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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

**Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni**

viella

A large, faint, light-blue mandala design is visible in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text and the dark blue background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

KAZAKHSTAN 2018-2019: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY
AMID ECONOMIC STAGNATION

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Stability has been Kazakhstan's political mantra since the early years of independence from the Soviet Union. Despite an unexpected transition of power in early 2019, the outgoing president continued to play an important role in the institutional structure of the country. Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ruled for three decades and curtailed opposition forces, ceded his post to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Speaker of the Senate and seasoned diplomat. Yet, Nazarbayev continued to have an authoritative voice both at home and abroad, as he participated in meetings of heads of state even after his resignation. Another word that entered the vocabulary of Kazakhstan's recent history is «crisis». Whether their origin was domestic or global, several crises and tragedies conditioned the behaviour of the people and government of Kazakhstan. A fire that killed five children in the capital city at the beginning of 2019 became a trigger for protests and showed how fragile the connection between resource wealth and socioeconomic welfare could be in an economy that failed to diversify. Internationally, Kazakhstan reduced its PR effort, perhaps in response to c GDP growth. In addition, however, human rights watchdogs have condemned the continued repression of opposition forces and journalists, tainting the pristine image of harmonious stability that Kazakhstan has tried to publicise for years.

1. Introduction

Kazakhstan underwent major changes in early 2019, when its long-time president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, voluntarily resigned. Since independence in 1991, this is only the second fully peaceful transition of power after Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev stepped down in 2017 as his term ended.¹ While the succession grabbed all headlines both within the country and internationally, the permanence of Nazarbayev as the «Leader of the Nation», overlooking the fate of the country, became synonymous with stability.

Opposition forces, naturally, felt impotent before an orchestrated transition of power and decided to earn a badge of legitimacy through street protests, against the old regime and for a much-awaited change. Interest-

1. This account does not include the voluntary handover of power by Roza Otunbayeva, interim president of Kyrgyzstan, to Atambayev in December 2011 following presidential elections, because it took place in extraordinary conditions, namely the aftermath of the 2010 revolution.

ingly, as highlighted in the next sections, several opposition forces emerged both in the capital and in Almaty. While some of these forces have traditionally been active in Kazakhstan's politics, new groups have appeared as well, shaping up a vibrant political environment for the upcoming decade. The 2010s, in fact, had largely been characterised by a systematic and almost complete annihilation of any dissenting voice.

In terms of internal shifts, Kazakhstan witnessed a few other tumultuous events. The capital city was first shocked by a tragic fire that killed five children and then was renamed in honour of the outgoing president. Labour inequality, as well as gruesome criminal incidents and environmental disaster, sparked more protests.

Throughout the 2018-2019 period, Kazakhstan's foreign policy became more prudent and less ambitious. Kazakhstan continued its effort to reach out to an international audience of investors and diplomacies. These attempts, however, were tainted by legal retaliations and backlash from human rights advocates. The drive to curry favour with the world by creating a new Latin script for the Kazakh language also failed to succeed.

2. *The orchestrated transition of power*

When on the evening of 19 March 2019 Nazarbayev told his fellow countrymen that he had decided to step down after almost thirty years in power, the population and international observers were shocked. Most citizens had not known another leader in their lifetime. Nazarbayev's blessing of Senate speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as the successor, however, confirmed that, at least for an initial period, the leader of the nation would still be at the helm.

In retrospect, several changes in the previous years had paved the road to 19 March. Nazarbayev had already dodged constitutional limits by bestowing on himself the title of «Leader of the Nation» in 2010. The epithet of *Elbasy* granted Nazarbayev and his family immunity from prosecution, and protected his name from personal insults, punishable by law. Unrestricted by the laws applicable to all other citizens in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev ran for re-election in 2011 and – «for the last time» as he declared – in 2015.² In 2018, he became the chairman-for-life of the National Security Council, an oversight body that simultaneously gained constitutional powers. These measures were consistently classified under the rubric of power transition by most analysts and scholars.³

2. Paolo Sorbello, 'Kazakhstan: One Last Time for Nazarbayev', *The Diplomat*, 16 March 2015.

3. Dosym Satpayev, *et al.*, *The Twilight Zone: Traps of the Transition Era*, Almaty: Alliance of Analytical Organizations, 2013; Annette Bohr, *et al.*, *Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition*, London: Chatham House, 2019.

Before the transition, Nazarbayev had significantly tweaked the composition of the government, carefully appointing loyal members in February 2019.⁴ Outgoing Prime Minister Bakhytzhan Sagintayev later became the mayor of Almaty, substituted by the powerful ex-vice Prime Minister Askar Mamin. Several among those initially snubbed from ministerial posts in the February reshuffle, were appointed to staff positions around Nazarbayev after he left office, in an effort to keep a balance of loyalists and young rampant figures between the government and his new office.

In essence, ageing Nazarbayev had lived through a handful transitions in neighbouring countries and wanted to ensure that his legacy could be kept whole, while his position within the power structures would not suffer a demotion. In Russia, in 1999, Boris Yeltsin handed over power to Vladimir Putin, who changed dramatically the style of government. Yeltsin quickly became redundant and powerless in Putin's Russia. In Kyrgyzstan, both Askar Akayev in 2005 and Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010 were ousted by popular uprisings. Two all-powerful leaders, Turkmenistan's Saparmurat Niyazov and Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, died in office in 2007 and 2016 respectively. Nazarbayev sought for himself a unique way out, during which he could enjoy a few more years of ruling over his country.

Despite a feeble «opening up» of the political arena, the presidential elections of June 2019 were predictably won by Tokayev, against six other candidates who ran without fundamentally contesting Nazarbayev's preference for succession. While Amirzhan Kossanov was mildly vocal about the need for change and despite the presence of the first and only woman candidate, most other candidates professed loyalty to the Leader of the Nation. Tokayev, a seasoned diplomat and a trusted member of Nazarbayev's closest circle, ran a campaign with the full support of the former president and the ruling party, the Nur Otan.

While some personnel in the government changed, the fundamental core of the elite remained untouched by the transition.

2.1. Two days that shook Kazakhstan: Nursultan leaves, Nur-Sultan appears

Once Nazarbayev stepped down, in accordance with Kazakhstan's Constitution, Tokayev became the interim president. On 20 March, his first day on the job, Tokayev proposed the renaming of Astana, the capital city, into Nur-Sultan, in honour of the first president. In 1997, Nazarbayev had moved the capital there from Almaty, the country's largest city. For the next two decades, the First President progressively shaped the new capital as his own personality cult project. The Nazarbayev airport, Nazarbayev University, and the Library of the First President are just a few examples of urban landmarks named after him.

4. Paolo Sorbello, 'Kazakhstan Appoints a New-Old Government', *The Diplomat*, 26 February 2019.

The Akmola settlement from the 1800s became Tselinograd in 1961, regained its Akmola toponym in 1992 and changed again in 1998, becoming Astana, the capital city. A proposal to rename Astana in honour of Nazarbayev circulated for at least a decade before becoming reality the day after his resignation. The personality cult came full circle once Nur-Sultan was announced.

After accepting the interim role upon Nazarbayev's resignation, Tokayev soon set a date for presidential elections, in an effort to cement his legitimacy. Amid a strong wave of popular protests, initiated by both traditional opposition groups and young civic activists, a snap election took place on 9 June. Tokayev ran virtually unopposed and won nearly 71% of the votes. Amirzhan Kossanov, a veteran opponent of the Nazarbayev regime, mobilised a wave of support, finishing second with 16% of the votes.⁵ Kossanov's immediate concession of defeat and acceptance of Tokayev as the legitimate president, despite evident violations in the election process, angered his supporters and led him to abandon politics.

Nazarbayev publicly stated that he would take a back seat, but still observe and provide advice on the management of the country. Yet, in October 2019, Tokayev signed a decree effectively reducing his powers: new ministerial and regional appointments would have to be approved by Nazarbayev.⁶ The decree can be regarded as a paragon for the unbalanced relationship between the old and the new president. Residents joked that while taking a back seat, Nazarbayev also took the metaphorical steering wheel with him, leaving Tokayev as a front-seat passenger.

At the end of November 2019, at a summit of leaders of Central Asian countries in Tashkent, Kazakhstan sent Nazarbayev, rather than Tokayev, to meet with the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. While the government cited a schedule clash and lauded the fact that having two leaders could allow them to be more active on several fronts, many both in Kazakhstan and in neighbouring countries believed the presence of Nazarbayev qualified the unbalanced relationship with Tokayev in favour of the former.

2.2. *Opposition resurfaces in Kazakhstan*

In 2001, Mukhtar Ablyazov, a rampant banker and former minister, co-founded the party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK), in open opposition to Nazarbayev.⁷ After falling from grace with the president, Ablyazov served time in prison. Nazarbayev pardoned him after Ablyazov promised to cease his political activity. Yet, as his banking business became

5. 'Nazarbayev protégé wins Kazakhstan elections marred by protests', *France24-AFP*, 10 June 2019.

6. Kate Mallinson, «Governance», in *Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition*, Chatham House Report, 2019, p. 10.

7. Sally Cummings, *Kazakhstan: Power and the Elite*, London: IB Tauris, 2005, p. 29.

affected by a mortgage bubble, Ablyazov fled the country and decided to revive the DVK from exile, finding thousands of supporters ready to take the streets on his behalf.

Released from a French prison in 2016 after serving a three-year sentence, Ablyazov began a daily campaign against Nazarbayev via livestreaming interventions, which the Kazakh government rudimentarily countered by lowering internet speeds throughout the country at the times of the streaming.⁸ The acrimony between Ablyazov and Nazarbayev translated into a personal struggle that excludes political principles. Most of the thousands of supporters of Ablyazov judge him as a better leader, without much consideration for its scant political programme for change. Calls for a parliamentary republic and an end to corruption have found little traction among the population and several observers and critics of Ablyazov's movement alleged that some of his supporters who took the streets to protest were paid to do so.

Several other opposition groups mushroomed besides Ablyazov's DVK in 2018-2019. A small, eclectic group of long-time opposition figures funded by ex-Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin, now based in London, formed the Zhana Kazakhstan movement in April 2018.⁹ One of the participants to the handful of meetings organised by Zhana Kazakhstan outside of the country, was Kossanov, the most outspoken opposition candidate to run in the presidential elections described above. In 2019, a new movement led by former journalist and civic activist Zhanbolat Mamay coalesced into the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, promoting liberal values and vocally condemning the persistence of the Nazarbayev rule.

During the Almaty Marathon in April 2019, a handful of young activist displayed a banner stating: «You can't run away from the truth; I have a choice».¹⁰ Asya Tulesova and Beibarys Tolymbekov, who held the banner, and a few more activists were arrested for hooliganism. Both Tulesova and Tolymbekov were sentenced to 15 days in jail. Scores of young activists and human rights defenders attended the trials and highlighted how the repressive state was punishing those who dared speak their mind. In a wave of protest, young people protested by hanging banners with quotes from Kazakhstan's Constitution («The people shall be the only source of governmental power», art. 3) or by standing on a square with a blank poster. Aslan Sagutdinov, symbolically showing that his banner was empty to the police in Uralsk in early May 2019, was briefly detained, effectively showing that Kazakhstan's authorities had lost their direction.

It was in the midst of this transition that the «Oyan, Qazaqstan!» movement appeared. Founded by a handful of young activists from Almaty,

8. Dina Baidildayeva, 'Internet censorship in Kazakhstan: more pervasive than you may think', *openDemocracy*, 26 March 2018.

9. Paolo Sorbello, 'Kazakhstan's Elderly Opposition Tries Something New', *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2018.

10. 'In Asya's Own Words', *Adamdar.CA*, 21 April 2019.

the group aimed to form a network that would have monitored independently the upcoming presidential elections, scheduled for 9 June. The spark of the marathon protest, in which Tulesova and Tolymbekov also called for «fair and honest elections», ignited the youth. Since its formation, Oyan – which is the imperative form of the verb «to wake up» in Kazakh – has showed creativity and, at times, lack of coordination. The organisation of walk-and-talk meetings across the city in order to defy the strict rules on freedom of assembly garnered significant success throughout the summer of 2019, preparing the ground for a few demonstrations that were spared from arrests. The most significant one, on 9 November, saw the few dozens of Oyan members rally from Abai Square to the New Square. Oyan purposefully ignored the need to receive administrative authorisation to conduct the rally, thus testing the reaction from the authorities.

Yet, the government seemed to have learned a lesson after the appalling numbers of arrests before and after the presidential elections (see below, 5.1.). If not specifically called by Ablyazov and centred around their personal spat with Nazarbayev, the police would not intervene. Around 60 demonstrators, most of those attending, were arrested on 21 September during a DVK protest contained by around one thousand security forces. Police presence at public protests waned progressively until the Independence Day demonstrations of 16 December in Almaty. There, four different groups rallied peacefully, observed by a wealth of members of the security forces. The police refrained from arresting the activists until a small number of activists decided to march down Zheltoksan (December) street. Those arrested were released within a few hours, another sign of the changing attitude towards civic activism.

3. *Tragedies, accomplishments, and the eternal «crisis mode»*

Internal politics and economics have not escaped the framework of «the crisis», which could be theorised as a mode of government in the case of Kazakhstan. Since the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, Kazakhstan has struggled with ups and downs in GDP growth, financial stability, oil production, and, importantly, domestic accidents.

Almost every incident that scarred the recent history of Kazakhstan has been filtered through the lens of a crisis, something that reflects the selective calls for «emergency measures» as a response. This could be encapsulated within the *securitisation* framework developed by the Copenhagen School of International Relations.¹¹ According to them, security is a «speech act», and as soon as a topic is voiced as a matter of security by a relevant ac-

11. Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Society*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

tor; it becomes such. Similarly, this article argues that in Kazakhstan «crisis» is a speech act, and both the word and the type of governance affiliated with it were artificially constructed.

In authoritarian Kazakhstan, authorities have used securitisation measures to define several events and act with emergency measures often also targeted to dispel any opposition. In 2018-2019, whether natural disasters or accidental tragedies, these events were labelled crises by either the government or its opponents. The following paragraphs focus on the ways specific occurrences were moulded into crises and «external threats».

3.1. Dead fish and plane crash: Bringing the country together

Tens of thousands of saiga antelopes died over the span of one week in the summer of 2017; countless fish appeared dead on the riverbanks of the Ural river near Atyrau in western Kazakhstan in the spring of 2019. In July 2018, Olympian figure-skater Denis Ten was murdered by thieves in central Almaty. In February 2019, five sisters were killed in an accidental fire in the capital city, while their parents were working a night shift; just before the 2020 New Year holidays, a plane crashed at take-off in Almaty, killing 12. These tragedies, while disconnected from each other, epitomise the enduring risks in Kazakhstan, which the population blames on poor government management: environmental damage, socioeconomic inequality, and negligence in safety controls.

While the government pointed the finger towards external causes for most violence and tragedies until 2017, the population clearly defined the most recent events as domestic mishaps. The death of Ten sparked a movement for the reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which aimed to improve and increase police presence in an effort to control criminality. In a clear *securitisation* move, the government soon ordered to dispatch a constant police patrol of the crossroads where Ten was killed, as police both in uniform and plain clothes observed the behaviour of those who gathered near the monument erected in his memory. Societal pressure also impacted a project for the construction of a mountain resort near Almaty, which the new president suspended indefinitely on environmental grounds.

In January 2018, the snow falling over Temirtau, a *monotown* in central Kazakhstan hosting a large steel factory, landed black on the ground, covering the city in a dystopic dark layer.¹² Industrial pollution has plagued several regions in Kazakhstan since a sudden drive to industrialisation moved Soviet production facilities to the Kazakh SSR in the 1960s. Both the deaths of the saiga antelopes and of the fish in the Ural river could also be caused by industrial pollution, be it oil and gas production or other industrial activity in the steppe.

12. Abdujalil Abdurasulov, 'Black snow troubles pollution-weary Kazakhs in Temirtau', *BBC*, 11 January 2018.

Oil production and its inherent tendency to foster inequality were at the core of an inter-ethnic incident that involved Kazakh and Arab expatriate workers in the Tengiz enclave, a temporary camp hosting the operations for oil extraction at the largest field in Kazakhstan. A post on social media angered local workers, who initiated a brawl with Arab workers, with dozens injured and several expatriate employees quickly repatriated. By liquidating the incident as an ethnic clash, however, the authorities and the oil companies performed the *securitisation* speech act that would allow them to take exceptional measures – firing those responsible for the brawl, repatriating several foreign workers, restricting freedoms within the camps – to restore peace at the field. By doing so, they swept under the rug a much more fragile fault line: workers' rights. Yessenova described in detail the frictions between local and expatriate workers at Tengiz and how they hinge on the coalition between the government and the companies in restricting labour rights and working conditions.¹³

While some of these tragedies sparked popular anger, the government tried to use them as bonding moments for the country, at a time when economic stagnation had hit people's purchasing power. Failed attempts to diversify the economy made responses to the crises rigid, rather than flexible, transforming the *moments of crisis* into a *permanent crisis*. Heteronomous, unavoidable, and long-lasting, crises have become the new normal in Kazakhstan's political and social life.

3.2. *Vanity projects, international PR, and repression*

Amid the crises, Kazakhstan's government tried to self-advertise as a burgeoning economy, with excellent potential for investors. In this light, it organised the international exhibition EXPO 2017,¹⁴ a costly nation branding¹⁵ exercise that received praise and criticism in equal measure. Upon the closing of the mega event, the government decided to use the glitzy, futuristic spaces it had built for EXPO as the new grounds for the Astana International Financial Center (AIFC), a new stock exchange that would complement the one already operating in Almaty in an effort to attract foreign investment.

The AIFC, headed by former Central Bank chief Kairat Kelimbetov, operates with principles of English Common Law and hired British judges for its arbitration courts. Designed as a one-stop-shop for foreign investors, the AIFC underperformed in its first two years of existence since its official

13. Saulesh Yessenova, 'The Tengiz Oil Enclave: Labor, Business, and the State', *PolAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 35 (1), 2012.

14. Adele Del Sordi, 'Kazakhstan 2017: Institutional stabilisation, nation-building, International engagement', *Asia Maior 2018*, pp. 424-ff.

15. Adrien Fauve, 'Global Astana: nation branding as a legitimization tool for authoritarian regimes', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, n. 1, 2015.

foundation in July 2018. The only notable listing was the sale of a minority stake of state-owned KazAtomProm, earmarked for partial privatisation for years prior.

In a continuous effort to appeal to global capital, Kazakhstan's government also renewed its push to finalise a transition to the Latin alphabet for the Kazakh language, a policy that the First President vehemently advocated for around a decade. Written using Cyrillic characters, with the addition of several unique characters for the missing sounds, the Kazakh language is written through a complex set of orthographic rules. Transitioning into a script that structurally holds fewer phonemes risked the excessive inclusion of modifiers such as apostrophes and accents to distinguish different sounds. After the initial approval of a script that heavily used apostrophes,¹⁶ a public outcry caused a revision only one month later.¹⁷

The government's objective with the new script was to ensure a full emancipation from Cyrillic and an attempt to become less alien to English-speaking peoples, used to read Latin. The Latinisation of Turkic languages has occurred in several instances, from Azerbaijan and Turkey in the 1920s¹⁸ to post-Soviet transitions in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan among others. Yet, the top-down decision to change the script of a language should be accompanied by a thorough reform of education and a capillary operation to acquaint with the change those adults who have seldom read the Latin script. Diplomatically, the move away from Cyrillic could not sit well with Russia, especially because Kazakhstan still hosts a substantial minority of ethnic Russians, especially in its northern regions.

Kazakhstan's attempts to boost its international profile and bridge its distance with the globalised world were repeatedly tainted by an ongoing repressive strategy against press freedom. In 2018 and 2019, authorities raided the offices of two newspapers in Almaty,¹⁹ fined and detained an accredited French journalist²⁰ filming a documentary in Aktau, on the Caspian shore, as well as several local journalists on fabricated charges.²¹ Furthermore, in the summer of 2019, the government requested the installation of a security certificate to filter telecommunications, effectively a spy-

16. Andrew Higgins, 'Kazakhstan Cheers New Alphabet, Except for All Those Apostrophes', *The New York Times*, 15 January 2018.

17. 'No Apostrophe: Nazarbaev Decree Spells Out Changes In New Latin Alphabet For Kazakhstan', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 February 2018.

18. Attempts to write Kazakh language with Latin script were timidly initiated in the 1920s and 1930s. Cfr.: Okan Bahtiyar, 'Latinisation of the Kazakh alphabet', *New Eastern Europe*, 3 December 2019.

19. 'Kazakhstan police raid newsrooms, detain journalists, seize equipment', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 13 April 2018.

20. 'Kazakhstan detains French journalist and bans him from filming', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 18 September 2018.

21. 'Kazakhstan journalist fined after covering protests', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 14 March 2019.

ware on the domestic transfer of internet data. Condemned by international internet freedom watchdogs,²² the government soon retracted, calling the certificate «an experiment».

The use of libel charges to silence investigative journalists continued to be practised selectively. After being handed an 18-month suspended sentence in 2017, Amangeldy Batyrbekov was charged again with libel in 2018 and only finally pardoned in January 2020. Muzzled, blocked, and temporarily detained ahead of public demonstrations, journalists in Kazakhstan remain a target for state-led censorship.

4. Failed diversification from oil exports and financial stagnation

Oil revenues continue to be the cornerstone of Kazakhstan's economy, despite attempts to diversify income. Hydrocarbons produce around one quarter of Kazakhstan's GDP and account for more than half of the country's exports, according to official statistics.²³ At times of lower commodity prices, the local economy suffered, with the financial sector suffering due to lower productivity across industrial sectors and diminishing investments. An ambitious government programme to invest several billion dollars into the country's infrastructure, the Nurdy Zhol, was slashed.

With the economy in crisis mode, however, the government reached into the coffers of its sovereign wealth fund and its international reserves. In 2018-2019, Samruk-Kazyna, the government-owned wealth and investment fund, increased its revenues, mostly by selling assets in a drive towards privatisation. The authorities, however, progressively reshaped the privatisation programme, making it less ambitious and placing on the market fewer companies than initially announced. Plans for a privatisation of KazmunaiGas, the state oil and gas enterprise, have yet to materialise.

4.1. The oil boom in times of low commodity prices

After oil prices plummeted in 2016, reaching the lowest prices in more than a decade, the global oil industry was forced to reorganise in light of diminishing profits. Large trans-national companies cut expenses, laid off personnel, and slashed investment plans. Oil exporting countries, especially those organised in the OPEC group, devised a cut in output that would restore prices to a sustainable level. Kazakhstan, however, followed a different pattern: although slower than initially expected, investment plans advanced, and oil production increased. The expansion of the most promising projects at Tengiz and Kashagan, in fact, offset the production slump of

22. Paolo Sorbello, 'Web Giants Counter Kazakhstan's Spying Tool', *The Diplomat*, 27 August 2019.

23. Deloitte, 'Business Outlook in Kazakhstan', 2019.

brownfields in the rest of the country. At one point, Kazakhstan was named the «biggest over-producer», essentially breaking the pact underwritten by OPEC countries together with other crude exporters.²⁴

Kazakhstan's oil production grew to 90.5 million tons in 2019, a figure that should stay stable for the foreseeable future, according to the ministry of energy. The increased share of oil production and export from fields owned by international consortia, however, implies smaller revenues for the state company, Kazmunaigas. At Tengiz, the state owns a 20% share in the Tengizchevroil consortium (TCO), while at Kashagan (NCOC), the state owns 16.88% equity.²⁵ At the gas and condensate project in Karachaganak (KPO), Kazmunaigas owns 10% and has shown appetite for increasing the stake. The abovementioned production sharing agreements collectively amount to more than half of Kazakhstan's oil production and trans-national companies accumulate most of the earnings from oil exports.

Kashagan, an offshore field in the Caspian, steadily increased production since it resumed operations in October 2016.²⁶ In the last quarter of 2019, however, unscheduled maintenance curbed production and reminded the industry of the technological challenges inherent to a field discovered in shallow waters that partially freeze during the winter and pumping oil with high hydrogen sulphide content. These obstacles created delays and cost overruns through the years, leading ConocoPhillips to leave the consortium in 2013 and Total to weigh an exit option in mid 2019.²⁷

The sharing of profits from oil and gas extraction has continued to plague relations between the Kazakhstani government and the trans-national companies developing the Karachaganak field in the north of the country. In October 2018, the parties seemed to have reached an agreement by which the companies would have paid a US\$ 1.1 billion compensation for an alleged unfair distribution of earnings. By the end of 2019, however, the government said that the proposed sum would no longer suffice to resolve the dispute.²⁸

24. Elena Mazneva, Jack Farchy & Nariman Gizitdinov, 'Kazakhstan Overtakes Iraq as OPEC Pact's Biggest Over-Producer', *Bloomberg*, 11 January 2018.

25. Tengizchevroil website: <http://www.tengizchevroil.com> and NCOC website: <https://www.ncoc.kz>.

26. Paolo Sorbello, 'Kashagan Restart Gives Kazakhstan Hope', *The Diplomat*, 17 October 2016.

27. For ConocoPhillips's exit see: Paolo Sorbello, 'Pipelines and Hegemonies in the Caspian: a Gramscian Appraisal', in Andreas Heinrich & Heiko Pleines (eds.), *Export Pipelines from the CIS Region Geopolitics, Securitization, and Political Decision-Making*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2014, pp. 175-200. Concerning Total's intentions to reduce its stake, see: 'Exclusive: Total seeks to reduce stake in giant Kashagan oilfield – sources', *Reuters*, 24 May 2019.

28. 'Kazakhstan says \$1.1 billion Karachaganak settlement offer insufficient', *Reuters*, 25 November 2019.

Revenues from oil and gas sales remained the foundation of Kazakhstan's economy. As such, the government continued to push for increased energy production, despite lower prices and outstanding legal controversies. Decreasing revenues, however, meant that the largesse in public spending that higher commodity prices previously granted to the Kazakhstani government could no longer be sustainable. While government workers' salaries were raised to match inflation, private sector workers suffered the crisis and saw their purchasing power decrease, as prices grew faster than in other Central Asian countries. Individual financial trouble, together with slower public and private investment, hit the banking sector, which underwent a reorganisation period.

4.2. A permanent banking crisis

In 2014, after the planned devaluation of the tenge currency, then-President Nazarbayev said the number of banks in the country should decrease significantly in order to maintain competition among financial institutions. Then, there were over thirty banks in Kazakhstan. A wave of mergers and acquisitions led to the disappearance of Alliance Bank and Temirbank, which were absorbed by Forte Bank already in 2014. As the banking crisis accelerated in 2016-2017, Halyk Bank, the largest lender, took over the second-largest, Kazkommertsbank. Finally, in 2018-2019, a range of banks, among which Qazaq Banki, Bank Astany, and Tsesnabank, collapsed under the weight of their toxic assets. In 2019, Tsesnabank was «saved» by First Heartland Securities, a little-known investment company tied to Nazarbayev, and was renamed Jysan Bank.²⁹

The enduring instability in the banking sector showed that the crisis became the new baseline scenario. Banks have failed to recover from the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, which hit Kazakhstan a few years later. The percentage of toxic assets on their books prevented them from improve their financial health throughout the years and only the banks close to the presidential circle could grow. Now, Halyk Bank, the largest lender, controlled by Nazarbayev's daughter Dinara and her husband Timur Kulibayev, represents over one-third of the whole sector. Personalism remained crucial to the survival of certain banks, slowing their healthy recovery.

In some cases, certain banks received help from the sovereign funds, namely the Nonperforming Loans Fund, controlled by the Ministry of Finance. At the end of 2017, however, Kazakhstan's state assets suffered a legal blow that threatened their stability. Through a complex network of lawsuits in several jurisdictions, a Moldovan investor managed to freeze the sovereign funds that Kazakhstan held at the Bank of New York Mellon,

29. Paolo Sorbello, 'Banks in Kazakhstan Give Mergers a Go, Again', *The Diplomat*, 7 May 2019.

pending the payment of a penalty awarded by an arbitration court over a failed business deal.³⁰

Anatolie Stati invested in two oil fields in the western Mangystau region in the 1990s. Upon political pressure on the one hand and a sluggish production plan, however, Kazakhstan's authorities seized the fields in 2009. Stati and his partners then sued Kazakhstan for violating the Energy Charter Treaty and unlawfully expropriating the business. The arbitration court awarded Stati's side a compensation of around US\$ 500 million, which the Kazakh government refused to pay, arguing the Stati side obtained information about Kazakhstan's assets fraudulently.³¹ While the Stati case is still under litigation, it is important to note that Kazakhstan has had to battle several arbitrations of a similar scale, often worsening the country's business environment.

Since December 2017, the offensive of the Stati party was acknowledged to have a legal foundation by several courts in the US, in the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, among others, which drew a direct link between funds and assets owned by the Kazakh government abroad and the US\$ 500 million it owed as compensation for the oil fields it confiscated. Trials and hearings have continued throughout 2018 and 2019, and the case is likely to continue to haunt Kazakhstan's assets until the government decides to compensate Stati, or the claim is fully dismissed in all jurisdictions.

5. *The waning international outreach*

The last years of Nazarbayev's rule on Kazakhstan showed a decreased international activity. The 2017 EXPO (see above) was the culmination of years of attempts to polish Kazakhstan's image abroad. Until then, Kazakhstan had placed itself at the crux of several diplomatic talks, involving Syria and Ukraine, as well as China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Seen from abroad, however, Kazakhstan had changed little since the early 2000s. Still known to the world as an authoritarian country, well-endowed with oil and a range of underground resources, the Central Asian country failed to clean up its international profile and remained under severe scrutiny from human rights watchdogs and activists.

5.1. *Syria talks, Ukraine talks, international pressure on crackdown*

The enduring conflict in Syria offered an occasion to ex-President Nazarbayev to showcase Kazakhstan's role as a neutral platform for negotiations. Since 2017, several rounds of meetings between the parties involved

30. Paolo Sorbello, 'Lawsuits Threaten Kazakhstan's Oil Money', *The Diplomat*, 12 January 2018.

31. The Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Benelux Courts Weigh in On Impact of KPMG Correspondence on Statist's Fraud*, 24 December 2019.

in the conflict, which include Russia, Turkey, and Iran, took place in the capital city, in what became known as the Astana Peace Talks. The activity of the forum, however, waned in recent years, with only a handful of meetings between 2018 and 2019. After yet another short-lived cease fire in 2018, the United Nations said the Astana Talks were a «missed opportunity» that failed to show progress.³²

Similarly, the initial drive towards a brokerage for the conflict in Ukraine translated into an exercise in diplomatic wishful thinking. Despite his repeated attempts, Nazarbayev could not become the peace mediator he envisioned for his international legacy. In addition, Nazarbayev's successor, took a dismissive stance towards the ongoing conflict between Kiev and the separatist forces. «We do not call what happened in Crimea annexation. What happened, happened. Annexation is too heavy a word to apply to Crimea», Tokayev said in an interview.³³

Instead of being remembered as a peacebuilding statesman, as shown in the sections above, Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan obtained fame for its repression of political dissidents.³⁴ In particular, the drive to silence arch-enemy Ablyazov and his followers took a farcical turn, when online users were visited by the police for their «likes» and other activities on social media channels controlled by Ablyazov. In addition, Ablyazov's lawyer Botagoz Jardemaile, who lives in exile in Belgium, denounced pressure on her family as her brother, Iskander Yerimbetov was arrested in November 2017 in Kazakhstan.³⁵

In his first months in power, Tokayev's approach to repression has led to thousands of arrests, both among Ablyazov supporters and newly-formed opposition groups. According to the Ministry of Interior, in the period around the presidential election, approximately 4,000 people were arrested for participating in unsanctioned protest rallies.³⁶ The Human Rights Charter and the Bureau for Human Rights, both headquartered in Almaty, issued an official statement of complaint about the treatment of detainees of 9 June, who were «kept for ten hours or longer in police stations without water or food [and] without access to lawyers», in clear violation of the rule of law.³⁷ Amnesty International echoed these reports, saying: «the Kazakh-

32. 'U.N. says Astana meeting on Syria a missed opportunity, no progress', *Reuters*, 29 November 2018.

33. Zhanna Nemtsova, 'Prezident Kazakhstan: My ne nazyvayem to, chto proizoshlo v Krymu, anneksei', *Deutsche Welle*, 4 December 2019.

34. Paolo Sorbello, 'What is Nazarbayev's Legacy in Kazakhstan?', *The Diplomat*, 5 June 2019.

35. Yerimbetov was freed from prison due to worsening health conditions on 30 December 2019.

36. 'Kazakhstan updates tally of protest arrests to nearly 4,000', *The Associated Press*, 19 June 2019.

37. Zhemis Turmagambetova and Yevgeni Zhovtis, 'Sovmestnoye obrashcheniye kasatel'no massovykh narushenii prav grazhdan 9 i 10 iyuniya 2019', *Human Rights Charter and Bureau for Human Rights*, 10 June 2019.

stani authorities again demonstrated their disregard for human rights by arbitrarily detaining hundreds of peaceful protestors.»³⁸

In an effort to placate the population, Tokayev established the National Council of Public Trust, a consultative body grouping several long-time civic activists and public figures. The Council met a few times in 2019, but failed to propose policy recommendations that would change the political playing field. Instead, by the end of 2019, the authorities' attitude towards public gatherings seemed to have shifted, with fewer arrests and a more discreet police presence. A major exception was a protest that DVK organised in September 2019 (see the next section).

While trying to tame the protest mood in the country, Tokayev's new paternalistic approach seemed to appease some international observers, after a summer of arrests. Still, human rights groups remain sceptical: «Despite a rhetoric of change, Kazakhstan's political transition looks like a human rights stagnation», Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said presenting the organisation's 2020 report.³⁹ Whether the population's thirst for reform and the government's promises will eventually match or clash remains to be seen.

5.2. *The China problem*

Days before Nazarbayev left office, the authorities arrested Serikzhan Bilash, a lawyer and human rights activist. Bilash served six months in pre-trial detention, a mix of house arrest and jail, before reaching an agreement with the court to drop his activities aimed to uncover the existence of a mass incarceration system in China. Bilash had denounced Chinese authorities for sending over one million people, chiefly ethnic Uygurs and Kazakhs, to so-called re-education camps, in an effort to eradicate any separatist or extremist sentiments in the Xinjiang region. The Turkic and Mongol populations in Xinjiang have sought independence from China for decades, but the central government has strongly repressed any attempt. The establishment of re-education camps affected also ethnic Kazakhs and Kazakhstani citizens, who were effectively imprisoned while visiting their families across the border.

Several months after the emergence of the first news and accounts from the Chinese detention camps, China became a hot political topic that the Kazakh government refused to face. Riding the wave of discontent that sparked the protests against proposed amendments to the Land Code in

38. 'Kazakhstan: Thousands detained across the country following disputed presidential elections', *Amnesty International*, 11 June 2019.

39. Human Rights Watch, *Central Asia: Reform Pledges Yet to Materialize*, 14 January 2020.

2016,⁴⁰ bringing to the streets several hundred Kazakhs in cities across the country, DVK and other opposition movements continued to publicly attack the Kazakh government for its deference towards China in terms of land and business. In September 2019, DVK organised a protest against the alleged relocation of 55 factories from China to western regions of Kazakhstan. Arguably, emphasising traditional values of Kazakh society such as the «sacred motherland» could be an effective strategy to mobilise people, but the violence against Kazakhs across the Chinese border should have been higher on the priority list, according to other opposition movements.⁴¹

Instead, the government focused on keeping well-balanced international relations with China. Kazakhstan heralded the role of China in funding infrastructure projects for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, despite metaphorical and literal roadblocks for some of its investments. The dry port at Khorgos, at the border between Kazakhstan and China, mostly served as a channel for goods to reach other Central Asian countries: reportedly,⁴² the final destination for around 40% of the goods is Uzbekistan and only around 1% of the shipments are directed towards Europe, the proclaimed goal of the project. Additionally, Chinese investors pulled out of a light rail transit project that would have linked the centre of Kazakhstan's capital with its airport. The US\$ 1.5 billion project was funded with government funds alongside a loan by the China Development Bank. In April 2019, a disagreement of the terms of the loan led to a sudden suspension of construction works.⁴³ While the government investigates alleged malfeasance by local bureaucrats and negotiates new terms with the Chinese bank, giant concrete columns built to support prospective urban trains were left unfinished along the main roads of Nur-Sultan.

6. Conclusion

A coal stove-heated house in the outskirts of the capital city became the theatre of a national tragedy for Kazakhstan on 4 February 2019, as five sisters aged one-to-twelve, died after a fire burned down their home. While some blamed the parents, especially the mother, for leaving their children

40. Adele Del Sordi, 'Kazakhstan 2015-2016: balancing regime stability amidst local and global challenges', *Asia Maior* 2017, vol. XXVII, p. 447-ff.

41. «Oyan, Qazaqstan!», for example, published a few statements during 2019 about the fate of a couple of ethnic Kazakhs on trial for having illegally crossed the border into Kazakhstan. The court threatened to extradite them back to China in December 2019.

42. Henry Ruchl, 'The Khorgos Hype on the Belt and Road', *The Diplomat*, 27 September 2019.

43. Darkhan Umirbekov, 'Kazakhstan: Anti-graft agents spring into action over LRT scandal', *Eurasianet*, 11 October 2019

alone, most pointed the finger to the government, which failed to provide the appropriate help to large families, essentially forcing both parents to work two jobs and work overtime to make ends meet.

Mothers from different cities united and rallied together demanding government support. The government responded by doubling the meagre monthly allowance for women with four or more children.⁴⁴ In August 2019, months after leaving office, Nazarbayev minimised the controversy by saying that families should not rely on government handouts, but «go out and buy two cows and provide for yourself». The «two cows» statement was as despised as it was mocked by the population, which dismissed it as ramblings from the ageing leader.⁴⁵

The fire and the «two cows» incident, however, properly summarises the past two years in Kazakhstan's history. In the face of ongoing crises, structural problems, and growing inequality, the government answered with piecemeal policies that only offered short term solutions. The same can be said about the business environment, plagued with legal battles and adverse market conditions. Internationally, once the «two cows» effect of the EXPO in 2017 waned, the government resorted to place itself as the friendly neighbour of the more powerful industrial engines of Russia and China and its rampant Central Asian competitor, Uzbekistan.

The pursuit of stability, embodied in Nazarbayev's carefully-engineered resignation, continued to be the thread of Kazakhstan's history. The crackdown on old rivals and the more recent clemency towards youth movements seem to suggest that the post-Nazarbayev twilight⁴⁶ will last for years to come.

44. Laura Tourtellotte, 'Laboring Women in Kazakhstan: Precarity, Protest, and Pronatalism', presentation at the Central Eurasian Studies conference, Washington DC, 11 October 2019

45. Chris Rickleton, 'Kazakhstan: Castles, cows and a grumpy old man', *Eurasianet*, 23 August 2019.

46. Dosym Satpayev, *et al.*, *The Twilight Zone: Traps of the Transition Era*, Almaty: Alliance of Analytical Organizations, 2013.

