



A full-scale uprising has broken out in **Kazakhstan** in response to the rising cost of living and the violence of the authoritarian government. Demonstrators have **seized government buildings** in many parts of the country, especially in Almaty, the most populous city, where they temporarily occupied the airport and **set the capitol building on fire**. As we publish this, police have recaptured downtown Almaty, killing at least dozens of people in the process, while troops from Russia, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Belarus arrive to join them in suppressing the protests.

We owe it to the people on the receiving end of this repression to learn why they rose up. In the following report, we present an interview with a Kazakhstani expatriate who explores what drove people in Kazakhstan to revolt—and explore the implications of this uprising for the region as a whole.

the
**UPRISING IN
KAZAKHSTAN**

INTERVIEWS w/ KAZAKHSTANI
& RUSSIAN ANARCHISTS





*Dedicated to our anti-authoritarian
comrades worldwide. Those fallen,
those still fighting, and those yet to
be born into the struggle.*

THE UPRISING IN KAZAKHSTAN
INTERVIEWS WITH KAZAKHSTANI
AND RUSSIAN ANARCHISTS

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We in the ex-Soviet republics have an impressive heritage of resistance and uprisings to draw upon. We need to connect to each other so we can access this heritage.

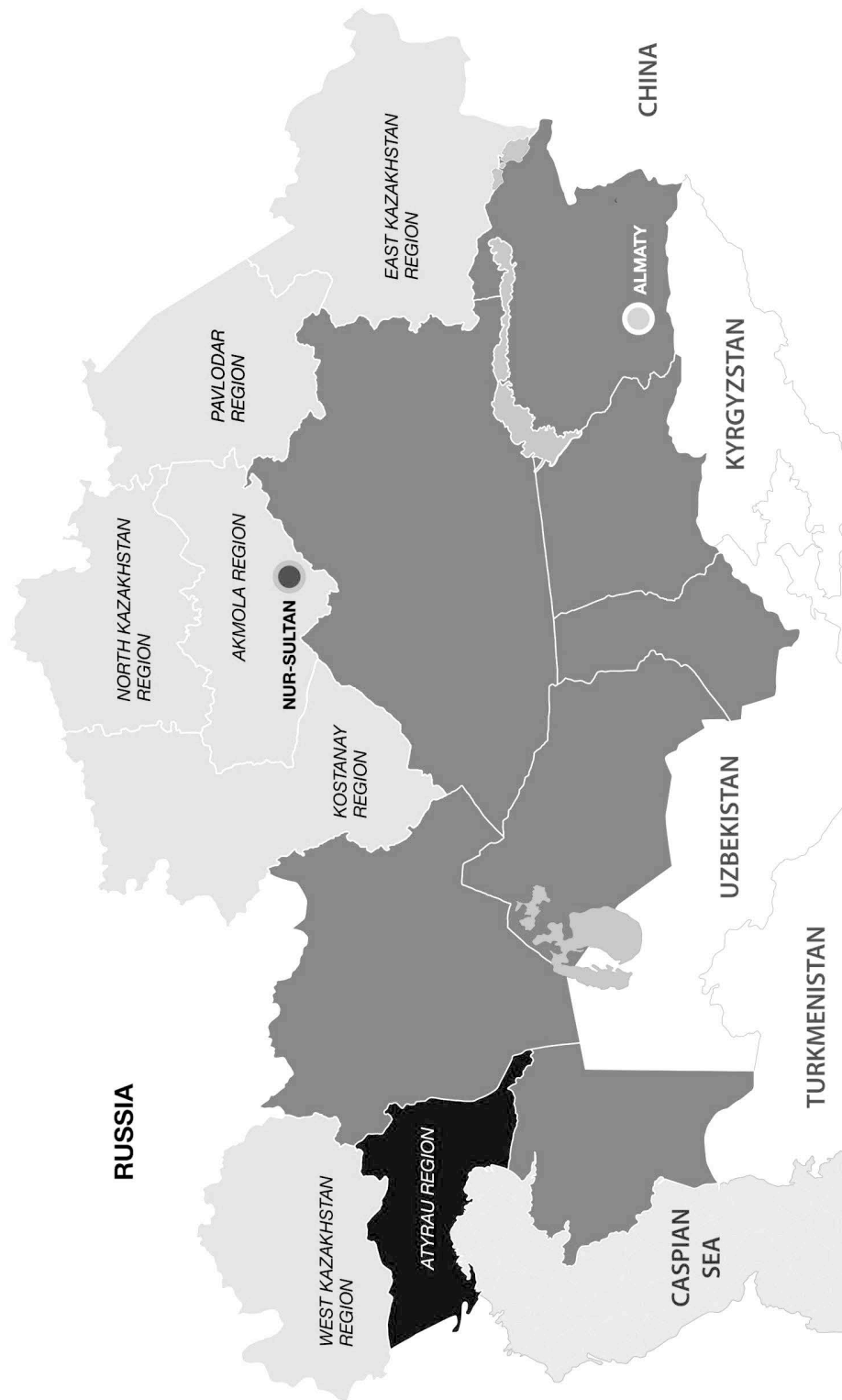
Solidarity and strength to everyone fighting in Kazakhstan and across all the post-Soviet countries. As people say, the dogs may bark but the caravan shall go on.

“Today, they may stomp on our necks, but the struggle won’t cease, and those who fell in the streets of Almaty won’t be forgotten.”

“What is now happening in Kazakhstan has never happened here before.”

“All night there were explosions, police violence against people, and some people burned police cars, including some random cars. Now people are marching around the main streets and something is happening near Akimat (the parliament building).”

- The last message we received from our comrade in Kazakhstan, an anarcho-feminist in Almaty, shortly before 4 pm (East Kazakhstan time) on January 5, before we lost contact.



support the uprising. To be ready and connected, we need to be able to face the contradictions within our communities and within our society as a whole. We need to be able to communicate our ideas and bring proposals to people around us in situations like these. Conflicts, disagreements, and isolation are smothering comrades who could otherwise dedicate their lives to the struggle. When I ask myself what is needed for us to see each other in the streets and in people's homes, walking together, caring for each other and fighting together, I imagine us approaching each other in different way—making it possible for each other to struggle, to develop, to survive.

We can ask ourselves: what do we need to change in how we approach each other and other people, how do we approach the struggle and our movements, in order to make them a source of life and inspiration that can offer people ways to think, fight, and live?

For example, we remember the feminist movement in Kazakhstan, which was the center of the public attention and discourse for some years in the 2010s, which published a feminist magazine and brought up that topic in Kazakhstan in ways that no one had before, connecting a lot of groups and communities along the fault line of domestic violence and patriarchy. This is an example of how we can position ourselves to address issues that will connect us to a wide range of other people in our society.

When we look at the events of the past decades in Kazakhstan, Belarus, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan, we need to ask what cooperation between initiatives and movements struggling towards liberation could accomplish on an international level. Such connections could enable us to exchange political and cultural experiences, to strengthen the common cause which the people of these countries should share. Yet in contrast to how much the economies and political realities of these countries are interconnected and interdependent, the anarchist movements are disconnected.

Kazakhstan can be an example for what can happen tomorrow in Russia, Belarus, and other countries in this part of the world. Today, people in Russia fear for their lives when they think about expressing any form of dissent. But tomorrow, we can see Zhanaozen and Almaty in the cities of Russia, Belarus (again!), and other countries. We can forget about the assurances that “It can’t happen here”—what can and cannot happen depends first and foremost on what we can imagine and desire.

When situations unfold like what we see today in Kazakhstan, we can see how important it is to be connected with others in our society. Today, we are surprised—we often might not even be among the people in the streets, fighting and defending each other shoulder to shoulder, or doing other important work to

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FOREWORD

In the wake of mass uprisings, there's always a fight to control the narrative. During the George Floyd rebellions, the abolitionist movement was quickly co-opted by liberals chanting "defund the police" while mutual aid was defanged and became synonymous with charity. At the same time, there were mainstream media accusations of "outside agitators" pulling the strings - spreading the conspiracy that black youth were incapable of organizing themselves unless provoked by evil communists from out of town.

The uprisings in Kazakhstan today are equally in the crosshairs of conspiracy. Some call the uprising a "Color Revolution" - a cheap term denouncing popular revolts that overthrow authoritarian governments by implying they're Western imperialist plots. This trope insinuates that gullible masses are simply tricked by outside agitators into doing the dirty work of regime change on behalf of Western interests. This narrative refuses to acknowledge long-form cultures of resistance and completely dismisses the autonomy, ideologies, complexities, and motivations of real, working class people.

I choose instead to apply nuance and seek out the voices of anti-authoritarians on the ground.

CONCLUSION: A VIEW FROM RUSSIA

In the following text, a Russian anarchist reflects on the implications of the uprising in Kazakhstan for the region.

After decades of repression, failures, and defeats, why is hope rising again and again, as we see in Belarus, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and now in Kazakhstan? Why, after our relatives, friends, and neighbors fall, shot dead by the police or the army, do people still struggle? How is it that we still get these chances to experience the wind of change and excitement, which gives us a taste of all that our lives could be?

We can feel some answers in the lines of Kazakh musician Ermen Anti from a band named Adaptation:

*"No matter how much they shoot,
the bullets won't be enough.*

*No matter how much they crush,
nevertheless the seedlings*

Of fair anger are sprouting up

*Prometheus children,
carrying fire to the people freezing cold."*

What can people outside Kazakhstan do to support the participants in the struggle?

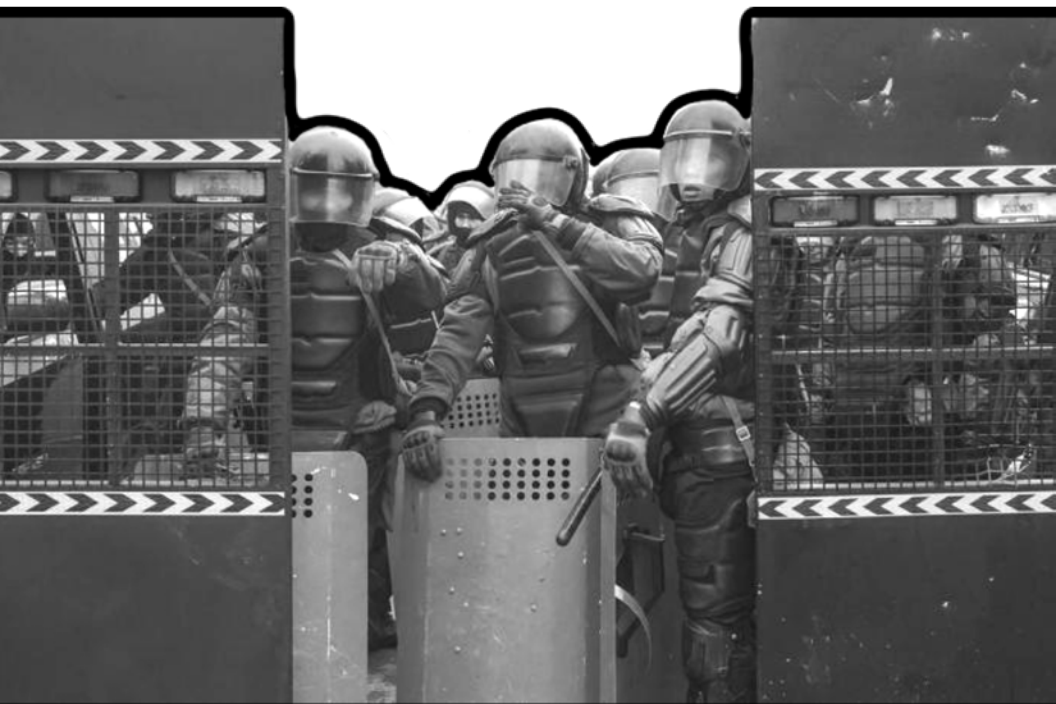
The only realistic way for people outside in Kazakhstan to support is by bringing more attention to the events and maybe organizing some sort of aid.

Western Imperialist powers led by the United States have without a doubt intervened in post-soviet states and other nations worldwide. Election fraud, military coups, propaganda campaigns, bribes, assassinations, occupations.. the list goes on. So, it isn't irrational to be skeptical of international movements for "democracy." Equally, Russia, China, Iran, and other alleged "anti-imperialist" nations intervene, deploy media strategies, sabotage, and invade to secure their own interests.

At the end of the day, workers across Kazakhstan are pressed geopolitically between a rock and a hard place. They're demanding the release of political prisoners, the abolition of price gauging, the resignation of their corrupt leadership - and they're willing to fight for it all. Assuming these people are merely being influenced to install a Western puppet leader is just as extreme as believing that Russian troops with shoot to kill orders are occupying Kazakhstan for any reason other than protecting the flow of capital.

From Palestine to Iran. From Sudan to Egypt. From Iraq, to Afghanistan, to Libya, to Yugoslavia, to Haiti, to Korea, to Guatemala, to Indonesia, to Chile, to Bolivia, and beyond. Interventions and nationalist campaigns for global hegemony are the enemy of the people.

We must build global solidarity against all modes of supremacy - especially the nation state. We must listen to our comrades on the ground and join the fight at home.



INTRODUCTION

We should understand the uprising in Kazakhstan in a global context. It is not simply a reaction to an authoritarian regime. Protesters in Kazakhstan are responding to the same rising cost of living that people have been protesting all around the world for years. Kazakhstan is not the first place where an increase in the cost of gas has triggered a wave of protests—exactly the same thing has happened in France, Ecuador, and elsewhere around the world, under a wide range of administrations and forms of government.

What is significant about this particular uprising, then, is not that it is unprecedented, but that it involves people confronting the same challenges we confront, too, wherever we live.

The urgency with which Russia is moving to help to suppress the uprising is also significant. The Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO], a military alliance comprised of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—with Russia calling the shots—has committed to sending forces to Kazakhstan. This is the first time that the CSTO has deployed troops to support a member nation; it refused to assist Armenia in 2021, during its conflict with Azerbaijan.

considering its close proximity and cultural ties to Kazakhstan, since both countries speak Turkic languages, I think its example has played a significant role in Kazakhstan.

What are the possibilities for what will happen next?

From my point of view, I can imagine a couple scenarios. Either the government resigns—or is overthrown—and Kazakhstan starts down the path to democratization, or the government suppresses the uprising with a tremendous use of force, including involving other countries. Or an even worse scenario—a prolonged and destructive civil war between the government and rebelling Kazakhs.

The president of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, is asking the CSTO [the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance comprised of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan] to send in “peacekeeping” soldiers. In short, the president is inviting foreign troops into Kazakhstan to try to suppress the protests. Either the armed protesters somehow repel these forces and the government falls, or the revolutionaries give up and are crushed.

Kazakhstan faces a dark future. It’s a war for liberty or defeat, and defeat would mean a potential loss of more liberties and possibly sovereignty.

In short, all Kazakhstan is now like *The Hunger Games*. If you have seen the *Hunger Games* trilogy or if you know a basic summary of the plot, you know what I'm talking about.

Again, incumbent President Tokayev doesn't want to hand over power. If that doesn't happen, I expect the chaos to continue until the government is overthrown or the uprising is brutally suppressed, or some even worse scenario.

Do you think the participants in these protests have any reference points for the protest movements that have broken out in France, Ecuador, and elsewhere around the world in response to increasing fuel prices? What is informing the tactics they are using?

I think a lot of them are influenced by the protests that have taken place in other post-Soviet countries like Belarus and Kyrgyzstan. It seems that in Almaty, the residents drew on the example of neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where people also stormed the government and burned down buildings—but compared to Kyrgyzstan, the government was overthrown more quickly. (In my view, this was partly due to it being a smaller country with just one major capital city.) Kyrgyzstan has experienced three revolutions so far;

“Protestors are attempting to take control of various cities one by one in an attempt to topple the government...”

It is instructive that the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan did not warrant CSTO intervention, but a powerful protest movement does. As in other imperial projects, the chief threat to the Russian sphere of influence (the “Rusosphere”) is not war, but revolution. Russia has profited considerably from the civil war in Syria and the Turkish invasion of Rojava, playing Syria and Turkey against each other to gain a foothold in the region. One of the ways that Vladimir Putin has held on to power in Russia has been by rallying Russian patriots to support him in wars in Chechnya and Ukraine. War—perpetual war—is part and parcel of the Russian imperial project, just as war has served the American imperial project in Iraq and Afghanistan. War is the health of the state, as Randolph Bourne put it.

Uprisings, on the other hand, must be suppressed by any means necessary. If the millions of people in the Rusosphere who languish under a combination of kleptocracy and neoliberalism saw an uprising succeed in any of those countries, they would hurry to follow suit. Looking at the waves of protest in Belarus in 2020 and in Russia a year ago, we can see that many people are inclined to do so even without hope of success.

In capitalist “democracies” like the United States, where elections can swap out one gang of self-seeking politicians for another, the illusion of choice itself serves to distract people from taking action to bring about real

change. In authoritarian regimes like Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, there is no such illusion; the reigning order is imposed by despair and brute force alone. In these conditions, anyone can see that revolution offers the only way forward. Indeed, the rulers of all three of those countries owe their power to the wave of revolutions that took place starting in 1989, bringing about the fall of the Eastern Bloc. We can hardly blame their subjects for suspecting that only a revolution could bring about a change in their circumstances.

Revolution—but for what purpose? We cannot share the optimism of liberals who imagine that social change in Kazakhstan will be as simple as chasing out the autocrats and holding elections.

Without thoroughgoing economic and social changes, any merely *political* change would leave most people at the mercy of the same neoliberal capitalism that is oppressing them today.

And in any case, Putin will not give up so easily. Real social change—in the Rusosphere as in the West—will require a protracted struggle. Overthrowing the government is *necessary, but not sufficient*: in order to defend themselves against future political and economic impositions, ordinary people will have to develop collective power on a horizontal, decentralized basis. This is not the work of a day or a year, but of a generation.

They were dispersed early in the morning of January 5, but they regrouped again by around 9 am in the foggy morning. Some law enforcement officers even switched sides and joined the protest as videos from social media show. Eventually, the protesters marched to the square again around 10 am and managed to storm the city hall, setting the building on fire. Government security officers fled Almaty, leaving the city under the control of the protesters.

Since then, President Tokayev sent some troops there again in an attempt to take control via a “terrorist cleaning” operation. I don’t know how it’s playing out at every minute, but I’ve seen on social media that during the night of January 5 or early in the morning of January 6, things in Almaty became chaotic as people started looting and breaking into weapons’ deposits in order to obtain them and gunshots were reported.

In other cities, it’s more peaceful, with massive protests in the central squares. I heard unverified information that some protesters have taken over the local government buildings in a few other cities, but as far as I know, those are less chaotic compared to Almaty.

In the capital, Nur-Sultan, it is quiet, but people have witnessed huge numbers of riot police surrounding the Aqorda presidential palace. Basically, the entire place is now a fortress.

there now, since the mayor's office was burned down and he disappeared from public view. The entire city is barricaded with armed protesters walking around.

The city is under a curfew, in theory, but in practice, law enforcement is absent or has joined the protests—so the city is like a commune [i.e., as in the Paris Commune] from what I hear. At this point, considering how the events are unfolding, I wouldn't call the people there protesters, but revolutionaries—especially seeing armed civilians there.

In response, the government which presides at the country's capital of Nur-Sultan (or Astana) has send various security "anti-terror" forces to take control of the city, turning the usually peaceful town into a nightmare war zone.

Present a chronology of the events of the past week.

The protest started in the oil-producing town of Janaozen on January 2. By the next morning, other cities and villages in western Kazakhstan had begun protesting in solidarity.

The most massive protests took place at night as the unrest spread to other cities, including Almaty. Late at night on January 4, people in Almaty marched to the main square in front of city hall. Huge troops of police were positioned there. Clashes broke out, but the protesters got the upper hand.

What anarchists have to contribute to this process is the proposal that the same structures and practices that we develop in the course of the struggle against our oppressors should also serve to help us create a better world. Anarchists have already played an important role in the uprising in Belarus, showing the value of horizontal networks and direct action. The dream of liberalism, to remake the entire world in the image of the United States and Western Europe, has already proved hollow—the United States and Western Europe are implicated in many of the reasons why efforts to realize this dream have failed, in Egypt and Sudan and elsewhere. The dream of anarchism remains to be tried.

In response to the events in Kazakhstan, some supposed "anti-imperialists" are once again parroting the timeless talking point of Russian state media that all opposition to any regime that is allied with Putin's Russia can only be the result of Western intervention. This is particularly egregious when the nations in Russia's sphere of influence have largely abandoned any pretense of socialism, giving themselves over to the sort of neoliberal policies that sparked the revolt in Kazakhstan.

In a globalized capitalist economy, in which we are all subjected to the same profiteering and precarity, we should not let rival world powers play us off against each other. We should see through the whole charade. Let's make common cause across continents,

exchanging tactics, inspiration, and solidarity in order to reinvent our lives.

The ordinary people in Kazakhstan who rose up this week showed how far we can go—and how much further we have to go together.



in developed European countries. Of course, there are different demands from different people—some seek the resignation of the entire government, while others want a new form of democratic government, specifically a parliamentary form without an executive president, and still others want more jobs and industry and better social conditions.

Some of the fiercest rioting and looting is taking place in the old Soviet capitol of Almaty, which is the financial metropolis and the largest city in Kazakhstan now. People are looting stores and setting things on fire. They have burned down the Almaty administrative building (or *akimats*, as they are referred in Kazakhstan) in front of the central square, as well as the law enforcement headquarters.

In my view, the government has contributed to this situation, because they haven't fulfilled the demand to resign peacefully and let an opposition-run interim government form a new democratic political system. The current president of Kazakhstan, who is a close ally of the former and first president, Nazarbayev, is adding fuel to the fire by refusing to transfer his power. The longer he holds on to his position, the more violence will occur, since neither the government nor the protesters can compromise. As long as this goes on, the people who are doing violent acts will be able to continue to get away with it. There's lawlessness in Almaty; it seems that nobody is sure who's in charge

unexpectedly doubled. This enraged people. They protested in the square in massive numbers. Law enforcement seemed hesitant to disperse the protest. Other villages in the province rose up and started blockading roads in protest. Then, in a few days, the protests spread nationwide.

What started with a protest over the hike in gas prices grew largely because of the other problems I mentioned previously. These motivated people to go out on strike and into the streets more.

Describe the different agendas of the different groups on both sides of this struggle. Are there identifiable factions or currents within the demonstrations?

At first, the government ignored the gas price problems by trying to get people used to it, even blaming consumers for the high demand. Eventually, they lowered the price, but this didn't stop the protests. Then the state essentially denied their involvement in letting the gas prices inflate—but as the protests intensified, the government began to concede more to try to calm people down. For example, they pledged to introduce some policies to offer people economic assistance, after ignoring them for years. But the protests still haven't stopped. Few people trust or support the government. The people demonstrating simply want a better life, like they imagine people have

The BACKGROUND to the UPRISING

Early on January 6 (East Kazakhstan Time), after internet blackouts made it impossible to complete an interview with participants in the movement in Almaty, we conducted the following interview with a Kazakhstani anarchist advocate living abroad.

For context, what anarchist, feminist, and ecological projects or movements have existed in Kazakhstan in the 21st century?

Early on, there was opposition to the first ex-communist president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ended up leading Kazakhstan in the post-soviet era. From the mid-1990s, he started becoming more authoritarian, changing the structures of governance to acquire stronger presidential powers. This earned Nazarbayev opponents within the political elite across the political spectrum. Surprisingly, communists, social democrats, centrists, and pro-business people collaborated to call for a more democratic constitution with limited presidential authority.

As for movements from below, there were anarchists, who were more of an underground movement, and

there was a unusually loud socialist movement group, whose leader Ainur Kurmanov ended up fleeing Kazakhstan in the end. There were nationalists and radical Islamists as well, but again, they weren't really that prominent and they too were sort of underground.

As for environmentalists, if they did have some public attention through media or promotion, it was mostly from advocacy groups or, as they're called "public associations" there. In Kazakhstan, only six political parties are registered by the government right now, and they are the only ones legally permitted to participate in general elections; the others that have tried to form political parties end up seeing their required registration processes systematically rejected by the ministry. However, whenever the Kazakh authorities do in some circumstances proclaim their political pluralism to the public, they make a show of this using loyal public associations, especially during presidential elections.

Are there any opposition parties in Kazakhstan?

Regarding opposition parties, there are basically none in Kazakhstan that are deemed legal. There used to be such independent functioning political parties back in the 1990s and early 2000s, but they were all shut down or banned by the government, along with independent press and media. Today, there are people who claim to represent the opposition, but they live abroad in

despite documented cases of electoral fraud. This is similar to the situation in Russia, Belarus, and other dictatorial post-Soviet countries. As time passed, things really got dire as a cult of personality was created around Nazarbayev. The government spent millions in state budget naming and erecting streets, parks, squares, airports, universities, statues, and the capital city of Astana after him. All this accomplished was to irritate the public more, making Nazarbayev look like a narcissist.

The situation in Kazakhstan became worse after 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. People lost their jobs; some were left without any way to pay for goods, receiving very little support whatsoever from the government, while health restrictions made people more frustrated and distrustful of the government. And then the price of goods rose for food specifically—this has taken place worldwide, but for Kazakhstan, it had a considerable impact.

To return to the town of Janaozen, which has a history of bloodshed, the price for liquefied gas skyrocketed—in the very place where the fuel is actually produced. That cost has grown steadily for the past ten years, but it finally increased even more when the government stopped subsidizing it, instead letting the market decide. There had already been small protests about this issue in that city—but on January 1, 2022, the price for the liquefied gas that is used to power vehicles

social media to gain traction. Political protests and activism were organized under the banner of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party. This did lead to longtime President Nazarbayev resigning after ruling for almost three decades, but he had his position taken over by his long trusted ally, the current President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Tokayev barely received any trust from Kazakh citizens; he was viewed as Nazarbayev's political puppet, as he barely took any steps towards widely demanded reforms and took no executive action against government officials that the public despises.

Kazakhstan's political system and President Nazarbayev's leadership have defined Kazakhstani society for the entire history of its independence. I mentioned before how Nazarbayev basically became an authoritarian ruler via various means that catalyzed the opposition against him. Under Nazarbayev, the Kazakh government had never allowed any actual opposition statesmen to challenge him through the country's presidential or parliamentary elections. The rest of the politicians and legal parties that were contestants in the elections were simply different people with different faces but the same pro-government stances, all as a poorly implemented illusion to make Kazakhstan look like a "democratic" country in which one strongman and his ruling party happen to win every election with an unconvincing, even surrealistic majority of votes—

countries such as Ukraine. They have no real connection to the street.

There is also some sort rivalry within them: I've heard all of them accusing each other of collaborating with the government or intelligence agency. A typical characteristic of the controlled opposition in Kazakhstan is that the so-called declared oppositions try to lure dissatisfied citizens into doing things that don't actually pose any threat to the government, things that give the illusion of making change, like telling people to engage in peaceful dialogue with local officials or to participate in the election by purposefully ruining the ballot as a way to "protest"—any tactic that gives the illusion of fighting the government, when in reality it is just a waste of time.

In recent years, this sort of opposition actually started to appear inside country, as well; out of nowhere, there were random activists forming political movements and holding pickets without experiencing any form of persecution, whereas ordinary people who have no connections are always detained by police immediately whenever they tried to protest.

One unusual opposition group—I can't tell whether it is controlled opposition—is called Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. It is led by a former businessman and politician living in France named Mukhtar Ablyazov. If you search his name, you'll see articles about supposed

money laundering cases and lawsuits. He was a cabinet minister in the 1990s, until he broke ranks with the government that was predominately loyal to President Nazarbayev. He was jailed by the Kazakh government, but eventually released; he ended up fleeing from Kazakhstan and living in exile like other disloyal officials of Nazarbayev's. Since then, he has led the political opposition with the most support on social media. Most anyone associated with his movement has been persecuted and arrested; this has been happening ever since he re-established the movement again in 2017 on various social media platforms. Every protest he has organized from abroad has been repressed, with a massive police presence in public areas. There have been cases in which the internet was partially restricted nationwide.

In any case, what is happening in Kazakhstan now is completely unexpected.

What tensions within Kazakhstan preceded these events? What are the fault lines in Kazakh society?

What really sparked the mass unrest took place in the town of Janaozen. This town produces oil profits, yet the people there are among the poorest in the country. The town is known for the bloody events of December 2011, when there was a labor strike and the authorities ordered the police to shoot demonstrators. Although the tragedy ended quietly, it still remained in many

Kazakhs' minds, especially among the town's residents. Since then, more small strikes have taken place there in the oil industries—though those were peaceful and didn't lead to bloodshed. Since 2019, strikes and protests have become more common there. At the same time, due to economic factors, people have become more active in politics across country as oil prices plunged worldwide, impacting Kazakhstan economically. As the Kazakhstani currency—the *tenge*—became weaker, people could afford less and less.

There are also serious problems in Kazakhstan: lack of clean water in villages, environmental issues, people living in debt, public mistrust, corruption and nepotism in a system in which any objection can easily be shut down. Most people have gotten used to living in these conditions while the economy has served billionaire oligarchs who have ties with government officials and other prominent people. In the early 2000s, people in Kazakhstan had a glimpse of hope as the economy grew thanks to natural gas reserves; as a consequence, many people's standard of living rose. But it all changed in 2014, when oil prices dropped worldwide and the war in Ukraine led to sanctions against Russia—which impacted Kazakhstan, since it is dependent on Russia.

There were some small protests from 2014 to 2016, but they were easily suppressed. From 2018 to 2019 they grew more, thanks in part to the aforementioned opposition businessman, Mukhtar Ablyazov, who used