Kazakhstan and Perestroika: a chance at “heroism” lost?

On 17-18 December 1986, a students' uprising took place in Almaty, the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KazSSR). The pretext for the riots (commonly referred to as the December events) was the appointment of the non-Kazakh and non-Kazakhstan "person from outside", G. Kolbin, to the post of the First Secretary of the KazSSR Communist Party. The former First Secretary, D. Konayev, who had been leader of the Republic since 1964, was removed from his post "due to the pension age". The change of leadership in Kazakhstan happened as a result of the rotation of cadres' launched by M. Gorbachev to realise the newly proclaimed perestroika course.

The political processes in the centre of the USSR were a mere echo in Kazakhstan, which always remained a Soviet periphery. Although the centrifugal administrative structures never granted much power to local authorities, the patterns of centre-periphery relationships varied at different periods of the Soviet history. From very early on (beginning of the 1920s), Moscow had little faith in the Kazakh political elite, a group that continued to be actively engaged with establishing the imagined Central Asian Republic, with its centre in Turkestan city, independent from the Soviet Russia. The province was smiled at as pan-Turkism and its initiators and supporters were repressed. As a result, the Kazakh elite remained under suspicion of nationalism.

Perestroika in Kazakhstan: a shadow of nationalism

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