

# The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

## Major Unrest Breaks Out in Kazakhstan Prompting the Sacking of the Country's Government and the Declaration of a State of Emergency

Public demonstrations in Kazakhstan that began as protests against the removal of state subsidies on fuel have escalated into violent riots and uprisings against the incumbent government. The unrest stems from a sentiment among some of the country's citizenry that while Kazakhstan is a resource rich country, the incredibly vast petroleum fields, mineral, and metal deposits that have made a segment of the Kazakh population wealthy have been prevented from transferring equitable benefits to the majority of the population. When the government lifted its subsidies on liquified petroleum gas (LPG), as part of President Tokayev's economic reforms, prices for the LPG nearly doubled almost immediately. Tokayev had also promised political reforms to the country, which had not yet materialized. The shift in demonstrations from protesting economic conditions to an uprising with loud political tones that are demanding further reforms has prompted the sacking of the country's government and the declaration of a state of emergency, with many observers concerned with the worrying levels of violence taking place.

There has been an acknowledgement from issue experts that the rhetoric of the unrest is similar to ones that have emerged in other ex-Soviet countries that have attempted to move away from overly Moscow-friendly autocratic governments. As is often the case during a popular rejection of the government in these instances, some Kazakh officials and Russian state media have said that the protesters are part of a foreign terrorist plot and are accusing the West of generating the uprising. Russia has deployed paratroopers to Kazakhstan to suppress the unrest at an invitation from Tokayev, as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO is a security alliance between Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Police officials from Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, have reported that dozens of protesters have been killed, 1,000 people have been injured, 400 hospitalized, and 62 are in intensive care. It is also suspected that at least 2,000 have already been arrested, and internet services have been severed across the country.

Kazakhstan is one of the largest oil, coal, and gas producers in the world. The major international oil corporations – Chevron, ExxonMobile, and Shell – all operate in the country. U.S. companies account for 30% of the oil extracted in Kazakhstan and would potentially be negatively affected by a decrease in production from riots. Major petroleum infrastructures also traverse Kazakhstan and connect markets in Russia and China. It is the largest producer of uranium; global market prices for the nuclear energy metal rose 8% over the first two days of riots in the country. Since its separation from the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan has attracted hundreds of billions of dollars in foreign investment.

Many of the demonstrations are protesting against the autocratic, leader-for-life government. The longtime ruler of the country stepped down in 2019, but was still the head of the nation's Security Council and viewed as the real power behind the scenes. He, and the current president's entire cabinet resigned in response to the uprisings, but this has done little to satisfy the protesters. Western countries and human rights groups have often been critical of Kazakhstan for its authoritarian government and stifling control on freedoms of expression. Officials from the United States and the European Union have condemned the violence and worry has been voiced that a harder suppression by security forces may be forthcoming.