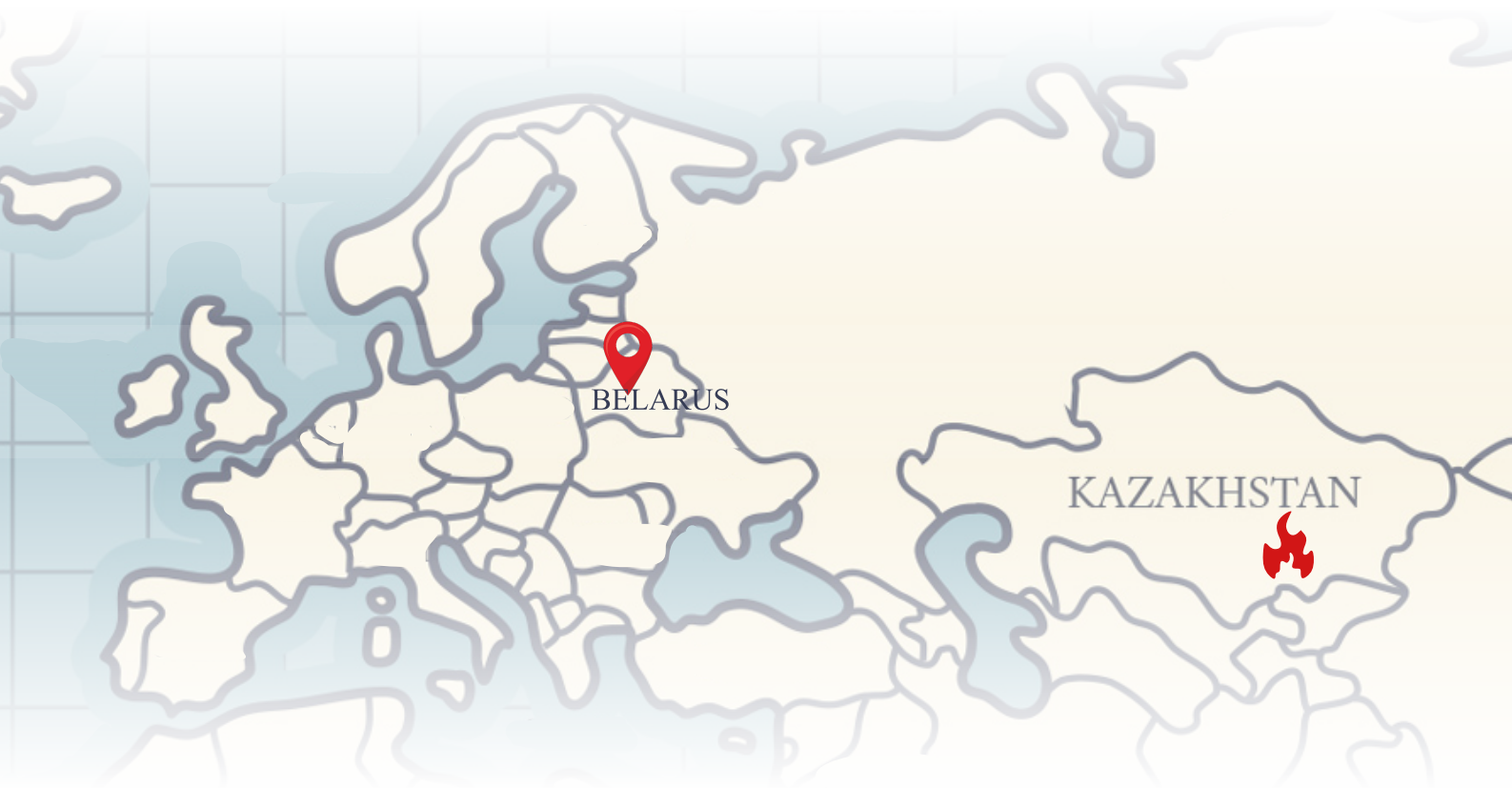


## GCRF COMPASS Policy Brief

# PROTESTS IN KAZAKHSTAN AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE CSTO: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR BELARUS AND THE WIDER NEIGHBOURHOOD

31 January, 2022



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[OST Research Center](#): OST Research Centre is a research department of the [Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya \(OST\)](#). The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

[Oxford Belarus Observatory](#): The Oxford University Belarus Observatory (OBO) was formed to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policy-making, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

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- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

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# **PROTESTS IN KAZAKHSTAN AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE CSTO: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR BELARUS AND THE WIDER NEIGHBOURHOOD**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*This policy brief offers a recap of the expert discussion held on 20 January 2022, examining the causes and consequences of the events in Kazakhstan and the involvement of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in the country. The analysis highlighted the deep complexity of the political and economic landscape of the elite relations within the country and between its regions thus requiring a more nuanced understanding of the situation on the ground, to ensure future reforms. The developments in Kazakhstan also exposed some alarming tendencies concerning the involvement of the CSTO, and its potential use for safeguarding authoritarianism across the post-Soviet space, as called for by Lukashenka's government. The brief offers some policy recommendations for domestic, regional and international stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** Protests in Kazakhstan, CSTO, Russia and Belarus

**Abbreviations:** *CSTO* - Collective Security Treaty Organisation; *CIS* - Commonwealth of Independent States; *OBO* – Oxford Belarus Observatory; *OST* – Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; *NATO* – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

## **BACKGROUND**

The recent protests in Kazakhstan took many by surprise. For a resource-rich country, a sharp rise in energy prices and ensuing consumer impoverishment, which contributed to the protests, have raised questions, but in truth these developments have been long overdue. What was truly out of the ordinary is the subsequent rapid rejigging of power configurations, and the deployment of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) troops to restore order. The former looked like a premeditated coup, and the latter were invited by Kazakhstan

authorities, raising serious security concerns among politicians, the military, experts and ordinary citizens. While for the international community these developments in Kazakhstan seem like another exercise of power by Russia; for Belarus this was the first deployment of its troops abroad, on a CSTO mission.

What are the implications of the protests in Kazakhstan for the post-Soviet region and Belarus in particular? What do they mean also for regional and international security, in the current circumstances? What recommendations should be offered to national and international stakeholders, regarding the CSTO's military involvement, to restore order? These and other questions were discussed during the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of the [Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#) (OST Research Centre) and the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO), with the support of the [GCRF COMPASS project](#), on January 20, 2022.

The event was moderated by **Prof. Chris Gerry** and the speakers of the event included **Valery Kavaleuski**, Head of the Cabinet, Representative of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on Foreign Affairs; **Dr Diana Kudaibergenova**, Lecturer in Political Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge; **Dr Tatiana Romanova**, Associate Professor in International Relations at St. Petersburg State University and the Higher School of Economics; and **Prof. Alexander Cooley**, Director of the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, New York, and Claire Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College. What follows below is a recap of the discussion, including the analysis of key issues, and recommendations on how to deal with the implications of the CSTO's deployment in Kazakhstan to restore order in the country.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE**

### **Grounds for the protests in Kazakhstan**

In their discussion about the current situation in Kazakhstan and its implications for Belarus and the wider neighbourhood, the speakers of the webinar noted several important developments.

Given the complexity of the situation on the ground, the causes for protests should not be framed as singular - i.e. only economic, or 'gas protests' as they were initially referred to.

The real causes are much wider, ranging from socio-political calls for dignity and calls for political reforms, to economic and strategic reasons, including relations with external stakeholders.

First, one needs to have a deeper understanding of the political, economic, and social landscape in Kazakhstan before making any generalisations or parallels with other regional developments. Not only does the investigation into the causes and consequences of the unrest and the authorities' response continue; there are also a lot of factors that need to be accounted for, in light of the complex landscape of the country and the wider region. Given its vast territory, Kazakhstan has a very intricate complex industrial and socio-economic context and relations in each region; there is also a competition for resources, and power distribution between different clans; as well as various ethno-cultural tensions within and between the regions. The protests, which began in western Kazakhstan, have a particular legacy of contentions associated with the precarious labour conditions in the oil/gas industries and related sectors; and they have been ongoing for at least a decade. From a domestic perspective, another complication concerns the types and involvement of labour unions, precipitated by the labour relations and strategies deployed by the informal labour unions, which do not have state institutions to represent them. Another factor is the role of transnational companies, which have their interests within this industrial region, who exert substantial influence on the Kazakhstani government to secure preferential treatment.

Second, similarly to Belarus the protests were self-organised and didn't have a single leader; they were self-reliant and initially peaceful. Later however, in Almaty, they became violent, engaged by all sorts of groups looking rather chaotic and disorganised. The question here is whether there might have been some deliberate provocations calling for public disorder, orchestrated externally, to justify the involvement of the CSTO.

Third, it is important not to try to frame these protests in accordance with some existing mainstream theories or frameworks. For instance, the reference to colour revolutions does not exactly fit with what has been taking place on the ground in Kazakhstan and would be misleading for developing a deeper understanding of the crisis: it did not occur around elections - as was the case with other revolutions in the recent past; similarly, it did not have a centralised authority or orchestrated unrest. The protests did though focus on the need for economic and political reform, to fight growing inequality and enduring corruption in the

country. At the same time, the protests were also about solidarity, and calls for dignity and justice.

### **Russia's role in Kazakhstani events**

With the unfolding events in Kazakhstan, Russia scored some significant advancements there. It demonstrated its ability to mobilise the political will of the CSTO member states and implemented a rapid and effective airlift of the military forces to Kazakhstan, for the first time in the history of the organisation. It did so without upsetting other political players, e.g. China and Turkey, and to the surprise of NATO, and its European and American allies. The CSTO demonstrated force, organisation and military superiority, stabilising the situation within a few days. The CSTO troops also left Kazakhstan as quickly as they had been mobilised, at the request of President Tokayev, this way legitimising his authority and indebting him to Putin for this efficient military response.

In terms of the evolution of events, initially the Kremlin articulated quite clearly that it was an internal affair of Kazakhstan, and Kazakhstani authorities should be capable of dealing with the crisis on their own. This was in line with Russia's foreign policy of non-interference. On the contrary, Lukashenka was a much more vocal advocate for the use of force, especially for the purpose of restoring order to thwart external 'provocations'. He was concerned about the developments in Kazakhstan and insisted that the protests were enticed by the West, to destabilise the country. This swayed the CSTO member states' decision in favour of intervening; however even then, it was clearly stipulated that the operation was to guard the infrastructures and strategically important objects (oil plants etc), and not to become the police force for the country. This helped to stabilise the situation and bolster the police engagement in Kazakhstan allowing them to focus on restoring public order.

In terms of Russia's civil society and its reaction to these events, due to the lack of internet and information available, there was much concern about the unfolding situation in Kazakhstan. As the protests became more violent, there was also a growing disappointment with the scale and the nature of events. It was largely reported by the media as a failed attempt to undertake a coup d'état underscoring the importance of order and peaceful transition.

From the internal point of view, it strengthened mounting scepticism about a 'Nazarbayev style of transition'. While the Kremlin has always been sceptical about that type of transition - with Nazarbayev stepping down from the presidency to become the Chairman of the country's Security Council, and still maintaining significant power of decision-making - for a time, it was seen as a workable solution ready for adoption by other authoritarian leaders. The recent events in Kazakhstan, however, have undermined that proposition, showing the fragility of internal power balances especially when external forces are involved.

### **Regional and global implications of the CSTO intervention**

Effectively this was the first deployment of the CSTO troops, including the Belarusian contingent. Russia advocated for a rapid engagement because any instability on its borders would be a significant risk for importing instability back home. As the protests grew more violent, the CSTO member states considered it important to react, to nip insurgency in the bud, believed to be externally orchestrated, from spreading. The involvement of the CSTO was to demonstrate to everyone that while the operation might have been incentivised by Russia, it was not directly a Russian operation. Such an approach helped to strengthen the position of Russia in Kazakhstan and made Tokayev indebted to the Kremlin for this operation. Russia managed to secure strategic objects (Cosmodrome Baikonur, in particular) and a number of other strategic economic assets Russian businesses have in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Russia reaffirmed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as its sphere of interest while the West took a position of observer, limiting themselves to issuing a few general statements.

In addition, the CSTO has demonstrated that it is capable of agile and rapid response: it transformed from a paper structure to a real organisation, confirming that it can undertake military operations effectively and efficiently, with a minimal loss of human life. More importantly, to date, the CSTO, being a regional organisation, has not been taken seriously by the West on at least two grounds. One is that it had always failed to respond to the call in the past: e.g. during the flare-up of the Karabakh war in 2020; or ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Lukashenka in particular, criticised it for its inability to defend its member countries' regimes to thwart insurgency when necessary. The Organisation was often criticised for being a 'talking shop' for its limited capabilities and inability to respond when called on.

The second reason CSTO has not been considered relevant, is that it was accused of being purely memetic in its nature, only copying NATO with a rapid reaction force, a secretariat and rotating chairmanship. However its membership has been through coercion, and its mandate often compromised. These were among the reasons why Western defence officials, including NATO, refused to engage with it or even to acknowledge it as a regional security organisation.

The CSTO involvement in Kazakhstan seems to have proved its 'use' by acting as a guarantor and protector of member states' regimes and their practices. The CSTO made a very quick decision to intervene on behalf of the Kazakh government in what seemed like an inter-elite dispute. It signalled to the Kazakhstani security services that Moscow backed Tokayev, that it was time for Nazarbayev and his family to go, and that further clan disputes would be inadvisable. Although in accordance with its mandate the CSTO troops were sent not to cease the protests but to guard the assets and strategic installations; this was a very symbolic gesture to intimidate further insurgency in the country, and to legitimise Tokayev's regime, to restore order in the country, with far-reaching implications for the future of democratic struggles across the region. In terms of the likely personal trade-off, Putin might ask for some favours from Kazakhstan to be returned in the future, thus ensuring further dependency of the country on the central pivot of power, Russia.

### **Events in Kazakhstan and their impact on Belarus**

The situation in Kazakhstan and the involvement of Belarus' forces in the CSTO operation, demonstrated a step-change in Belarus' status and role in regional and international security. This started with the hijacking of the Ryanair flight on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021, an event which sent shockwaves globally. The situation with Ryanair meant that the internal Belarusian crisis spilled over into the international sphere. Previously Lukashenka created risks for the people inside the country, but he was trying to demonstrate that he is not a threat to international peace and security and, *vice versa*, Minsk offered a potential platform of neutrality for peace negotiations. However, with the Ryanair case Lukashenka changed his path and brought his internal practices on to the international stage - recognised as a security threat by the international community. The second episode in repositioning Belarus in the security sphere happened with the migration crisis, engineered by Lukashenka, on the borders with the EU, Lithuania and Poland, in particular.



Now, participation of Belarus in the CSTO operation in Kazakhstan did not just negate its neutrality claims; it also violated its own Constitutional provision. Belarus' involvement in external operation contradicted the clause in the 1994 Constitution of Belarus which stipulated the state's neutrality in all external affairs. Lukashenka deliberately violated this clause by rendering support to the CSTO's mission in Kazakhstan, and also openly pledging to support Russia against Ukraine's aggression. Interestingly, this action also put in jeopardy the new provisions drafted and prepared by Lukashenka himself for the Constitutional Referendum on 27 February 2022.

Furthermore, Belarus has become a territory which can be potentially used for military actions against Ukraine from the North. Belarus has never been more dependent on or 'closer' to Russia than it is now. Last year Russia already had a sizable presence in the country: two military drill centres of semi-temporary or semi-permanent character were established in Belarus on an allegedly temporary basis. That was something that Lukashenka had objected to initially but had to concede to more recently under pressure from Putin. This resulted in signing 28 roadmaps with Russia as part of the rejuvenated Russia-Belarus Union State, and the stationing of a 100,000 troops on Belarus territory - allegedly for further training, and in preparation for a war with Ukraine, should this occur.

## CONCLUSIONS

The events in Kazakhstan have exposed the *complexity* of the situation on the ground, which requires a nuanced analysis of its possible causes and consequences, including in terms of socio-political and socio-economic reforms needed in the country; and the level of comprehensive strategy that the government and external donors could offer, to support peaceful transition of the country towards democracy and more transparent governance. In response, Tokayev's government began working with its own people; it is important to ensure that this relationship endures to bring peace, stability and prosperity to the country and the region.

The protests in Kazakhstan called for political and economic reforms, as well as for *dignity* and *justice*, this way indicating that it is indeed high time for the *mobilisation of civil society* across the entire post-Soviet space, to challenge and change the enduring authoritarian leaders of the past, and to demonstrate their illegitimacy in the eyes of the peoples. In particular, Lukashenka's actions, time and time again, prove that for the purpose of staying in power he

is willing not just to brutally thwart the protests, but also to violate the Constitution, and sacrifice the very sovereignty of Belarus for which the country has fought so hard.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The situation in Kazakhstan and the involvement of the CSTO especially are alarming, and represent a lesson for the West on how authoritarian governments and leaders across the post-Soviet space are likely to react to maintain their power and to thwart initially peaceful protests, including through the possibility of involving the CSTO in these operations.
- The CSTO should now be taken more seriously by the west, as the organisation which is set to maintain security across the region, and which should be acknowledged and engaged with, to ensure its operation based on democratic norms and regulated by international laws.
- It is essential to note Lukashenka's new rhetoric and the involvement in CSTO military operations. This demonstrates a sea change in his government policy - shifting from neutrality to pledging open support - including military - for Russia. For an unstable politician, like Lukashenka, these new developments carry a significant security threat for the future not only of Belarus and the post-Soviet region, but also the wider world, and require immediate action from the international community to support Belarusian democracy and to prevent the enticement of war in the region.

## **REFERENCES / SOURCES:**

1. Video recording of the discussion, accessed on 27 January 2022 available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCCkpZKtIX4>

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