibid.*

domestic and international challenges arising in 2015-2016 by using strategies taken from the «soft authoritarian tool kit». At the domestic level, as will be seen in the following two sections, the regime has chosen soft approaches to deal with economic crisis, instability and protest, by seeking legitimacy through the electoral process and the official discourse, while, at the same time, refraining from large-scale repression in favour of subtle forms of control. A partial exception is found in the way the regime has dealt with the threat of Islamic terrorism: its combination of repressive measures and ambiguous framing in this domain actually shows the limitations of the soft authoritarian toolkit. These limitations are also visible in the way the regime manages the internet, which, it will be shown, oscillates between methods of sophisticated control and sheer repression. Internationally, as the last section shows, the leadership has consistently pursued a greater involvement in diplomatic processes and international organizations, with the double goal of strengthening the position of the country in the global arena and, indirectly, gaining domestic legitimacy through international recognition.

## *2. Dealing with the economic crisis: balancing low output with higher input legitimization*

### *2.1. The Macroeconomic outlook*

The macroeconomic situation in 2015-16 followed the same, difficult, pattern of the previous two years.<sup>18</sup> The highest point of the crisis was the decision, in August 2015, to let the national currency (the tenge) float freely. The choice reflected the persistence of the economic crisis that had also led to the previous tenge devaluation, in 2014.<sup>19</sup> In 2015, the GDP growth remained very low, reaching 1.2%, and further slowed at the beginning of 2016, hitting 0.1%.<sup>20</sup> Oil prices were kept low, severely curtailing the country's revenues from natural resources.<sup>21</sup> The country's economy was further negatively influenced by slow Chinese growth, which also hobbled oil prices, and by the persistence of the crisis in Russia, which was still dealing with the Ukraine-related sanctions and the implementation of the Eurasian Eco-

18. Fabrisi Vielmini, 'Kazakhstan 2013-2014', p. 430.

19. *Ibid.*

20. The Asian Development Bank sees signs of marginal improvement for 2017, when the growth should go back to 1%. Asian Development Bank, 'Kazakhstan: Economy', *Asian Development Outlook 2016 Update*, September 2016. One of the reasons for optimism is the beginning of commercial-scale production at the Kashagan oil field in October 2016. 'Oil Production Starts at Giant Kashagan Field', *oilprice.com*, 13 October 2016 (<http://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Oil-Production-Starts-At-Giant-Kashagan-Field.html>).

21. Bradley Jardine, 'Kazakhstan: Economic Crisis, State Companies, And the Nation's Image', *Radio Free Europe*, 13 June 2015.

conomic Union.<sup>22</sup> The implementation of this Union led to a «trade war» with Russia, with both countries trying to limit the imports of certain products from the other.<sup>23</sup>

The decision to float the tenge severely affected the population, who had to face higher prices and increasing uncertainty, and possibly felt less confidence in the authorities.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, if the importance of performance legitimacy for the country's stability is taken into account, the regime had much to fear from such a prolonged crisis. The measures taken, therefore, were not all dictated by the need for austerity. The authorities used the funds of the national sovereign fund Samruk Kazyna to boost the economy, not only by helping out the industrial sector, in particular the national oil company Kazmunaygaz, but also by investing in the country's development programme Nurly Zhol.<sup>25</sup>

The government further pushed its development agenda by launching a new initiative, called «100 Concrete Steps», in the spring of 2015. The programme had the dual purpose of effectively accelerating modernization while rhetorically reassuring domestic and international audiences about the government's willingness to take a proactive stance to solve economic problems.<sup>26</sup> Given the persistence of the crisis through the whole of 2015, the regime also tried to reduce its impact on the population. Authorities adjusted wages and subsidies to the new currency value, advertising these measures as a way to «fulfil the government's obligations towards the people».<sup>27</sup> Nazarbayev also attempted to discursively justify the present austerity with future goals of development and prosperity. In the 2016 Message to the Nation, he said that «reforms will not be easy, and possibly will be painful. But we have no alternative. If we do not carry them on, we will be left behind from the world developments. But we, as usual, will do what we have planned».<sup>28</sup> Finally, as in other periods of economic crisis, the regime

22. 'Kazakhstan – Explaining the early presidential election'. *Presidential Power*, 04 March 2015 (<http://presidential-power.com/?p=2883>). 'Kazakh President Nazarbayev Warns That 'Real Crisis' Is Coming', *Bloomberg*, 19 October 2015.

23. Sean Roberts, 'The Ukraine Conflict and the Future of Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 388, 15 September 2015. See also Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan's Role in International Organizations', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute/Silk Road Studies Programme, Washington DC-Stockholm*, 2015, 34-35.

24. 'Kazakhstan – Explaining the early presidential election'. After the 2014 devaluation, in fact, citizens of Almaty had taken the streets to call upon the government to take action. 'Politsia razognala miting v Almaty', *Radio Azattyq*, 15 February 2014.

25. Bradley Jardine, 'Kazakhstan: Economic crisis'.

26. As an example of official rhetoric, see the op-ed the then Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov wrote for the *Diplomat*: Erlan Idrissov, 'Kazakhstan: 100 Steps towards a New Nation', *The Diplomat*, 25 July, 2015.

27. Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Kazakhstan v Novoi Globalnoi Real'nosti'.

28. *Ibid.*

reacted to these shortcomings in performance, and consequently in the reduced scope for using performance legitimation, by resorting to greater use of input and institutional legitimation. This was chiefly done through the electoral process.

## 2.2. *Early Presidential and Mazhilis elections*

Despite, or perhaps because of their highly predictable results, elections play a very important role in the Kazakhstani political system. Their role is not limited to «faking democracy» or mimicking its practices for the benefit of Western observers – although this is an advantage not wasted on a regime that highly values international recognition, as will be seen in the last section of this paper.<sup>29</sup> In Kazakhstan, elections contribute to regime stability by sustaining institutional legitimacy.<sup>30</sup> In critical phases, elections couple with other liberalizing measures to demonstrate the regime's responsiveness and shift the regime's legitimation mode to input legitimacy. In other words, the leadership compensates for poor performance by reinforcing the fact, or rather the impression, that it cares about citizens' voices and participation.

To give priority to economic goals was offered as the official motivation for an anticipated Presidential Election, on 26 April 2015. As one of the members of the Assembly of Nations of Kazakhstan stated: «in conditions of increasing world economic crisis, to hold early Presidential elections would allow the country to implement effectively the program Nurly Zhol and to keep forwarding the country's long-term development priorities, as defined by the strategic document «Kazakhstan 2050».<sup>31</sup> The election, unsurprisingly won by Nazarbayev with a record 95.75% of the vote, can therefore be seen as an attempt to reassure citizens that the leadership was taking ac-

29. Andrew Wilson, *Virtual politics: faking democracy in the post-Soviet world*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005. See also Andreas Schedler, *The politics of uncertainty: Sustaining and subverting electoral authoritarianism*. OUP, Oxford, 2013.

30. Institutional legitimation can be defined as «the functional and normative appropriateness of institutions with regard to shared interpretations and beliefs». Martin Brusis, 'The Politics of Legitimation in Post-Soviet Eurasia', in Joachim Ahrens, Martin Brusis and Martin Schulze Wessel (eds), *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, pp. 1-17, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 2. On the role of institutional legitimation in Kazakhstan, see Adele Del Sordi, 'Legitimation and the Party of Power in Kazakhstan'.

31. The Assembly of Nations of Kazakhstan, also known as the Assembly of People, is a consultative body which gathers representatives of the country's ethnic groups with the goal of guaranteeing inter-ethnic harmony. As a body, it has the prerogative of legal initiative. It also appoints 9 of the 107 members of the Parliament's lower chamber, the Mazhilis. 'Dosrochnye vybory Prezidenta Kazakhstana predlozhila provesti ANK', *Tengrinews*, 14 February 2015.

tion to overcome the crisis.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, according to the opposition politician Zhamarkan Tuyakbai, the worsening economic and social situation in the country required the authorities to «take adequate measures».<sup>33</sup> The timing of elections was strategic: early elections allowed the authorities to delay austerity measures until after the popular consultations, thus preventing the consequent dissatisfaction from being reflected in the vote.<sup>34</sup>

The preoccupation with the economic situation was the ostensible reason for holding early parliamentary elections in 2016, too.<sup>35</sup> «Only unity and concerted actions will help us withstand the new economic shocks», said the petition in which a group of parliamentarians declared that the current legislature had «performed its historical duty» and requested the President to dissolve it.<sup>36</sup> Elections for the Mazhilis, the lower chamber of the Kazakhstani parliament, were held on 20 March 2016, and were an overwhelming victory for Nazarbayev's party, Nur Otan.<sup>37</sup> Again, elections can be seen as a way to show the government's responsiveness to the prolonged economic crisis. According to local experts, elections were a sign that the authorities are doing «something», and a way to «avoid the increasing of social pressure in the country».<sup>38</sup> Once again, the timing was deliberate. The forecasts of economic growth for the autumn looked rather grim, so the government wanted to «hold elections while the population still had the impression of a favourable economic situation».<sup>39</sup>

It is uncertain whether the regime's attempt to create a connection with the population through elections is a successful or a sustainable one. Despite a certain level of genuine consent, the electoral process in Kazakh-

32. OSCE/ODIHR, 'Republic of Kazakhstan, Early Presidential Election, 26 April 2015: Election Observation Mission Final Report', 29 July 2015, p. 26.

33. 'Za chem v Kazakhstane organizuiut dosrochnye vybory prezidenta?' *Deutsche Welle*, 18 February 2015.

34. The expert Dossym Satpayev considers it likely that Nazarbayev «decided to implement them after an election to counteract the likely loss of support for the government». 'Kazakhstan – Explaining the early presidential election'.

35. Authorities also mentioned the wish to coordinate parliamentary elections with those of local chambers of representations, the *maslikhats*. Maxim Likhachyev, 'V Kazakhstane proidut dosrochnye parlamentarskie vybory', *Blog of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies*, 25 January 2016 (<https://riss.ru/analitics/25610>).

36. *Ibid.*

37. The pro-presidential party Nur Otan confirmed its dominant position, gaining 82.2% of votes and 84 seats out of 98. OSCE/ODIHR, 'Republic of Kazakhstan, Early Parliamentary Elections, 20 March 2016: Election Observation Mission Final Report', 27 July 2016, p. 26.

38. 'Ocherednye vneocherednye vybory v Kazakhstane', *Deutsche Welle*, 21 January 2016.

39. 'Dosrochnye vybory v Kazakhstane – Effektivnii menedzhment v usloviakh ekonomicheskogo krisisa', *Nur.kz*, 2 February 2016 (<https://www.nur.kz/1032976-dosrochnye-vybory-v-kazakhstane-effek.html>).

stan is tightly constrained, giving little or no space to opposition forces.<sup>40</sup> Signs of instability and protests have emerged in the last two years, indicating a possible weakening of this connection.

### *3. The domestic outlook: dealing with popular protest, the threat of Islamic terrorism and the information crisis*

#### *3.1. The Land Reform Protests: managing discontent with soft repression*

The last biennium witnessed the «worst social unrest» since the riots of Zhanaozen in 2011.<sup>41</sup> The trigger for it was the adoption of new legislation on the status of landed property. In particular, this extended the conditions under which foreigners could rent agricultural land in the country.<sup>42</sup> Protests against the bill erupted at the end of April 2016, when rallies were organized in several cities. Demonstrations started in the west of the country, in Atyrau, on 24 April, and continued on 27 April in Aktobe, also in the west, and in the eastern city of Semey. In later days, protests expanded to the southern city of Kyzylorda and the western town of Zhanaozen. The events were remarkable because of their geographical diffusion and number of participants: the event in Atyrau, with its estimated 4000 participants, was «the largest in Kazakhstan for 5 years».<sup>43</sup> The reason for such a negative reaction is the conviction, seemingly unfounded, that the reform would allow foreigners, Chinese in particular, to purchase land in Kazakhstan. Indeed, by reflecting the «prism of distrust and fear» through which China is seen in the country, the rallies exposed the strong enmity of the local population towards their eastern neighbour.<sup>44</sup>

40. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, which carried out monitoring activities, denounced irregularities in the procedures and curbed political competition in both elections. See: OSCE/ODIHR, 'Republic of Kazakhstan, Early Presidential Election, 26 April 2015'; OSCE/ODIHR, 'Republic of Kazakhstan, Early Parliamentary Elections, 20 March 2016'.

41. See 'Kazakhstan: Land Issue Fuelling Social Discontent', *Eurasianet*, 24 May 2016.

42. The new bill, approved in November 2015, regulates the conditions under which entities with (at most) 50% foreign ownership are eligible to lease agricultural land in Kazakhstan. The law extends the existent term for leases from 10 to 25 years. It also eliminates the possibility for residents of Kazakhstan to lease land and creates, in its place, an auction-like system for purchasing plots. Dena Sholk, 'Kazakhstan's Land Reforms', *The Diplomat*, 15 June 2016.

43. Igor Savchenko, 'Report: Oppression of participants in rallies against Land Reform in Kazakhstan', *Open Dialog Foundation Report*, 12 October 2016 (en.odfoundation.eu/a/7944,report-oppression-of-participants-in-rallies-against-land-reform-in-kazakhstan).

44. Kemel Toktomushev, 'Chinese Bogeyman and Land Reform in Kazakhstan', *China-US Focus*, 03 October 2016 (<http://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/chinese-bogeyman-and-land-reform-in-kazakhstan>).

Protests, however, were mainly the sign of widespread popular discontent. The distance between the leadership and the citizenship had increased, as noted before, because of the prolonged economic crisis.<sup>45</sup> The regime definitely feared such an open expression of discontent, as it would damage «the country's carefully cultivated image as a haven of stability» and delegitimise the leadership of Nazarbayev.<sup>46</sup> As they had done in the past, the authorities tried to deal with the protests with a combination of repression, concessions and discursive tools. However, compared to past occurrences, the reaction to the 2016 demonstrations was softer. The contrast with the 2011 protests in Zhanaozen is particularly significant.<sup>47</sup> Then, demonstrations ended with a violent crackdown by the security forces. As a result, the authorities experienced the disadvantages of using open violence. As Erica Marat explains, by crossing the line between the usual level of state violence to what she calls «transformative violence», the regime ended up energizing the protesters, fuelling instability and attracting criticism from the international community.<sup>48</sup>

In light of that experience, it is not surprising that in 2016 the authorities refrained from large-scale violence. Activists were rounded up, participants were arrested, and demonstrations were interrupted, but it happened without the police forces opening fire on the protesters, or using other forms of hard repression.<sup>49</sup> As one activist said, «it is not intimidation but rather subtle forms of pressure on participants in the rallies».<sup>50</sup> In addition, the regime tried to appease protesters by making significant concessions,

45. See 'Kazakhstan: Land Issue Fuelling Social Discontent'; 'Kazakhstan: Is Land Issue Foundation for Wider Anger?' and Igor Savchenko, 'Report'.

46. 'Kazakhstan: Land Issue Fuelling Social Discontent'.

47. Workers of the western oil town had been striking since the summer of 2011, demanding higher pay and, later, protesting against massive dismissals. The conflict escalated on 16 December 2011 (Kazakhstan's Independence Day), when riots and their violent repression by police forces left at least 16 people dead. Dossym Satpayev & Tolganay Umbetaliyeva, 'The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector: Conflicting Interests in a Rentier State', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* Issue 6, 2015, pp. 122-129.

48. Erica Marat, 'Kazakhstan had huge protests, but no violent crackdown. Here's why', *The Washington Post*, 6 June 2016. In a resolution on Zhanaozen, the European Parliament criticized «the dramatic worsening of the human rights situation in Kazakhstan». *European Parliament resolution on the human rights situation in Kazakhstan*, 18 April 2013 (2013/2600(RSP)). The US State Department also expressed concern about the events. United States Department of State, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, Washington, DC: United States Department of State Publication, 2013.

49. Erica Marat, 'Kazakhstan had huge protests'. Igor Savchenko, 'Report'. 'Kazakhstan: Panicked Authorities Rounding Up Activists', *Eurasianet*, 17 May 2016.

50. The activist Max Bokayev, who spoke these words before being arrested, was sentenced to 15 days detention in a late-evening hearing on 17 May. 'Kazakhstan: Panicked Authorities Rounding Up Activists'.

including calling a moratorium on the reform and establishing a special commission to re-examine the text.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the leadership employed discourse to delegitimise the protests and reassure the rest of the citizenship that their concerns were unfounded.<sup>52</sup> Nazarbayev tried to frame the issue in such a way as to separate the disapproval for the reform from criticism of his rule. First, he shifted the blame onto government officials, accusing them of devising an over-complex reform that the population could not understand: «If our people do not understand and trust the decisions that have been taken, then it is not right [to press ahead with them]» Nazarbayev said.<sup>53</sup> Following these statements, the Minister for Economic Issues Yerbolat Dosayev and his deputy Kairbek Uskenbayev were forced to resign from their posts.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the president blamed the disorders on external «provocateurs», who allegedly speculated on the sale of land, and called for them to be «exposed and punished» for spreading unfounded rumours.<sup>55</sup> Stories warning of the negative social and economic consequences of protests were published by official media from the beginning of the protests.<sup>56</sup> In particular, in a speech on 1 May 2016, Nazarbayev warned about the development of a Ukraine-style scenario of civil war and economic downfall.<sup>57</sup>

The situation in the last months of 2016 was less tense. Oil workers went on strike in the west, but these protests did not reach the main urban centres.<sup>58</sup> The better economic prospects for 2017 might have positively influenced the public mood and reduced the need for soft authoritarian tools of protest management.<sup>59</sup> Yet it was such tools that proved insufficient

51. Dena Sholk, 'Kazakhstan's Land Reforms'.

52. After Zhanaozen the regime used discourse to isolate the protesters from the general public. Erica Marat, 'Kazakhstan had huge protests'. David Lewis, 'Blogging Zhanaozen: hegemonic discourse and authoritarian resilience in Kazakhstan', *Central Asian Survey*, Issue 3, No 3, 2016, pp. 421-438.

53. 'Kazakh leader delays land reform, yielding to protests', *Reuters*, 5 May 2016.

54. 'Government makes concessions to defuse land protests', *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 6 May 2016.

55. 'Nazarbayev govorit o «provokatorov» v zemel'nom voprose', *Radio Azattyq*, 26 April 2016.

56. 'Government makes concessions to defuse land protests'.

57. 'Nazarbayev predostereg ot «Ukrainskogo stsenaria» v Kazakhstane', *Radio Svoboda*, 1 May 2016.

58. 'Oil Worker Strike in Kazakhstan Ends without Violence', *oilprice.com*, 6 October 2016 (<http://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Oil-Worker-Strike-In-Kazakhstan-Ends-Without-Violence.html>).

59. Another example of the regime's use of soft authoritarian techniques was the alleged aggression against the journalist and activist Irina Mednikova. Mednikova, who leads the independent organization 'Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan' was attacked near her apartment in Almaty on 12 October 2016. She reported that a bag containing the materials, permissions and money for an upcoming event,

to deal with the other great challenge for the stability of the Kazakhstani regime: the returning threat of Islamic terrorism. It is this threat that I now turn my attention to.

### 3.2. *Facing the threat of Islamic terrorism*

In 2016, Kazakhstan witnessed a return of the threat of Islamic terrorism. While the previous years had been relatively calm,<sup>60</sup> the June attacks in the Western city of Aktobe were a powerful reminder of the threat. The attacks were carried out by a handful of men armed with shotguns and extended over several days, ending only with a large anti-terrorism operation which left a total of 19 people dead and 37 injured. The country was shaken again in July, when a gunman killed five people in the southern capital, Almaty.<sup>61</sup> The reaction to these violent events is an example of the ambiguous way the Kazakhstani leadership deals with radicalization and religious-based terrorism in general. In the words of the expert Luca Anceschi, the attacks reveal the «uneasy nexus between government rhetoric, socio-economic instability and terrorist violence».<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, the Kazakhstani authorities use events like this to securitize a factually low threat of Islamic terrorism.<sup>63</sup> The authorities treat terrorism as a highly dangerous menace in order to reach other goals, such as reacting to an international context that is socializing them in that direction, or to justify tighter measures of control on the population.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the Kazakhstani leadership depicts the country as a haven of stability and multi-confessional harmony, with the ultimate goal of presenting itself to the international community as a reliable ally in the war on terrorism. Through discourse, the authorities frame radical Islam as non-traditional and alien to the local

ZhasCamp Atyrau, was stolen. Testimonies by colleagues connect the aggression with the subsequent difficulties they encountered in running the event, as partners and sponsors withdrew their support after the attack. 'Napadenie na Irinu Mednikovu svyazyvaiut s ZhasKemp', *Radiotochka*, 14 October 2016 (<https://radiotochka.kz/28779-napadenie-na-irinu-mednikovu-svyazyvayut-s-zhascamp.html>).

60. Fabrisi Vielmini, 'Kazakhstan 2013-2014', p. 428.

61. Luca Anceschi, 'Kazakhstan: the limits of authoritarian crisis management', *Open Democracy*, 26 June 2016.

62. *Ibid.*

63. According to the Copenhagen school of International Relations, to securitize is to socially construct a certain issue as a threat through a «speech act». Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver & Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998. On Central Asia, see David W. Megoran & John Heathershaw, 'Islam, secularism and danger: a reconsideration of the link between religiosity, radicalism and rebellion in Central Asia', *Religion, State & Society*, Issue 44, No 3, 2016, pp. 192-218.

64. David W. Montgomery & John Heathershaw, 'Islam, secularism and danger: a reconsideration of the link between religiosity, radicalism and rebellion in Central Asia', *Religion, State & Society*, Issue 44, No 3, 2016, pp. 192-218.

society, and Kazakhstan is presented as a place where many religious faiths live together in peace and harmony.<sup>65</sup>

These approaches were reflected in the ways the regime dealt with the threat of Islamic terrorism in the last two years, particularly after the Aktobe and Almaty events. The authorities were quick in making the connection between the attackers and Islamic radical movements, even when this connection was not supported by evidence. Suspects in the Aktobe attacks were identified as «followers of radical, non-traditional religious movements», which is the way radical Islamists are commonly labelled by authorities.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the authorities attempted to connect the Almaty shooter, Ruslan Kulikbayev, to radical Islamic movements, though these allegations proved unsubstantiated.<sup>67</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the attacks were used to implement harder security measures, following the usual pattern.<sup>68</sup> Nazarbayev called for the attacks' perpetrators to face the death penalty, despite the fact that this punishment had not been enforced since 2003.<sup>69</sup> The legislation on fighting extremism and terrorism was amended, increasing punishments for those involved in violence, but also imposing significant restrictions on the exercise of religious freedom.<sup>70</sup> Finally, a new Minister of Religion and Civil Society was established in September 2016, possibly further increasing state control in this area.<sup>71</sup>

Reflecting the aforementioned ambiguity, the authorities tried to disclaim the presence of active Islamist cells in the country to maintain the carefully constructed image of Kazakhstan as an island of stability. They did so by blaming the attacks on forces acting from abroad. Nazarbayev actually tried to connect the events with the land reform protests, claiming that they

65. See the last section of this paper; Maria Y. Omelicheva, Islam and power legitimization: instrumentalisation of religion in Central Asian States, *Contemporary Politics*, Issue 22, No 2, 2016, pp. 144-163; Adele Del Sordi & Emanuela Dalmasso, 'Religious foreign policy as nation branding'.

66. 'Suspected militants attack Kazakh guard base, kill six', *Reuters*, 5 June 2016.

67. Luca Anceschi, 'Kazakhstan: the limits of authoritarian crisis management'.

68. Experts agree that the threat of extremism and terrorism has been increasingly used as a justification for tighter control on media and civil society. Interviews conducted by the author, Almaty and Astana, 2015. In 2015 several websites were blocked after publishing materials about the Islamic State. Freedom House, 'Kazakhstan: Country Profile', *Freedom on the Net 2016*, 2016. The fear of foreign agents destabilizing the country has been the official justification for a new restrictive legislation on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Civicus, 'Special series on threats to civic space in Kazakhstan - Part 1: Association', 3 February 2017 (<https://monitor.civicus.org/newsfeed/2017/02/03/special-series-threats-civic-space-kazakhstan-part-1-association>).

69. *Ibid.*

70. Civicus, 'Special series on threats to civic space in Kazakhstan'.

71. *Ibid.*

were parts of a larger plan to destabilize the country in a «coloured revolution» kind of way.<sup>72</sup>

This combination of hard repression and legitimation has proved successful for the moment, but there are serious doubts about its effectiveness and sustainability over time. Anceschi notes how addressing the socio-economic problems that are a more likely cause of instability would be a much more effective long-term strategy than repressing dissent.<sup>73</sup> Also, the harsher treatment of these events showed the limits of the soft authoritarian approach as well as its instrumental and volatile nature. The opposite ways the regime «managed» the information field during the land reform protests and the Aktobe and Almaty events, which I discuss in the following section, further demonstrate this point.

### 3.3 *The battle on the information field*

Both the land reform protests and the violent attacks in Aktobe and Almaty reflected the leadership's difficulties in managing information. The authorities had to deal with an internet showing its potential as a facilitator of protest, and with the uncontrolled spread of panic-generating rumours. During the land reform protests, the internet's potential to facilitate protest became particularly evident.<sup>74</sup> Just as had happened in 2011 in Zhanaozen, new technologies became an alternative source of information to state chan-

72. The president declared that he saw «all the signs of a coloured revolution»: «artificially contrived rallies» (the land reform protests) and a violent attempt to seize power from «adherents of radical pseudo-religious movements instructed from abroad». 'Nazarbayev pologaet, chto v tragedii Aktobe vinovata «tsvetnaya revoliuciya»', *MKRU*, 8 June 2016 (<http://www.mk.ru/politics/2016/06/08/nazarbaev-pologaet-chto-v-tragedii-aktobe-vinovata-cvetnaya-revoluciya.html>).

73. Luca Anceschi, 'Kazakhstan: the limits of authoritarian crisis management'. Also according to Erlan Karin, expert on terrorism and former director of the Kazakhstan Centre of Strategic Studies, marginalization and criminalization are the key factors in pushing several people, especially youngsters, in the direction of radical ideologies. Personal interview, Astana. October 2015.

74. The internet has been found to facilitate protests in different ways: it can provide alternative sources of information, facilitate change of attitudes, decrease the communication costs for oppositional movements, reduce uncertainty about who is actually going to participate and facilitate popular mobilization by spreading dramatic videos and images. Kris Ruijgrok, 'From the web to the streets: internet and protests under authoritarian regimes', *Democratization*, Issue 24, No 3, 2017, pp. 498-520. For the role of the internet during the Zhanaozen riots and the subsequent regime reactions, see: Luca Anceschi, 'The persistence of media control under consolidated authoritarianism: containing Kazakhstan's digital media', *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Issue 23, No 3, 2015, pp. 277-295. For the role of the internet during the land reform protests, see: Nurseit Niyazbekov, 'Kazakhstan jails activists, plans a Great Firewall to stifle online dissent', *The Conversation*, 30 November 2016 (<https://theconversation.com/kazakhstan-jails-activists-plans-a-great-firewall-to-stifle-online-dissent-69308>).

nels, responding to popular frustration about lack of information.<sup>75</sup> They also contributed to expanding «the movement's support base by directly appealing to individual users».<sup>76</sup> Finally, by spreading images of violence, the internet mobilized even more people to join the protests.<sup>77</sup> In both events, the regime feared for its stability and consequently increased control over the internet. In Zhanaozen, the authorities tried to shut down the internet during the most intense phase of protests, and afterwards blocked a large number of websites.<sup>78</sup> Possibly learning from this experience, the regime later enacted more sophisticated forms of control, not only making blockings more legitimate but also resorting to bloggers' co-optation.<sup>79</sup>

The evolution of the regime towards a «networked authoritarianism»<sup>80</sup> became particularly evident during the land reform protests. Then, the regime refrained from making wide use of blockage but tried, instead, to mirror channels of communications used by protesters.<sup>81</sup> When the protests did not stop, and activists started planning a «peaceful meeting» for 21 May, using Facebook,<sup>82</sup> the regime applied digital technologies to get ahead of protesters. They used their extensive surveillance apparatus to get to protest organizers and prevent participation in demonstrations in a way reminiscent of the techniques used by the Syrian and Iranian security establishments.<sup>83</sup> Activists were tracked down using Facebook posts in which they expressed their intention to join the rallies, arrested on the day before the planned protest, and charged with the organization of illegal rallies.<sup>84</sup> Activ-

75. Dossym Satpayev & Tolganay Umbetaliyeva, 'The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector', p. 127; E. Marat, 'Kazakhstan had huge protests'.

76. Nurseit Niyazbekov, 'Kazakhstan jails activists'.

77. Erica Marat, 'Kazakhstan had huge protests'.

78. Dossym Satpayev & Tolganay Umbetaliyeva, 'The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector', p. 127. Luca Anceschi, 'The persistence of media control under consolidated authoritarianism'.

79. Luca Anceschi, 'The persistence of media control under consolidated authoritarianism'. David Lewis, 'Blogging Zhanaozen'.

80. Luca Anceschi, 'The end of the Nazarbayev's dream', *Open Democracy*, 16 November 2015. Rebecca MacKinnon, 'China's «networked authoritarianism»', *Journal of Democracy*, Issue 22 No 2, pp. 32-46.

81. The decision to call for a moratorium on the reform was communicated via a WhatsApp message. Nurseit Niyazbekov, 'Kazakhstan jails activists'.

82. 'Za post v Facebook v Uralske arestovan rukovoditel obshchestvennogo ob'edineniia, *Moi Gorod*, 19 May 2016 (<http://mgorod.kz/nitem/v-uralske-aktivista-sudyat-za-post-v-socialnoj-seti>).

83. On Iran, see Marcus Michaelsen, 'Exit and Voice in a Digital Age: Iran's Exiled Activists and the Authoritarian State', *Globalizations*, December 2016. On Syria, see Dana M. Moss, 'The Ties that Bind: Internet Communication Technologies, Networked Authoritarianism, and 'Voice' in the Syrian Diaspora', *Globalizations*, December 2016.

84. Human Rights Watch, 'Kazakhstan: Massovye Aresty Aktivistov', 20 May 2016 (<http://www.refworld.org.ru/docid/573ee1a04.html>); 'Za post v Facebook v Uralske arestovan rukovoditel obshchestvennogo ob'edineniya'.

ists who monitored or intended to monitor the protests were also arrested.<sup>85</sup> Possibly getting information about designated meeting areas from the social networks, police forces cordoned off squares in Almaty and Astana on 21 May before the arrival of protesters.<sup>86</sup>

The system was further tested after the violent events in Aktobe and Almaty in the summer of 2016. In these cases, however, the regime tried to exert its obsessive control over the information sphere, actually going back to sheer repression.<sup>87</sup> Not only was the internet blocked, but broadcasts were interrupted after news of the Almaty shooting started spreading.<sup>88</sup> In a way that looked almost Soviet, measures were taken against those who had allegedly spread unfounded rumours on the subject.<sup>89</sup> Once more sensing the dangers related to «losing on the information field»,<sup>90</sup> a new Ministry of Information and Communication was established in late May 2016, with the goal of devising a more efficient state information policy.<sup>91</sup>

The aforementioned attacks were the motivation for the government to adopt new, more pervasive forms of control on the online sphere. Proposed legislation assigns more responsibility to authors of online content.<sup>92</sup> In addition, the Ministry of Development and Innovation announced the intention to launch a National Internet project. The Great Firewall, named after its Chinese equivalent, will allow security forces to monitor and block all internet traffic on desktop and mobile devices.<sup>93</sup> This measure will com-

85. Human Rights Watch, 'Kazakhstan: Crackdown on Peaceful Protest', 23 May 2016 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/23/kazakhstan-crackdown-peaceful-protest>).

86. *Ibid.*

87. Luca Anceschi, 'The limits of authoritarian crisis management'.

88. 'Kazakhstan: Aktobe Violence Wrong-foots Authorities', *Eurasianet*, 6 June 2016.

89. Luca Anceschi, 'The limits of authoritarian crisis management'.

90. 'Kak ne proigrat' na informatsionnom pole pri teraktakh', *Tengrinews*, 19 July 2016 ([https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/kak-ne-proigrat-na-informatsionnom-pole-pri-teraktah-298876](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kak-ne-proigrat-na-informatsionnom-pole-pri-teraktah-298876)).

91. 'Novoe Ministerstvo v Kazakhstane zaimetsa Internetom', *Digital Report*, 6 May 2016 (<https://digital.report/novoe-ministerstvo-v-kazahstane-zaymetsya-internetom>).

92. 'V Kazakhstane blogerov i frilanserov khotiat zagniat'v zakonodatel'nye ramki', *Fergana*, 07.10.2016 (<http://www.fergananews.com/articles/9113>). The existing legislation already considers blogs and social networks as media, making authors responsible for content for the purposes of civil and criminal law. Fabrissi Vielmini, 'Kazakhstan 2013-2014', p. 424. In 2015, more people were prosecuted on the basis of their online activities: Saken Baikenov and Bolatbek Blyalov of the Antigepitil group, known for protesting Baikonur rocket launches, were accused of inciting ethnic and social discord respectively. In October 2015, Ermek Narymbaev and Serikzhan Mambetalin were charged with inciting national discord in Facebook posts, in which they reported the writings of another activist. Luca Anceschi, 'The end of the Nazarbayev's dream'.

93. Nurseit Niyazbekov, 'Kazakhstan jails activists'. Human Rights Watch, 'Kazakhstan: Events of 2015' (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/kazakhstan#c3ba16>).

plete the system established since January 2016, when the National Security Certificate was introduced. This system is presented as a way to protect users from harmful content, but according to critics will allow the authorities to view, store and possibly edit all encrypted internet traffic.<sup>94</sup>

While these last developments show the probable evolution of Kazakhstan towards a «networked authoritarianism», the uncertainty of the regime in the management of the information field during the Aktobe and Almaty events demonstrates how this evolution is not linear. Obstacles are found both in technical problems and different opinions within the leadership. A further obstacle is represented by a more classic «dictator's dilemma», one which sees the contraposition between the advantages of open communications for the economy and the desire of total control over the internet.<sup>95</sup> A further limit might be the fear of international criticism. Indeed, as will be seen in the next section, Kazakhstan engages very actively with the international community, and works hard to build a reputation as a stable and reliable country. In 2015-16, in a period of economic crisis, the role of international recognition as a source of regime legitimation might have been particularly relevant.

#### *4. Seeking legitimacy beyond borders: the international relations*

In 2015-16, Kazakhstan initiated or participated in an extraordinary amount of international initiatives, ranging from trying to host negotiations between Russia and Ukraine and signing a new Peace and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union, to getting a temporary seat at the UN Security Council.<sup>96</sup> Far from being a novelty – Kazakhstan has been defined as «the most proactive and innovative former Soviet republic in the sphere of international cooperation» – these engagements speak of Kazakhstan's constant efforts to establish the country as a «reliable and constructive international actor».<sup>97</sup> The reason for such a committed and diversified engagement is to be found, according to Engvall and Cornell, in the desire to keep the relative importance of each of the country's «pillars» of foreign policy in balance. Kazakhstan, in fact, is known for pursuing a «multi-vector» foreign policy: it tries to maintain good relations with a variety of global and regional powers,

94. Freedom House, 'Kazakhstan: Country Profile'.

95. Taylor C. Boas, 'The dictator's dilemma? The internet and US policy toward Cuba', *Washington Quarterly*, Issue 23, No 3, 2000, pp. 57-67.

96. In addition, Kazakhstan maximized its efforts to host high-profile international events, such as the EXPO, which will be held in Astana in summer 2017. In January of this year, Almaty hosted the 2017 Winter Universiade. Almaty also proposed to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, though the competition was eventually won by Beijing.

97. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood', p. 7

including, but not limited to, Russia, the Central Asian nations, China, the United States and the European Union.<sup>98</sup> Such an exercise can be challenging, especially when the relations between different partners deteriorate, as happened during the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>99</sup> Also, in recent years the relationship with Russia has significantly strengthened through the Eurasian Economic Union, diminishing the relative importance of the other pillars and possibly questioning the multi-vector balance.<sup>100</sup> The recent pursuing of opportunities in the global arena should be seen, according to Engvall and Cornell, as a way to counter-balance this situation.<sup>101</sup> In addition, Kazakhstan might have intensified its activity in the policy area of anti-terrorism and inter-faith dialogue to counteract the domestic threats related to increasing numbers of Kazakhstanis joining the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>102</sup>

Though Engvall and Cornell's perspective correctly highlights the authorities' efforts to balance different foreign policy needs, it misses an additional dimension to Kazakhstan's international pro-activeness. International engagement is in fact also used by the Kazakhstani leadership to reinforce regime legitimacy at home, through the mechanism of external legitimation.<sup>103</sup> Edward Schatz calls this mechanism «international recognition»: the leadership of Kazakhstan uses the favourable opinions of international partners to present itself as professional and deserving of support in front of its domestic audience.<sup>104</sup>

Having first developed such a strategy in times of economic crisis, it is not surprising that the regime resorted to international recognition in another phase of economic difficulty in 2015-16, when relying on performance legitimation was difficult.<sup>105</sup> As seen before, the prolonged economic crisis created widespread discontent and increased the distance between the regime and the population. By increasing diplomatic engagement and transmitting the praise gained for it from the international community, Nazarbayev may have tried to find another channel of connection with the Kazakhstanis. In his speeches, particularly in the yearly Messages to the Nation, Nazarbayev

98. *Ibid.*

99. Sean Roberts, 'The Ukraine Conflict'.

100. Despite the trade conflicts that emerged from the implementation of the Eurasian Economic Union (mentioned in section 2.1), it is undeniable that the relationship between the two countries has become significantly stronger since the agreement was made.

101. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood'.

102. *Ibid.*

103. External legitimation defines «legitimation strategies vis-à-vis the domestic audience that pass through the international realm». Bert Hoffman, 'The international dimension of authoritarian regime legitimation: insights from the Cuban case', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Issue 18, No 4, 2015, p. 569.

104. Edward Schatz, 'Access by Accident', p. 270. See also the first section of this paper.

105. *Ibid.*

never fails to stress the proactive role that Kazakhstan has in the international community and how this is appreciated by foreign partners.

In this section, the three main areas of Kazakhstani foreign engagement in 2015-16 are briefly reviewed, and examples from Nazarbayev's speeches are given to demonstrate how these achievements are used to legitimise his rule in front of the domestic audience.<sup>106</sup>

First of all, Kazakhstan tried to smooth out the tense relations within the post-Soviet region, mostly originating from the Ukrainian issue.<sup>107</sup> Nazarbayev actively facilitated the Ukraine negotiation process, which eventually resulted in the Minsk agreements; he also repeatedly offered Astana as the venue for further peace talks.<sup>108</sup> Thanks to his proactive stance, Nazarbayev quickly earned the label of «mediator» and «peacemaker», a role which was widely advertised by the media at home.<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, while there is no agreement among experts about the actual capacity of Nazarbayev to exert influence on Putin or Poroshenko, some of them underline the fact that the president uses the issue for «self-promotion» at home.<sup>110</sup> In fact, one of the grounds on which Nazarbayev claims legitimacy at home is his commitment «to resolve any conflicts peacefully and doing everything that depends on us for this»<sup>111</sup>.

Second, in the last biennium Kazakhstan boosted its participation in international organizations. In 2015 Kazakhstan finally completed its

106. The division between areas follows the one found in Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood'.

107. Sean Roberts, 'The Ukraine Conflict'. Relations with Russia remained somehow tense after Putin's 2014 remark on Kazakhstan's lack of statehood: an initiative to celebrate Kazakhstan first khanate in 2015 seems to be an answer to that statement. 'Kazakhstan Celebrates Statehood in Riposte to Russia', *Eurasianet*, 6 January 2015. Recently, Nazarbayev defined the policies of the Russian Empire towards Kazakhstan as those of a «colonial power». 'Nazarbayev: Kazakhstan byl koloniei Rossii', *Regnum*, 6 December 2016 (<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2214315.html>).

108. The Minsk process started in 2014, but continued in 2015 with the adoption of the Minsk-II agreements. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood', p. 70. Nazarbayev proposed to conduct new talks in Astana in 2015 and 2016: 'Stanet li Astana prodolzheniem «Minskogo formata» peregovorov?', *RiaNovostiUkraina*, 16 February 2015 (<http://rian.com.ua/analytics/20150216/363555049.html>); 'Kazakhstan gotov predostavit' ploshadku dlia peregovorov po situatsii v Donbasse', *Ukraina.ru*, 26 December 2016 (<http://ukraina.ru/news/20161226/1018088287.html>).

109.<sup>110</sup> See 'O Kazakhstane stali govorit' kak o «mirotvorets v krisise v Ukraine», *Radio Azattyq*, 11 Mart 2014. For instance, the Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, the official government mouthpiece, titled a feature piece on the president: «Nazarbayev: strateg i peacemaker». 'Nazarbayev: strateg i mirotvorets', *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 6 June 2015 (<http://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/nursultan-nazarbaev--strateg-i-mirotvorets1>).

110. 'O Kazakhstane stali govorit'; Nazarbayev khochet zabrat' u Lukashenko rol' mirotvortsia v Ukraine?', *Beloruskii Partizan*, 15 January 2016 (<http://www.belaruspartisan.org/politic/330440/>).

111. Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Kazakhstan v Novoi Globalnoi Real'nosti'.

20-year-long accession process to the World Trade Organization (WTO). The accession package was agreed on in June and the country became an official member on 30 November.<sup>112</sup> Significantly, Nazarbayev chose to give his yearly Message to the Nation on that day, to celebrate an achievement that had long been on the top of his foreign policy agenda: «this event is an important milestone in the history of independent Kazakhstan», he said. And then, stressing the respect of the international community for his leadership, he continued: «[The WTO accession] testifies to the recognition of our country as an equal trade and economic partner».<sup>113</sup> In December 2015, Kazakhstan finalized an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with the EU. The Agreement, already announced in 2014,<sup>114</sup> is somewhat looser than the Association Agreements and accompanying Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements that the EU has offered Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia within the framework of its Eastern Partnership. However, it is more ambitious than any agreements between the EU and other Central Asia states, as it aims at «providing a broad framework for reinforced political dialogue, cooperation in justice and home affairs among other sectors, and promoting mutual trade and investment».<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, in October 2016 Kazakhstan signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).<sup>116</sup> This was presented to the public as «a sign of the correspondence of our investment climate to the high standards of the organization and a testimony of the enormous work that the leadership has put into the process».<sup>117</sup> Perhaps the brightest diplomatic success of the last two years was the assignment of a prestigious non-permanent seat at the Security Council of the United Nations. Kazakhstan had painstakingly prepared its bid, with the goal of confirming its willingness to play a constructive role in international affairs.<sup>118</sup> At the beginning of his 2017 Message to the Nation, Nazarbayev cited it as «proof that the international community knows well and highly appreciates the achievements and successes of Kazakhstan».<sup>119</sup>

112. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood', pp. 49-50.

113. Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Kazakhstan v Novoi Globalnoi Real'nosti'.

114. Fabrissi Vielmini, 'Kazakhstan 2013-2014', p. 441.

115. European Union External Action, EU-Kazakhstan relations, *Factsheets*, 03 October 2016 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/4076/EU-Kazakhstan%20relations](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4076/EU-Kazakhstan%20relations)).

116. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood', pp. 52-55.

117. 'Kazakhstan voshel v Komitet po Investitsiam OECR', *Tengrinews*, 21 October 2016.

118. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood', p. 61.

119. Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'The third modernization of Kazakhstan: global competitiveness', 31 January 2017 ([http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-nnazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-31-yanvarya-2017-g](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses_of_president/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-nnazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-31-yanvarya-2017-g)).

Last but not least, Kazakhstan pursued what Engvall and Cornell call «unilateral activities». In the last two years, Kazakhstan continued, as it had done in the past, to promote its international position by initiating dialogue platforms and new organizations. In June 2015, the fifth Congress of World Religions took place in Astana. Partly stemming from the need to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of the several religious groups present in the country, the initiative, a creation of Nazarbayev's, also showed «the Kazakh leadership's desire to present the country as a model of inter-religious accord and a crossroad between civilizations» and «as a respected international partner with a proven record in working for peaceful, cooperative solutions to pressing global problems».<sup>120</sup> Again, the engagement in interfaith dialogue is used extensively in the domestic discourse as a legitimating frame.<sup>121</sup> For instance, the page devoted to the event on the president's website recites: «The initiative of our Head of State to convene the leaders of world religions in Astana has a great significance in the development of a global dialogue of cultures and civilizations».<sup>122</sup> The last domain in which Nazarbayev put forward a new, ambitious, foreign policy initiative is global security. In May 2016, he presented a strongly worded manifesto, «The World, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century», in Washington DC. In it Nazarbayev challenged other world leaders to commit to peace and dialogue and actually provided an agenda not only for Kazakhstan but for the international community as a whole. In an unprecedented effort, Nazarbayev set out a comprehensive programme of actions with the ultimate goal of freeing the world from the threat of conflict, including nuclear disarmament, a ban on the development of weapons of mass destruction, and the creation of weapon-free zones. In particular, the document calls for the substitution of diplomatic blocs, defined as «relics of the Cold War», with intensified collective efforts for building peace.<sup>123</sup> The over-ambitious programme extends to addressing the very roots of conflicts by creating «equal and fair access to infrastructure, resources and markets for all nations».<sup>124</sup> While there is some genuine commitment to the values of peace and global security, the manifesto looks very much like an operation in public diplomacy, with the goal of pushing the bid for the UN Security Council seat.<sup>125</sup> The document en-

120. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood', pp.18-21.

121. Adele Del Sordi & Emanuela Dalmaso, 'Religious foreign policy as nation branding'.

122. 'S'ezd liderov mirovykh i traditsionnykh religii' ([http://www.akorda.kz/ru/national\\_projects/sezd-religii-2012\\_1338973130](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/national_projects/sezd-religii-2012_1338973130)).

123. Erlan Edrissov, 'The Real Cause of the 21st Century', *The Diplomat*, 19 April 2016.

124. *Ibid.*

125. This is the opinion of the expert Togzhan Kassenova. Quoted in 'Kazakhstan Unveils Plan To End All Wars; Details To Come', *The Bug Pit*, 19 April 2016 (<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78381>). See also: 'Strong push for Kazakhstan's

joyed exceptional coverage from official sources and it is featured on the websites of most Kazakhstani embassies round the world.<sup>126</sup> At home, the state media published articles full of praise for the initiative and the new recognition that the authoritative figure of Nazarbayev and his bold initiative are giving the country.<sup>127</sup>

The activities of the last two years provide several examples of Kazakhstan's intense international engagement and of its use for legitimation purposes. Nazarbayev and his government have put forward the country's commitments and achievements on the international scene as reasons for supporting the regime. It is obviously uncertain whether the process legitimation based on international recognition actually results in legitimacy. But the efforts made by the leadership in this direction seem to show that they, at least, believe that it does.

### 5. *Conclusions*

This paper has shown that in 2015-2016 the leadership of Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime continued on the path of stabilization started in the previous biennium. Local and global challenges had the potential to destabilize the rule of Nazarbayev, though. Danger came from the prolonged economic crisis, the emergence of popular protests, the return of the threat of Islamic terrorism, and the re-discovered potential of the internet as a vehicle of protest, as well as a source of panic. To this, the difficult international situation should be added, with Kazakhstan squeezed between Russia, the West and its global ambitions.

This paper has demonstrated that the authorities managed to maintain stability by applying and further refining the soft authoritarian tools that have become a defining characteristic of its rule. Intimidation and soft repression were used instead of hard repression to sedate protests, along with a de-legitimation of protesters. The electoral process was strategically used to reinforce the connection between the leadership and the population through institutional legitimation. Also, more sophisticated tools were introduced in the regime's control of the internet. However, the soft approaches found significant limits in the treatment of Islamic terrorism. Here the regime adopted a more ambiguous approach, halfway between hard

UN Security Council bid', *The Business Times*, 3 June 2016 (<http://www.businesstimes.com.sg/hub/kazakhstan-country-focus/strong-push-for-kazakhstans-un-security-council-bid>).

126. It appears on the website of Kazakhstan's Representation to the United Nations, as well as on the sites of the Embassies of Kazakhstan in the United States, Italy, the UK, Japan and others.

127. 'Manifest «Mir. 21vek» – prizyv k razumu i dobroj voli', *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 12 April 2016.

repression and strategic framing directed at denying the presence of radical movements in the country.

Internationally, Kazakhstan has initiated or participated in an extraordinary amount of initiatives, ranging from trying to host negotiations between Russia and Ukraine and signing a new Peace and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union, to getting a temporary seat at the UN Security Council. It has been shown that the driving force of this proactive stance in the international sphere is not only the regime's ambition of earning a reputation as a stable and reliable ally, but legitimising its rule in front of domestic audiences.

While it is not clear whether these strategies of legitimation are successful and have actually result in increased regime legitimacy, the leadership's efforts show that they, at least, believe that these strategies do work. At the same time, attempts at seeking legitimation through democratic-like institutions and a deeper engagement in the international community might have unintended consequences, namely the creation of more openness in the regime which, in the long term, could lay the groundwork for regime change.<sup>128</sup> The last two years showed that, so far, Nazarbayev has been able to use legitimation as a stabilization tool without running this danger. Obviously, future stability will also depend on the ability of Nazarbayev, now 76 years old, to prepare a smooth succession. Talks of constitutional reform, which would transfer more powers to parliament, are a sign that the preparation for succession might be an important item on the political agenda for the coming years.

128. Edward Schatz, 'Access by Accident'; Peter Burnell, 'Autocratic opening to democracy: why legitimacy matters', *Third World Quarterly*, Issue 27, No 4, 2006, pp. 545-562.