

# Kazakhstan and Perestroika: was 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-Kazakhstani “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 leading 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.

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THERE ARE VARIOUS CONTRADICTIONING VIEWS in academic milieu about the decisive factors that bring strong and complex politics, as the USSR, to a halt. Taking into account the complexity of the perestroika course that resulted in the USSR's collapse, this article focuses on the study of the political situation in the KazSSR in the second part of the 1980s. This research is based upon the data extrapolated from the recorded interviews with the participants and witnesses of the December events, results of the three focus-groups, content-analysis of the Kazakh and all-union periodicals of those years and memories of the members of the KazSSR Communist Party.<sup>2</sup>

Most publications on perestroika in Kazakhstan are heavily ideological; think of J. Kydyralina, who focuses on the national question, while A. Shakhanova investigates the religious situation in the Republic during perestroika.<sup>3</sup> Both authors base their research on the archival documents of the KGB in the KazSSR and the archives of the KazSSR Communist Party. Still the perestroika period has not been given much attention by Kazakhstani researchers, for which there have been some systemic political reasons.

## Perestroika in Kazakhstan: a shadow of nationalism

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 Kazakhstani political elite, who continued to be actively engaged with establishing the imagined Central Asian Republic, with its centre in Turkestan city, independent from the Soviet Russia. The project was labelled as pan-Turkism and its initiators and supporters were repressed.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the Kazakh elite remained under suspicion of nationalism.



The voices in support of this opinion were heard in our recorded interviews: “...Moscow had always treated Kazakhstan with suspicion and considered the probability of

escalation of ‘nationalism’ in the Republic to be very high.” And so, the republican national elite was deprived of decision-making abilities in the political sphere. Only later were ethnic Kazakhs promoted to the post of First Secretary of the KazSSR Communist Party: Zh. Shayahmetov in 1946-1954 and D. Konayev in 1964-1986. The history of distrust towards the Kazakh elite was most likely the key reason for Gorbachev's decision to appoint an ethnic Russian (and former First Secretary of the regional party committee in a small Russian town Ulyanovsk), G. Kolbin, to the post of First Secretary of the KazSSR Communist Party in 1986. The decision seems to have been supported by the information coming out of the Republic on the increased “threat of nationalism” in Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup>

Even though there was an ethnic Kazakh candidate, N. Nazarbayev (at that time leading the Council of Ministers of the KazSSR), Gorbachev appointed Kolbin and later claimed it to have been Konayev's initiative. But, despite the fact that Kolbin now occupied the post of the First Secretary of the KazSSR Communist Party (which he held until 1989), he mustered little authority and Nazarbayev remained the unofficial leader of the Republic. Nazarbayev continued in his attempts

to convince Gorbachev of his loyalty and support for the perestroika course. In his turn, Kolbin was confronted by the Kazakh youth who protested his appointment; he had to suppress these protests, and in so doing, distanced himself from the Kazakh elite. Furthermore, he spent his whole tenure as First Secretary competing against former-First Secretary Konayev's enduring popularity.



According to Nazarbayev, his suppression of the students' revolt in Almaty in December 1986 should have been enough proof of his loyalty to Moscow. Nazarbayev was the first to condemn the rebellion in the media and call the protesters “extremists and hooligans”.<sup>6</sup> Later, after independence in 1991, and after his appointed as President of the new Republic, he would radically change his position, but at the time of perestroika he maintained his accusations of nationalism among the protesters, because that is what the Kremlin evidently wanted. By doing this, he launched a new campaign against various expressions of nationalism in the party apparatus and in the system of education in the Republic. The protesters were brought to court and prosecuted.<sup>7</sup>

More evidence of Nazarbayev's determination to prove his loyalty, was the principle change in his position. Never openly discussing the problems in the Republic during perestroika, he later suddenly became the transmitter of the “national interests of the Kazakh nation”. He claimed that he had always been concerned about the future of the Kazakh people and their language and had always been an active opponent of Kremlin's political domination.<sup>8</sup> Our content-analysis of the periodicals and other open sources for the period of 1982-1991 did not reveal a single fact to support this claim.

Despite the fact that after 1991 Nazarbayev re-claimed his image as representative of the Kazakh people, the role of the Kazakh youth in the December events still remains understudied. More than this, many facts that could potentially shed light on what happened during those days in the Kazakhstani capital, still remain unknown. The most common versions are: (1) It was democracy in its essence, whereby a movement of young people, who believed in the slogans of perestroika (*glasnost*, freedom of speech, democracy), expressed their disagreement with the decision to appoint Kolbin to the post of First Secretary; (2) It was a movement of nationalist character, showing the Kazakh people's dissatisfaction about their status and, especially, the disappointing position of the Kazakh language; (3) The rebellion was organised by the republican party elite, which fought for the leading positions in the Republic. During Konayev's reign, the republican elite had gained more advantageous positions vis-à-vis the Kremlin and enjoyed certain levels of independence, which they were not inclined to give up.

The campaign against the participants of the December events and their supporters continued during the whole period of perestroika. As a result,

the republican elite and wider sections of the population, followed the perestroika developments, but were never the vanguard of the reform. However, the diminishing leadership role of the CPSU in the state and society, as well as the weakening position of Gorbachev himself, influenced the events in the KazSSR. Thus, M. Shakhnov, the famous



writer and the Deputy of the Congress of People's Deputies managed to establish the Commission of Investigation of the December events in 1989 and rejected the accusation of nationalism among the young protesters. As a result, all participants were acquitted from all charges and released from prison, or hospital (as the case was for many). Those who had perished during or after the events, had their names cleared posthumously.

Despite everything, the ideas of separatism did not gain wide support in the Republic. There was no wide public debate on the issues discussed at the Congresses of People's Deputies in Moscow in 1989-1991. Lacking their own vision on the reform, the party elite continued to support Gorbachev's course and did not reveal quests for political independence. Consequently, the Republic was the last one to announce its independence from the USSR, in 1991, when *de facto* the USSR had itself already ceased to exist.

## Gorbachev's course in the memories of Kazakhstani people

The attitudes towards perestroika and its outcomes appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, many common people were rather passive towards the new course, acting as mere observers. On the other hand, not everyone supported Gorbachev's course and many people were sceptical about the Kremlin's policies. However, eventually the majority of the population became disillusioned by perestroika; despite Gorbachev's endless speeches on television, his proclaimed decisions remained unimplemented.

Nevertheless, the people's perceptions about the Soviet economic and social system remain unanimously positive; people still warmly recollect their lives under socialism, although they can also remember shortages and poor quality goods. The population of contemporary Kazakhstan is still unwilling to consider their lives in the USSR in a negative way, and therefore, in the peoples' perception, “perestroika” began in the 1990s, after the USSR's disintegration.

The KazSSR elite feared losing their status quo and finding themselves on the Soviet periphery, but opposing the Kremlin was an even more frightening option, to the extent that they were ready to sacrifice the interests of the Republic and its population. As a result, the current political elite, the great part of which built up their fortunes in Soviet times, lacks a “heroic past”, based on which it could start writing a new national history. This probably also explains why the Kazakhstani officialdom does not demonstrate much enthusiasm about any research on perestroika.



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## Notes

- 1 The author is grateful to VolkswagenStiftung for sponsoring the project *The History of Perestroika in Central Asia*.
- 2 Konayev, D. 1992. O moiom vremeni [About my time]. Almaty: 362; Kamalidenov, Z. 2011. Dorogami sud'by [On the roads of fate]. Almaty: 135.
- 3 Kydyralina, J. 2008. “Ethnicity and Power. The social and ethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan during the Soviet period”. *Social Sciences and the Present*, 5:120-128; Shakhanova, A. 2009. “Politika partiinyh i gosudarstvennyh organov Kazahstana v otnoshenii islama v period ‘perestroiki’ (1986-1990)”. [The policies of party and state organs of Kazakhstan in relation to Islam in the period of ‘perestroika’ (1986-1990)]. *Vestnik Evraziiskogo Gumanitarnogo Instituta*, 4:13-18.
- 4 Beisembayev, K. 1976. *Essays on the history of socio-political and philosophical thought of Kazakhstan*. Almaty: “Kazakhstan” publishing house, p.278-290.
- 5 Kydyralina, J. 2010. Natsiya i istoriya. [Nation and history] Extracts, 4 Feb., retrieved from <http://contur.kz/node/1159>.
- 6 Interview with N. Nazarbayev. 1987. *Druzha narodov*. No 9.
- 7 Kshibekov, D. 1987. “Internatsionalizm i natsionalizm: o dekabr'skikh sobytiyakh 1986 g. v Almaty.” [Internationalism and nationalism: on December events of 1986 in Almaty] *Globus*. No 21; Abdylgaliev, B., Zhumakhan, N., Korpebauly, B., Sarym, A. 2006. *86-Jeltoksan. Stat'i i publikatsii za 1986-1995 gg.* [86-Jeltoksan. Articles and publications for 1986-1995] Almaty: Fond Altynbeka Sarsenbaeva: 328.
- 8 Nazarbayev, N. 1991. *Bez pravdy i levyyh*. [Without right and left] Almaty: 361.

Above, left and right: Images of the 1986 protest, known as the December events. Photos courtesy of the Central State Archive of Almaty.

Below: A scene depicting the 1986 Jeltoqsan (December) events. Republic Square, Almaty, Kazakhstan. CC Attribution-ShareAlike.