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The Controlled Succession of Power in Kazakhstan

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On 9 June, Kazakhstan will hold the first presidential elections in which Nursultan Nazarbayev will not take part. Despite his resignation as president, he maintains political influence over the state and will control the succession process. The peaceful transfer of power will have a positive impact on the stability of Central Asia and will foster the EU's interests in the region.

After more than 28 years as president of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev announced his resignation on 19 March. A day later, in accordance with the constitution, his duties were taken over by the chairman of the Senate and member of the ruling Nur Otan party, Kassym Jomart-Tokayev. He set early presidential elections for 9 June. During an extraordinary meeting of Nur Otan on 23 April, the party's chairman, Nazarbayev, nominated Tokayev as its candidate in the upcoming elections, winning unanimous support from the other members.

The Conditions of Succession. Although Nazarbayev decided to resign, it was not because of a limit on his term of office—in 2007, parliament gave him the title “Father of the Nation” and legally guaranteed the possibility of a lifelong presidency. Neither was he at risk of losing an election—he had won previous elections with a huge advantage, for example, in 2015, he recorded 97.75% of the votes, though none of the elections in Kazakhstan's history has met democratic standards, according to the OSCE. Nazarbayev's aim is probably a controlled transfer of power inspired by the figure of Lee Kwan Yew, the first prime minister of Singapore who, upon leaving office in 1990 took the role of “Senior Minister” and kept control over the state for another decade.

Nazarbayev's resignation was conditioned by his age (79), his state of health, and the course of successions in other countries in the region. There, the leaders lost power as a result of revolution (Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan) or in connection with constitutional limits on the number of terms (Roza Otunbayeva and Almazbek Atambayev also in Kyrgyzstan). Two others—Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan and Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan—died while in office without ensuring the safety of their families. Nazarbayev drew a number of conclusions, especially after the death of Karimov in 2016. The Uzbek president did not prepare his succession, which caused competition among the ruling elite for power and his daughter, Gulnara, found herself in prison, charged with corruption.

The Course of Succession. Nazarbayev has been preparing his resignation for many years. According to laws from 2010, together with his family, he obtained civil, criminal, and tax immunity. In 2013, he appointed as chairman of the Senate—formally the second person in the country—his close associate, Kassym Jomart-Tokayev. In 2016, another of Nazarbayev's close associates—Karim Massimov—became chairman of the National Security Committee (NSC), the body managing internal security and the intelligence structures. Nazarbayev also strengthened the role of the country's Security Council as a constitutional coordinating body in the field of security and foreign policy at the president's office, and then personally took over the role of its chairman. In this way, he monopolised the control of power. Due to his

institutional place (as head of the ruling party and Security Council) and importance in Kazakhstan's identity policy, Nazarbayev will probably retain lifelong influence in the state.

The authoritarian nature of Kazakhstan's political system means Tokayev's nomination by the ruling party guarantees him victory in the presidential election. Their quick appointment also proves his strong position among the ruling elite, based on Nazarbayev's patronage. During his succession, Tokayev will seek to strengthen his legitimacy to govern both through electoral mandate and care for legal requirements (on 23 April, he asked the Constitutional Court to confirm his passive electoral right).

However, Tokayev's age (67) will limit the duration of his rule, which increases the potential role of more of Nazarbayev's people, such as Karim Masimov (head of the NSC and an ethnic Uyghur), Samat Abish Satybalda (Massimov's deputy and nephew of Nazarbayev), Askar Mamin (prime minister), Timur Kulibayev (husband of Dinara Nazarbayeva, daughter of Nursultan Nazarbayev) or Dariga Nazarbayeva, who on 20 March succeeded Tokayev as chairwoman of the Senate. The continuity of the presidential succession will depend on the loyalty of the power sector to Nazarbayev's family after his death.

Challenges in Domestic and Foreign Policy. The Kazakh authorities will try to maintain a balance between Russia and China. This is evidenced by the first official visits abroad after Nazarbayev's resignation were Tokayev on 3 April to Russia and Massimov on 9 April to China. On the one hand, Kazakhstan will remain involved in the Russian integration structures, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). On the other hand, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative will remain a key instrument of economic development for Kazakhstan. A challenge will be Russia's policy aimed at deepening integration within the EAU and related political pressure. Relations with China will remain complicated by the situation of Kazakhs and Uyghurs, repressed by Chinese authorities, and the rise of China's political and military involvement in the region.

The challenges for the Kazakh authorities in politics inside the country continue to be stabilising the economy and its currency, the Tenge, and ensuring security in the context of terrorist threats, ethnic tensions, and anti-government protests. The directions of socio-economic development designated by Nazarbayev in the medium and long term (until 2050) will probably be continued, as will the transition of the country to the Latin alphabet, planned for 2025.

Conclusions. Nazarbayev's resignation began a transitional period in Kazakhstan's political system. The stability of the state during the period of succession is to come from strengthening the role of state institutions and preserving an important role for Nazarbayev in public life as a factor guaranteeing continuity of the system. The former president, thanks to his position, will authorise the actions of the new authorities while standing at the head of political institutions (Nur Otan, the Security Council) and maintaining influence on power (through the head of the NSC, Massimov). The importance of the family and business clan system will be preserved. Succession probably will not increase the democratisation of Kazakhstan or weaken the autocratic system built by Nazarbayev.

The process of a controlled succession is important in the international context because Kazakhstan's destabilization could be used instrumentally by Russia and China. For example, under the pretext of a possible deterioration of security or using the status of the Russian minority in Kazakhstan (23% of the population), Russia may seek to increase its military presence in the country or put political pressure on its authorities. An element of the power transition in Kazakhstan will thus be the continuation of the multi-vector foreign policy and strategic partnership with Russia.

If the transfer of power in Kazakhstan is successful, it will stand as a succession model for other leaders in the region wanting to ensure the stability of their countries and security of their families, such as the presidents of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, or Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Greater predictability in succession in undemocratic Central Asian states would reduce the risk of their destabilisation and subsequent vulnerability to external pressure. The actions taken by Nazarbayev, however, also show that it is a long-term and multi-faceted process requiring legal changes and personnel movements, which also depend on the public mood and international environment. Such a succession model probably will not be used in Kyrgyzstan, which is the most democratic state in the region.

Similar solutions will be difficult to apply in Russia as Vladimir Putin ends his fourth term in 2024 because he does not play a role similar to that of Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan—he is not an element of national identity and his family is not involved in politics. However, the Kazakhstan model of legal and institutional reforms preparing the state for succession could also be used in Russia to make constitutional changes and abolish restrictions on the president's term of office or in preparing a special state function for Putin to continue to rule other than as president.