

# CONNECTIONS

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## The Transfer of Power in Central Asia and Threats to Regional Stability

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It is no secret that authoritarian forms of government are predominant across post-Soviet space, although some are softer than others. In Moscow, Astana, Minsk, Dushanbe, Ashkhabad and so forth across almost the entire region, each country is governed by “strong personalities,” some enlightened, others not. Even today’s Ukraine, which is a little closer to the West in terms of geography and mentality, continues to hesitantly fluctuate between poles of democracy and authoritarianism. Truth be told, these endless oscillations will ultimately mean the death of the country.

Authoritarianism offers uncontested advantages that help the former Soviet republics to find and maintain stability during transition: authoritarian methods are the shortest path to consensus, and facilitate control and governance. The population, meanwhile, has no objection to “strong personalities,” tolerating figures that might be overthrown elsewhere, because they are “saviors of the homeland” – a legend discreetly confirmed by all-pervasive state propaganda. All of history, both recent and more distant, tells us of endless “foreign chicanery,” the permanent state of being “surrounded by enemies,” as if living in a “besieged fortress,” where it is so often necessary to “power through,” “resist and rebuff” and so on, and so forth.

Since Ukraine, the reflex to “support our man,” to “stand up for our beloved leader” has only become stronger in post-Soviet authoritarian states: the horrors of a civil war initiated from outside the country leave the population no choice. This populace will not hesitate to support its “strong personality” but will not support democracy, because you can only sit back and wait for the fruits of liberal democratic reforms to ripen if you are protected by two oceans (as in the case of the USA) or if 800 years have passed since your first social contract (as in the case of England).

In all post-Soviet countries, authoritarianism is obscured by the fig leaf of constitutional clauses stipulating democratic provisions and institutions which, truth be told, do not function (because it would be foolish to obey the law during a “period of lethal danger”) or are selectively deployed at strategic moments for the benefit of world public opinion (for example, the UN General Assembly).

Naturally, the population in post-Soviet countries understand that the quality of governance in authoritarian regimes is fairly low, while the risk of instability, or imbalance between the interests of society and the elite, is high. This is a drawback. A greater downside of authoritarian forms of governance, which has not yet been fully evident in post-Soviet space but which threatens stability across the Eurasian continent, is the lack of institutions for the transfer of power.

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The rotation of leaders in such a political system is truly a time of historic vulnerability, as the old and weak president withdraws, as he can no longer exert control over events in the country, and a new leader takes his place, who is equally weak because he is, as yet, unable to control the state machinery. At this point, competitors can take advantage, forcing a redistribution of resources and property, perhaps under the guise of reform. Meanwhile, the forces attempting to choreograph the political transition face the ultimate challenge: correctly balancing the distribution of power in line with existing relationships between clans, tribes, families, etc. – an exceptionally complex task.

Given such vulnerability, the process of transferring power is conducted in a total information blackout, especially as regards the health of heads of state. The modest history of power transfers in post-Soviet space has already given us a memorable example: the figure who first heard about the illness of the president of Turkmenistan (naturally, it was the Minister for Health) inherited that high office.

As they come to power, new forces inevitably begin (as a rule under the label of “reform”) the radical redistribution of resources, without which it would be impossible for them to hold on to power. However, such redistributions inevitably upset the balance of forces and interests both within the elite and within society. Such shifts often reveal “weak links” which can face an increased load, risking the destabilization of the entire social system. There are “weak links” in every country (ethnic, religious, tribal, family or clan relationships, interactions with neighboring countries or great powers, strong opposition figures, etc.) and new authorities, as a rule, do not think a great deal about threats triggered by such a load redistribution. They release a powerful Genie, in the hopes that after using his powers to secure a victory, they can chase him back into the lamp.

Of course, power transfers could be greatly simplified, and risks reduced (removing them completely would be impossible), if clear conditions for the transition existed – terms accepted by the elite and by society (at least, by the majority). As all the countries of Central Asia are “democratic,” the laws governing the transfer of power are laid out in all the constitutions. As a rule, they are based on the standards adopted in the West.<sup>1</sup>

However, it would be very surprising if, given the prevalence of legal nihilism (the inability to live by the law) this particular portion of legislation was observed religiously. No-one can count on this. In these countries, a practice has formed, whereby the individuals most capable of attracting resources at the time of a power transfer—domestic, foreign, informational, financial or military—are awarded the desired position (although it should be underscored that this is by no means the last stage of the transition: as was noted previously, while attempting to redistribute resources, it is possible that one destabilizes a country, losing the entire war booty). Therefore, despite the presence in Central Asian countries of legislated procedures for the transfer of power, this actually takes place in very different ways, depending on the resources deployed, and destabilizing factors.

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<sup>1</sup> Erden Nazarov, *Kazakhstan after ...* (Almaty: Studiia “Vektor,” 2013).

One example is Kyrgyzstan, an unstable country susceptible to “orange revolution” infections, where the process of power transfer remains incomplete, but could come into effect at any moment, and take any shape. Nevertheless, here we already see the shaping of traditions of democratic elections and inter-clan consensus, which inspires optimism for the mid-term. In Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov has spent too little time in the president’s office to think about how to pass on his authorities (although in 2006 it was he who established a tradition of law-breaking when the Senate Speaker, the legal successor of Turkmenbashi, was placed under arrest). The Tajikistan’s President Emomaliy Rahmon has been in power for twenty years, but he is still in excellent physical form and building a dynasty to transfer power to his heirs (his advantage is a plethora of sons – this is no less important in Central Asia than in Azerbaijan).

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, two key regional powers, the situation is dramatically more urgent. The local leaders have very little time left: both are extremely advanced in age, neither has a son to offer the simple solution of political dynasty, and there is no precedent for the transfer of power here (both leaders have governed their countries since Soviet times). Moreover, these are densely populated, multi-confessional and multi-ethnic countries, where numerous circumstances have to be factored into any transfer of power. Finally, the consequences of an unsuccessful transfer for regional (and global) stability could be even more serious, and more painful, than destabilization in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan or Turkmenistan (especially if the transition follows the “orange” or “Arab Spring” tradition).<sup>2</sup>

Uzbekistan has a population of thirty million, the largest in the region. The Uzbek diaspora is the largest in Russia. The country’s leadership, headed by Islam Karimov, has the trickiest relations with the Islamists, both within the country (Hizb-ut-Tahrir) and outside (The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, and its followers). Most spectators consider that resolving the problem of inheritance of power in the country could have a colossal impact on both internal and external stability (especially taking into account the dominant traits of Karimov’s regional policies: isolationism, hegemony and aggressiveness).<sup>3</sup>

Islam Karimov has governed Uzbekistan for more than 25 years. He is 76 years old, and rumors suggest that he suffered a powerful heart attack in March of 2013. There is no opposition in the country (even Islamic), and no pretenders to the throne: the inner circle, even blood relatives, are shy of expressing any presidential ambitions – of those who have, most did not even make it to the border.<sup>4</sup> In society, the

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<sup>2</sup> Evgeniy Satanovsky, “The Destabilization of Central Asia. A Repetition of the Arab Spring on Russia’s Southern Borders Is More than Possible,” *Voenna-promishleniy Kurier* 6(524), 9 February 2014, available at <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/19189> (in Russian).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sergey Dolgov, “Who Will Inherit Uzbekistan?” *Ekspert* 14 (8 April 2013), available at <http://expert.ru/expert/2013/14/kto-unasleduet-uzbekistan> (in Russian); Alexey Malashenko, “Uzbekistan: No Transition yet Visible” (Moscow: The Carnegie Moscow Center, 2014), pp. 3–4.

question of the transfer of power is not openly discussed. Unofficially, the main pretender is Gulnara, Karimov's eldest daughter, although her position recently became far less strong, including in the eyes of her father.<sup>5</sup>

The country's Constitution states that a change in power in Uzbekistan must take place "when the president cannot perform his functions" (a very vague formula, which omits, *inter alia*, the critical concept of "voluntary retirement"). In this case, the head of the Senate would become acting president for three months (Article 96 of the Constitution, 18 April 2011).<sup>6</sup> Yet no-one doubts that, if necessary, a different person would be nominated, according to Karimov's personal preferences.

The loyalty and devotion of the country's new leader to the current president is the key factor guiding the handover of supreme authority, as retirement would not necessarily imply the president's demise. Karimov may expect to gradually withdraw from office over a long period of time, which would make him heavily dependent on his temporary replacement, who could heavily influence the choice of a future, permanent leader. Of course, we have to take into account that, apart from his personal interests, today's president is also thinking about the interests of his family (two daughters) and his clan (the Samarkand-Bukhara Clan). Finally, there is no doubt that Karimov is seeking an acceptable transition mechanism in the interests of stability and security for the whole country, which is inseparable from the interests of the family and the clan.

At the same time, everyone understands that legal transition mechanisms alone, especially those under the complete control of Karimov himself, will be insufficient to reliably legitimize the new president-heir. Therefore he would naturally want to reinforce the legal mechanism with dynastic principles of succession that are acceptable to the majority of the population of Uzbekistan. This is evidenced by his long and patient support for the ambitions of his eldest daughter, Gulnara. However, as all of her activities have discredited her (both with respect to her family, and the state itself) the president is thought to have rejected the idea of succession via the female hereditary line (his second daughter is unlikely to accept an offer of power – she prefers business, even in very seedy forms).<sup>7</sup>

The absence of male heirs forces the president to think of ways to transfer power to reliable figures from his own circle. In truth, this will not be highly legitimate, because the constitutional procedure for the election of a new head of state will clearly lack democratic content. There are currently just a handful of serious pretenders to the presidential privilege.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniil Kislov, "Uzbekistan: Karimov's Power Unshatterable," *Fergana Information Agency*, 20 February 2014, available at <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8059> (in Russian).

<sup>6</sup> Erden Nazarov, "Rules for Power Transfers in Central Asia," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, 24 July 2013, available at <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/07/pravila-peredachi-vlasti-v-stranah-tsentralnoy-azii> (in Russian); Alexandr I. Cherkasov, *Heads of State and Government in the Modern World (Constitutional and Legal Regulation and Norms)* (Moscow: Ekzamen, 2006), 222 p.

<sup>7</sup> Malashenko, "Uzbekistan: No Transition yet Visible," pp. 5-7.

First, there is Karimov's most trusted aide, the head of the National Security Service, Rustam Inoyatov. There are doubts as to whether he really needs to be president – it may be that he is perfectly happy to remain the country's "grey cardinal," the all-powerful head of state security. If this is so, then Inoyatov may support the deputy PM and Finance Minister, Rustam Azimov, who is in favor of pro-Western foreign policy, and draws support from the moderately influential "Tashkent Clan."

Azimov may face competition in the person of Shavkat Mirziyayev, the country's PM, who enjoys the trust of the president (they both belong to the Samarkand-Bukhara Clan), but in foreign policy, the prime minister looks towards Moscow (if his bond with distant relative A. Usmanov, the Russian billionaire, is any guide).<sup>8</sup>

If a new president were to come to power with questionable legitimacy, the competition within the elite may be dissatisfied. It cannot be excluded that resistance could take the form of Islamist protests. The dangers would be relatively small, as Karimov has almost completely suppressed the Islamist movement in the country with the most vicious repressions; it is currently extremely weak, driven deep underground. Local Islamists are highly unlikely to be able to take advantage of the point of transition. However, if the next president is not as tough as Karimov, then they could "raise their head" and, in time, the ideas of "Islamic justice" could gain popularity. Today, Uzbek Islamists from the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Akromiya and Islamiya movements are unable to change the political situation in the country single-handed – they need an external detonator.<sup>9</sup>

This external detonator is well known: it is called the Islamic Movement for Uzbekistan, or IMU, and it has existed for a long time, since the end of the 1990's. This is when IMU attempted to penetrate Uzbekistan from Afghanistan through the territory of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. IMU subsequently lost its leaders, and split into a number of smaller groups, the most visible of which was the Islamic Jihad Union (SID) and the Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT). These groups are now ready to form a united front and once again march on Uzbekistan, to which end they are honing their military skills in Syria, fighting for the fundamentalist opposition.<sup>10</sup>

Successful breakthroughs by IMT and the local radical Islamist uprising are unlikely even in the mid-term, because what was barely possible in 1999 is already impossible today. Such events should draw a strident response from the SCO, which was created specifically to deflect threats of this nature. Moscow and Beijing, under the pretext of the need to fight Islamist fundamentalism (which they claimed was spreading in the form of a "Central Asian Spring," an "arc of instability," "manageable chaos," etc.) will soon be able to radically reinforce their positions in Central Asia, becoming guarantors of regional stability. Of course, Moscow and Beijing have no strong lobby

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<sup>8</sup> Dolgov, "Who Will Inherit Uzbekistan?"; Malashenko, "Uzbekistan: No Transition yet Visible," pp. 8–10.

<sup>9</sup> Malashenko, "Uzbekistan: No Transition yet Visible," 15.

<sup>10</sup> Dolgov, "Who Will Inherit Uzbekistan?"

in Tashkent, but they could manage without any lobbyists, if needed.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, geopolitical opponents of Russia and China are in no way ready to offer such a convenient pretext.

An Islamic uprising in Uzbekistan is therefore unlikely, as the USA and EU have a good understanding of the associated risks, particularly given lessons learned in Ukraine. For the USA, Tashkent is just a temporary partner to support the withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> Karimov, meanwhile, has always been able to find the right distance in relations with Washington: after the 9/11 attacks, he brilliantly played his cards, winning hundreds of millions of dollars in economic and military aid, and in 2005, after Andijan, he brazenly switched his attentions to Moscow.

As the US withdraws troops from Afghanistan, the opportunity to drive a wedge between Russia and China is too tempting for Washington. Forewarned of Karimov's penchant for treachery, America will try to push for deeper commitment to their policies, for example by handing Tashkent part of the American weapons used in Afghanistan. These bonds, together with external pressure through the Islamic movement, could have an effect in the mid-term (5–7 years), the most likely time for "operation successor."

On the other hand, the period of political transition in Uzbekistan, when it comes, is unlikely to exacerbate the situation along the Tajik axis. Troubled relations between Dushanbe and Tashkent are largely the result of personal antipathy on the part of Rahmon and Karimov: the latter, in helping the former to come to power, had hoped for complete understanding from his Tajik counterpart. Rahmon, however, managed to use the counterweights of Moscow and Washington to implement an independent regional policy. On the whole, the personal nature of the conflict and the possibility of mutual neutralization of exacerbating factors (e.g. Tashkent could deploy a railroad blockade in response to water and energy pressure from Dushanbe) suggest that Karimov's successor will not use this factor to further "consolidate the nation."<sup>13</sup>

On the whole, the risks of ending up in the ballpark of another "spring," "orange revolution," or an "Islamic revival," inevitably triggering suppression by SCO partners, threaten Uzbekistan with weakened independence and greater control either from the East, or the West. In Tashkent, however, all foreign policy vectors find some support, and in such a situation—at the time of transition—the local elite will most likely be forced to find a compromise figure capable of preserving the equilibrium between clans and the existing economic order (the "Turkmen option" of power inheritance). Otherwise (i.e. if a consensus is not found) internal contradictions will deepen, external forces will attempt to take advantage of them and, if an Islamist "fifth column" emerges in the country in addition to competing regional neighbors, Uzbekistan may well face "Ukrainization." It is highly unlikely that the existing elite will allow events to develop this way.

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Rumors About Uzbekistan Leader's Health Set Off Succession Debate," *The New York Times*, 7 April 2013, A14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Dolgov, "Who Will Inherit Uzbekistan?"

In Kazakhstan the situation around a possible period of political transition is noticeably different both in structure, and in terms of the potential consequences for regional stability. Kazakhstan has a colossal territory rich in natural resources (especially hydrocarbons). It is a member of the Eurasian Union, and depends heavily on Moscow, despite the counterweight of massive Chinese economic investment, as well as the presence of Western corporations.

A large part of the population—17 million—is made up of ethnic Kazakhs, while Russian-speakers are rapidly becoming fewer (dropping from 40% in 1991 to 20% in 2014). The secular nature of government is unchallenged, and the opposition is as tame as a puppet. There are Islamists (again, Hizb-ut-Tahrir), but they enjoy no support amongst the population, nor have any chance of becoming a genuine political force (unless there is an unexpected social cataclysm). Massive income from the sale of oil and gas persuade the insanely rich elite that they can hope for a “trickle-down effect” to stabilize the social situation.

The problem of a power transition in Kazakhstan is becoming more topical each year, as the president of Kazakhstan (since 1990), “Leader of the Nation” Sultan Nazarbayev, is already 74 and the media often carry rumors of his poor health. Unlike Islam Karimov, the Kazakhstan president has no qualms about publically discussing the challenge of transition. On 4 July 2013, he made a particularly revolutionary televised appearance, in which he stated that a solid political foundation had to be built for a new leader to take over.<sup>14</sup> Apparently, he places no faith in the existing system.

In truth, Kazakhstan lacks legal institutions or mechanisms for the transfer of power and, therefore, maintaining the country’s political course. The constitution describes a general legal mechanism for substituting the head of state in emergencies. For example, a line of succession is described in case the president’s authorities are terminated prematurely (premature release, suspension due to illness, high treason or death): the first in line is the Senate Chair, followed by the Majilis Chair and, finally, the Prime Minister is third in line. The successor has to remain in that post for the rest of the presidential term.<sup>15</sup> Naturally, elections for a new president inevitably become a formality in the absence of multi-party political competition, merely approving and confirming the candidate put forward by the current president. No-one in the country believes elections are honest.

This means that Nazarbayev is trying his best to create a system of succession, which would not negatively impact the interests of the family, the clan, the elite or national stability. However, with the option of using elections to crown any person president, the incumbent faces the problem of choosing a candidate who is both a good compromise, and as legitimate as possible.

The need for a future president with maximum legitimacy in the eyes of the majority prompted Nazarbayev to think carefully about the issue of balancing modern and archaic traditions in Kazakhstan society. The highest priority was to factor in Kazakh

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<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group, *Kazakhstan: Waiting for Change*, Asia Report No.250, 30 September 2013, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Nazarov, “Rules for Power Transfers in Central Asia.”



self-identification, based on tribal and group (Zhuz) membership, and particularly the hereditary line of “Chingizides,” the highest and most legitimate rulers of the state and the entire Great Steppe.

Not being a Chingizide (although he is a representative of the Higher Zhuz) Nursultan Nazarbayev, according to some researchers, placed his bets on his eldest daughter, Dariga, and her husband, Rahat Aliev, supposedly a Chingizide. The sons of their marriage could achieve the ideal form of legitimization in the eyes of the Kazakh population. One particularly favorable option was the eldest grandson of Nazarbayev, Nurali, who could occupy the presidency by 2020, aged 35, thus resolving the difficult task of balancing the modern demands of democracy with traditional ideas about the principles of succession. However, Rahat Aliev let the cat out of the bag, prematurely announcing his participation in elections, after which he was forced to flee the country in May 2007.<sup>16</sup>

With this scheme foiled, Nazarbayev sought a new plan. Legitimization had to be achieved by the appearance of direct heirs – the sons of his third, secret wife, Asel Isabaeva. Yet the eldest son, Tauman, is now only 9 years of age, and Nazarbayev will clearly be unable to stay at the country’s helm until the child reaches the age of 35. If a reliable successor can be found to play the role of temporary president, able to govern as regent, then Tauman could make it to the throne of this modern Khanate in 2040 (or even earlier, given the known flexibility of the constitution).

The situation in Kazakhstan is similar to that in Uzbekistan: anyone who shows initiative and independently makes moves towards the presidency is immediately disqualified from the race; Rahat Aliev and Danial Ahmetov illustrated this eloquently.<sup>17</sup> So, Nazarbayev only sees as candidates those among his circle of committed associates who silently demonstrate unlimited loyalty, such as Prime Minister Karim Masimov, Astana’s *akim* [mayor] Imangali Tasmagambetov, and the National Security Committee deputy, Samat Abish.

Karim Masimov may be Nazarbayev’s closest and most trusted friend, but many emphasize that he is an Uighur by ethnicity, and as such would not be trusted by the public, if president. Tasmagambetov has a different drawback – he represents a Zhuz that is not friendly with Nazarbayev. Meanwhile, in the opinion of most observers, Samat Abish could become the “backbone” of a new Nazarbayev Khan dynasty.

Kazakhstan traditions include a custom, when after the death of a chieftain such as Nazarbayev, his young widow, Asel, becomes the wife of one of his immediate relatives, in this case his nephew, the current deputy chairman of the National Security Committee, Samat Abish. The sons of the chieftain would thus retain the chance of becoming president, as they remain in the presidential family, via their father’s blood-

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<sup>16</sup> Oleg Yu. Maslov and Alexandr V. Prudnik, “Kazakhstan before and after 2020,” *Nezavisimoe analiticheskoe obozrenie*, 9 July 2007, available at <http://www.polit.nnov.ru/2007/07/09/chingizid> (in Russian).

<sup>17</sup> Leyla Khrapunova, “Nazarbayev’s main scenario is to pass power to his son,” *Ablyazov.org*, available at <http://ablyazov.org/glavnij-scenarij-nazarbaeva-peredacha-vlasti-sinu.htm> (in Russian).

line.<sup>18</sup> It would be easy to bring Abish to power, promoting him as a presidential candidate via the mechanism of Nur Otan, the ruling party. Many experts in Kazakhstan suggest that this candidate already got the green light from Moscow.

Nazarbayev is therefore offering the current succession system, in case of force-majeure events: first, a temporary president (the Senate Chair), and then an officially-selected president-regent (Abish) who would “keep the throne warm.” Only after this, perhaps by 2040, the prince and heir apparent, Nazarbayev’s eldest son (Tauman Nursultanuly) would ascend to the throne. If this chain is deployed the inflexibility of the scheme, the lack of any margin of adaptability, could be a destabilizing factor that detonates certain underground processes that, in the current dormant state, are merely gently rocking the foundations of Kazakhstan society.

Important external factors include relations with the powerful states next door, and farther afield. In Moscow, Nazarbayev is viewed as a close ally, a key element in implementing the Kremlin’s Eurasian plans, and thus the scheme supporting Samat Abish has broadly been accepted, as he himself has given guarantees of his commitment to further integration. It is thought that the problem of succession in Astana is of no great concern to Beijing, as they are confident that China’s Western neighbor has literally nowhere to go: the economic integration of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and Kazakhstan has reached a record high, and no-one in the Celestial Kingdom has the courage to challenge such processes.

Western investors, meanwhile, are very interested in the problem of political succession in Kazakhstan; they have just learned to adapt to the treacherous local conditions, infested with patronage and corruption. Naturally, they fear that if Nazarbayev is unable to fulfill his role of a “successful intermediary” then the rules of the game, which many investors have learned by heart, could change. For foreign investors, current political risks are multiplied by the lack of economic diversity, excessive bureaucracy, and an unpredictable tax regime. If the 73 year-old Nazarbayev vanishes from the political arena now, the *status quo* will inevitably collapse, leaving Western investors with no guarantees and no protection.

In the West, it is accepted that Nazarbayev is an excellent “supreme arbiter,” administering the privilege of access by the elite to capital and power. Competing groups look to him to resolve conflicts, so the internal balance of power is consistently maintained by the current president. Replacing this arbiter could provoke all-out war between internal groups, and so in the West many would prefer not accelerating or complicating the handover of power. At least, the ideal would be to maintain the current balance of power as much as possible, and the most appealing, and simple, option for Western investors is the transfer of power to Nazarbayev’s daughter, Dariga. According to unofficial public opinion polls she only takes seventh place in terms of elector

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<sup>18</sup> “Kazakhstan after ... Kazakhstan without Nazarbayev: the moment of truth,” *Central Asia Monitor*, 8 August 2014, available at <http://camonitor.com/12738-kazakhstan-posle-kazakhstan-bez-nazarbaeva-moment-istiny.html> (in Russian).

sympathies, but this is no great hindrance, given modern advances in election “know-how.”<sup>19</sup>

Within the highly unstable political environment, other destabilizing elements are already appearing. For example, labor conflicts in Western Kazakhstan, started by oil workers in Mangistau and in Zhanaozena. Oil and gas are the driving forces of the nation’s economy; yet, at the same time, the inability of the elite to share hydrocarbon income with the population is Astana’s main problem. If politically motivated, the poorest strata of the population could pose a serious threat to anyone inheriting Nazarbayev’s presidency.

More than this, the protests in Zhanaozena revealed a previously hidden, yet highly dangerous tribal division within the Kazakh people. As the Western Caspian has traditionally been under the control of the Adai, who are the core of the Bayoglu tribal union of the Kichi Yüz, they have always attempted to resist, by any means available, the theft of their natural resources by bureaucrats from the centralized authorities, who represent other tribal unions, primarily the Uluyüz. Ultimately the more belligerent Aldai managed to mobilize workers to join protests that provoked violent reprisals, but which nevertheless ratcheted up the tension between the Kichi Yüz and the Uluyüz, undermining any possible compromises on succession.<sup>20</sup>

Kazakhstan nationalism is potentially a very strong force, although the authorities have, as yet, avoided playing this card in the context of relations between the “titular nation” and ethnic minorities; there is a danger that Nazarbayev’s successor could do this in order to reinforce his position amongst ethnic Kazakhs. Some opposition groups are already trying to use this tool, incidentally accelerating the flight of the most qualified, Russian-speaking people from the country. This trend is fraught with danger, as it could contradict the choice of a future Kazakhstan: “Eurasian integration” within the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union.

These instability factors could turn out to be even more dangerous than they appear at first glance, if we take into account the fact that the situation could be heavily shaken by oligarchs in conflict with the regime, who are currently in exile, primarily Mukhtar Ablyazov and Rakhat Aliev. They possess huge financial resources, create and fund anti-government media, and distribute compromising information that they collected when still part of the Kazakhstan’s authorities.

It is important to remember here that a wave of violence swept through Kazakhstan in 2010-2012. Initially, it was thought that common criminals stood behind the events, but the authorities gradually came to admit that religious extremists had organized the violence in order to destabilize the country. Jund al-Halifa (The Soldiers of the Caliph-

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<sup>19</sup> Kramer, “Rumors About Uzbekistan Leader’s Health Set Off Succession Debate”; “Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: Intimations of mortality. Two of Central Asia’s strongmen and their daughters ponder succession,” *The Economist*, 6 April 2013, available at [www.economist.com/news/asia/21575826-two-central-asias-strongmen-and-their-daughters-ponder-succession-intimations-mortality](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21575826-two-central-asias-strongmen-and-their-daughters-ponder-succession-intimations-mortality) (in Russian).

<sup>20</sup> Fabrisi Vielmini, “It turns out that Kazakhstan is unstable,” *inoCMII.ru*, 23 January 2012, available at [http://inosmi.ru/middle\\_asia/20120123/183778418.html](http://inosmi.ru/middle_asia/20120123/183778418.html) (in Russian).

ate) was named most frequently, though we do not consider that this organization, or Hizb-ut-Tahrir, could be capable of galvanizing mass discontent and channeling such sentiment into mass protests. Kazakhstan could not be a foundation for a religious state. Isolated acts of religious opposition (including periodic terrorism) could be truly destabilizing only when the central authorities are weak due to a power transition, which has to be taken into consideration when planning any power handover.

Despite Kazakhstan's apparently comfortable position, the situation around a transfer of power, with a political transition and the impact on regional stability, is worse than in Uzbekistan, for example. The absence of clear paths of power transfer (however shady, compared to modern legislative standards) and, instead, persistent attempts to hold on to succession schemes and models that are clearly not viable in the long term, could trigger many of the destabilizing factors now evident in society.

Domestic and foreign religious fundamentalism (let alone terrorism and non-systemic risks) pose real but obscured threats, which will hold back efforts by Moscow and Beijing to pool their resources in the country in order to prevent risks associated with the transfer of power – especially considering that Russia and China have somewhat different goals and plans in Kazakhstan.

The West, especially America, have several reasons to refrain from interfering in the transfer of power and the complications it could generate. First, Kazakhstan has virtually no involvement in the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan; second, there is no reason to worry about the status of oil and gas corporations: whoever the president is, he is not going to “kill the chicken who lays golden eggs”; third, active interference could trigger a tough reaction from Moscow, Beijing, or both.

The factor of having a successor-regent makes a potential division in Kazakhstan society more likely along tribal or social lines, than along religious fault lines. The probability of consensus forming within the ruling elite with respect to the post-Nazarbayev power system is also waning. Despite approval for Vladimir Putin's scheme for handing over power, which is clearly capable of freezing, to some degree, the *status quo* for the mid-term, such an approach will not inspire the Kazakhs to unite, which is a precondition of critically-important reform. The risks associated with a power transition will deepen social instability in general, which cannot fail to also undermine stability across the region: relations with neighboring countries in Central Asia will deteriorate, and bonds with the great powers will become more of a challenge. Therefore, Astana will be unable to maintain Nazarbayev's successful multi-vector foreign policy for any significant length of time.

In conclusion, reforms will be out of the question in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan during the transition, and the actions of transition figures will be focused on preserving or reproducing the existing pattern for redistributing power and wealth in their respective countries. Most likely, both countries will manage to avoid turbulence triggered from outside the country (given that there are external guarantors with vested interests – Russia and China), although social turmoil is possible in the mid-term (especially in Kazakhstan), and could negatively impact regional stability in the mid-term.

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