

LEVEL OF SOCIAL CONFLICT POTENTIAL IN KAZAKHSTAN: POSSIBLE RISKS AND THREATS

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Introduction

As world experience shows, countries that embark on the path of socioeconomic and political modernization are likely to encounter a rise in social tension and the emergence of numerous conflicts.

The Republic of Kazakhstan is well versed in the prevention of these phenomena. Nevertheless, modernization in Kazakhstan is bringing to the fore other problems relating to efficient conflict management and finding peaceful constitutionally legal ways to carry out comprehensive reform of society.

It is a well-known fact that the aggravation of contradictions and the political conflicts in the post-Soviet states, which in some cases have led to armed conflicts, are undoubtedly related both to historical prerequisites and to crisis phenomena in the development of the sociocultural, soci-

oeconomic, and political spheres of public relations. However, we think that one of the main reasons for the emergence of the domestic political conflicts in the CIS countries has been the poor development of ways to prevent and regulate them. So strategies and efficient mechanisms must be sought for taking preventive measures against possible social upheavals and the outbreak of conflict action and for reaching a consensus among the political entities. It goes without saying that an entirely conflict-free society with ideal social relations is a utopia. Institutionalized conflicts are a different matter however, since they potentially perform a constructive function and help society to progress.

The author of this article concentrates on potentially destructive conflicts, the settlement of which could be accompanied by social upheavals.

Main Factors and Reasons for the Emergence of Conflicts in Kazakhstan

World science offers a variety of methods and models for identifying the reasons for conflicts and measuring the level of social tension that can be used for analyzing this problem within the framework of the following blocks.¹

The first block consists of indicators that characterize the subjective sphere: social deprivation and frustration as an expression of the dissatisfaction an individual or social group feels about the current standard of living, as well as worries about the gap between expectations and real possibilities. These indicators are mainly recorded by assessing the degree to which people's vitally important needs are being met and their expectations of finding a solution to the problems that affect their interests.

In this block, indicators of the state of people's social existence and their living conditions must be taken into account.

We studied the following parameters in order to discover the reasons for the conflicts in Kazakhstan and identify their characteristics in the context of the first block:

An analysis of the population's assessment of the current economic situation has shown that, on the whole, most citizens feel positive about the socioeconomic course being pursued in the country; 25.3% of the respondents think that it is "absolutely correct," while 62.9% think that it is "generally correct, but requires some adjustment." Only 4.0% of the polled citizens think that Kazakhstan is developing "in an absolutely incorrect direction."²

However, despite the positive assessment of the economic situation, 49.8% of the respondents mention unemployment and 74.9% price hikes and inflation in response to the question, "Which problems personally concern you most of all?"

Indeed, unemployment is characteristic of any economic system. But when more than half of the respondents feel concerned about it and 54.9% think that unemployment and poverty are capable of disrupting order and civil peace in Kazakhstan and causing a social conflict, it can be concluded that the problem goes beyond labor relations and is acquiring rather severe sociopolitical features.

A total of 74.9% of the respondents think that there is a yawning gap among the poor, middle, and wealthy classes.

So poverty and unemployment are still the main reasons for social tension in Kazakhstan. The gap that has appeared between the rich and the poor and the increase in economic inequality are perceptible aggravating factors and could become a potent source of social tension.

An analysis of the population's assessment of the political situation showed that 18.8% of the respondents feel optimistic about the democratization process in Kazakhstan, while 50.5% are "quite optimistic;" the number of the polled who are "pessimistic" and "quite pessimistic" totaled 18%.

Based on the results of the sociological poll, it can be concluded that the population has a high level of trust in the state power bodies, but this stands to reason, since the government is focusing

¹ See: E.I. Stepanov, "Metodologiya analiza sotsialnykh konfliktov," in: *Konflikty v sovremennoi Rossii. Problemy analiza i regulirovaniia*, URSS, Moscow, 2000.

² This article refers to the results of the sociological poll conducted by the International Institute of Regional Studies, Open Society, ordered by the Kazakhstan Institute of Sociological Research under the Kazakhstan President. Based on this poll, the Kazakhstan Institute of Sociological Research under the Kazakhstan President prepared a brochure called *Uroven sotsialnoi konfliktnosti: potentsialnye riski i ugrozy (po rezul'tatam sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia*, Almaty, 2010.

great attention on raising the material prosperity of citizens, improving the educational system, resolving housing problems, and so on. So the people are very optimistic about the political reforms being carried out in the country, which is a stabilizing factor in itself.

Therefore, the main reasons for social conflicts are price hikes, unemployment, inflation, tariff escalation, violation of human rights, and corruption.

The second block consists of indicators of citizens' willingness to take part in non-conventional action, protest campaigns (to protect their own interests), and open demonstrations against the power structures.

As we know, *protest is a specific form of active collective or individual citizen action aimed at demonstrating disapproval of any political decisions or changing the current sociopolitical reality.* There can be no doubt that the greatest threat to the political system is posed not by individual, but by collective action of the masses that could turn into open demonstrations and be expressed in aggressive and violent ways.

In their surveys, sociologists asked questions that probed the capacity of Kazakhstan's population to engage in active protest demonstrations. Only 3% of the polled answered "yes" to the question, "Are there grounds for carrying out protest demonstrations in Kazakhstan?", while 18.2% said "possibly," 33.5% answered "unlikely," and 38.5% said "no."

We think that the results of this poll are disconcerting, since most citizens do not exclude the possibility of mass protest, while 58.1% think that such economic problems as price hikes, inflation, and impoverishment of the population, etc. could lead to outbreaks of protest.

Public protest stems from the demands of the population and its value and political orientations. It stands to reason that an analysis of this problem should be based on studies of the psychology of the masses, their behavioral motives, and the formation of protest moods, which will make it possible to identify the factors that promote a buildup in social frustration and discontent.

Based on this, the author of the article asks how real the threat is of spontaneous mass protest demonstrations. According to specialists, such demonstrations should meet the following three criteria:

1. Protest acts should be held in several cities or population settlements.
2. Protest acts should concern the interests or rights of a particular mass category of citizens.
3. Representatives of this category should participate in the protest demonstrations.

In my opinion, another condition should be added: mass protest demonstrations should take place in all the cities involved at the same time. In other words, "if protest demonstrations are drawn out in time, broken down into small groups in different cities, and not organized into a unified movement, it is difficult to describe them as mass."³

So, mass protest demonstrations are public actions of the population organized into a unified movement with the aim of expressing non-acceptance and disapproval of certain actions or decisions of the power structures.

It can be asserted that Kazakhstan does not show any of these signs, so protest demonstrations are unlikely to assume mass proportions in the country. Kazakhstan citizens are not inclined toward manifesting any particular type of destructive activity, while social discontent is local for the following reasons:

- social structuring of society is incomplete and there is a low level of self-organization of the mass social groups;

³ B. Klin, "Odin protsent protestuiushchikh—eto mnogo," *Izvestia*, 26 January, 2005.

- there is no organized political force (party, movement, strong independent trade unions) capable of consolidating protest demonstrations;
- a certain number of citizens have chosen compulsory adaptation to the current reality as their life strategy. In this case, the results of the polls to identify the level of tolerance of Kazakhstan's population are extremely indicative: 42% believe that "things are not that bad and life is acceptable;" 28.2% think that "life is difficult but tolerable," 23.5% say that "life is tolerable, but not for long," and 6.1% admit that their "impoverished state can no longer be tolerated."⁴

Even those who do not like the current situation are afraid of change; they are loath to engage in radical action and prefer gentle reforms that will not affect their customary lifestyle.

The above-mentioned factors make it relatively easy for the authorities to neutralize any isolated acts of protest.

Adaptation to reality helps to prevent social upheavals in the short term. But in the long term, a buildup of social discontent in latent, non-institutional form will have a destructive effect on social development and be fraught with spontaneous outbursts of protest.

So it should be kept in mind that the population's adaptation to difficult conditions is compulsory and cannot last for long. People whose interests are infringed upon sooner or later reach the point where they want to protect them by forceful means; this particularly applies to the poor, who are incapable of independent legal acts of protest but are extremely perceptible to extremist forms of socio-political activity.

Recently, the authorities of several European countries have also been encountering manifestations of public discontent evoked by the socioeconomic situation. But the nature of the social protest is largely in keeping with democratic traditions and the level of political culture existing in a particular society. For example, French trade unions brought 2.5 million people out into the streets, whereby not one shop window was broken. This shows the high level of organization of the protest movement, where no windows were damaged, vehicles set fire to, or government buildings seized.

On the whole, the protests in West European countries and the CIS states have common roots: citizens are dissatisfied with the high cost of living, social inequality, and unemployment. Moreover, in the former Soviet countries, the authorities are trying to enforce their dominating position within the framework of the existing system of sociopolitical relations by personifying all forms of political activity, which is ultimately leading to the manifestation of non-systemic and illegal types of protest activity. For example, in Belarus, where flash mobs are becoming the latest rage as a form of protest, the authorities are aggressively putting down any attempts to express discontent. Here is what happens: protestors, who make arrangements in advance via the Internet, gather on Wednesdays in the center of Minsk and perform some seemingly pointless act, such as simply standing in silence, applauding, or turning on the dial-tones of their cell phones at the same time. Usually all the participants in such acts are arrested within the first few minutes, even though they are not making any political declarations.

It should be admitted that conflicts do not emerge out of the blue and it is very important to catch the signals heralding their outburst on time. These signals are manifested in demonstrations of non-acceptance (disapproval) of the existing state of affairs in society, loss of trust in government policy, differences in ideas about values, pessimistic assessments of the future, spreading of all kinds of rumors, emigration of citizens abroad, and so on.

⁴ G. Akhmetova, "Tipologizatsiia sotsialno-professionalnykh grupp po urovniu sotsialnoi adaptatsii k poreformen-nym usloviyam," *Saiasat*, No. 2, 2004, p. 16.

It is conflicts that express the demands, interests, and strivings of people and identify the reasons for social discontent or protest hidden behind customary codes of conduct in peaceful situations. Conflict can help the authorities to identify the existence of objective problems and contradictions in social development. So society should have the right to freedom of association that can openly express its viewpoint in the form of meetings, demonstrations, statements, public movements, and so on.

What is more, management decisions can be successful only if a civil society is formed and constructive techniques used for preventing conflicts. In this respect, it is worth recalling the words of M. Ross, who justly noted: "The problem is not in the conflict itself, but in how we resolve it."⁵

The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Settling Conflicts

One of the conditions for preventing destructive social conflicts is the formation of a mature *civil society*, the stability of which is based on the current system of mutual responsibility of its institutions. Civil society institutions and structures are indeed gradually developing in Kazakhstan. This is shown by the existence of such structural elements as political parties, various citizen unions and associations, nongovernmental organizations, and so on.

Political parties are instrumental in allowing various social strata and groups to institutionalize their interests. Nevertheless, it should be noted that mistrust in political parties is an integral part of the civil culture of Kazakhstan society. On the whole, political parties are not perceived as a bridge between the government and citizens. In my opinion, this is largely because parties are artificially created from above and become nothing more than election machines, while the opposition (which is represented by several parties) is extremely ineffective.

Political parties do not act as a divining rod of the tension existing in society since they rarely generate conflicts that relate to the interests of the protest population. The conflicts that arise among political forces are more personified in nature. In other words, interparty relations are one of the forms of opposition among various political forces, which do not fulfill the function of institutionalizing conflict interaction or maintaining a balance of interests among different social groups.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should play an important role in government decision-making regarding the need for preventive and restraining action. There are more than 5,000 of them in Kazakhstan today and they are acquiring valuable positive experience in working with citizens. However, in contrast to the developed countries, Kazakhstan's NGOs are individualized, while their activity is often oriented toward private and not collective interests of civil society. Moreover, not all NGOs in Kazakhstan are sufficiently active; the activity of many of them can be described as follows:

- some organizations flicker in and out, that is, they function depending on the availability of grants, when they do not have funding, their activity peters out;
- some of the NGOs created are essentially fictitious and their activity far from coincides with the authorized objectives declared at the moment of registration, which can be explained by their founders trying to evade the high taxes in effect in the business sphere;

⁵ M.G. Ross, "Dva litsa. Interesy, interpretatsii i kultura konflikta," in: *Konflikty. Teoriia i praktika razresheniia konfliktov. Opyt zarubezhnykh issledovaniï*, in 3 volumes, Vol. 2, Conflictology Center, Almaty, 2002, p. 184.

— there is a tendency for political parties to use NGOs as partners for achieving their political goals; consequently, there is the danger of politicization of the public sector.⁶

In short, at present most Kazakhstan citizens are not reaping the benefits of the efforts of domestic NGOs in social conflict prevention. So the role of NGOs should be raised by involving them in drawing up projects aimed at reducing conflict potential and protecting citizen rights. NGO activity should also be developed in the regions (particularly in rural areas) and systematically covered by the media.

Stability in a democratic state is based on a system of social partnership, which should harmonize the interests of different social groups of society. In Kazakhstan, all the attributes of social partnership are being actively used but, in my opinion, its institutions are largely functioning perfunctorily. Kazakhstan's trade unions have proven unprepared for using methods to protect workers' interests and rights; they rarely initiate talks for entering agreements and collective contracts. Moreover, they are not consistent enough in implementing the agreements reached.

It remains to be noted that weak trade unions will inevitably lead to increased instability in the labor sphere, particularly if we keep in mind the fact that one of the most conflict-intensive zones in Kazakhstan society is labor relations. This is shown, for example, by the strikes that are constantly being declared at the country's enterprises.

The 2011 Conflicts in Mangistau

As we know, in May 2011, some 700 employees of the Karazhanbasmunai enterprise began an act of protest, the main reason for which was dissatisfaction with the low wages and inactivity of the trade union. The protest moods swept to two more enterprises. The employees of Ersai Caspian Contractor also demanded re-examination of the work contracts. Then the oil workers of Ozenmunaigaz joined the protest, demanding nationalization of the oil-producing enterprises of the Mangistau region.⁷

It stands to reason that the strikes in Mangistau were of enormous detriment to the entire country. More than 2,000 people were fired and the strike organizers were arrested and convicted. Moreover, according to T. Kulibaev, the Chairman of the Board of Samruk-Kazyna National Charity Foundation, "during the strike, Ozenmunaigaz fell one million tons behind in its oil production. This will reflect in the year-end results for 2011 as underperformance and means that 54 billion tenge will not reach the budget or the National Foundation and that KazMunaiGaz Exploration Production will be faced with a revenue deficit of approximately 40 billion tenge."⁸

It must be admitted that it was very difficult to identify the events leading up to these conflicts for the following reasons:

- *First*, when trying to reproduce the course of events, the parties in the conflict evaluate them so differently that it is extremely difficult to obtain objective information. As for the employers, they of course give extensive arguments of their viewpoints. The workers, in turn, try to

⁶ See: *Prezidentskie vybory v Kazakhstane: fakty, analiz, kommentarii*, Academy of the State Administration, Astana, 2006, pp. 11-12.

⁷ A decision of the Zhanaozen court of 24 May, 2011 showed that the demands of the participants in the protest demonstrations were unsubstantiated and illegal.

⁸ "Volnyy gorod Zhanaozen," available at [www.np.kz/engine/print.php].

develop their interpretation of the conflict by proving the legitimacy and substantiation of their own interests and actions taken to protect them. According to the protesters, it was precisely the administration's unfair decision that prompted the workers to strike.

- *Second*, the media either remain silent about conflicts or present contradictory information. The evaluations of the pro-government and opposition media of the same events are often diametrically opposite.

So we need to conduct a comprehensive conflict-potential analysis of the conditions that made the strike possible. In other words, the following important questions must be answered: "What are the reasons for these labor conflicts?" and "Why have strikes become possible precisely at enterprises that have the highest wages in the country?"

However, A. Aubakirov, deputy general director for corporate development and asset management of KazMunaiGaz Exploration Production, claims that since 2008 all the company has been doing is yield to the protesting workers by constantly raising their wages. In this respect, another question arises: "What techniques are needed to resolve these conflicts?"

As we know, conflicts arise not only for objective reasons, they can also be determined by several subjective factors. Therefore, the determining factors causing a conflict could become more complex. The actual reasons for conflicts, however, are always hidden from the parties drawn into them.

Despite the fact that the main reason for the events in the Mangistau region was the workers' displeasure with the action of the administration of the oil-producing enterprises, this kind of labor conflict has much more extensive social grounds.

In my opinion, the socioeconomic problems of unemployment and migration form the underlying foundation of the conflicts, as well as the fact that the main demands of a certain part of the population of Zhanaozen were not met. According to the opinion D. Ashimbaev expressed at a sitting of the Expert Club created on the initiative of the leadership of the Samruk-Kazyna National Charity Foundation, "the situation in Zhanaozen escalated out of control. There are several reasons for this. First, incorrect social and migration policy. Between 2000 and 2010, the city's population doubled—from 60,000 to 120,000, whereby there has been no industrial growth in the region. That is, there was an abrupt increase in the able-bodied population that was not supported by an increase in jobs. Most of the newcomers are repatriates from Karakalpakia, Turkmenistan, and so on. The migration processes in the country are essentially not controlled; as a result, a large flow of people went to several regions where there were no jobs for them. This led to the formation of a surplus conflict mass."⁹

The conflict was triggered by the steps taken by lawyer N. Sokolova, whose destabilizing role is beyond doubt. Another reason for what happened is that the employers did not have any precise mechanisms for settling such tariff conflicts. The trade unions do not have legitimate methods for defending the interests of workers, who, in turn, have not learned to clearly formulate their demands and are easily manipulated. Moreover, there were no mediators capable of resolving the conflict; at the same time, political forces came into the picture which, by expressing their solidarity with the strikers, tried to turn the situation to their own advantage.

So, the state is still the only real actor. It has an indisputable advantage over the entities and structures of civil society and, with the help of the administrative resource, can prevent the buildup of entropic processes in society.

⁹ "“Kryshu zakazyvali?” Zashchishchat zabastovshchikov Zhanaozena—luchshiy politicheskiy piar," available at [<http://www.spik.kz>].

State power and government stability in themselves have a sobering effect on potential participants in conflicts. For example, it was the government that eventually took measures to reduce the tension in the Mangistau region; it can even be presumed that without interference by the state the conflict would have continued and become political.

Nevertheless, while recognizing the stabilizing role of the power structures, the degree of state influence on the entities of civil society needs to be addressed. Stabilization achieved by a rigid power vertical is short-lived, while preventing destructive conflicts without feedback is instable.

For example, when interfering in a conflict, the state often resorts to the defense and security structures, which, of course, should efficiently intercept the illegal actions of its participants. But the defense and security structures remove only the consequences of the conflict, while the actual reasons for them remain hidden and unidentified.

Within the framework of the study of this problem, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- *First*, the danger is that conflicts subdued by forceful methods could flare up again and escalate out of control.
- *Second*, in the long run, forceful methods are ineffective, since their use will most likely lead not to consent, but to resistance, which will increase the possibility of new conflict situation emerging.
- *Third*, the use of force shows the absence or insufficient development of constructive efficient techniques of conflict management. In other words, the use of force is frequently open-ended, makes it difficult to reach a consensus, and raises the destructive conflict potential of society.

Of course, no matter the extent to which different techniques that make it possible to prevent labor conflicts are developed and applied, they cannot fully eliminate the danger of conflicts arising. It is only possible to stop labor conflicts from spreading or to regulate them.

However, the level of conflict potential in the labor sphere is the most important and most precise of the indicators we have identified for gauging the current moral and psychological state of society; it reflects the severity and depth of the socioeconomic contradictions that have accumulated.

As for strikes, they are an extremely significant and prominent social phenomenon and require serious analysis.

It is no accident that labor conflicts and protests are the target of such keen attention. As we know, worker demonstrations can be a catalyst for major socioeconomic and even political upheavals. For example, in Poland, the demonstrations the Solidarity trade union at the beginning of the 1980s led to the collapse of the socialist regime first in the country itself, and then throughout the whole of Eastern Europe, while the miners' strikes that began on 11 July, 1989 in the Soviet Union gave a mighty boost to further democratization and became one of the stimulants for replacing the economic and political system in 1991.

Therefore, the current situation in Mangistau demands the use of new, extremely well-thought-out approaches and the making of joint compromise decisions, since the old strategy has proven entirely useless and unpromising.

The government must employ contemporary negotiation techniques and a set of socioeconomic measures in order to resolve the problem. In so doing, the most important thing must be kept in mind—“legislation must be improved to prevent labor conflicts, which should meet current reality and carry out a radical re-examination of the contents and structure of the minimum consumer basket.”¹⁰

¹⁰ K. Berentsev, “Zabastovka: analiz prichin i puti resheniia,” *Vzgliad*, No. 38 (218), 19 October, 2011.

Conclusion

On the whole, this analysis of how to prevent conflicts in Kazakhstan has revealed a combination of different factors. Some of them are stabilizing, while others cause destructive conflicts.

The stabilizing factors are:

- the absence of destructive sociopolitical conflicts;
- the implementation of socioeconomic reforms;
- the democratization of the political system and reaching a consensus on basic issues of the political system;
- the existence of institutions and structures of a civil society;
- citizen interest in strengthening political stability;
- the high role of the political leader in ensuring consent in society.

Factors causing destructive conflicts are:

- unemployment, poverty, and social inequality;
- underdevelopment of efficient conflict-management techniques;
- conflict-phobia;
- undeveloped institutions of civil society for regulating conflicts;
- corruption among bureaucrats and the use of forceful methods when settling conflicts;
- the absence of a mechanism for preventing and settling political conflicts.

So civil society institutions in Kazakhstan are still rather passive in protecting and realizing their own interests. In the past years of reform, real social entities have not fully developed, which is making interaction among the various elements and civil society structures difficult. As for the mechanism for streamlining positions and assimilating social roles, it is fragmentary and unstable. An “economic man” has still not formed in Kazakhstan capable of independently and responsibly participating in market relations.

In other words, conflict institutionalization in Kazakhstan is at a low level, which is manifested in the underdevelopment of legitimate structures and mechanisms of citizen interest expression.