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Kazakhstan, a significant defeat of the West in Central Asia



Sources: CEPRID

A country that is little talked about, Kazakhstan, has been the one that has started the year in a big way. A series of demonstrations, initially protesting the rising price of fuel, ended up turning into a struggle between oligarchic clans and a defeat of the West's aspirations for a new settlement after the Afghanistan fiasco.

Almost a month after this, we must start with a principle that should be taken into account when talking about any of the countries of the former USSR in Central Asia ending in "stan" (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan itself) and that

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is summarized in six axes that are repeated in any of them: 1) They acquire a relevant role at the geopolitical level in the West after the withdrawal from Afghanistan because they have been left without a place to locate their troops. 2) In all of them there are recurrent tensions on ethnic and/or religious grounds in which, at times, the Russian minority plays a role of greater or lesser importance. 3) In all of them there are important oligarchic clans, almost always linked to different ethnic and/or religious clans. 4) Since these clans have enriched themselves to insulting extremes after the large-scale privatization practiced after the disappearance of the USSR, there is a great social inequality that generates periodic economic and social tensions. 5) By the fact of being where they are located, they have practiced with greater or lesser intensity the "multivectorial" policy or, what is the same, they have tried to balance their alliances with the West and with the East, with Russia fundamentally in this case. 6) They have a common past within the Ottoman Empire until the appearance of the USSR and, later, the penetration of Turkey into them is an attempt to rebuild what Pan-Turkism calls "the Great Turan".

So, in order.

Britain's role

After the Western withdrawal in Afghanistan there was a country that found itself, literally, with its ass in the air: it did not know where to place the 4,000 soldiers it had in that country. While the US moved its own to its bases in the Persian Gulf countries and its European vassals (because they are) withdrew theirs to their countries since there were a few hundred, the United Kingdom of Great Britain, in full neo-colonialist effervescence after Brexit, did not want to do the same although finally it had no other choice. But he wanted to remedy it and return to the area. The only country in Central Asia where it has big interests is Kazakhstan.

To do this, it used its new national security strategy approved in March 2021 that breaks with what until then had been British foreign policy because, from that moment, two countries became, officially, its enemies: Russia and China. In this order. Russia has since been considered "the main threat to British security" while China is "a systemic challenge". The document in question is called "Britain in the Age of Competition. Integrated security, defence, development and foreign policy review". But the interesting

thing is that there is a significant increase in the budget for the "special operations" of its armed forces that can operate anywhere in the world. It should come as no secret that the British are in Ukraine, almost competing with the US to see who arms the Nazis there more and better, and that they have been the quickest to support Poland in the refugee crisis with Belarus.

What is a secret, or at least very little known, is that Britain has great economic interests in Kazakhstan (more than the US) such as, for example, uranium. Kazakhstan is the country that exports the most uranium in the world. There are 13 companies that extract it and of them only two are Kazakhs. The rest are foreigners. But two Brits are the most important, followed by others from Canada and the US. There are many other sectors where the British presence is the main one, which is why the ineffable Tony Blair, former British prime minister, was for several years an advisor to former Kazakh President Nazarbayev.

And that is why Britain has long been the preferred haven of Kazakh oligarchs, persecuted by their country's justice or not. This is where members of Kazakhstan's most powerful oligarchic clan, that of former President Nazarbayev, have their main residences abroad, where they divert much of the money they make – it is said that this clan controls 55% of the country's wealth – and where oligarchs who have some problem with justice for their robbery travel. This is the case of Mukhtar Ablyazov, one of the most corrupt oligarchs.

This guy is the classic oligarch of each and every one of the countries of the East and the former republics of the USSR: he goes from businessman to minister, he becomes an entrepreneur again, he becomes a minister again, etc. In short: because of the struggle of clans, or oligarchs, he ends up deposed, accused of corruption, abuse of power, and convicted. But since he was a man from the West, the West quickly came out in his support and managed to get him pardoned less than a year later. But he returned to the beaten track, again convicted but not arrested because he fled to Britain, where he was granted political asylum. By virtue of this, he organized his party and his pressure lobby, very active in the European Parliament and where, as is also usual with everything that smells of the East, he is well received by the entire political spectrum. Especially if Russia is involved.

But in Britain he also made his own and so upset his hosts that they threatened to arrest him and withdraw his asylum. Abliazov fled again, but not far away: to France. Russia requested his extradition for economic crimes, but that was enough to grant him the asylum card arguing that he was a political persecuted, you know, by the most villainous of all villains: Putin. Sure, he put his lobby in the European Parliament at full sail (1), organized his party and put his headquarters as close as he could to Kazakhstan: in Ukraine. It is not surprising, therefore, the role that this country has played in the Kazakh revolts.

From Ukraine, Abliazov has been making announcements of mobilizations and protests for "a change of regime" that on very few occasions have been followed by the population, despite having had a not inconsiderable support: that of the United States. From the page of the embassy of that country in Kazakhstan, each and every one of these initiatives has been published with the excuse that Us citizens could be involved in them. The last one, with great detail in terms of cities, places and hours was on December 16.

That day nothing happened, but fifteen days later and almost in the same cities and places announced by the embassy. The interesting thing is that as soon as the riots began that information disappeared from the embassy's website.

Workers' struggles as a cover-up of the struggle of oligarchic clans

One of the most combative cities in the country, and where in practice the revolts began is Janaozen. Already in 2011 there were workers' mobilizations in this city, repressed with several deaths, with the increase in wages – especially in the oil sector – as the main visible demand.

Kazakhstan has an interesting history of workers' struggle and that goes beyond that 2011, although it is from there when they multiply and travel throughout this decade leading to the prohibition of trade unions and even the Communist Party. That was during Nazarbayev's tenure. Already in 2020 there were strikes in industrial and oil sectors, which extended in 2021 to the gold mines. However, the difference between them is that in the latter there was much less repression, although there was.

The interesting thing is that these workers' struggles have always been used by the oligarchs in their internal struggles, even within the same clan. This is what has happened now, that a social demand for the rise in the price of fuel has become a struggle between clans and a pulse between West and East at the geopolitical level, with a small Turkish extension. That is why I used to say that wage demands were the visible faces of other less visible but much more forceful struggles. It is something, the struggle between clans, which has multiplied by a thousand since the disappearance of the USSR in all its former republics.

In 2011 this workers' revolt was used to clean up one of those clans that was linked to Nazarbayev himself and that affected, neither more nor less, than one of his sons-in-law. Nazarbayev was charged, figuratively speaking, as corrupt taking advantage of the circumstance. But nothing happened to him, not least because he chose to leave the country and leave... to Britain, the golden paradise of the Kazakh oligarchs. When Nazarbayev left power in 2019, the son-in-law apparently took advantage of his golden and luxurious exile to become an opponent of the new government.

The rapid expansion of the revolt cannot be seen as coordination because, in Kazakhstan (and in the rest of the "stan" countries) it is always more than one who pulls the strings, inside and outside the country. And there are not always the same strategies, but rather different. In this particular case, three bands: among the pro-Western, the pro-Turks and among the pro-Easterners. With the nuances that you want to put to these qualifiers.

The initial demands of the demonstrators were reasonable and the Tokayev government, although it reacted at first like all governments, a few days later relented, proposing the resignation of its members. But that did not calm the spirits, but those who pulled the strings went for everything. Especially in the south of the country. That in some cities the security apparatus disappeared from the scene was very surprising, as was the appearance of armed demonstrators. By whom and where are still outstanding questions, although the victorious clan does not hesitate to accuse the Islamists of these behind all this (with a veiled accusation to Britain and the US for having moved Islamist fighters from Syria to Afghanistan and, from here, to Kazakhstan). But although this is one of the official versions, another is that the head of the country's security facilitated and consented to everything, so when things became a little clear, especially after the arrival in the country

of the troops of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), he was arrested for "high treason". And his relationship with the United States and with today's President Biden in particular was uncovered.

The parallel with what happened in Ukraine in 2014 is more than evident, as well as the external and internal implications.

The CSTO ordered a stop... with a Chinese agreement?

There was a time when it seemed that the government was not sustained, clans were bidding everywhere and the revolt was spreading. Until an unexpected actor made his entrance on the scene: the CSTO. This was decisive because none of the clans in contention, except the one in power, even thought that something like this could happen: it was not done in Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh war with Azerbaijan or in Belarus, but now, Armenia and Belarus being members of the CSTO.

A fast and effective presence, although with many questions still to be answered. For example, if Russia knew what was being forged (not in vain almost 25% of the population of Kazakhstan is Russian) and had everything greased to operate at the right time. For example, whether that movement was consulted with China or not. Because if China was aware of it, we are in another stage of geopolitical relations, whether the West wants it or not. There will be no more Ukraines, no more coups, no more color revolutions, no more color revolutions, or anything like that in that area. It is one step away from the West's elimination from Central Asia.

It would not be surprising if Russia had not consulted yes communicated to China the presence of the CSTO in Kazakhstan. What the Chinese media has been publishing goes in that direction, without being so explicit. The foreign ministers of the two countries are known to have been in close contact throughout the revolt and China's official stance is that "China and Russia, as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and neighboring and friendly countries of Central Asia, must prevent chaos or war from breaking out in the region."

Here we must look at two things: first, its veto power in the UN Security Council is clearly reflected, that is, it is warning Western countries (the US, France and Great Britain) not to go around because nothing they propose will come out. Second, when he talks about "neighboring and friendly countries" he is talking about borders and says what is the minimum common that they have, to avoid chaos or war in the region. China is sending clear signals to the usual suspects, read the West, because what has not been told is that the area where the Kazakh revolt was most important was in the south, centered in the city of Almaty. And all of this south, which is made up of two provinces, East Kazakhstan and Almaty, is the border between Kazakhstan and China. But not with any part of China, but with Xinjiang. Just the crux of the matter to understand the Western campaign against China and the ways to weaken this country.

In Kazakhstan it is already openly recognized that this is where the protests have been most violent and where there has been more Islamic presence. Turkey itself recognises that this is where its companies are most present. And it is here that the Kazakh government says that there have been "training camps for Islamic extremists" coming from both the Middle East (especially Syria) and Afghanistan in figures ranging between 20,000 and 8,000 that, for sure, will be exaggerated but that indicate that when the river sounds, water carries. Regardless of whether the channel is large or small.

China is the country that has the most borders with others, with up to 14 countries. Therefore, everything that happens in neighboring countries is important to her. That is why China always says that with its neighbors it talks about avoiding "the three evils: terrorism, extremism and separatism." This is directly related to China's national security or what is the same: China is not going to sit idly by in anything that happens in them. Especially since one of the things that the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers talked about was that if there are other revolts of this type in the area, it is not the CSTO that intervenes, but the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China is not in the CSTO, china is not in the SCO. That's going to go to a much higher level. And decisive.

The Politics of Contentment

In short: that there has been a coordination of internal and external forces is evident. That a struggle that may have had its origin in popular demands and workers' struggles has

developed on a very different terrain is real. That in that field the main players have been the clans is obvious, as well as that each clan has sought a different support, in the East or in the West. We must never forget that "color revolutions" always have, what is always said, with local accomplices. Following the demise of the USSR in all its former republics, including Russia, there was a large-scale privatization in which former communist leaders became oligarchs. This is the case of Nazarbayev, who became the owner and lord of the country after independence.

In his speech after the revolt, President Tokayev formally accused Nazarbayev's clan of having formed "a club of the super-rich, even by international standards." Without expressly mentioning Nazarbayev, his entire "entourage" (word used, that is, everyone around him but not him) has been marked. That is to say, it is recognized - and this is a victory for the workers, albeit a Pyrrhic one - that oligarchic groups have become the main beneficiaries of the disappearance of the USSR and of the capitalist economy followed since then. Therefore, all these clans "must pay homage to the people of Kazakhstan." To this end, and with surprising speed, the Kazakh government has approved a special fund, called "Kazajstan jalkyna" (To the people of Kazakhstan) for the oligarchs to make "voluntary deliveries of capital to meet the needs of citizens", adding that these amounts will be on an annual basis. The first deliveries worth one million euros have already been made. A sign that the oligarchs have seen the ears of the wolf.

At the same time, and although Nazarbayev is neither mentioned nor touched, and that was one of the main slogans of the first protesters, that Nazarbayev leave, the government is now cleaning several apartments and companies of the presence of his sons-in-law, nephews and so on. That it is the losing clan is undoubted. To such an extent that there is already talk of recovering the name of the capital, officially called Nur-Sultan (in homage to Nazarbayev), after the old one of Astana and that its name disappears from the airport and the main university. At the moment they are nothing more than proposals.

It is not the only step that the government is taking to please the protesters: a freeze on the salaries of senior government officials (ministers, deputy ministers, governors, etc.) is announced for 5 years, the definitive cancellation of the increase in fuel rates and the presentation before September of a series of economic measures that "help reduce social inequality". Along with this, small pieces are offered to the protesters such as stopping the

privatization of two power plants that had been offered to companies in the United Arab Emirates.

And what do the Turks paint in this?

One of the data that the government is publishing is that during the revolt buildings and companies owned by Russia and China, but not Turkish or Western, were attacked. Of course, there are images of it and the Turks themselves are alarmed by the visibility of this fact, which gives rise to the official discourse that there has been an Islamic presence. If during the revolt Turkey reproached the "anti-Islamic repression" it is now seeing the ears of the wolf. "Turkish states under threat," it is said in Turkey. Nazarbayev did one of the things he did was to ally with Turkey not only for an economic issue, but to launch the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States or Organization of Turkish States. As a first step, in 2017, a law was passed that changes the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin, based on the Turkish alphabet, in a gradual process that would have to end by 2025.

Turkey now fears that this process will be reversed or done much more slowly. Even that it gets stuck. If Turkey took an important step in the Nagorno-Karabakh war by supporting Azerbaijan, it has now regressed exponentially much further. Especially since within the CSTO is Armenia, which has also sent its soldiers to Kazakhstan. Something more than an irony and a warning.

Note

(1) On 20 January the European Parliament adopted a resolution on "the violation of human rights" in Kazakhstan and asked the EU foreign policy officer to visit the country "to assess the situation and contribute to the release of the detained protesters".

Alberto Cruz is a journalist, political scientist and writer. His new book is "The Witches of the Night. The 46th "Taman" Regiment of Soviet aviators in World War II", published by La Caída with the collaboration of CEPRID and which is already in its third edition. Orders can be made at libros.lacaida@gmail.com or ceprid@nodo50.org It can also be found in bookstores.

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