KAZAKHSTAN ELECTIONS

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With the support of
The presidential election on 9 June was seen in Kazakhstan as crucial for the future development of the central Asian country. This was the first one in which Kazakhstan’s first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was not running, auguring the introduction of more pluralism.
Kazakhstan, the ninth largest country in the world, with an area the size of Western Europe and a population of more than 18 million citizens, is tomorrow testing the maturity of its democracy, writes Beibut Atamkulov.

Beibut Atamkulov is the foreign minister of Kazakhstan.

The presidential election on 9 June is crucial for the future development of our country. The elections of the head of state have indeed taken place regularly since Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991. This election, however, is the first time that First President Nursultan Nazarbayev is not running.

In a relatively short time, having only gained independence during the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has become a dynamically developing country. In less than three decades, Kazakhstan has built a stable, growing economy with a favourable business climate. We now rank 28th in the World Bank’s Doing Business Index. Our young population is well-educated, multilingual and aspirational.

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The comprehensive and decisive reforms have ensured that we are on a firm footing. Our economy continues to diversify, incomes are rising, and people are enjoying better quality healthcare and education.

The upcoming elections are aimed at electing a new president of the country, for whom the task of further improving the well-being of the population, building a socially oriented state will also be a priority.

The decision of the First President to willingly step aside in favour of a new generation of leaders demonstrates the maturity of Kazakhstan's statehood. Kazakhstan has certainly bucked the trend in an age which is often characterised by challenging political transitions.

This election will also be the most competitive in our nation's history. Seven candidates are running, giving the electorate more choice than ever before. One of the features of the electoral process is that the candidates include representatives of the opposition.

In addition, the Ak Zhol party's candidate, Daniya Yespayeva, has become the first woman in the history of Kazakhstan to run for president. This is another important step in our democratic development.

Kazakhstan's presidential nomination process has been designed to be robust and fair. For example, it stipulates in law that all candidates must receive signatures from 1% of Kazakhstan's registered electorate – around 118,000 people. All seven candidates, representing different policies and visions for the country, have received public support from many citizens.

Despite the instability in the global economy, Kazakhstan remains an attractive foreign investment destination in Central Asia, and accounts for more than half of the region's GDP.

As part of the industrial-innovative development programme of Kazakhstan, launched to help diversify and decrease the dependence on a resource-based economy, about 500 new businesses were established in the last four years.

The country remains focused on the digitisation of the economy, the development of e-government platforms, smart cities, communications, and a completely new space industry.

Serious attention is also being paid to our nation's social development. In recent years, per capita GDP in Kazakhstan has increased six-fold, reaching more than $9,000. Over the last thirty years, more than 1,500 new schools were built. In the next three years, we plan to build 200 more.

We are working hard to expand and enhance the quality of our education system. Kazakhstan is ranked 9th by the level of education of young people in the Vouchercloud rankings.

The Bolashak (Future) international educational scholarship programme gives young Kazakh citizens the opportunity to study internationally at many of the world's leading universities. Since the programme was established twenty-five years ago, more than 13,000 students have completed their studies under this fully funded government scholarship.

Kazakhstan is home to more than 130 different nationalities who make an important contribution to the development of our country and build a future for their children. A striking example of tolerance is the harmonious coexistence of peoples from around twenty different religious denominations. Every three years in Kazakhstan, the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions is held, seeking to ensure interreligious and interfaith dialogue in the world.

Due to its geographical position and location at the heart of the Eurasian continent, Kazakhstan has also become a modern transit hub. Our logistics and transport infrastructure enables trade between East and West, North and South.

Kazakhstan has been conducting and will conduct a peaceful multi-vector foreign policy focused on the development of partnerships with all countries of the world. As our First President put it, “Due to its geopolitical position and economic potential, Kazakhstan does not have the right to isolate itself on narrow regional problems.

This would be incomprehensible not only to our multi-ethnic population, but also to the entire world community. The future of Kazakhstan is in Asia, and in Europe, in the East, and in the West”.

Kazakhstan is a young nation with an ancient history. The citizens of Kazakhstan of various ethnic, political and religious identities have worked together over the last thirty years to build a stable, prosperous and open society. Exercising our democratic right through a national vote on the presidential election will help strengthen what we have achieved.

For our country to develop and thrive, it is important as many citizens as possible exercise their constitutional right and vote on June 9.

It is just as important for the international community to clearly understand that, proceeding from the interests of our own people, Kazakhstan is firmly on the path to strengthening its democracy and expanding its market economy while being clearly conscious of its responsibility for the stability, security and sustainable development of not only the key region of Central Asia, but the whole of Eurasia.

Regardless of the outcome of the June 9 elections, our determined course of action will continue.
Tokayev set for victory as Kazakhstan transitions from Nazarbayev

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com

When Kazakhs go to the polls for a presidential election on Sunday (9 June), they will face something of a novelty – the name of their first president, Nur-Sultan Nazarbayev, will not be on the ballot.

Nazarbayev, 78, stood down as president in March, after nearly thirty years of uninterrupted rule, with Senate leader, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, appointed interim president. Tokayev called early elections the following month and is running as the ruling party candidate.

Regional analysts expect Tokayev, a former diplomat and Director-General of the United Nations in Geneva, to win with about 70% of the vote.

But Kazakhstan is still very much seeing a gradual political transition. Nazarbayev is set to retain significant powers in his title as ‘Yelbasy’ – head of the nation – as well as the leader of the security council and of the ruling Nur Otan party.

The transition is already taking place, said Murat Shibutov, head of the Transparency Kazakhstan Foundation. Nazarbayev “preserves a certain role

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in strategic decision making but the operative decisions are already being taken without him”.

“For our political elite, it is a big test of how they can govern. How competent can they be without him (Nazarbayev)”, added Shibutov.

Western observers have never recognised elections in Kazakhstan – the last presidential poll in 2015 was won by Nazarbayev with 98% – as free and fair. Nazarbayev last faced an opposition candidate in 2005.

This time, however, veteran oppositionist Amirzhan Kosanov has been permitted to run by the National Electoral Commission, as part of a field of seven candidates.

“A very important period is currently undergoing in Kazakhstan. What model of power will be after Nazarbayev?” said Kosanov, who will stand as the candidate for the Destiny of the Nation movement, which lobbies for Kazakh linguistic and cultural rights.

“The presidential election is one of the answers…it seems that the authorities are starting to realise that the opposition should exist, that it exists and that it shall be taken into account,” Kosanov told EURACTIV.

“After 14 years, I was registered as the representative of the opposition. Frankly, I was not expecting that. I see positivity in this,” he added.

The new government will be under pressure to move towards a more competitive and open economy, and diversified away from dependence on oil and gas.

“We are at a very transitional period,” said Zhazira Duisembekova, a member of the civil society group, Almarat.

“Our economy is very commodity addicted which brought a lot of easy money into the economy, and created a whole class of oligarchy at some point, and a whole level of large businesses which is very important for our economy,” Duisembekova told EURACTIV.

While Tokayev is almost certain to win by a hefty margin on Sunday, and has the state machinery behind him, the next step in the transition is likely to be parliamentary elections, which are expected to follow in the coming months.

“When the elections were announced, the Ak Zhol party demanded that the President ensure fair and open elections. President Tokayev has promised to do that,” said Ak Zhol’s presidential candidate, Dania Yespayeva. Her party won 7% and 7 of the 98 seats in the Mazhilis, Kazakhstan’s lower house of parliament.

“The results of this election will demonstrate how transparent they were, and this will affect relations between state and society.”

Meanwhile, with observers certain of a Tokayev victory, many say that, unlike at previous polls, it will be significant who places second and third.

“In this election, it is not only important who will win, we more or less know who will. There are other things like turnout, regional distribution of voices, and those who will run second and third,” Murat Abenov, chairman of the National Council for Education and Innovation, told EURACTIV.

“I think that the parliamentary election will be right after these elections, and those who are participating – they don’t really think of this election, but of the parliamentary election and how many seats they will be able to win there. I think it is the beginning of the process of political reform,” he added.
Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the political “child” of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev who ruled Kazakhstan since Soviet times, was overwhelmingly elected as the new leader of the country on Sunday (9 June), in a vote closely watched by international observers.

According to the first exit polls, Tokayev got 70% of the votes, in line with predictions, followed by Amirzhan Kosanov (15.3%), liberal Dania Yespayeva (5.3%) and communist Jambyl Ahmetbekov (3.9%).

Kosanov, a former journalist, is the most outspoken critic of the establishment, having served short prison terms for his activism.

In total, seven candidates were registered while the turnout reached 77%, said the Central Electoral Commission.

On 19 March, Nazarbayev surprisingly resigned and announced that the Speaker of the Senate, Tokayev, will serve as interim leader before the next presidential election. In order to honor his mentor, Tokayev renamed the country’s capital Astana to Nur-Sultan.

Tokayev is a career diplomat and a polyglot: He is fluent in Kazakh, Russian, English and Chinese and has knowledge of French. He has served, among other positions, as director general of the United Nations Office in Geneva, and as a personal representative of the UN Secretary-General to the Conference on Disarmament.

A month later, Tokayev set 9 June as the date of the early presidential election and said the vote was “absolutely needed” to
ensure “continuity, predictability and stability”.

From the outset, he has been seen as the winner, although diplomats recognise that the elections mark an attempt to introduce pluralism. As early as in mid-May, a diplomat predicted that Tokayev will get 70%.

**PROTESTS AND OBSERVERS**

Hundreds of observers monitored the election procedure with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) alone sending more than 300 people.

An official OSCE report is expected later today; however, first signs show that the election campaign, as well as the voting process, ran smoothly.

Asked by EURACTIV, Dania Yespayeva, the liberal candidate, said the government did not hinder her campaign at all.

Daniel Witt, an independent observer from the US, said his team met with candidates and all party representatives, who “all emphatically said Kazakh Central Electoral Commission (CEC) should be trusted”.

“They were not restrained by the administration during their election campaigns,” Witt told EURACTIV and added that the election was a significant step forward in Kazakhstan.

“This can be a model for other countries to follow, in the region, in the broader neighbourhood. The neighbours will definitely notice what’s happening today in Kazakhstan,” he said.

Similarly, Valeriu-Andrei Steriu, a socialist lawmaker from Romania and observer in the elections, commented, “What we saw today was a fair, transparent and democratic process”.

“I cannot know at the national level but at least here in the capital, this is the case,” he added.

However, hundreds of people took to the streets of Astana protesting against the “fake” elections and chanting “Old boy [Nazarbayev] get away”.

Protesters told EURACTIV that Nazarbayev had already determined the result of the elections and added that he would still rule the country behind the scene.

The police said the protesters prevented other people from reaching a polling station in the downtown and detained 500 of them. According to AFP, the police also detained journalists, as well as activists, who were later released.

Amirzhan Kosanov, the main opposition leader, has been the most critical of Nazarbayev of the seven candidates.

In a recent interview with EURACTIV, he said it was difficult to be in opposition. “I was beaten […] I was detained for organising rallies,” he said, adding that now things have changed and the central government has realised that the opposition is needed.

**BIG TEST FOR THE POLITICAL ELITE**

A diplomat who spoke to EURACTIV on condition of anonymity said Tokayev is “Nazarbayev’s political child” but “this child has an opinion”.

“He plans to bring the opposition closer to him […] it is said he will place many opposition members to several bodies especially when it comes to human rights,” the diplomat said.

“In any case, this is a big test for the political elite […] we need to see how it will react now without Nazarbayev at the centre of decision-making,” the diplomat added.

The same diplomat added that another key aspect Tokayev is planning to deal with is the special relation with Moscow, as well as the “collateral damage” on Kazakhstan from Washington’s sanctions.

For Romanian lawmaker Steriu, the high turnout politically means a clear mandate.

“The next president is important to continue this democratic transition and keep the economy stable. It’s a dynamic economy and a country full of resources. But these resources are used in such a way that they are re-invested back in hospitals, education and social issues,” Steriu said.

He added, though, that the political transition could not take place with the pace of a western country.

Earlier this week, the Human Rights Watch issued a strong statement against Tokayev, saying that human rights violations will persist under his presidency, as the so-called political transition is an “illusion”.

“Kazakh authorities routinely break up peaceful protests […] and sanction them with warnings, fines and short-term imprisonment,” the organisation said.

“Speaking with people from the opposition, no one of them gave me the impression they are not free,” Steriu told EURACTIV.

Asked about Nazarbayev’s influence on Tokayev, the socialist politician replied, “Each president is coming with his own personality and his own will to develop a country”.

“They were building the country together and normally they share some common ideas. But every president brings his new stamp,” he added.
The EU has voiced concerns about the 9 June presidential elections in Kazakhstan, while the country’s newly elected leader, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has vowed to enhance cooperation with neighbouring Central Asian states, including Russia and China.

Tokayev, the protégé of former longtime president Nursultan Nazarbayev, was overwhelmingly elected as the new leader on Sunday (9 June), scoring 71%.

The election process was closely monitored by hundreds of observers, who said the pre-election campaign had run smoothly. The other candidates also confirmed that they were free to campaign before the elections.

Asked by EURACTIV, Dania Yespayeva, the liberal candidate, said the government “did not hinder my campaign at all”.

However, the election day was overshadowed by violent demonstrations in Almaty and Kazakhstan’s capital Nur-Sultan, which was recently renamed from Astana by Tokayev to honour Nazarbayev.

People took to the streets to protest against the “fake” elections and chanted “Old boy [Nazarbayev] go away”. Some of them boycotted the poll saying that Nazarbayev had already determined the result of the elections and added that he would still rule the country behind the scenes.

The police said the protesters had prevented other people from reaching a polling station in the city.

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and detained 500 of them. According to AFP, the police also detained journalists, as well as activists, who were later released.

**OSCE, EU HIGHLIGHT VIOLATIONS**

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which had sent 300 observers to monitor the election, issued a statement underlining “clear violations of fundamental freedoms as well as pressure on critical voices.”

“While there were seven candidates, including for the first time a woman, considerable restrictions on the right to stand, and limits to peaceful assembly and expression inhibited genuine political pluralism,” OSCE said, adding that cases of ballot box stuffing, and a disregard of counting procedures were also observed.

Maja Kocijancic, EU spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy, referred to the OSCE preliminary findings and said the newly elected president should address the issue.

“We expect Kazakhstan to address these violations, as well as the controlled legal and political electoral framework, as they run counter to the country’s OSCE commitments and international obligations,” Kocijancic said.

In response to OSCE’s criticism, a government official told EURACTIV: “If people are prevented from voting in a Western country, how do the authorities react?”

Tokayev told a press conference on Monday (10 June) the elections were fair and open and thanked the authorities for their reaction.

In Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed the election results and congratulated his Kazakh counterpart. According to Putin, it was a “convincing victory” which will help advance bilateral ties and the country’s foreign policy interests.

“I would like to […] promote mutually beneficial integration processes in the Eurasian space for the benefit of the fraternal peoples of Russia and Kazakhstan,” Putin said.

Kazakhstan is part of the Eurasian Economic UnionArmenia, together with Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Russia.

As interrogated by EURACTIV about his main foreign policy priorities, Tokayev said the focus would clearly be on the neighbourhood.

As interim president, Tokayev paid his first foreign visit to Moscow and vowed to strengthen bilateral ties. As the elected president, he said he’d first visit Central Asian countries.

“I am planning to visit the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit on June 13-14 in Kyrgyzstan and the next days I am participating in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) to be held in Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan,” Tokayev said.

“But my main focus will be to develop our relations and cooperation with our neighbours: Russia, China and Central Asian countries,” Tokayev added.

Opposition liberal Yespayeva shared a similar view. EURACTIV asked her on 9 June if Kazakhstan should continue the policy of focusing on Russia, China and the US. In her reply, she made no reference to the US.

“When it comes to Russia and China, Nazarbayev and Tokayev managed to build relations with these countries quite well, the new president will have to pursue the same policy. We have to preserve this kind of balance,” she said.

The new Kazakh leader also said Kazakhstan is essential for the implementation of China’s Silk Road project.

The Kazakh authorities want to transform the capital city into the largest business and transport hub in the region, a bridge between Europe and Asia. By 2020, the volume of transit traffic through the country is estimated to almost double.

**THE ‘SWEET SPOT’**

Commenting on what’s next for the Central Asian country, Enrico Mariutti, a researcher of Italian think-tank ISAG, said Kazakhstan is constantly struggling to find the “sweet spot”.

“Foreign Policy magazine has described the Kazakh situation as a constant fight for the perfect equilibrium among China, Russia and the US,” he said.

According to Mariutti, Beijing focuses on Kazakh raw materials and Washington on the energy/economic sector. Moscow, he said, views Astana as a constant fight for the perfect equilibrium among China, Russia and the US, he said.

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A diplomat, who spoke to EURACTIV on condition of anonymity, said the constitution itself makes the elections in Kazakhstan problematic. “Their constitution explicitly provides the conditions around the elections. However, there is also a small sentence saying that these conditions can change in a separate electoral law. From a legal point of you, this is already questionable,” the diplomat said.

The diplomat added that the electoral law was amended two years ago and introduced further “embarrassing” restrictions. For example, someone can run in the elections if they can prove five years of public service.

Besides the legal aspect, the diplomat criticised the overall political atmosphere in the country, with the lack of independent NGOs, free media and real opposition. “All these circumstances overall makes it impossible for the elections to be democratic.”

The diplomat added that Nazarbaev is even more powerful than the president himself, considering that he is the head of the country’s Security Council and leader of the ruling party.

The diplomat also referred to the economic situation, saying that it is not in a very good shape. “The economy is based on oil and gas, this is the 60% of the GDP. Nowadays, this is problematic if you consider the volatility of oil prices and there is also growing social discontent in the country. And the revenues are distributed in an uneven way.”

Regarding the country’s foreign policy objectives, the diplomat said Russia and China was a difficult path to follow. “Both of them are egoistic and you cannot get high-technology from them [...] Russia is facing exactly the same problems, you cannot get high-tech from Russia,” the diplomat concluded.
The European Neighbourhood Council (ENC) conducted interviews over the recent presidential elections, revealing a need for further reforms to overcome an oil-dependent economy, while further deepening ties with the European Union (EU), writes Samuel Doveri Vesterbye.

Samuel Doveri Vesterbye is the managing director at European Neighbourhood Council (ENC) @ENC_Europe

On 9 June President Kassym-Jomart Tokaev was elected President of Kazakhstan with 70.9% of the vote. His main opponent, Amirzhan Kossanov, received 16.23%. The first female candidate in the country's history, Daniya Yespayeva, came in third place with 5.05%.

The landslide win by Tokaev was widely expected and – ahead of June 9 – the OSCE (of which Kazakhstan is a member) had already raised serious concerns through the election environment and process through the ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report.

ENC conducted electoral observation and field interviews at 7 out of 35 polling stations in Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan's electoral mood calls for more ties with Europe.

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a small de-industrialised oil-town close to the Caspian coast.

The interview findings were revealing and indicative of Kazakhstan’s need for further reforms to overcome an oil-dependent economy, while further deepening ties with the European Union (EU), Kazakhstan’s single largest trading partner.

THE ECONOMIC REALITY IN WESTERN KAZAKHSTAN

In order to visit Zhanaozen, a visitor (from capital) must travel by plane for three hours to reach Aktau, a city to the West of the country on the Caspian Sea. From Aktau to Zhanaozen it takes approximately one hour and a half via car along desert areas and pockets of a de-industrialised wasteland.

Some industrial sites from the Soviet period (previous car manufacturers) now decay, unused for decades. In other parts, new companies have moved in, noticeably ones from Azerbaijan (largescale refrigeration centres used as a logistics hub to store and distribute, for example, fruit from Turkmenistan), China (providing infrastructure and services linked to oil production), Turkey (constructing roads/highways and asphalt factories), and Korea (supporting oil and gas logistics).

During interviews in the area, the generally accepted economic success-story (of connectivity) and the added-value of oil-production was regularly questioned by locals. Most interviewed voters expressed deep concerns about unemployment, youth, migration, worker’s safety and China’s role in the region.

At the same time, long rows of workers’ houses (with reported co-ownership by the workers) are visible along the road between Aktau and Zhanaozen. Most of these recent constructions show that the Kazakh government is fully aware of this problem and gradually tries to alleviate social burdens through housing.

Competition, declining oil prices and automation will increase such pressures in the near future, as the global economy changes rapidly and workers lose faith in their government’s ability to protect their rights.

Kazakhstan is blessed with the gift of raw-materials, but cursed with the danger of ‘putting all its export-eggs in one basket’. Put differently, Kazakhstan today faces the choice of staying a middle-income country with a GDP per capita of €11,400 or move up the global ladder to join the club of sustainable innovators.

The later is fundamentally feasible considering its levels of GDP, education and geographic connectivity. Currently it is uniquely positioned to do this, having signed both agreements with the EU, in the form of the ECPA in 2015, and with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

ELECTION DAY CALLS FOR BETTER TIES WITH EUROPE

Voters in Zhanaozen are allocated a polling station, in accordance to their domiciled residence. There are 35 stations, each of which consist of between 1,500-2,500 registered voters. Station staff arrive at the stations at 6 am, while voting takes place between 7 am and 8 pm.

Between 8 pm and 8.30 pm, counting takes place, followed by the transfer-of-numbers to the city and regional levels of electoral committees. Observers cannot touch or interact physically with the counting/ballots, but have the right to stay in the room (and report irregularities) at an

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approximate distance of 2-3 meters from the ‘counting table’.

According to a verbal report (from polling station S.85) 10 national observers are present, including 7 staff members, meaning a total of 17 people inside the main counting room. National observers also have the permission to accompany the station staff in delivering the ballots to the city-level/regional electoral committees.

During ENC's electoral observation, the following technical irregularities were found:

- Practically no technical voter irregularities were detected during the observation of 7 polling stations on June 9 in Zhanaozen;

During ENC’s electoral observation, the following observations were made:

- A very high degree of support for Kossanev, both among voters and most national electoral observers (NGOs), including ones from competing parties;
- All political parties were represented (with minimum one national electoral observer) and present at each of the polling stations;
- Kossanev national electoral observers were fully aware of their political party’s platform. National electoral observers from Kossanev, Tokaev and the NGO (Nur Otan - which represents ex-President Nursultan Nazerbayev) were the most informed about their political party/NGOs platforms/ideas. Many of the other national observers knew little about their NGOs and party platforms;
- The Communist Party were registered on paper, but was rarely present at any of the polling stations;
- Both voters and national observers were vocal about youth issues, severe unemployment levels (30-40%), migration to cities (especially youths), labour protection needs, lacking minimum wages and protection against environmental degradation, undemocratic practices, land expropriation by foreign (Chinese) companies and government contracts;
- One national electoral observer suggested adding live-streaming during the counting process to guarantee impartiality, anti-corruption and transparency;
- Not one single national electoral observer reported any technical irregularities. Many voiced concerns about the lead-up to the elections;
- Not one single reference or mention was made of the protests, killings and arrests which took place in 2011.

The conclusions are simple: Kazakhstan is a booming demographic trading hub with momentum for transition and political openness. Now the choice lay with its citizens and government in deciding whether it wishes to promote peace and interconnectivity, increase trade and ties with European universities, while developing independent democratic institutions.

Further EU support and regulatory harmonisation with an emphasis on education and institutions could finally allow the Kazakh’s to transition away from an oil-dependent economy. The results could determine what country Kazakhstan and its citizens will live in decades from now.
On June 9th, Kazakh citizens will go to the polls. It’s the first time since Kazakhstan’s independence from the Soviet Union that it’s first president, and long-time leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev isn’t on the ballot.

EURACTIV travelled to Kazakhstan to learn more about how the political landscape is changing and how the transition of power is perceived.

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