



Feature Article
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Four Years On: An Update on Kazakhstan's Reforms

Svante E. Cornell

Almost four years have passed since President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev embarked upon an agenda to bring thorough reforms to Kazakhstan's politics and society. This article looks at the process of implementation of these reforms in a highly precarious geopolitical environment, where Russia's war in Ukraine has led to increasing threats to Kazakhstan's integrity by leading Russian figures. This analysis shows that Kazakhstan has proceeded on institutional reform, including modest but meaningful steps in sensitive areas such as separation of powers and electoral systems.

President Tokayev launched his first major reform package at the end of 2019, and it was followed by several additional packages of reforms in the

years that followed. In several extensive addresses to the nation, Tokayev spoke in frank and relatively scathing language about many of the problems plaguing Kazakhstan,



Voters in Kazakhstan Referendum, 2022. (gov.kz)

which hold the country back from progressing more rapidly toward its stated aim of joining the world's most developed nations in the next few decades. His government initiated

numerous reforms in political, economic and social areas in order to transform the relationship between citizen and state. As Tokayev pointed out, these reforms

aimed at undoing the Soviet-era dominance of state over society, and change the nature of the state institutions into one guided by a notion of service to the population. Tokayev summed up his intention in the notion of a “listening state.”

These reforms did not aim to transform Kazakhstan overnight into a western-style democracy.¹ Kazakhstan’s elites, President Tokayev included, maintain a strong skepticism of unfettered liberalization, something they fear would risk the very statehood of Kazakhstan given the highly complex geopolitical environment the country finds itself in. By contrast, the reforms adopted in Kazakhstan are intended to gradually modernize the country in a controlled fashion, first and foremost by ensuring more efficient and transparent government – something that will, inevitably, generate conditions for evolutionary political change over time.

However, it was soon clear that influential forces within the state were slow-walking or outright opposing reforms that would potentially counter the vested interest of certain elite groups. In January 2022, recalcitrant elite groups appear to have seized on the

public unrest over economic issues that began in western Kazakhstan to attempt an insurgency against President Tokayev.² The government managed to suppress this attempted coup, but at considerable cost – President Tokayev was forced to call in support from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and Kazakhstan’s image as a stable, modernizing country took a hit.

While many foreign observers expected Kazakhstan to move closer to Russia in the aftermath of these events, the opposite has happened. The CSTO mission left Kazakhstan after less than two weeks, and when Russia invaded Ukraine only weeks later, Kazakhstan refused to endorse the invasion. Quite to the contrary – while Astana made sure to maintain cordial relation with Moscow, it distanced itself from Russia’s aggression, and made it clear the country would not recognize Moscow-controlled entities in Ukraine as independent states, as Moscow expected. Kazakhstan also made it clear it would not assist Moscow in circumventing Russian sanctions. Instead, Kazakhstan maintained relations with Ukraine and provided significant quantities of humanitarian assistance to the country. This in turn led to a

¹ Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr and Albert Barro, *Political and Economic Reform in Kazakhstan under President Tokayev*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program November 2021. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/211201Kaz-Reforms.pdf>)

² Svante E. Cornell, “Learning from Kazakhstan’s January Crisis,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 18, 2022. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13715>)

strong increase in aggressive statements from sources close to the Kremlin, statements that put into question Kazakhstan's statehood and sovereignty. Moscow also repeatedly halted the flow of Kazakh oil exports through Russian territory on blatantly made-up pretexts, thus putting Kazakhstan under considerable pressure.

In spite of this pressure, President Tokayev doubled down on his reform agenda in the first half of 2022 – launching a much wider package of reforms in March that he promised would lay the ground for building a “New Kazakhstan.” The reform agenda was put to a referendum in June that year. These reforms were, among other, intended to change Kazakhstan's super-presidential system of government and strengthen the powers of parliament, while also revising the electoral system to open up for greater popular participation in politics and reforming the judiciary system to make it more accessible to the population.

This article takes stock of the process of implementation of these reforms, looking in particular at the judicial system, electoral reform and the fight against corruption. However, we shall turn first to President Tokayev's September address to the nation for

clues as to the priorities and thinking at the helm of the state.

A September Speech under Darkening Skies

On September 1, 2023, President Tokayev – as has become customary – held an address to the nation at the opening of parliament. At this occasion, Tokayev claimed that “the majority of my initiatives have been implemented, while some are nearing completion” while inserting the caveat that “there is still much to be done, and we will continue to work diligently.”³

Tokayev cited the “large-scale political transformations” taking place in recent years, opining that Kazakhstan has now achieved an “optimal balance among the branches of government.” This is in line with the formula he announced earlier of “a strong president – an influential parliament – an accountable government.” In the recent address, Tokayev emphasized that this shift in the balance of powers is central to “putting in practice the concept of a listening state, with parliament playing a pivotal role.” Compared to Tokayev's earlier addresses, however, this one focused strongly on economic matters – in line with the ambition to build a “Just and Fair

³ President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address, "Economic course of a Just Kazakhstan," September 1, 2023. (<https://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses>)

Kazakhstan,” a notion launched by the President the year before.⁴ He stressed the need to transition to a new economic model where tangible improvements in citizens’ lives is the guiding principle. In a veiled swipe at past practices, Tokayev spoke against the “practice of setting long-term, ephemeral goals,” thus distancing himself from the grand visions periodically launched with great fanfare by his predecessor. Instead, he emphasized the need to accomplish most objectives in less than three years.

First among the priorities outlined by the president was the need for economic diversification, whose urgency “has never been greater” than at present. Flowing from this was the emphasis on the rapid development of the manufacturing sector. While Tokayev spoke in particular of reforming public procurement, developing the mining sector, and improving the agro-industrial sector, significantly he also accorded close attention to the development of defense industry. He noted that the defense industry “plays a key role in ensuring national security in developed countries,” and emphasized the need for a high degree of localization to “reduce dependence on imported supplies.”

The theme of economic reform to safeguard national security returned in the discussion of energy, where Tokayev stressed the need to reduce dependence on foreign countries for electricity. He also raised the sensitive question of whether Kazakhstan should develop nuclear power generation. While Tokayev appeared supportive of this idea, he acknowledged the concerns in society stemming from the tragic history of Soviet nuclear testing in Kazakhstan and pledged to submit the question of a nuclear power plant to a referendum.

In Tokayev’s comments on transportation, the precarious geopolitical situation once again shone through. While making sure to mention that cooperation with Russia and China will continue, Tokayev spent most of his energy stressing the importance of the Trans-Caspian route, whose capacity he expects to increase five-fold – requiring “coordinated efforts” with partner countries including China, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

While President Tokayev’s address delved into many more areas – including the development of a green economy, investment climate and relationship between business and state – there is no question that the address

⁴ Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, “Kazakhstan’s president: We’re moving full speed ahead toward reform,” *Politico*, September 20, 2022.

(<https://www.politico.eu/article/kazakh-president-we-must-flip-the-switch-of-reform/>)

was shaped to a considerable extent by the increasingly exposed geopolitical situation that Kazakhstan finds itself in. The emphasis on increasing diversification, reducing dependency on electricity imports, and developing a domestic defense industry independent of foreign suppliers all indicate that fundamental notions of national security underlie the major priorities adopted by the government of Kazakhstan.

This should not come as a surprise. Indeed, all major decisions in Kazakhstan are by definition taken in a context where existential security questions have risen to the forefront like never before. Moscow has not only intensified its rhetorical attacks on Kazakhstan for failing to toe the line on Ukraine: it has issued very thinly veiled threats on northern and eastern Kazakhstan, while indicating its preparedness to halt deliveries of Kazakh oil to world markets. These are unprecedented steps that put into question the long-standing approach of Kazakhstan to its national security, namely to maintain a close and productive dialogue with Moscow while simultaneously strengthening its relationships with other world powers and deepening Central Asian regional cooperation. Kazakhstan does not have a solid alternative to this approach, but Russia's behavior is nevertheless an indication that the feasibility of appeasing Moscow may be more difficult than expected.

While a deeper discussion of Kazakhstan's national security is outside the scope of this article, it nevertheless informs the analysis that follows, regarding which reforms the government of Kazakhstan has focused on implementing and how it has gone about doing so.

Judicial Reforms and Separation of Powers

A major reform resulting from the June 2022 referendum was the re-establishment of a Constitutional Court in Kazakhstan, to replace the weaker Constitutional Council that had existed previously. President Tokayev signed the Constitutional Court into law on November 5, 2022. It consists of eleven judges, of which five are appointed by the president, including the chair, and three each by the two houses of parliament.

To chair the Constitutional Court, Tokayev appointed the country's former commissioner for human rights, Elvira Azimova, who had also served as deputy minister of justice. A look at the other four justices nominated by the president provides an instructive view of the role the court may have in the future. Two names – Kairat Zhakipbayev and Bakyt Nurmukhanov – were unsurprising, as the latter had served as chair of the Constitutional Council, while the former had served in various capacities in the Prosecutor-General's office.

The two other names came from a very different background. Aizhan Zhatkanbayeva and Roman Podoprigora do not come from the official state bodies but from academia, and, moreover, both have extensive publications in Western academic and policy journals. Zhatkanbayeva has served as a professor at Al-Farabi Kazakh State University, and authored or co-authored several dozen studies in Russian and English, many of which with Western counterparts, on legal issues ranging from disability rights to administrative and customs law. Podoprigora, a professor at Caspian University, is a Fulbright grantee and a trustee of the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan, and has been a member of the OSCE/ODIHR Experts' Group Advisory Council on freedom of religion and beliefs. His writings, particularly on religious freedom matters, have consistently been relatively critical of the government.

Most judges nominated by the Senate and Majilis are more conventional, yet the composition is still not the standard expected roster of a post-Soviet high court. Particularly President Tokayev's nominees serve as an indication that he sees the Constitutional Court

as a serious institution with a function to support the reform process in the country. However, this sprinkling of non-government expertise is balanced with institutional players, ensuring the Court continues to function within the confines of the political system.

The main differences between the Constitutional Court and its predecessor are that individual citizens have the right to appeal to the court directly and that the court issues decisions that cannot be appealed and must be implemented. As Chairperson Azimova noted in an August 2023 article, the Court received 4,000 appeals in its first eight months. While most of the petitions were not deemed to fall within the remit of the Court, it had reviewed 23 cases while another 20 were being assessed at the time of writing. This stands in comparison to the 140 cases reviewed by the Constitutional Council over 27 years.⁵

In its first decision in January 2023, the Court stripped former President Nazarbayev of his title of Elbasy (leader of the nation) and the privileges and immunities that came with that title.⁶ In addition, the court deemed a series of legal provisions unconstitutional and provided new interpretations for a dozen

⁵ Elvira Azimova, "Kazakhstan's Transformation Through Political Reforms and Constitutional Amendments," Asia Law Portal, August 24, 2023. (<https://asialawportal.com/kazakhstans-transformation-through-political-reforms-and-constitutional-amendments/>)

⁶ "Kazakhstan's Constitutional Court Nixes Law On First President-Leader Of Nation," RFE/RL, January 11, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-nazarbaev-law-annulled/32218636.html>

other laws. These findings mainly concerned citizens' access to justice and did not cover major political issues. The extent of the Court's influence remains to be determined, but it should be noted that the Court has worked assertively to promote public awareness of its competencies, while also expanding its cooperation with international legal bodies, first among them the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.⁷

In addition, a series of amendments were signed into law, described in detail in an earlier study in this series.⁸ These sought to strengthen the powers of parliament as opposed to the presidency, and strengthen regional institutions versus central state powers. For example, the parliament's powers to audit the executive bodies were increased, while the president prerogative to dismiss provincial governors was reduced.

Electoral Reforms

Two particular facets of electoral reform in Kazakhstan have been implemented and begun to change the political landscape in the country. The first is the election of rural *akims*

(mayors) and the second is the shift in parliamentary elections.

Of these, arguably the shifts at the local and regional level are the most significant. Up until recently, the system of local government in Kazakhstan was highly centralized. Power in the district and rural areas lies with the executive bodies, with local governors or *akims* serving as an extension of the executive system, which was defined in the constitution as "representatives of the President and the Government."⁹ It is the President who appoints regional and city *akims*, while the district and rural *akims* were elected by indirect ballot, by a vote in local councils, the *maslikhats*. In President Tokayev's second yearly address to the nation, he acknowledged the strong popular support for rural *akims* to be elected rather than appointed, and a pilot project was launched with elections in certain rural areas in July 2021. The ruling party won the overwhelming majority of those races, but the reform may nevertheless prove meaningful, as *akims* are provided with a greater incentive to be involved in political life and be accountable to their voters.

⁷ Aibarshyn Akhmetkali, "Kazakhstan's Constitutional Court Advances Human Rights, Says Chairperson," *Astana Times*, August 21, 2023.

⁸ Svante E. Cornell and Albert Barro, "Kazakhstan's June Referendum: Accelerating Reform," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 31, 2022.

(<http://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/220531-FT-Kazreferendum.pdf>)

⁹ Malika Toqmadi, "Kazakhstan," in Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2021*. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/nations-transit/2021>)

In the two years that have passed since the direct election of rural akims was announced, State Counsellor Erlan Karin in August 2023 announced that 1,668 akims of villages, settlements, rural districts, and towns of district significance had been elected. 57 percent of the elected akims were new to the position, with an average age of 45 years – indicating a rejuvenation taking place at this most local level of government.¹⁰ In his September address to the nation, Tokayev announced that this reform will now be expanded to heads of districts and cities of regional significance. This reform obviously has yet to be implemented, but is an indication that the government is feeling emboldened to expand rather than contract the experiment with direct elections to regional executive bodies.

At the national level, Kazakhstan held parliamentary elections on March 19, 2023. This election took place under a new electoral system, where 70 percent of seats were allocated on the basis of proportional party lists, and the remainder in single-member electoral districts. The elections followed reforms that reduced the difficulty of registering political parties, and lowered the threshold to parliament to 5 percent instead of 7 percent. And as intended by the reforms, a larger number of political parties contested the election and gained representation in parliament. These

included the Auyl party, focused on agrarian interests; the center-right Aq Jol party; the center-left People's Party of Kazakhstan and Social Democratic Party; and the Respublica Party, which appeared to target a younger audience. These parties all won between five and eleven percent of the vote, while the ruling Amanat Party received 54 percent – down from 71 percent in the previous election. Amanat, however, made up for this by sweeping the overwhelming majority of single-member constituencies, thus ending up with a comfortable majority in a more diverse parliament.

It should be noted that the parties allowed to compete in the election were generally supportive of President Tokayev's agenda, whereas several radical opposition parties that sought to register for the election were not permitted to do so. As such, the process of opening up the political system is decidedly a gradual and controlled one – where the leadership's aim is to provide a broader choice for voters, but within the confines of a political environment that broadly remains within the system rather than stepping outside of it.

There is no question that this constitutes an improvement over past elections, and the

¹⁰ "Seven Regions of Kazakhstan Elect 17 Rural Mayors," *Astana Times*, August 15, 2023.

(<https://astanatimes.com/2023/08/seven-regions-of-kazakhstan-elect-17-rural-mayors/>)

OSCE said as much in its report on the election. It acknowledged that there was an element of competitiveness introduced into the election, and noted the relatively free campaigning that took place, while noting remaining administrative obstacles to political actors considered non-systemic and irregularities with the counting and tabulation of votes in some districts. It should also be noted that the government continues to experience serious issues with turnout in the major cities. In Almaty, only a quarter of the electorate turned out to vote, while in Astana the figure was 42 percent – and countrywide, the figure was an underwhelming 54 percent. In other words, the political parties in Kazakhstan have some work to do to generate public enthusiasm for their programs.

While it is clear that the reforms of the electoral system are not intended to bring about the immediate liberalization of the political system, they do represent an ever so slight shift in the focus of reforms. As noted, the main purpose of reforms is to make government more efficient and transparent, thus building legitimacy without necessarily taking the risk of full-scale liberalization. The January 2022 events appear to have led Pres-

ident Tokayev to conclude that only improving the quality of government is not enough; there will be a need to open up for greater popular “voice” in the political system. The 2023 election constituted a step in this direction.

Anti-Corruption and Asset Recovery

In February 2022, Kazakhstan adopted an anti-corruption policy for 2022-2026. In conjunction with this, the government announced measurable targets it is aiming to reach by 2026. These are very precise and dependent on the scoring of international governmental and non-governmental entities. For example, Kazakhstan aims to obtain no less than 47 points on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (the score for 2022 was 36 points.) On the World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index, the aim is to reach the 74th percentile (the score for 2022 was 58.) More ambitious, perhaps, is the aim to reach the 57th percentile in terms of the Bank's Voice and Accountability index, where Kazakhstan presently ranks at the 19th percentile.¹¹ As concerns the Control of Corruption index, Kazakhstan has reached the 48th percentile, a serious improvement

¹¹ “Anti-Corruption Agency Implements Crucial Measures to Reduce Corruption Risks, Return Illegally Withdrawn Assets,” *Astana Times*, October

19, 2022. (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/10/anti-corruption-agency-implements-crucial-measures-to-reduce-corruption-risks-return-illegally-withdrawn-assets/>)

since 2017, when it was barely at the 20th percentile.¹²

Kazakhstan does not aim to reach these targets on its own. After acceding to the Council of Europe's Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) in 2020, the country now is preparing for accession to the Council's Criminal Law Convention on Corruption, requiring legislative amendments.

The more specific initiative taken to address corruption in the aftermath of January 2022 has been efforts to recover assets illegally acquired and invested abroad. As leading government representatives acknowledge, this is in part in response to the clear anger in society at the massive resources that very small elements of the elite have misappropriated since independence and stashed abroad. Indeed, Tokayev launched this initiative in February 2022, immediately following the protests that were directed largely at representatives of the *ancient régime*, but also manipulated by the same forces to undermine the government. President Tokayev has refrained from criticizing his predecessor by

name, but has on a number of occasions lamented the practices that were common during Nazarbayev's tenure. A number of assets seized by the state have, indeed, belonged to the former President's family. Nazarbayev's son-in-law lost control over a 50 percent stake liquified gas storage facility in Atyrau; the former president's younger brother was forced to surrender stakes in a wholesale market and a machinery plant. Nazarbayev's nephew, sentenced to six years for embezzlement, was deprived of several hundred million dollars worth of gems, jewelry and foreign securities. In total, prosecutors claim assets worth almost \$1.7 billion had been recovered.¹³ This figure nevertheless pales in comparison with estimates that as much as \$160 billion may have been taken abroad.¹⁴

In recovering stolen assets, Kazakhstan has partnered with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, as well as the World Bank's Stolen Assets Recovery Initiative. These institutions both helped Kazakhstan with best practices, and facilitated contacts with authorities in offshore jurisdictions.¹⁵

¹² World Bank indicators available at: <https://www.govindicators.org/interactive-data-access>.

¹³ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan: Government recoups \$1.7Bln in illegally appropriated assets," Eurasianet, May 13, 2023. (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-government-recoups-17bln-in-illegally-appropriated-assets>)

¹⁴ "Kazakhstan aims to recover illegally acquired assets," Euractiv, May 29, 2023. (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-aims-to-recover-illegally-acquired-assets/>)

¹⁵ Baurzhan Kurmanov, "Stolen Asset Recovery: Experience of Kazakhstan," UNODC Expert Meeting on asset return, Nairobi, 28-29 November 2022.

The government is further accelerating its efforts in this regard. In May 2023, it announced the creation of a special agency under the prosecutor general to deal with asset recovery. In July, the president signed a specific law “On the return of illegally acquired assets to the state.” This legislation targets individuals with assets over approximately \$100 million, and facilitates the channeling of recovered assets to a Special State Fund earmarked for the financing of socio-economic projects such as schools and hospitals. The law targeted oligarchic groups and entities, particularly those colluding with individuals in administrative positions.¹⁶

The asset recovery drive has come under criticism from domestic and foreign critics who view it as a vendetta against the President's political foes, and as designed to consolidate power following the challenge of the *ancient régime* to his position. Such allegations are to be expected, given that corruption investigation in authoritarian states typically target political opponents of the leadership, while ignoring similar practices by the leadership's

allies. Further, critics are wary of the due process aspect – the fact that certain assets have been “voluntarily” returned has given rise to questions whether individuals were intimidated into surrendering assets.

Kazakhstan's current effort to recover assets is reminiscent of the situation in Georgia following the 2003 Rose Revolution.¹⁷ A strong effort to stamp out petty corruption – which was endemic in the country under the previous Shevardnadze regime, but successfully eradicated by 2006 – was accompanied by an aggressive effort to recover assets stolen by former regime acolytes. Saakashvili's government had a number of high-level officials arrested and offered them a “plea bargain” option – to hand over stolen assets in exchange for their freedom.¹⁸ This policy led to strong criticisms in the West: the Council of Europe's Secretary-General warned the government that the fight against corruption “should not infringe law and due process.” But the situation in Georgia under Shevardnadze was best characterized as a form of

(https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/NairobiEGM2022/Session_VI_-_Baurzhan_Kurmanov.pdf)

¹⁶ “The Head of State signed the Law “On the return of illegally acquired assets to the state,” Akorda.kz, July 12, 2023. (<https://akorda.kz/en/the-head-of-state-signed-the-law-on-the-return-of-illegally-acquired-assets-to-the-state-1262957>)

¹⁷ Johan Engvall, *Against the Grain: How Georgia Fought Corruption and What It Means*, Central Asia-

Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, September 2012.

(https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2012_09_SRP_Engvall_Georgia-Corruption.pdf)

¹⁸ Whit Mason, “Trouble in Tbilisi,” *National Interest*, Spring 2005.

state capture; and Western policy and academic circles have not devised ways that help reverse state capture through means that would conform to due process requirements.¹⁹ In Kazakhstan, while the situation may not quite have warranted the term “state capture,” the processes are similar in the sense that the positions of influence of the individuals that acquired large resources likely enabled them to ensure that evidence of their wrongdoing disappeared. As a result, the Kazakh government may have little choice than to pursue an aggressive approach to stolen assets in order to be able to recover even a limited portion of the billions that have gone missing from the country.

Social Reforms

From 2022 onward, the focus of reforms in Kazakhstan shifted to the social sector, in recognition that many of the most central concerns of the population had to do with matters of education, healthcare and retirement. As a previous study indicated, Kazakhstan had invested considerably in healthcare and education reforms, but the landmark successes tended to focus on the

creation of elite institutions, such as Nazarbayev University and advanced cancer research.²⁰ However, over time it has become clear that while these initiatives were successful, they did not trickle down to the broader masses. In fact, the opposite could be said: in some instances, the focus on top-end investments ensured that scarce resources were not spent on initiatives that provided visible improvements in the lives of ordinary people, particularly outside large urban centers.

The reforms launched since 2022 have sought to change that. In education, the primary priority has been to address the situation in elementary schools – where buildings are deteriorating, and qualified teachers are scarce. In addition, despite numerous promises to end this situation, there are still schools in Kazakhstan that operate three shifts per day in order to accommodate all children. This has long been considered inadequate but the government has failed to resolve the situation.

In his September 2022 address, President Tokayev pledged to build modern schools for

¹⁹ See Svante E. Cornell and Niklas Nilsson, “Georgian Politics since the August 2008 War,” *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 17 no. 3, 2009. (https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/17_3_K28U3808822Q4V06.pdf)

²⁰ Albert Barro and Svante E. Cornell, *Social Reforms in Kazakhstan*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, September 2022. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13460>)

800,000 children by 2025.²¹ He also scheduled the launching of a “National Fund for Children” from January 2024. According to this plan, a full 50 percent of the National Fund annual revenues (which accumulates income from the country’s oil and gas reserves) will be allocated to individual savings accounts for children, from which no withdrawals will be possible before age 18. This measure, while ostensibly directed toward education, also appears designed to play an important role in quelling public questions about how the government is using and managing the country’s large hydrocarbon resources.²²

In late 2022, the government created the Education Infrastructure Support Fund, to which \$244 million of confiscated and repatriated assets were allocated for the construction of almost 70 new schools.²³ In total, 154 schools were commissioned in 2023.²⁴ This should finally eliminate the scourge of three-shift schools. In total, about 400 schools are in

the process of construction or slated for construction.²⁵

Speaking in September 2023, President Tokayev noted that “state measures in the education field are incomplete and lack cohesion.” As a result, the President launched a unified voluntary accumulation system called *Keleshek* (Future) which aims to provide coverage for children from the age of five. Under this program, the government will provide “funding for educational start-ups, annual state premium payments, and investment income.”

The government has focused also on the development of vocational education. The country’s Prime minister reported that plans for the development of vocational education have included the creation of foreign internships for several hundred college teachers. But regional discrepancies remain, and the government has raised attention to the slow

²¹ “Kazakhstan to Build Schools for 800,000 Children by 2025,” *Astana Times*, September 1, 2022. (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/09/kazakhstan-to-build-schools-for-800000-children-by-2025/>)

²² “Annual Investment Income to Support Children Starting in 2024,” *Astana Times*, September 1, 2022. (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/09/kazakhstan-to-allocate-half-of-national-funds-annual-investment-income-to-support-children-starting-in-2024/>)

Saniya Sakenova, “Kazakhstan’s National Fund to Allocate Funds to Children,” *Astana Times*, September 20, 2023. (<https://astanatimes.com/2023/09/kazakhstan-national-fund-to-allocate-funds-to-children/>)

²³ “Kazakhstan Allocates Funds Seized from Corrupt Officials to Build New Schools,” BNN Network, February 2, 2023. (<https://bnn.network/breaking-news/education/kazakhstan-allocates-funds-seized-from-corrupt-officials-to-build-new-schools/>)

²⁴ Office of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, “Emergency and three-shift schools being solved: 52 new facilities to be introduced by September 1,” <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/emergency-and-three-shift-schools-being-solved-52-new-facilities-to-be-introduced-by-september-1-25076>

²⁵ Tokayev address to Nation, September 1, 2023.

pace of change in several regions of the country.

In healthcare, the focus has been on developing facilities in rural areas and small towns. In November 2022, the Prime Minister detailed plans for “655 primary healthcare facilities to be built and rehabilitated, 12 existing district hospitals will be renewed, and 20 new ones will be opened.”²⁶ In September 2023, President Tokayev informed that 300 of these healthcare facilities were under construction.

While these plans signify a clear intention of the state to broaden social services, this is no easy task and it comes with challenges. An obvious financial challenge is the burden it puts on state finances going forward. A perhaps more difficult challenge is the staffing problem – developing sufficient numbers of well-trained educators and health care professionals to fill all the necessary positions, including in far-away areas that may not be attractive to graduates of urban educational institutions. To remedy this problem, the government has worked to increase the salaries paid to education and healthcare professionals. According to the President, teachers’ salaries have doubled since 2020, and the wages of medical professionals now are over

the national average. Whether this is sufficient to staff the emerging facilities in the short to medium term remains to be seen.

Conclusions

In times of growing security threats to Kazakhstan, President Tokayev has doubled down on his determination to pursue reforms to modernize Kazakhstan. Clearly, it is easier to announce reforms than to implement them, and the task of implementing the many initiatives Tokayev has launched will take many years until the full results are visible. Still, it is already clear that the reforms are being implemented and that gradual changes to the form of government in Kazakhstan and to the relationship between state and society are taking place.

At the same time, reforms are also ongoing in the social sector, where President Tokayev takes great pride in the increases in salaries to teachers and medical professionals that have been implemented in the past two years, as well as the increases to the minimum wage. In addition, a new initiative will lead the National Fund to allocate half of its annual revenues to special savings accounts for children, intended to help them obtain

²⁶ Office of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, “Massive construction and reconstruction of medical facilities to begin in Kazakhstan villages,” November

22, 2022. (<https://primeminister.kz/en/news/massive-construction-and-reconstruction-of-medical-facilities-to-begin-in-kazakhstan-villages-2210038>)

housing or education when they reach the age of 18.

The trajectory is thus clear: President Tokayev has placed a bet on meeting the growing demand for change and socio-economic development in society by a combination of efforts. These include shifting the logic of state institutions, carefully opening up for political voice in a controlled way, recovering stolen assets, and expanding state spending on socio-economic investments in schools, healthcare and children. Taken together, the government's objective is to provide sufficient investment in the future and sufficient

change to the current state institutions to ensure that the government's legitimacy is strengthened in society, and further protests – which have been growing over time in Kazakhstan – remain manageable in scope and nature. All the while, the objective is to drive such change while retaining overall control over the political system to avoid a situation of unrest – let alone revolution – which has affected countries like Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine, and opened up for nefarious foreign actors to benefit from the situation and undermine the progress of these countries. Only time will tell whether this bet placed by President Tokayev will succeed.

