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Kazakhstan

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<https://crimethinc.com/2022/01/12/kazakhstan-after-the-upris>

I. The Uprising in Kazakhstan

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 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.

“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 anarcha-feminist in Almaty, shortly before 4 pm (East Kazakhstan time) on January 5, before we lost contact.

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.

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.

politically, and Kazakhstan will become like the Russia that we know now, with tortured activists and trumped up cases. Our political opposition is already completely silenced, and the population of the country completely intimidated. Considering that this is the second shooting during protests (2011 and 2022), and in the history of Kazakhstan there was also a brutal suppression of an uprising under the USSR in 1986, and the information on the number of people killed back then is still classified... then there is no hope that in the near future we will know what really happened and how many people were killed and wounded. The count most likely goes to thousands of people.

What do you think will happen next?

Now it’s very early to imagine the outcome, in a situation of information wars, propaganda, and isolation. I’m not a political expert.

For sure, repression will intensify now. The internet and all media will be censored. Now the government tries to put on a “good face,” like they are the saviors who saved us from terrorists. I am not sure this will work. But for the time being, I think it will be quiet. People are too scared and shocked.

Is there anything that people outside Kazakhstan can do to support you or others there?

To spread information, of course. Maybe soon, there will be more repression, and some activists will require help to leave country.

The most important support is informational. In 2019, after the presidential election, we were all arrested at the rallies and the only ones that wrote about it were foreign media and independent Kazakhstani media (which are very few and the sites are often blocked). Now it is very important that the bloody January in Kazakhstan was not just a beautiful revolutionary picture as many left-wing publications write, but also that it is not remembered as a terrorist act from outside, as all the official sources from different countries say.

human rights defenders, and independent media in his words became a threat to stability. State discourse is constantly changing in the process of this search for an enemy: yesterday that enemy was supposedly bribed unemployed people from Kyrgyzstan, today it's already radicals from Afghanistan. We all hope that tomorrow it won't be the activists who have advocated for political reforms in Kazakhstan for the last three years and came out to rallies.

What can you tell us about the repression?

Kyrgyz musician Vicram Ruzakhunov was arrested and tortured by Kazakh authorities as a “terrorist” and was made to record a video and “confess.” Now he is free.

Local independent journalist Lukpan Akhmediyarov has been arrested. Another independent journalist, Makhambet Abjan, messaged that on January 5, police came to his apartment; now he is missing. My friends and many other people on social media report that their relatives and friends are missing too.

Officials have already confirmed the deaths of hundreds of victims, including two children. Activists from labor unions are missing—including Kuspan Kosshigulov, Takhir Erdanov, and Amin Eleusinov and his relatives.

In Almaty, journalists from Channel Dozhd' (Телеканал Дождь), who tried to take footage in the municipal morgue, were shot at (they were not harmed).

On January 6, volunteers came to the square. Some activists displayed a banner reading “We are not terrorists.” Police shot at them, killing at least one.

How do you think that Russian troops entering Kazakhstan will change the situation, in the long term?

The entry of Russian troops is very worrying. In the situation of a war with Ukraine, we could imagine all the worst scenarios. Everyone I know agrees that this is inappropriate, and that we can call it an occupation.

Personally, I'm afraid that Russian troops entering this country will cement the already strong influence of Russia on Kazakhstan

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 immiserating 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.

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.

The Background of 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.

and others seeking power—for example, there is one theory that Tokayev, with the assistance of the Russian military, is securing his position in power.

The scary thing about all this is that tens of thousands of people were involved in the game and their well-intentioned attempts to change the social and political conditions in this country for the better, for everyone’s sake, are now being used by a few people to divide the resources of this country among themselves in a new way. Yes, it all started with the economic demands of workers in western Kazakhstan, who were protesting the sharp hike in gas prices. Then the demands became political: the resignation of the government and president, the election of *akims* (mayors), and a parliamentary republic. Some of the demands were met, but not at once, and when they were ignored, a wave of protest and solidarity spread to all the cities of Kazakhstan, so that from outside it looked like a big revolutionary outburst, which in our country has not occurred throughout thirty years of authoritarian regime.

We can’t say anything for sure now, except one thing—this protest had no public leader, and the street riots and occupations of administrative buildings had no voiced demands. But there were murders and a huge number of victims among the population, who suffered first in battles with the police, then with each other in the streets, from which the police fled, and then the shooting of civilians in the streets by the armed forces of Kazakhstan and the CSTO (although we are promised that they only protect state facilities now).

The mass media that were permitted to continue functioning began to tell us about radicals and Islamists, using the image of the enemy from outside. Before that, during the first days of the protests, there was a discourse calling to “engage in a peaceful dialogue with the protesters”—and a day later there was already an order to shoot to kill (in President Tokayev’s speech). After the entry of CSTO troops and two days of constant shooting in the streets, Tokayev equated protesters with terrorists, as well as activists and

Everything started as a popular uprising. Yes, they burned *Akimat*, but no one led them. They just wanted the old regime gone. They were not “criminals” [sic].

After it started, some other forces showed up. We don’t know who they were. But it’s true that they were organized. But by whom? Now there are many rumors. Some official media says they are from [neighboring] Kyrgystan, where there have been several revolutions since independence [like Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan became independent when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991]. Those outlets are also spreading reports about the Taliban or jihadists. People I know personally said they saw people on the streets who “looked like them” [sic].

Here in Kazakhstan, I haven’t seen any talk about the CIA [the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States government]. I think that is Russian propaganda.

The former adviser of the president has been making claims about a conspiracy inside governmental structures, claiming that for several years there were “training camps” in mountains and the National Safety Committee was hiding this information. He claimed: “I have exclusive information that, for example, 40 minutes before the attack on the airport, an order was given to completely remove the cordon and guards.”

What can you say about the internal dynamics of the uprising?

Everyone outside of Kazakhstan is trying to analyze what’s going on and it’s very difficult to do that without context, and those inside the country can’t do it because of the lack of complete information. I think that even we—the residents of this country—won’t understand what happened for a long time yet. In addition to the fact that there is no stable internet connection now, and that before that, there was not even a cell phone connection, all the news channels are severely censored, and it is only going to get worse.

I will not describe the theories that are circulating now, but they all concern different power struggles between the Nazarbayev clan

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

Early on, there was an opposition to the first ex-communist president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ended up leading post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Beginning in the 1990s, he started becoming more authoritarian—for example, dismissing a more political plural parliament twice in 1993 in order to obtain loyal members of parliament, extending his first presidential term, and changing the structure of governance to acquire stronger executive powers through referendums that were deemed rigged in 1995. This earned Nazarbayev opponents within the political elite itself from across a wide political spectrum including Communists, Social Democrats, Centrists, Liberals, and Nationalists who collaborated to call for a more democratic constitution with limited presidential authority and a multi-party legislature.

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 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

looting, and civilian casualties. At midnight, between January 5 and 6, all internet connections were shut down. For four days, we were in isolation; we could only make and receive calls, and those didn't work well.

That night, the whole city was abandoned by all services, including the fire department and medical services. Fires were extinguished by volunteers. Also, some protesters and volunteers tried to stop "robbers."⁴

On January 7, some shops and ATMs far from the city center were still working. In that part of the city, mostly everything was clear, except the burned government buildings around the square. Some services were working there. The previous day, it had been possible to get inside the buildings; no one guarded them. This time, we took some photos and then there was a gunshot in the air nearby and we left this area.

On the evening of January 9, it became possible to get an internet connection with proxy services. A mobile connection was still unavailable. On the morning of January 10, the connection worked everywhere, but only until 1 pm and then from 5:30 to 7:30 pm.

There has been a lot of talk from outside Kazakhstan about who is "behind" the protests. Do these accusations have any credibility? We have also seen some news reports claiming that clashes between rival factions inside the power structure are also contributing to the situation. How much do you think that Islamic fundamentalism is involved in these events?

President Tokaev still rules, in spite of rumors about his retirement. Now government TV channels and media are spreading so much disinformation and propaganda. It's very early to draw conclusions, but some things are clear.

⁴ This news article explores this issue, albeit from a partisan position.

Then we saw the *Akimat* burning. We couldn't believe our eyes. People were tending bonfires. Everyone was calm. They smashed the doors to the building opposite the *Akimat*. There were TV channels and other government services. Men came up to us again: "Why did you come?" (They meant—why did you come, since you are ethnically Russian?).

"This is my city and country as well as yours," I answered. They greeted us cheerfully. We did not feel any aggression from them.

We offered the protesters hot tea. The man told us that he was at the protests from the very beginning—that it all began peacefully, until the authorities began to detonate flash-bang grenades and use violence.

"Now," he said, "They are shooting combatants." The guards remained only near the *Akimat* building itself.

He and other men there had seen people shot in the head. They called taxi services and put injured people in the cars to get them to the hospital. He told us that they planned to occupy the airport, so that the Russian military would not be able to land there.

Many of the bourgeois high-level government and business people had already left the country on private flights. There were rumors that N. Nazarbaev had left the country, too.

None of the people we saw on the square looked like "marauders" [sic].

They wanted the government to resign. They were not carrying out orders; no one was pulling their strings. This was a nationwide labor uprising. No one was scared to die, but we didn't see any anger. They showed us injuries from rubber bullets and warned us that soon there would be serious shooting, that it would be better for us to leave.

The sound of explosions and shooting became closer and more frequent. We left. One man gave us a lift in his car. All those days, people showed solidarity to each other.

My friends and I decided to stay together in my home. We all felt excited. This was before any news appeared about destruction,

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 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—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 mil-

stung, we felt sick, we coughed ceaselessly. It's a miracle I didn't pass out. They must have fired off more than a hundred stun grenades between 11 pm and 4 am, which was when my colleagues had to get me home. I could still hear the bangs from my apartment.

About an hour after the crowd reached Republic Square, they headed down to Abai Street. There they faced down an armored personnel carrier coming in their direction. A truck drove past carrying citizens waving Kazakh flags. Some of them were holding shields they appeared to have snatched off riot police.»

People heard explosions all night. I refused to believe it. In the morning, the news was reported by phone. I called everyone for half a day, heard about victims, the activists were released. It was only possible to get online at the house of some friends. The *Akimat* building (the town hall) was being occupied. Everyone was trying to persuade us to stay home. Speculating that the protests might have a nationalist character, some people started to be afraid (I am ethnically Russian in Kazakhstan).

There was no information available about who was in the square or in the city at that time. My friend and I decided to go to see for ourselves.

The city was half empty. Cars with Kazakhstani flags on them drove through the streets, shouting something joyful. Everything was closed. On the doors, there were signs reading "we are with the people." An atmosphere of excitement. As we got closer to the square, there were more groups of young men. I saw a police shoulder strap lying on the road. There were people with sticks meeting. It became a little scary, but no one was aggressive. At the monument to the events of 1986 (the uprising against the Soviet regime), we met protesters with police shields. There was not a single policeman or soldier to be seen.

Even at the time of the events in Zhanaozen in 2011, when the protesting workers were shot, there was very little support from Almaty. Many people thought that what happened there was right.

Before, if there was any protest, it was organized and supported by the older generation, by workers and people from the regions, the *auls* (villages), usually led by the shady opposite leader Mukhtar Oblyazov. But over the last three years, young people from the urban middle class have become political activists. It was mostly people from Almaty, but there was support in other cities too.

By the way, I think that the ecological problems in Almaty—where we experience extremely high levels of pollution and it becomes worse every year—are the big reason for youth protest here. Alongside the development of social media, of course.

Tell us what you experienced in Almaty last week.

Soon after the New Year, news began to arrive about a workers' uprising in Zhanaozen. The protest was peaceful, but the demands were quite radical—ranging from lower gas prices to the resignation of the government. Protests also began in other cities. It became known that there would be solidarity actions in Almaty on January 4, but I did not have precise information.

On the way home that day, I learned of protests in different parts of the city and the arrests of activists from [the aforementioned youth liberal movement] *Oyan Kazakhstan*. I live a little outside the city, in the mountains, and already at home it became clear that something serious was happening. In the evening, all internet connections went offline. I didn't know where to go and whether I could come back.

Regarding what happened in the city during that time, my comrade Daniyar Moldabekov, a political journalist, wrote:

When the demonstrators approached the square, police began throwing stun grenades and tear gas. Me and thousands of others choked, our eyes and faces

lions 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 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 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 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.

performances, published a feminist magazine named *Yudol'*, and organized demonstrations for March 8 [International Women's Day].

There is a youth liberal movement here called *Oyan Kazakhstan* ("Wake up, Kazakhstan") that is active now. They organize public meetings, performances, marches, and are often harassed by police. It started after the banner action that Beibarys Tolymbekov and Asya Tulesova carried out at the city marathon in 2019.³ They were jailed for 15 days and it started a big wave of attention, especially in social media, which hadn't happened before. There is a conspiracy theory that all these activists are pro-government, because nobody is in jail now, but I don't think it is true. I know many of them personally. They also support feminist and LGBTQ activities. On the opposing side—mostly haters on the internet and some government media outlets—people claim that all of this is the work of "the West" (Europe and the United States).

Kazakhstan is an authoritarian country. We had the same president [Nursultan Nazarbayev] for 28 years, and the new one [Kassym-Jomart Tokayev] is just a puppet. But when the first president quit, people started to think about change. The cult of personality around Nursultan Nazarbayev didn't disappear after he quit. The capital, Astana, was renamed "Nursultan," which caused many protests. Over the past few years, the economic situation has been worsening, especially after the pandemic, very high inflation, corruption, etc. Also, there has been a lot of selling and renting our lands to China and other countries.

The situation has always been like this—but ten years ago, or even five years ago, more people were loyal to the president and afraid of "destabilization." At that time, there was a hope that we [Kazakhstan] were "developing," that things would be better soon.

³ On April 21, Asya Tulesova and Beibarys Tolymbekov were jailed for 15 days, charged with violating Kazakhstan's law regarding public assembly after hanging a banner along the marathon route in Almaty, reading "You can't run from the truth"—a comment on the presidential elections.

Bondarenko and other heroes. They died to make us braver and stronger, and we are indebted to them. We must tell how they lived and what they gave their lives for. As events in Kazakhstan show, fallen martyrs are capable of raising people to revolt.”

Interview: Eyewitness Testimony from Anarchists in Almaty

To get more perspective on the events in Kazakhstan, we reached out to two anarcho-feminists who witnessed some of the scenes from the uprising firsthand. They were not at the front of the clashes, but they are known activists who have participated in feminist organizing in the city for years,² so they have the closest thing to a “neutral” standpoint on the events that we could find.

Introduce yourselves and the situation you are speaking from.

We are two anarchists from Kazakhstan, both she/her. We have participated in many left-anarcho-fem-eco, animal liberation, vegan activities in Almaty over the last eleven years, but we are not so active at the moment.

I can’t name any anarchist movements in Kazakhstan in the 21st century. There were some underground activities in the 1990s, but for the present, nothing like that exists. I used to take part in a left-Marxist group: meetings, a reading group, some public lectures. I don’t know what the ex-members who stayed here are doing now. I hear nothing about any “left-wing” groups here.

I was one of the organizers of one of the first feminist movements here—Kazfem. We organized many public activities and per-

² Kazfem, arguably the first feminist movement in Kazakhstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union, publishes the feminist magazine *Yudol’* and organizes demonstrations for March 8, International Women’s Day.

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 sent 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 protestors got the upper hand.

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 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.

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

olutions in 1848 and 1956, with tanks in the streets of Prague in 1968, and with the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

From Zhanaozen to Almaty: Remembering the Dead

From Anarchist Fighter:

“The current uprising in Kazakhstan began with the protests in Zhanaozen. The same city where, in December 2011, the authorities shot striking oil workers. The tragedy in Zhanaozen has left a mark on the protest culture in Kazakhstan. The people have cherished the memory of the dead. The duty of the living was to continue the work of the fallen.

And in January 2022, Zhanaozen rose again. The first city in the country, an example for all the others. The formal reason for the protests was the increase in gas prices and rising food prices. But, as noted by Mikhail Bakunin, mere dissatisfaction with the material situation is not enough for the revolution, a mobilizing idea is needed. In Kazakhstan, one such idea was the loyalty to the fighters who died in 2011. The workers who died then under the bullets will never see the world they dreamed of, but death for the sake of a dream became a testament to the living to continue their cause. And so for the rebels of Kazakhstan there is no way back now.

Kazakhstan's rebellious culture has much to learn from. We, too, must keep the memory of the martyrs of the liberation movement in Russia and Belarus. About Michael Zhlobitsky, Andrey Zeltzer, Roman

ters.” That caused a crucial lack of information from the places where uprising was taking place, making it easier to represent—or misrepresent—the events. In a time when everything is filmed, photographed, uploaded, and shared, cutting off a social uprising from means of communication serves to erase it from reality, opening a space in which falsehoods can thrive.

Yet one of the most important events took place in plain sight: the intervention of the CSTO. This raised many contradictions at once. Formally designated as “peacekeeping assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),” it includes a contingent up to 200 hundred soldiers from Armenia and Tajikistan, 500 from Belarus from dictator Lukashenko (who recently suppressed an uprising of his own), an unspecified number of Kyrgyz soldiers, and 3000 soldiers from Russia. It is significant that the Russian paratroopers who have been moved into Kazakhstan are commanded by Anatoliy Serdyukov, who is experienced in the Chechen wars, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in Syria. We can see Russia’s imperial activities on full display here.

In Kazakhstan, the regime is striving to remain in power by any means necessary, resorting to inviting neighboring dictatorships to invade. For people in Kazakhstan, this should mean the final loss of any legitimacy Tokayev might have had in their eyes. Everyone in the region can see that the CSTO represents the unity of its governments against their peoples.

According to avtonom.org:

“A president who calls the people of his own country ‘terrorist gangs’ represents a nadir even by the standards of post-Soviet authoritarian ‘republics.’”

In fact, this is an invasion of another country by force on the side of the authorities who have lost the trust of the people. It would mean the endless reproduction of the “Russia is a prison of nations” scenario and would be on a par with the suppression of the Hungarian rev-

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.

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.

Conclusion: A View from Russia

In the following text, a Russian anarchist reflects on the implications of the uprising in Kazakhstan for the region. You can read a perspective from Belarusian anarchists here.

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.”

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

in the first place. The police and the army had already begun to move to the side of the rebels, and it was obvious that any of a variety of outcomes was possible. Under these circumstances, Tokayev decided on the last extreme—to call in the punitive forces from neighboring countries. This was political suicide: in fact, he admitted that he was at war with his own people and even with his own state apparatus.”

The situation in Kazakhstan escalated very quickly—not only the protests, but also the brutality with which they were suppressed. The fighting in the streets is a consequence of the ways that the patience of people in Kazakhstan has been tried for decades now. Kazakh society has seen fighting and shooting in the streets before—in 1986, when Mikhail Gorbachev’s government suppressed an uprising in Almaty, carrying out a massacre,¹ and in 2011, when police shot striking workers in Zhanaozen, killing dozens.

When the first news of domestic military intervention came out, this did not seem to cause a major setback for the uprising. The fighting did not cease then—on the contrary, it intensified. We saw videos of disarmed soldiers in the crowd of people, welcomed for changing sides.

Then the internet was shut down. The official reason for the internet blackout was “preventing terrorists from various countries who are fighting in Almaty from coordinating with their headquarter-

¹ From December 17-19, 1986, there were protests in Almaty in response to Mikhail Gorbachev, then-General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, dismissing the longstanding First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and replacing him with an official from Russia. (Gorbachev later claimed he was trying to prevent Nursultan Nazarbayev from concentrating too much power in his hands; Nazarbayev went on to rule Kazakhstan for 28 years.) In 1986, as in 2022, the protests ended in a massacre at the hands of state forces. In 1986, as in 2022, rumors spread that the protesters were bribed with vodka or led astray via leaflets.

assets tripled in 2020 to \$1.47 billion (\$453.5 million in 2019), equity almost doubled to \$225.5 million (\$131.3 million respectively), net income jumped 10-fold to \$42.3 million (\$4 million respectively).”

And so on.

And on the other side of the barricades are all those who either work for all this beau monde for 300 bucks a month (this is approximately how the median salary in Kazakhstan is estimated), extracting minerals for “British” and “Singaporean” corporations or serving fellow citizens in the service sector, which also belongs to all the same from the list; or those who have not found work at all in large and medium-sized business, whose earnings could only be guessed (it is believed to be even lower). Workers, concentrated around enterprises, demand social guarantees (lower utility prices, free medical care, higher wages, etc.). Those who aren’t even workers are simply trying to get their own from retail chains and banks through broken windows and looted shops.

Considering that workers are sure to be dumped as soon as the heat subsidies, the actions of the latter cannot be called irrational or unjust.

A Spring that Has Been Delayed for Thirty Years

Again, according to the avtonom.org podcast, “Trends of order and chaos,”

“The Kazakh authorities and President Tokayev did not trust their own policing and governmental structures

shoulder to shoulder, or doing other important work to 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.

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.

II. Kazakhstan after the Uprising

Eyewitness Accounts from Almaty; Analysis from Russian Anarchists

Following up our coverage of last week's uprising in Kazakhstan, we have translated an array of perspectives on the situation from various Russian anarchist sources and interviewed two anarchists from Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan and the place where the fighting became most intense.

This text also includes previously unpublished photographs taken by our contacts in Almaty.

The following sources should serve to debunk any facile misrepresentations of the uprising from the authorities in Kazakhstan, Russia, or the United States—or their misguided supporters.

To those who spread conspiracy theories about the United States attempting to stage-manage a “color revolution” in Kazakhstan, we must point out that the protests began in response to the government canceling its subsidy on gas, which is produced under a profitable state monopoly in Kazakhstan. Those who defend the governments of Kazakhstan and Russia are defending repressive forces that are imposing neoliberal austerity measures upon exploited workers in an extraction-based economy. The honorable place for all who genuinely oppose capitalism is at the side of ordinary workers and other rebels who stand up to the ruling class, not supporting the governments who claim to

lines are occupied by the Kazakhstani Koreans of Kim. The first one is the major shareholder of KAZ Minerals, a “british copper company”, as Wikipedia describes it. In 2021, his fortune increased by \$600 million. The second Kim, together with Baring Vostok, owns one of the main Kazakh banks, Kaspi Bank, which is also traded in London and has shown impressive growth, despite the pandemic. In third place I was surprised to find a citizen of Georgia Lomatdze, who is also a co-owner of Kaspi Bank and its manager.

Then comes a certain Bulat Utemuratov, who in the Nazarbayev's government of the 90's specialized in foreign trade. He owns ForteBank, whose net income for 2020 “amounted to 53.2 billion tenge” (\$121 million), as well as the major stakes in the major mobile operators, 65% of the gold mining company RG Gold and a bunch of other assets, including a Burger King franchise and “Ritz-Carlton hotels in Nur-Sultan, Vienna and Moscow”...

The fifth and sixth places are shared by Nazarbayev's daughter and son-in-law. His son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev, owns “the controlling stake in Singapore's Steppe Capital Pte Ltd”, which owns the “Dutch” KazStroyService Infrastructure BV and Asset Minerals Holdings (Caspi Neft JSC, 50% of Kazazot JSC).

Dinara Kulibayeva, Nazarbayev's daughter, together with her husband, owns Halyk Bank of Kazakhstan—the bank's “market capitalization reached £3.1 billion (\$4.3 billion).” In seventh place is a Russian financial speculator and founder of the “American investment company” Freedom Holding Corp. Timur Turlov. “According to the company's financial statements, its

Tokayev himself has not hesitated to propound the most outlandish stories, claiming that the international terrorists who allegedly led the revolt cannot be identified because their bodies have been stolen from the morgues.

According to Anarchist Fighter,

“It turns out that the terrorists can’t be shown to the public even if they are dead. Their comrades-in-arms kidnapped the dead right from morgues!

And the main thing is that Kazakhstani authorities with no shame openly state that radical demonstrators dressed up as the police and the soldiers (!!!) Now any atrocity of the punishers can be attributed to the revolutionaries themselves. Maybe the protesters were shot by those “in disguise”? And if it now turns out that the children and journalists were shot by men in uniform and with shoulder straps - then you already know: of course it was the disguised “rioters” and not the brutal executioners of the Tokayev special forces.

Beyond the question of who participated in the uprising, it is important to ask who benefits from its suppression. As one commentary put it:

“Putin is not a nationalist, but a guarantor. He guarantees the security of the post-Soviet elite and the safety of their property. He used to guarantee it only in the Russian Federation, but now it seems that he guarantees it in Kazakhstan as well. After all, there is Russian capital there too.

Look at Kazakhstan’s Forbes list. The real beneficiaries of the peacekeeping operation are listed there. The list, by the way, is interestingly international. The first two

represent protesters while gunning them down and imprisoning them.

This is not to say that the clashes in Kazakhstan represent a unified anti-capitalist struggle, or for that matter a labor movement. The most credible accounts of the composition of the protests acknowledge that there have been a wide range of different participants utilizing different tactics to pursue different agendas. Of course, if we are sympathetic to workers who protest against the rising cost of living, we can also understand why the unemployed and marginalized might engage in looting.

A crisis like the uprising in Kazakhstan opens up all the fault lines within a society. Every preexisting conflict is pushed to a breaking point: ethnic and religious tensions, rivalries among the ruling elite, geopolitical contests for influence and power. We saw this to a lesser degree in France during the Yellow Vest movement and in the United States during the George Floyd Uprising and its aftermath, though those crises did not proceed as far as the uprising in Kazakhstan, where, owing to the entrenched authoritarian power structure, any struggle is immediately an all-or-nothing venture.

If it is true, as we have argued, that the protesters in Kazakhstan were opposing the same forces that rest of us face all around the world, then the violent suppression of those protests by the soldiers of six nations’ armies poses questions that we all must confront. It seems that such explosions are becoming practically inevitable as economic, political, and ecological catastrophes hit one after the other all around the world. How do we prepare in advance, in order to maximize the likelihood that these ruptures will turn out well despite all the forces that are arrayed against us? In moments of revolutionary potential, how can we propose transformative questions to the others who make up this society with us, focusing the lines of conflict along the most generative and liberating axes even as we compete with a variety of factions that aim to centralize their

own ideologies and interests? How do we avoid both conspiracy theories and manipulation, both *defeatism* and *defeat*?

In the following overview, composed in collaboration with Russian anarchists, we present the analysis of the uprising in Kazakhstan that has come out of the ex-Soviet region, then share an interview we conducted with anarchists in Almaty as soon as internet access was reestablished following the crackdown.

The Prison of Nations

Starting on January 1, what began as a single protest against the rising cost of living escalated to a full-scale nationwide uprising, which for now has been brutally suppressed by a combination of domestic and foreign military force.

At first, the protesters sought the resignation of government, a reduction in the price of gas, and the removal of the ex-president—Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Grey Cardinal of Kazakhstan—from the head of the National Security Council. The slogan of the whole country for these days became “*Shal ket!*”—“Grandpa, go away!” As the protests gained momentum, people quickly came to the point of not wishing to agree to anything less than a complete change in the government, including the ouster of current president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

The regime attempted to suppress the protests. Yet the protesters managed to seize weapons from the police and fight back, looting shops and burning down or occupying municipal buildings. President Tokayev declared a state of emergency and sent military against the protesters with orders to shoot on sight anyone who dared to resist. At the same time, Tokayev officially asked the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, consisting of Russia and several neighboring countries) for support in regaining the control over the country.

the events in Almaty, there were clips from the same Uralsk, where the demonstrators were bravely liberating the detainees from the police.

Let’s allow ourselves a truism: yes, a radical “violent” protest does not guarantee success at all, nor is it immune to provocations. But a purely “non-violent” protest in our authoritarian reality is simply doomed in advance. “You have been heard, we’ll sort it out, and we’ll put the most violent of you in jail”—that’s always the answer from the powers that be in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan...

The various rumors about internal conflicts within the power structure in Kazakhstan and the speculations about geopolitical schemes at play in the uprising could all be true. But to elevate these rumors and speculations to the central position in the narrative about what is happening in Kazakhstan is a political choice: it is a decision to deny the agency of the countless ordinary people who participated in the uprising for their own reasons. Like all conspiracy theories, this assumes that the only people who have any agency in the situation are shadowy global power players; it also serves to distract people from the obvious things that *everyone knows* are happening, such as the political elite of Kazakhstan profiting at the expense of everyone else.

Rumors and speculation serve to influence the events and the ways that others understand and engage with them. True or not, each of these interventions serves to focus attention on certain figures, to spread a certain set of assumptions about how the world works. If these conspiracy theories cast doubt on the participants in the uprising enough to distract people from supporting the protesters who are standing up for themselves against economic exploitation and political domination, then they will have succeeded in their purpose to keep everyone everywhere dependent on political elites.

[i.e., the protests in Kiev], where the defense was organized both spontaneously by the crowd and with the participation of radical organized groups that joined in.”

Claims about Islamic fundamentalists participating in the events may well be true to some extent. But it is also certain that the authorities will make use of any information about them to discredit all the other groups, identities, and participants involved in the uprising. Economic desperation and social and political persecution often drive people to fundamentalism as well as other forms of radicalism.

According to Anarchist Fighter:

“The question about the real balance of forces among non-state actors of the events is still urgent:

Opposition journalist Lukpan Akhmedyarov, on Ekho Moskvyy radio station, expressed confidence that the armed attack on the authorities in Almaty was the work of Nazarbayev’s people. The arguments for this confidence are not clear.

It is noteworthy that Akhmedyarov noticed in his native Uralsk on the square next to the protesters a group of several dozen organized people calling for an assault on the Akimat. A small group of “identically dressed instigators” was also reported from Kostanai.

What is it? Some shadowy organized rebel force, criminal groups or really provocateurs from state services? Or maybe a “non-violent” narrative, seeking to immediately label supporters of direct action as such? There are no answers.

One thing is clear: dividing protesters into “peaceful” and “terrorists” is a distortion of reality. Even before

According to Kazakhstan’s Interior Ministry, nearly 8000 people were arrested during the demonstrations, and at least 164 people killed; since then, much higher figures have circulated. Some prominent bloggers and union leaders are reported to have disappeared. The internet was shut down for days. People were shot in the squares and on the street by snipers and other soldiers.

The military suppression of the uprising, including the intervention of the CSTO, played a key role in the outcome. As of January 10, media reports and testimonies of people in Kazakhstan show that the fighting has stopped in Almaty and mass gatherings have ceased in other cities.

Here is the analysis that Anarchist Fighter, an anarchist platform looking on from Russia, published on their Telegram channel:

- 1) CSTO intervention. All more or less sane sources among the Kazakhs perceive this as an intervention and an attempt of “Big Brother” on their sovereignty. Every hour of presence of these forces in the country multiplies the aversion and anger;
- 2) Authoritarian rule has not disappeared. President Tokayev has concentrated more power in his hands, invited foreign military, ordered his troops to “shoot without warning”... But Kazakhstanis are not used to government brutality. It does not stop them, and the dissatisfaction with the government is not going away.
- 3) The economic crisis will not cease without fundamental reforms towards social justice. Enforcement is essentially just a postponement of price increases. No measures to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in society are offered by the authorities. Consequently, the discontent they have created will not abate either.

“Wahhabis, Terrorists, Protesters”—Misinformation about the Uprising

According to the avtonom.org podcast, “Trends of order and chaos,”

“The Kazakh authorities are trying very hard to save face and construct their version of reality. The punitive operation is called “counter-terrorist,” as if a “terrorist” is any person who opposes the authorities by violent means. Rebellious people, respectively, are “militants and bandits, they must be killed,” and the reason for the uprising is allegedly “free media and foreign figures,” which is literally what Tokayev said. We are witnessing the development of militant propaganda virtually live on air. The lie that black is white and war is peace, not to the point of sentimentality, and whoever doesn’t believe it—to the wall. After all, no one will feel sorry for the “terrorists,” this is a mantra that post-Soviet dictators have learned well.”

From the beginning of the fighting, both Kazakh and foreign media made claims regarding the identities of the protesters. The definitions ranged from “protesters,” “aggressive youth,” and “marauders” all the way to “nationalist squads,” “20,000 bandits attacking Almaty,” and “Islamic terrorists.” It is true that a variety of groups and factions participated in the uprising. But that is not itself a problem—an entire society was represented in the uprising, with all its differences and contradictions. It is safe to assume that different people participated in different actions against the regime, including fighting and looting.

From Anarchist Fighter:

The journalist Maksim Kurnikov said some very interesting things on Ekho Moskvyy’s morning broadcast. He remarked that the scheme “to take weapons from gun stores and then attack security forces” is not new in Kazakhstan.

Exactly the same thing happened in the city of Aktobe in June 2016: several dozen young men, divided into groups, took weapons from two gun stores, seized vehicles, and attacked a part of the National Guard, where they were defeated. The authorities of Kazakhstan have been much muddled about the case: It is still not very clear what the basis is for their claims of an “Islamist connection.”

Kurnikov also spoke of paramilitary guards at illegal oil refineries in western Kazakhstan, made up of local villagers, disparagingly called “mambets” (collective farmers) by Kazakhstani townsfolk. These groups have also at times engaged in armed confrontations with police officers.

What does all this tell us? Of course, President Tokayev’s words about “terrorist groups carefully trained abroad” are pure propaganda and most likely a gross lie. That armed cells capable of seizing security institutions and arsenals suddenly materialized from a motley crowd also sounds unlikely. That said, we have no evidence of Islamist or nationalist involvement in the Almaty events. However, as we can see, organized groups capable of active armed resistance exist in Kazakhstani society in principle. It is likely that those people who engaged in direct confrontation with the security forces were partly representatives of such groups and partly spontaneous self-organized protesters. There is an analogy with the 2014 Maidan