

Political Reforms in Kazakhstan

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Kazakhstan, a U.S. [partner](#) in areas such as counterterrorism and regional security, is implementing political reforms as it faces a range of domestic and international challenges. Following unprecedented unrest in January 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has moved to consolidate power while his country confronts difficult geopolitical dynamics in the wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Reforms introduced by Tokayev are restructuring Kazakhstan's political system and annulling the privileged position of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who held office for nearly three decades. While authorities tout ongoing reforms as moving the country in a more democratic direction, skeptics [question](#) the degree to which Kazakhstan will implement genuine democratization. On November 20, Tokayev secured a second term in a [snap presidential election](#), winning [81%](#) of the vote. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) [deemed](#) the electoral contest "lacking competitiveness." Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [criticized](#) this assessment as "biased." The U.S. Department of State [concurred](#) with OSCE findings and declared support for Tokayev's reform program. Some Members of Congress have [expressed](#) interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Kazakhstan, and in Kazakhstan's reform process.

January Unrest

On January 2, 2022, peaceful demonstrations broke out in Kazakhstan's western oil-producing region over increased fuel prices. The protests quickly [spread](#) throughout the country, encompassing grievances over corruption and economic inequality, with much of the anger [directed](#) at Nazarbayev and his family. By January 6, the protests had become the largest and most violent unrest in Kazakhstan's history, leaving [over 200](#) dead. Some Members of Congress [condemned](#) the violence, calling on Kazakhstani authorities to respect human rights. Some scholars [assess](#) that in addition to peaceful protestors with genuine economic and political demands and opportunistic looters, the events involved "organized provocateurs," who attacked government facilities and law enforcement. Tokayev [referred](#) to the events as an "attempted coup." Many analysts contend that figures associated with Nazarbayev and his family took advantage of genuine popular protests to pursue an [intra-elite](#) power struggle.

As Tokayev moved to control the situation, he appealed for assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led security alliance to which Kazakhstan belongs. In the [first deployment](#) in the organization's history, a CSTO mission of [approximately 2,500](#) troops from Russia, Armenia,

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Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan arrived on January 6 and remained in Kazakhstan until the following week.

“De-Nazarbayevification” and Political Reforms

In the aftermath of the January unrest, President Tokayev consolidated power, [removing](#) Nazarbayev associates and family members from positions of authority. What some observers term the “[de-Nazarbayevification](#)” of Kazakhstan is [ongoing](#). In September, Kazakhstan’s capital, which Tokayev had [renamed](#) Nur-Sultan in Nazarbayev’s honor in 2019, [reverted](#) to its previous name, Astana.

In a move some analysts see as part of Tokayev’s efforts to reduce Nazarbayev’s influence, Kazakhstan held a [constitutional referendum](#) on June 5, 2022. Voters approved a range of changes curtailing some presidential powers and [removing](#) mentions of Nazarbayev from the constitution. Tokayev [said](#) the constitutional changes would shift Kazakhstan from a “super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with a strong parliament.” Following additional legislation passed in September that extends the presidential term from five years to seven and imposes a one-term limit, a snap presidential election was held on November 20, two years ahead of schedule.

Analysts [assess](#) the vote was intended, as one wrote, to “underline that [Tokayev] is his own man and no longer reliant on Nazarbayev’s patronage” while he is at the potential “[apex](#)” of his [popularity](#). Skeptical observers [termed](#) the election a “one-horse race.” All three parties in parliament [backed](#) Tokayev. Although Tokayev’s vision for a “New Kazakhstan” [includes](#) development of a “multipolar party system” and “fair and free political competition,” some analysts [doubt](#) the degree of political pluralism Kazakhstan’s government will allow, seeing Tokayev’s reform program as one of “[authoritarian modernization](#).”

Implications of Russia’s War in Ukraine

In January, some analysts posited that the CSTO intervention would [undermine](#) Kazakhstan’s [multi-vector](#) foreign policy and increase the country’s dependence on [Russia](#). In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan has [maintained](#) its “diplomatic balancing act,” and Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has [not shifted](#) in Russia’s favor. Astana has repeatedly expressed [support](#) for Ukraine’s [territorial integrity](#) and provided humanitarian aid. While [polling](#) indicates public opinion on the war is divided, some analysts see Kazakhstan as increasingly [distancing itself](#) from Russia in response to the ongoing conflict. Some observers see the war in Ukraine as having enabled Tokayev to reinvent himself as a “truly independent figure,” [arguing](#) that the snap election was intended to give Tokayev “a popular mandate to rule, as distinct from a mandate from either Nazarbayev or Putin.”

Because of close economic ties between Russia and Kazakhstan, the war places Kazakhstan in a difficult position. The country is [facing](#) significant inflation and supply chain disruptions. Following Russia’s September announcement of “partial mobilization,” [more than 200,000](#) Russian citizens officially entered Kazakhstan, of whom about 50,000 remain in the country. Some outside observers see this influx as a “[humanitarian crisis in the making](#).”

Issues for Congress

Congress could consider what opportunities exist for developing U.S.-Kazakhstan relations given shifting geopolitics, and how the United States might effectively support democratization in Kazakhstan. While some analysts see Kazakhstan as a potential avenue for [sanctions evasion](#) by Russia, Kazakhstani officials have [asserted](#) their intention to [abide](#) by U.S. and European sanctions. The State Department has stated the United States seeks to [minimize](#) the impact of those sanctions on Kazakhstan. In light of the war,

Kazakhstan aims to [diversify](#) its trade relationships; sanctions on Russia may also present [opportunities](#) for Kazakhstan as companies consider relocating their operations or redirecting transit routes through Kazakhstan. Members may wish to consider how U.S. engagement can aid Kazakhstan in reducing its dependence on Russia, although some observers see China as the potential beneficiary of any such distancing. Some Members have [called](#) for an international investigation into Kazakhstan's response to the January unrest, and a State Department review of security assistance to Kazakhstan in order to ensure accountability for alleged human rights violations.

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