



In this issue:

Is Kazakhstan awaiting its Arab spring?



From the Editor

It has been just over a month since a sudden and daring attack took place in the city of Taraz (12.11.2011, Southern Kazakhstan), when sensational news spread all over the world concerning the former Central Asian oasis of serenity: on 16.12.2011, on the Day of Independence in Kazakhstan, military forces violently suppressed the demonstrations of unarmed strikers from the oil industry and civilians in the town of Zhanaozen in Western Kazakhstan.

The international community reacted to these events forthwith:

- 1) The very next day, December 17, the UN Committee on Human Rights expressed its concern over the death of 10 people resulting from the riots in Kazakhstan's town of Zhanaozen.
- 2) The EU High Representative for foreign policy, Catherine Ashton, in her statement emphasized a hope that "the authorities of the Republic of Kazakhstan shall promptly conduct an investigation into these events, and that through a social dialogue a peaceful solution will be found to the problems faced by the striking oil workers".
- 3) December 19, the U.S. response also comprised a decisive appeal to the Government of Kazakhstan "to urgently and fully restore all types of means of communications across the country," and "to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the causes which led to the violence. All those who have committed crimes must be punished in accordance with international standards", - said Victoria Nuland, U.S. State Department spokesman.
- 4) December 21, 47 deputies of the European Parliament wrote an open letter to the President of Kazakhstan, in which they expressed their condemnation of the law enforcement agencies in Zhanaozen, and the international rating agency Standard & Poor's, reported that it will review the previously approved BBB + credit rating, if the situation continues to worsen.

Moreover, the events in Zhanaozen were reminiscent of the start of revolutionary events in North Africa and the Middle East late 2010 - early 2011, again raising the debate about how likely we are to see an "Arab spring" scenario in Kazakhstan.

In this newsletter we will take an in-depth look at the current situation in Kazakhstan, in order to compare it with what was observed shortly before the events of the "Arab spring" in other countries and to answer the question: "Is Kazakhstan awaiting its Arab spring?"

Sincerely,
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IS KAZAKHSTAN AWAITING ITS 'ARAB SPRING'?

On 16th December, 2011, on the day of the 20th Independence day celebrations of the in the Republic of Kazakhstan, there were massive clashes between oil industry protesters and troops of law enforcement agencies in the city of Zhanaozen (Western Kazakhstan). Two weeks after these events, the world community has still not received a complete picture of what really happened and is unaware of how these phenomena correlate these with the broader context of social and political processes in Kazakhstan.

And there are more questions being raised than apparent answers available in terse summaries of various news agencies. What is the true extent of the destabilisation in Western Kazakhstan? Are these events conducive to the initiation of an 'Arab spring' in the key country of Central Asia? Which factors contribute to the socio-political tensions in the country? What is the role and position of the external forces and global players? Read about it in our material.

Tragedy in Zhanaozen

Around 10:30 local time on 16th December, law enforcement agencies used military weapons and poisonous gas against the oil workers, who had been on strike for 7 months in the town square, and against the inhabitants of Zhanaozen who had gathered for the celebration of Independence Day [1].

The data regarding the number of those injured and killed delivered by the authorities and residents of Zhanaozen significantly differ: 16 people were killed and about 100 were wounded according to the official sources reports, and more than 70 people were killed and at least 500 wounded (including those missing) according to the statements of Zhanaozen residents and striking oil workers.

This difference in figures is due to the complete isolation of information relating to the city of Zhanaozen from 16th December to date. According to Kazakh human rights organisations and independent media, the city is deprived of cellular network coverage, landline phones work, but with considerable interference, access to the Internet is blocked. In addition, Kazakhstan has blocked social

networks sites such as Twitter, Youtube and the 'Republic' portal through which messages and videos from relating to and of the event had been rapidly disseminated. Numerous attempts to penetrate Zhanaozen on the part of journalists and human rights activists as well as independent experts were violently suppressed by the military orders that have been implemented across the borders and inside the city.



Thus, the Kazakh blogger Muratbek Tungishbaev [2] was beaten in the village of Shepte after he held meetings there with eyewitnesses of the events of 16th December. Under the threat of using firearms his press credentials were taken away from him and destroyed, audio and video materials were completely destroyed, the equipment was confiscated. There were cases of arrests of foreign media representatives: on 18th December, 'Lenta.Ru' special correspondent, Ilya Azar and 'Kommersant' reporter and photographer Vladimir Soloviev and Vasily Shaposhnikov were arrested in Zhanaozen[3].

The special correspondent of the Russian edition of 'Novaya Gazeta' Elena Kostyuchenko said in her report from the scene in Zhanaozen: *In Zhanaozen, the hospital and the morgue are more secure than the State Department of the Interior (police department). People who took the bodies from the square to the morgue said that at 9 am on 17th December in the morgue and in the adjoining room there were 64 bodies, including the bodies of two children. There is also evidence of a surgeon-resuscitator,*

who said that 23 people died during her attempts to save them. The next morning the number of those wounded in the Zhanaozen hospital approached 400, some of the wounded were taken immediately to Aktau. The authorities did not release any bodies to relatives and it is prohibited to visit the wounded in the hospital. The city has gathered several thousand riot police from the neighboring areas, a state of emergency has been declared [4].

According to reliable sources of the 'Open Dialog' Foundation it is well known that the bodies of the victims, also of those who died after being severely tortured in the police department, are released only after their relatives sign a statement confirming that their loved ones died of natural causes.. Looting and cruel mockery of local residents; especially young people by riot policemen, has been observed by eyewitnesses. A particularly absurd situation was witnessed where riot policemen confiscated clothes and leather gloves from a child.

On 17th December, President Nursultan Nazarbayev declared a state of emergency in the region, which will last until 5th January, 2012. The same day, the head of diplomacy of the European Union, Catherine Ashton, made the following statement: "The High Representative of the EU hopes that the authorities of the Republic of Kazakhstan shall promptly conduct an investigation into events, and that through social dialogue a peaceful solution to the problems faced by the striking oil workers will be found." And on 19th December, the Standard & Poor's rating agency reported that the previously approved BBB + credit rating will be reviewed if the situation continues to deteriorate [5] (we have provided more information on the reaction of the EU in the intro).

According to our sources, on 17th December, the workers of «Buzachi Operating Ltd.» ceased production as a sign of solidarity with the oil workers and against the bloodshed in Zhanaozen (LLC «Buzachi Operating Ltd.» 'Northern Buzachi field, the owners of the Russian oil company' LUKOIL [6], Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) 50%, Mittal Investments 25%). The situation is similar in Fort-Shevchenko, the Consortium Agip KCO Contractor [7] (employing cca. 2,800 people [8]).

In Aktau, on 17th December at least 2,000 employees of 'Karazhanbasmunai' (China's state investment company CITIC Group and Kazakh oil company, Exploration Production JSC 'KazMunayGas') came to the rally. The protesters expressed their solidarity with the bereaved families in Zhanaozen and stopped production.

The excavation from deposit of JSC 'MangistauMunaiGas' was stopped [9], whose owners are the Kazakh oil company, Exploration Production JSC 'KazMunayGas' (50%) and Chinese oil company CNPC (50%):

- Oil and gas management Kalamkasmunaygaz (Kalamkas, the number of workers 4000);
- Oil and gas management Zhetybaymunaygaz (Zhetybai field, the number of workers 3000);
- Oil and gas management Ozenmunaygaz (the number of workers 8,500).



In the village of Shetpe people dismantled railway tracks, thus halting five trains. The police opened fire, officially - one person was killed. A group of lawyers, who came from Aktau to assist detainees in Zhanaozen, were not allowed into the city [10].

These events have become the largest and most dramatic conflict between the government and private community groups in the history of the country's independence. But just as importantly, they brought back the memory of the events of late 2010 to early 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East.

It is a well-known fact that during this period there was a wave of revolutionary demonstrations and protests in the Arab world, which were later re-

ferred to as the 'Arab spring'. The results of the 'Arab spring' were: revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, a civil war and the assassination of Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, the increase in social and political tensions in Morocco, Bahrain, Syria, and in several other countries. In many cases, the escalation of the conflict took place after the unprecedented act of open aggression of power structures toward the civilian populations (ill-treatment of civilians, dispersal / shooting at mass demonstrations).

In this context, as well as in the context of discussions on the impact of the 'Arab spring' on the socio-political processes in other regions [11], we are interested in the probability of experiencing a similar scenario in Kazakhstan which would threaten the stability of the region and increase the political risk of the state. To answer this question, we will conduct a comparative review of the causative forces of the revolutionary events in the Arab world with the current situation in Kazakhstan, and also attempt to determine the potential and nature of the influence of external factors on these processes.

Basis for the protest

As shown by recent events in the Middle East and North Africa, the factors that accompany the development of the protest, include: high unemployment and socio-economic inequality, economic instability, lack of prospects and lifts of social mobility for young people, discrimination based on religious, nationalistic, or social grounds, the high level of corruption and authoritarian style of government. Attention can be also drawn to the fact that these characteristics should be taken into ac-



count not only for a particular state, but also for the region as a whole (in this case - Central Asia).

Economic stability, which is based on the exploitation of the abundant natural resources of Kazakhstan (in particular, hydrocarbons), has long allowed this country to avoid severe acute social tensions. The effect of less favorable economic conditions in the neighboring states - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, were essentially neutralised by allowing migration from these countries (mostly - to Russia) [12]. These facts gave grounds for some experts to believe that the risk of a revolution in Kazakhstan and Central Asia following the 'Arab spring' scenario is negligible [13].

But the events of 2011 cast doubt on the adequacy of the current levels of social stability. Protests of oil workers in Kazakhstan [14], which began in May this year, occasionally supported by other professional societies [15] which led to the tragedy in Zhanaozen suggest that the current format of distribution of wealth from the sale of natural resources, as well as working conditions are no longer acceptable for the workers. Additional problems are generated by the lack of a multi-lateral format of settling labour disputes, which only exacerbates the situation.

Equally important a trend is the intensification of conflicts on nationalistic grounds, in key economic regions of the Russian Federation (it's sufficient to mention the events at the Manege Square in Moscow [16]). Further aggravation of international hostility in Russia, which is a factor reducing the attractiveness of potential migration to this country for immigrants from Central Asian countries, can significantly affect not only the Life Quality Index for many people in these countries, but also have a significant impact on the socio-political situation in the region.

Unfortunately, the issue of conflicts on nationalistic and religious grounds is becoming increasingly important for Kazakhstan itself. The adoption of a new law on religion, which greatly limits (and in many cases, explicitly prohibits) the activities of both traditional and nontraditional religious movements in Kazakhstan, is considered one of the key reasons for the series of terrorist attacks throughout 2011, as well as the growing popularity of radical Is-

lamists[17]. Additional risk of oil workers' conflict and restrictions on religious freedom in Kazakhstan in terms of potential self-contradictions lies in the regional heterogeneity of the population. It is known that the ethnic Kazakh population (as well as those who practice Islam) dominates in the western and southern parts of Kazakhstan, where the most intensified protest activity has occurred. At the same time, the North and North-east of the country, which is dominated by the Russian minority (some 30% of the population) has remained calm and sometimes demonstrated indifference to the problems of other regions [18].



An equally important factor that creates the necessary conditions for a potentially revolutionary situation is the type of political regime and decision-making mechanisms in the country. Both political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few elite groups, who fear the appearance of a counter-elite, strongly restrict the activities of civil society as well as alternative political parties and independent media. In view of these circumstances, there are no mechanisms in Kazakhstan of channeling social dissatisfaction in the format of public discussion. Instead, the situation is held back until it turns into a critical state (as in the case with the oil workers' protests).

The driving forces of the protest

If in the previous section we have discussed the existence of the prerequisites for the protest and revolutionary sentiments and processes, no less important is the issue of the driving forces behind the protest, which can be simply formulated in the question: 'For whom may it be beneficial?'

In many instances of the 'Arab Spring' there existed a degree of competition between strong players in

the country (the president and the army in Egypt, tribal clans in Libya) and the external environment for changes in the region, and support for the revolutions from the West. Let's consider the ratio of internal and external forces which can be observed in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Let's start with the external factors. Kazakhstan has managed to achieve a balance between the interests of key players in the region - the U.S., Russia and China. All three parties are fairly equally permitted to participate in the economic processes of the country, in particular - in the extraction of natural resources.

In addition, Kazakhstan plays a role in strategic projects of each of the centres of influence, yet continues to be, more or less: independent. For example, as a result of carrying out the project of the 'Turkmenistan-China' pipeline, which has been laid through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, China has managed to eliminate Russia's monopoly on gas transport in Central Asia. Simultaneously, in June 2011, the son of the president and already the former head of the largest state holding company 'SK' Kulibayev [19] as of 22nd December 2011 joined the Board of Directors of the Russian gas monopoly 'Gazprom' [20].

On the other hand, cooperation with the United States allowed Kazakhstan to counterbalance the influence of Russia and China, even though U.S. actions could become the main source of instability in the near future. As it became known last summer, the Obama administration has decided to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan [21], which greatly upset the balance of power throughout Central Asia. It would be impossible to believe that in the light of the looming energy crisis and global competition between the U.S. and China for energy resources (and this is one of the reasons for the existing examples of the 'Arab Spring'), they would just walk away and leave such an important region, rich in hydrocarbon reserves. But what will be the new format of the U.S. presence in Central Asia (as well as what level of stability / instability in Kazakhstan will correspond to it) is not yet clear.

Yet, neither China (as one of the main investors in the oil and gas industry of Kazakhstan), nor the United States (who are looking for a stable country

for new sites as well as a new format of their presence in Central Asia after their withdrawal from Afghanistan) or Russia (which forms the joint Kazakhstan customs and economic area) should be interested in destabilizing the situation. In that case, let's try to determine the potential influence and possible interests of different groups of elites in Kazakhstan.

Forces from within

The events of 16th December in Zhanaozen became the embodiment of the waves of instability, which flooded Kazakhstan in 2011 - beginning with the protests of oil workers and ending with the series of terrorist attacks in Aktobe, Astana, Atyrau and Taraz. It is clear that at the core of these events there are evident failures of central and local authorities on issues of humanitarian and religious policies, in their attitudes to the resolution of labour disputes between oil companies in Western Kazakhstan and their employers.

At the same time, aggravation of the situation could and can be used to promote internal competition between different elite groups. Now stability depends on one person - President Nursultan Nazarbayev. But because of his age and health [22], uncertainty and competition in elite circles increases.

For example, all the more grounded seems the version that Nazarbayev planned to replace the head of his own administration Aslan Musin with Krymbek Kusherbayev, Governor of Mangistau region (where the tragic events took place) immediately after the parliamentary elections. According to this version, it was with the assistance of forces which are close to the presidential administration, that the original provocation was arranged in Zhanaozen which resulted in clashes with police and ultimately; bloodshed [23]. One way or another, the authoritarian system of governance is failing, when the life or health of the central figure is endangered; more prominent cracks exist in his immediate environment, the risk of social instability is higher as is the likelihood of redistribution of power and spheres of influence.

Technology and revolution It is well known how important a role is that played by social networks;

Twitter and Facebook in helping to mobilise the population of the Arab countries [24]. An equally important function was performed by the Qatari television channel; 'Al Jazeera' [25].

Therefore, when analysing the potential of carrying out the scenario of the 'Arab spring' in Kazakhstan, one shouldn't underestimate the existence of several "technical" prerequisites for the development of protest moods in the country. Primarily, these include the level of popularity of the Internet and the conditions for development of alternative sources of media, as an alternative to the state media.

With regard to the Internet, here we observe positive and negative dynamics in quantity and quality. While in 2008 only 14% of the people of Kazakhstan used the Internet [26], in 2011 this figure has reached 41% [27]. At the same time, under the pretext of combating terrorism and extremism hundreds of Internet websites have been banned in recent years. A high-profile incident was the decision of a court to ban access to the popular blog network LiveJournal [28], which gives reasons to speak about the application of censorship in the Internet space by the government.

The situation with the traditional mass-media is not substantially different in terms of quality. Although officially, censorship in Kazakhstan was abrogated back in 1990, experts point to problems with state registration that the opposition media face, as well as organisational and economic obstacles which have been created (advertisers refuse to place their materials in such media, printers cannot print opposition newspapers) [29]. In some cases, it escalates to threats to the lives and health of journalists. An attack on the 'Stan.kz' journalists in October this



year may serve as a recent reminder of such activity[30].

It is apparent that the situation in Kazakhstan and throughout Central Asia is still not conducive to self-organisation of the population or to information supportive of the protest movements from a technological point of view. At the same time, the level of public confidence in the media is very low [31]. This gives an increased impetus to rumours, which are intentionally or inadvertently, used as tools to destabilise the situation.

The election and instability

President Nursultan Nazarbaev scheduled early elections of members of the lower chamber of the Kazakh Parliament and of local authorities for 15th January, 2012. The experience in other post-Soviet countries: Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus show that during the election period, political contradictions may radically exacerbate. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the context and the reasons for running the election in terms of threats to the political and social balance in the state.



Recent elections to the Majilis (lower chamber of the Parliament) were held in 2007. The presidential party 'Nur Otan' won 88.05% of the vote, which allowed them to form an absolute majority (no other party has overcome the electoral threshold of 7%). At the same time, during the term of the new members of the Majilis, amendments were introduced to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. According to them, this body must include at least two political parties - the second force is going to enter the Parliament even if it did not manage to achieve the required 7% of the vote.

It was the desire to comply with this standard that became the official version and the main reason for dissolution of the Majilis (although regular election

was supposed to be held in August 2012). Additional reasoning included, the intention to avoid an overlap of electoral campaign with the second wave of the economic crisis.

This standpoint, although it seems rational, still does not reveal everything. According to other statements [32], Nazarbaev feels distrust toward a part of his team and decided to carry out the personnel reshuffle in order to strengthen his own position. All the more so that the elections carried out immediately after the Christmas-New Year period, i.e. in January, provide an opportunity to do it quietly, without attracting too much attention from the West towards the course of the electoral campaign. The U.S., EU, UN, OSCE have unanimously expressed deep concern regarding the outbreak of violence in Western Kazakhstan. As early as 21st December, 47 MEPs wrote an open letter to the President of Kazakhstan in which they condemned the actions of the Kazakh authorities in the settlement of a labour dispute of the oil workers and the use of force in quelling a demonstration on December 16 [33]. And it is a signal which speaks of the creation of conditions for a substantial worsening of the political and economic image of Kazakhstan in the international arena.

Conclusions

So, is the 'Arab spring' really impending for Kazakhstan? In terms of the form of it – no, but in terms of the meaning of the events – it is very probable.

Judging by the aspects of the current situation which we have discussed, there are many differences between Kazakhstan and the Middle East, that is why it is incorrect to make a direct analogy with the "Arab spring".

At the same time, the level of social tension as well as conflicts in elite circles of Kazakhstan is increasing. To a certain extent, the situation in Kazakhstan is similar to the last years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this period, the governing party began to lose influence, and the state increasingly suffered from the continuing social, economic and ethnic conflicts. At the same time, attempts to 'tighten the screws' and maintain the collapsing system by force, which were made by certain elite groups did not bring the expected results and only accelerated the process of its disintegration.

Now the instability in Kazakhstan is prevented by the lack of appropriate external conditions, as well as by the weakness of domestic counter-elite groups. But the questions about how much longer the current system of governance is going to withstand and whether the external demands are going to change, remain unanswered.

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