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KAZAKHSTAN, JANUARY 2022: A STRATEGIC SURPRISE?

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ABSTRACT

The events that took place in Kazakhstan during the first two weeks of January came like a bolt out of the blue. The surprise was three-fold: first, the rapid transformation of peaceful demonstrations into violent riots; then the forceful regain of control by President Tokayev; and lastly, the unprecedented and effective intervention of a military contingent of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The end of the unrest is synonymous with reconstruction, reforms and consolidation of national unity.

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The Republic of Kazakhstan, which has just celebrated its 30 years of independence, has seldom been at the center of media attention, except during the “Astana 2017” international exhibition or, more often, to underscore the success of the country’s extractive industries or the avant-gardist planning of its capital city Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana). Figures are indeed what most often define this country of 19 million inhabitants, whose territory is almost five times larger than mainland France and borders both Russia and China. The country’s performances in agriculture (wheat and meat) and the production of strategic raw materials (uranium, oil and gas) make Kazakhstan a leading exporter in Asia and to Europe. For France, its 5th-largest customer and 9th-ranking supplier, Kazakhstan has above all been a strategic partner since 2008. This partnership, which is greatly developed around cooperation in aerospace, has taken shape through investments by Airbus in Astana (a helicopter assembly and maintenance workshop and especially a satellite assembly and verification complex) and Thales in Almaty (ground-to-air defense radar assembly plant).

After a brief review of the chronology of events in early January, we will propose an analysis and some thoughts about the future.



THE SERIES OF EVENTS

In a context that had been calm until then, the events unfolded rapidly after the January 1st announcement of the sudden increase in the price of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from 60 tenge a liter to 120 (from 0.12 to 0.24 Euros). The doubling of the price of this fuel, which is used extensively for private cars, trucks, and buses, sparked unauthorized demonstrations the very next day in the cities Zhanaozen and Aktau, and more generally in the Mangystau region, the main hydrocarbon production area, near the Caspian Sea, to the west of the country. On January 3, demonstrators blocked roads and railways and occupied the train station and airport in Aktau.

As from January 4, the protest extended to other regions of the country, particularly to the two main towns in the south, Shymkent and Almaty. The protests in Almaty rapidly grew in scale and degenerated into clashes with the police, which retaliated with stun grenades and tear gas. Despite President Tokayev's appeals for calm and negotiation, and the decision to reduce the LPG price rise bringing the liter down to 70 tenge (0.14 Euros), the demonstrations did not cease and swiftly turned into riots.

January 5 saw a sudden and dramatic worsening of the situation in Almaty, where violence raged against the authorities and especially the police – several police stations were attacked and officers killed, including two who were beheaded.¹ Public buildings were burned down, and gun shops and shopping malls were looted. Faced with a situation of revolt, which he described as an attack on the State, President Tokayev declared a state of emergency across the country, fired the Prime Minister and his government, and took charge of the Security Council, led until then by his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev. He invoked Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty and requested assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) whose rotating presidency is currently held by the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

On January 6, while the rebellion was ongoing in eight regions with attacks on detention centers and television station offices, the first units of the CSTO contingent flew into Nur-Sultan and Almaty. On January 7, the rebels occupied one hospital and attempted to take possession of two others, along with the Kazakhtelekom TV tower and offices in Almaty. The terror alert level was set to red and a complete operation was deployed in all the regions hit by the unrest.

At this stage, the demonstrators deserted the streets, where armed groups were operating and in response to which the security forces were authorized to shoot to kill. The missions were assigned in concentric circles: in direct contact with the armed gangs, the units of the Ministry of the Interior (police and above all the National Guard) and the KNB (national security and border guard) were tasked with “cleaning up” the urban centers, the perimeter and highways being controlled by the Defense Ministry's armed forces. Meanwhile, strategic sites (airports, power plants, telecommunications relay stations and

1. “The bodies of two policemen found beheaded in Almaty” (translated from Russian), Baigenews agency website, January 6, 2022, https://baigenews.kz/news/telo_politseyskogo_s_otsechennoy_golovoy_obnaruzhili_v_almaty/?utm_campaign=recommendation&utm_source=ainews.

bread factories) were assigned to the collective peacekeeping forces of the CSTO. This operation continued over the following days in Almaty, and in the southern regions of Jambyl, Turkestan and Kyzylorda.

On January 13, President Tokayev considered the situation to be under control and so informed his Russian counterpart.²

On January 14, the mission of the CSTO contingent ended and it had fully withdrawn from Kazakhstan on January 18.

The death toll of these events, particularly the number of civilian victims, is difficult to know with any degree of accuracy. Official communiqués from the Kazakh authorities have so far reported a total of 225 deaths, including two children, two journalists and 18 members of the internal security forces (including two beheaded). The number of casualties is almost impossible to verify as only data concerning the security forces have been disclosed, with 378 officers admitted to hospital (62 in intensive care).

The easier to verify material losses were severe. Not only were the symbolic buildings of the central or local authorities burned or ransacked (presidential residence in Almaty, several city halls, four police stations), private property was also a target with the looting of many retail outlets (gun shops, supermarkets, shopping malls, and food stores). More than 600 vehicles were burned, including six fire trucks. The authorities estimate the damage at more than two billion Euros.

ANALYSIS

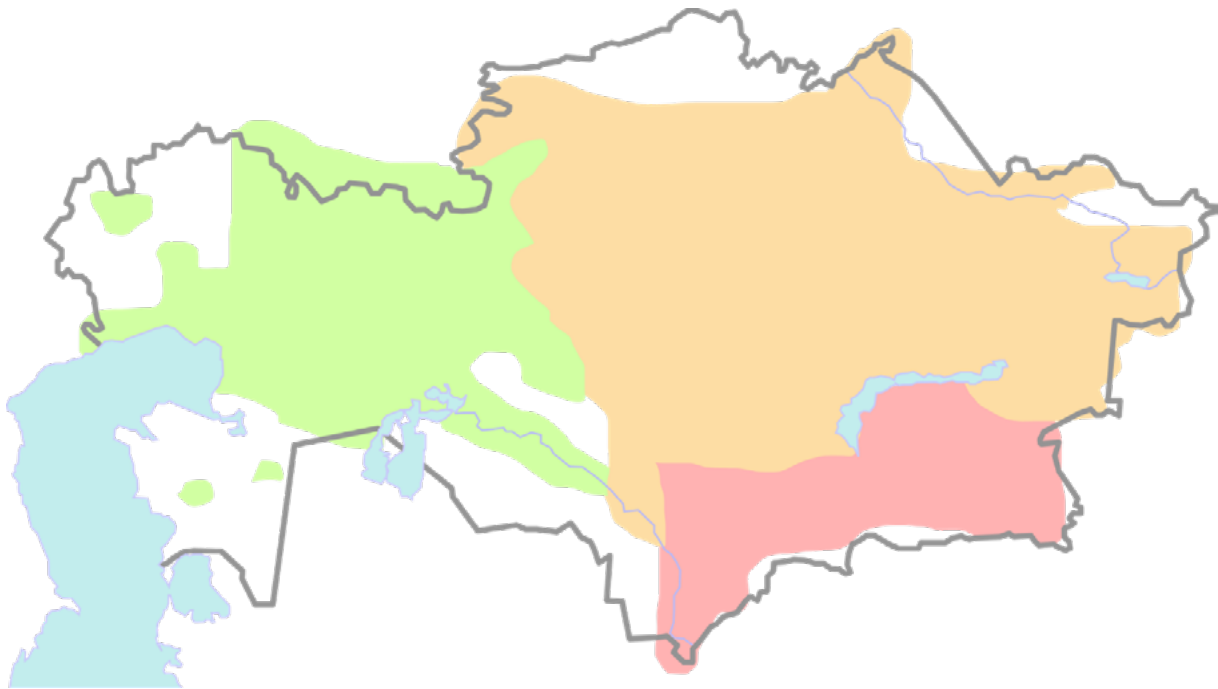
The complexity of these events is revealed by the terminology used by the executive when referring to the protagonists: demonstrators, thieves, bandits, terrorists, and finally the phrase “attempted coup”.

In fact, there were initially unauthorized but peaceful demonstrations to protest against the doubling in price of LPG, which was expected to entail an increase in the price of all goods transported by road, including coal for supplying thermal power plants. This predictable increase in the cost of living (food products, electricity, community services) quickly led to social demands (wage increases, freezing of rental costs, award of exceptional bonuses), in a context of impoverishment. Indeed, after the economic boom between 2000 and 2013, the following years saw a return of insecurity for the working poor and over-indebtedness among the middle classes.

The Mangystau region, where the protest initially arose, deserves its own analysis. First, it is the main region for hydrocarbon production, where people find the oil-indexation of gas prices difficult to comprehend. The town of Zhanaozen strikes a particular chord, ten years after the December 2011 demonstrations, marked by what is generally remembered as a brutal use of police force. Finally, this western part of the country is the birthplace of the “Junior

2. “Telephone conversation between Vladimir Putin and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev” (translated from Russian), *Krasnaya Zvezda*, January 13, 2022, <http://redstar.ru/telefonnyj-razgovor-vladimira-putina-s-kasym-zhomartom-tokaevym/>.

Zhuz” (in green on the map), one of the three divisions or zhuz of the Kazakh ethnic group, traditionally hostile to central government, held by the descendants of the Senior Zhuz (in red on the map), and accused of despoiling wealth and diverting it to Astana (territory of the Middle Zhuz (in orange on the map)).



The rapid spread of the protest movement and its deterioration in Almaty, the former political capital and still the economic and cultural capital, is also telling. Almaty is a large population center of nearly three million inhabitants, open to all kinds of influences, including organized crime. Not only did the peaceful demonstrations turn into outbursts of violence against security forces and public buildings, stores were looted and a hospital and the airport occupied (grounding five airliners with their passengers). The mark of criminal groups is easy to see from the attacks on detention centers with the intention of freeing prisoners to bolster their ranks. Alongside the use of civilians as human shields, certain modes of action reveal an additional aspect of these tragic events, such as the beheading of two police officers, typical of jihadist-inspired terrorist practices. The lootings of gun shops and attacks to seize the television tower, as well as the occupying of five television station offices, would appear to substantiate the theory of an attempted coup.

In our opinion, this was a highly organized movement, originating from the inside, with multiple players, exploiting a real social situation to mix elements of organized crime in with a crowd of protesters and with the possible participation of jihadists. Suspicions of collusion within the National Security Committee (KNB) leadership, whose head figure Karim Massimov³ has been charged with high treason, could point to factious activity, in support of the theory of an attempted coup.

3. “Communication to the KNB of the judicial investigation concerning Karim Massimov and others” (translated from Russian), agency website inform.kz, January 13, 2022, <https://www.inform.kz/ru/o-dosudebnom-rassle->

All this seems far removed from the “color revolutions” that have marked the post-Soviet space since 2003, each time following a contested election. Similarly, the argument of foreign involvement, often put forward in Central Asia to stigmatize disturbances of the peace, has yet to be backed up by any evidence presented to the press.

Reactions of the Kazakh Government

The Kazakh authorities, known to traditionally respond to the slightest peaceful demonstration with a disproportionate deployment of internal security forces, were stunned by the rapid spread and sudden deterioration of the situation. Cancelling the LPG price rise had no effect on the protesters, who were overrun by agitators and criminals.

In response to this new turn in the crisis, President Tokayev took three strong measures on January 5, dismissing the government, declaring a state of emergency, and taking control of the Security Council. While the first of these measures is not out of the ordinary in Kazakhstan, where partial or full ministerial reorganizations are regularly decided by the head of state, the two others are highly significant. The state of emergency allows for the use of all internal security forces, with reinforcement from the Ministry of Defense’s military units, as well as a restriction on movement and the introduction of a curfew. Taking control of the Security Council, which was hitherto led by former President Nazarbayev, honored with the title of *Elbasy* (leader of the Nation), is a strong sign of the ambition to reclaim all instruments of power. The fourth decision made on the same day, i.e., the request for assistance from the CSTO, came as a true surprise. The move seemed excessive, even desperate, particularly as the only previous intervention of a CSTO peacekeeping force dated back to the bloody civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997).

Operation of the CSTO’s Collective Peacekeeping Forces

The first feature of this operation was the speed of the force generation process which was such that the first units were projected only a few hours after Nikol Pashinyan gave the political green light. The bulk of the force and all the logistics were provided by the Russian armed forces, who collected and transferred to Kazakhstan the detachments supplied by the other CSTO member states (Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan).

The first projected elements, known as the immediate readiness force, consisted of the Russian elite units of the 45th Guards Special Purpose Detached Brigade and the *spetsnaz* companies of the 76th Air Assault Division. They arrived in Nur-Sultan and Almaty at dawn on January 6, Christmas Day in the Russian Orthodox calendar.

There was then the performance of the strategic air transport with, according to official sources of the Russian Ministry of Defense, no less than 70 IL-76 M aircraft and five An-124

[dovanii-v-otnoshenii-karima-masimova-i-drugih-lic-soobschili-v-knb_a3885285?utm_campaign=recommendation&utm_source=ainews](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752165620000000).

“Ruslan” cargo aircraft. This capacity, once considered a weak point of the Russian armed forces, has therefore since been upgraded as a result of operations in Crimea and Syria.

Finally, the mission was completed in eight days by a force of more than 2,000 soldiers, without any incident or even the slightest clash with the local population. The mandate to secure sensitive infrastructure sites was scrupulously respected, allowing the Kazakh armed forces to carry out internal operations in regions where they were needed to close off areas and control access.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE EVENTS

On the Regime

Despite this call for outside aid, which triggered fears of a surrender of sovereignty, President Tokayev’s position was ironically shored up, as this very surprising strategic decision came like a shock wave. He displayed unsuspected authority, particularly by distancing himself from figures close to Nursultan Nazarbayev (family, protégés and oligarchs) who were swiftly removed from their positions of responsibility. As an experienced diplomat, he demonstrated respect for the person and work of the former leader while isolating him and ousting his descendants and obligers from high-level positions. After taking control of the Security Council on January 5, he was elected leader of the Nur Otan party (“Radiant Fatherland”) on January 28, and henceforth held all of his predecessor’s governing powers, the latter merely retaining the honorary title of “First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Leader of the Nation” along with substantial perks. The dual executive system established in 2019 following Nazarbayev’s resignation thus came to an end and the regime regained its vertical form.

A Necessary Reform of Force Structures

Taking advantage of the return to order, Tokayev seized the opportunity to build his legacy with a number of necessary reforms, the most urgent being the structures of forces that the events had put under great strain.

This reform was initiated on January 15, at a meeting⁴ with the heads of the Prosecutor General’s Office, the KNB, the Defense and Interior Ministries, the presidential administration and the security council apparatus, who the Head of State asked to produce concrete measures. The first such measure was the creation of a command for forces dedicated to ‘special’ anti-terrorist operations, a homeland security mission, part of which fell to the

4. “The President has held a meeting with the leaders of force structures” (translated from Russian), Akorda, official website of the presidency, January 15, 2022, <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/prezident-provel-soveshchanie-s-rukovodstvom-silovyh-struktur-1502518>.

Ministry of Defense (MORK), while the law enforcement function remained with the specialized units of the Ministry of the Interior.

A clear indication of this reorientation of the MORK's missions was given on January 19, with the appointment of Lieutenant General Ruslan Jaksylykov, former Commander in Chief of the National Guard (police force with military status, similar to the French Gendarmerie) and Vice-Minister of the Interior, to replace General Murat Bektanov.

The latter, who had only been minister since August 31, 2021, was severely criticized for his lack of initiative in failing to suggest, as soon as the troubles began to develop, that units from other regions be dispatched to Almaty, such as the 36th air assault brigade stationed in the capital. In actual fact, in his previous roles as Commander-in-Chief of the land forces and then Chief of the General Staff, General Bektanov had made a full success of preparing the Kazakh army for peacekeeping operations under UN mandate (from 2018 to 2020, insertion of a company of 120 soldiers into the Indian battalion of the UNIFIL) and of the armed forces' participation in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. However, taking initiative in the sensitive area of internal security was not part of his powers nor, for that matter, of his military training.

Another measure of the force structure reform is currently being examined by the Committee for International Affairs, Defense and Security of the *Mazhilis* (lower house of Parliament). It concerns the military police force,⁵ or rather the military police forces of the MORK, the KNB and the National Guard which fulfill a range of missions: security of access to military compounds, personnel clearance, conformity of technical documentation for service vehicles, road traffic for military convoys, counter-espionage and even provost marshal authority (military judicial police for armed forces on external deployment). As they have not had shared regulations until now, a body of legislation defining their status and competencies must be established. It will be interesting to compare this change in the role of the military police with that of its counterpart in the Russian armed forces, which has been very visible since 2019 in the theater of operations in Syria.

The most sensitive case concerns the National Security Committee (KNB), which received special treatment in several stages leading to the destitution, then the arrest and finally the indictment of Chairman Karim Massimov, Vice-Chairmen Marat Osipov, Daulet Ergozhin, Anuar Sadykoulov (commander of the "A" action service) and Samat Abish (nephew of N. Nazarbayev). The investigation under way, into the extremely serious charges of high treason, attempt to take power by force and abuse of authority, is an official secret. The only publicly known element of the case is the passivity of the chain of command during the occupation by rioters of a KNB building in Almaty, in the night of January 5 to 6, with no response from the "A" service, an elite group specialized in counter-terrorism and hostage recovery.

To replace Karim Massimov, a heavyweight of the regime who served as Prime Minister from 2007 to 2012 and again from 2014 to 2016, President Tokayev chose a security specialist of undeniable loyalty. On January 6, he appointed Major General Yermek Sagimbayev,⁶

5. "What reform for the military police in Kazakhstan" (translated from Russian), Baigenews agency, January 25, 2022, https://baigenews.kz/news/kakaya_reforma_zhdet_voennuyu_politsiyu_v_kazakhstane/.

6. "New Chairman of the KNB in Kazakhstan" (translated from Russian), inform.kz website, January 6, 2022, https://www.inform.kz/ru/naznachen-novyy-predsedatel-knb-rk_a3881772.

formerly chief of another force unit, the SGO (“State Protection Service”, a security group which oversees the protection of the President).

Fighting Corruption and Inequalities: Work in Progress

Alongside reforming force structures in order to adapt them to policing and antiterrorist missions, President Tokayev must tackle the sources of discontent, namely low wages and soaring prices, tax evasion, unequal distribution of public services, corruption of government officials, greedy commercial intermediaries, and embezzlement of agricultural development grants. During the government session on February 8,⁷ enlarged to include regional executive bodies, the Kazakh head of state listed a whole series of inadequacies and set deadlines for proposed solutions. In particular, he considered it unacceptable that one million citizens’ income was below the minimum subsistence figure and ordered measures to curb inflation. He spoke out against criminal groups controlling the Altyn Orda market in Almaty who are responsible for the rising prices of everyday consumer goods and likely involved in the events of early January.

A New Reputation for the CSTO

Foreign observers have long considered the Collective Security Treaty Organization to be an empty shell, and therefore a poor negotiator, but thanks to its brief operation in Kazakhstan, the organization has acquired a certain credibility. However, this statement must be qualified because the alliance of the six states is still disparate, consisting of two groups with very different military capabilities: on the one hand, three countries (Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan) with well-equipped and well-trained armed forces and, on the other, three countries (Armenia, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan) which have far less equipment but whose territories permanently host a Russian military base. It is obvious that the Russian armed forces deserve all the credit for the success of the CSTO operation in Kazakhstan, as they supplied most of the troops and handled the logistics.

On the Image of Kazakhstan

The January events in Kazakhstan were unexpectedly violent and sudden, in a country renowned to be safe and quiet. The manner in which order was restored, after a moment of uncertainty, also drew attention, with the combined use of internal security forces and the army and the unprecedented intervention of the CSTO contingent.

7. “The Head of State held an enlarged government meeting” (translated from Russian), Akorda, official website of the presidency, February 8, 2022, <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/glava-gosudarstva-provel-rasshirennoe-zasedanie-pravitelstva-respubliki-kazahstan-81311>.

Above all, they brought to light certain weaknesses in a society which, in just thirty years of existence has experienced a “growth spurt” comparable to that of a human body which has grown up too fast and reached adulthood without going through all the diseases of early childhood.

A potentially very wealthy country due to its natural resources, Kazakhstan is nonetheless struggling to diversify its economy which remains too dependent on exports of its energy resources and commodity products from both the country’s industry and agriculture. The situation is starting to improve thanks to partnerships with foreign groups resulting in joint ventures in sectors ranging from extractive industries to food processing and construction of railway equipment. Some prospects for development are emerging for this latter sector with the intensification of freight transit by rail in the context of the “new silk roads”.

At the same time, private trade has experienced phenomenal growth, transitioning from an economy of traditional central Asian bazaars to a consumer society with shopping malls packed with countless stores employing young, unskilled and low paid workers. These jobs are greatly subject to the ups and downs that affect consumer buying power, and the turnover rate of small commercial businesses is high. The result is an open labor market with low unemployment but little hope of climbing the social ladder. The situation is much different for the fortunate beneficiaries of the Bolashaq (“future”) international scholarship program. On returning home after their studies in prestigious universities abroad, these graduates take up positions in the public authorities or join the management teams of leading national groups.

One of the main weaknesses that fuels the population’s discontent is their access to public services which are still very disparately provided across this vast country (Kazakhstan is the 9th-largest nation in the world with a surface area of 2.7 million square kilometers), despite the proactive implementation of “digital government”, which further marginalizes the elderly.

There is still a lot of room for improvement in the quality of these public services, especially in the sensitive areas of public education and healthcare.

In fact, the standard of public schooling was such that a parallel system was developed in 2012, the Nazarbayev Intellektualnye Shkoly (Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, NIS),⁸ a network of some twenty schools in the 17 biggest cities. It has the status of an autonomous education organization, whose infrastructure and faculty are financed by the Fund of the First President – Leader of the Nation. These schools accommodate students between ages six and eighteen. The tuition fees remain payable by parents, except for particularly deserving children from poor families who may obtain a grant from the Fund.

In 2020, as in many other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light inadequacies in the public health system, namely hospital capacities and especially the initial lack of preparation to protect staff from infection. To rebuild the whole system, an ambitious program has been launched for the construction of some twenty hospitals. It is funded by

8. Official website <https://www.nis.edu.kz>.

a public-private partnership that is proving to be less worthwhile for State finances than expected.

For the moment, the national consensus does not appear threatened. It concerns the Kazakh identity, symbolizing the unity of 130 nationalities brought together by the various and complex waves of settlement, sometimes with consent but most often forced, during the 20th century. This unique melting pot, representing a true sample of the former population of the USSR, no doubt forms the foundation and center of gravity of Kazakhstan's independence.

It is expressed in two official languages: Kazakh as the national language and Russian as the language of the State. The proactive policy to promote Kazakh does not currently challenge the official bilingualism: it targets young generations of school-going age and then in active working life. While it does not limit access to public sector jobs, it can be a serious hindrance to the advancement of citizens who only speak Russian. It is especially put under strain by the language reform to switch to the Latin alphabet, decided in 2017 and supposed to open up the digital world to Kazakh literature, but which is unnecessarily complex and ill-explained. These rather unfortunate beginnings, exploited by the media in Russia, may have reinforced the resistance of some members of ethnic Russian communities concerned about a possible marginalization. The executive should pay attention to this aspect in order to preserve the national consensus.

The other key factor of the Kazakh identity is secularism: the Government is separate from religions and respects them, but prohibits religious preaching in public places. Fears particularly concern the development of Islamic fundamentalism, in the southern regions where strong family traditions still remain and more generally among the youth of the impoverished middle classes. Maintaining this secularism will also be a future indicator of social peace in Kazakhstan.

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Calm has thus been restored in Kazakhstan, but the dramatic events of early January sounded the alarm and revealed true social discontent, as well as the ability of criminal groups to cause harm and dysfunctions in the force structures. Following a short period of astonishment at what was only a surprise in terms of its timing, the executive power responded with authority and caused a strategic stir by seeking assistance from the CSTO which thus became an instrument of crisis resolution.

A graduate of Saint-Cyr Military Academy (“Grande Armée” class, 1981-1983) and of the École de Guerre, Colonel Stéphane Samaran has spent his career between the regiments, overseas operations, work as a training officer in several French and foreign military schools and as a case officer in the Defense Staff. He has gained substantial international experience with notably ten years as defense attaché in several Russian-speaking countries. As such, he served in Kazakhstan from 2016 to 2020. He joined IRSEM on September 7, 2020 as Head of “Strategies, Norms and Doctrines” research department.

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