Kazakhstan is to hold parliamentary elections for the Majilis, the lower chamber of the Kazakh parliament, on 10 January 2021. Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the Central Asian country is inviting observers and journalists and is hoping to attract international attention.
Kazakhstan to hold parliamentary elections in January

Expert: Multi-party democracy has potential in Kazakhstan

Political scientist: COVID-19 will not become a brake for Kazakhstan election

Kazakhstan election holds genuine strategic importance

‘We have to be observers’ in Kazakh elections, MEP says
Kazakhstan to hold parliamentary elections in January

By Georgi Gotev | EURACTIV.com

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has signed a decree scheduling the parliamentary elections for the Majilis for 10 January 2021. The elections are seen as another step in the process of “controlled democratisation” of the former Soviet republic.

Majilis is the lower chamber of the Kazakh Parliament consisting of 107 deputies who are elected for a five-year term. The upper house is the Senate of Kazakhstan, with 47 members. Members of the Senate are elected on the basis of indirect suffrage by secret ballot, and half of the elected members are up for election every three years.

The previous elections for the Majilis were held in March 2016. Six political parties participated in the elections and three of them, Nur Otan (82.2%), Ak Zhol Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (7.18%), the Communist People’s Party of Kazakhstan (7.14%), won the right to send their deputies to the chamber.

Currently, the Nur Otan party

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has a majority of 84 deputies in the Majilis, while the Ak Zhol and the Communist People’s party have 7 deputies each.

Nine deputies are elected from the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, an advisory body under the president of Kazakhstan whose members are drawn from organisations representing major ethnic communities living in the country.

“All political parties had time to prepare for the upcoming election campaign, develop an election platform, and enhance party infrastructure. The Central Election Commission and the Prosecutor General’s Office will continuously monitor the legality, transparency, and fairness of elections,” Tokayev said in his address.

He emphasised the reforms he has undertaken since he stepped into the presidential office in June 2019, including the introduction of a parliamentary opposition institute.

Tokayev won the 9 June 2019 poll with 70% of the votes, in elections disputed by seven candidates – a novelty in terms of pluralism for the country.

“One chair and two secretaries of the Majilis standing committees will now be elected from the members of the parliamentary opposition. In addition, the parliamentary opposition will have the right to initiate parliamentary hearings at least once during one session and to set the agenda for the government hour at least twice during one session,” said the Kazakh president.

In 2019, Tokayev signed a decree that introduced a mandatory 30% quota for women and young people on party lists in an effort to increase their voice in the decision-making process.

The next elections for maslikhats (representative local authority bodies) will for the first time be held based on party lists, which according to Tokayev will “enable parties to strengthen their position in the country’s political system.”

In August, seventeen Senate deputies from the nation’s 14 regions and cities of Nur-Sultan, Almaty and Shymkent were elected to the Senate.

The renewed composition of the Kazakh parliament, noted Tokayev, will focus on “quality legislative support for social and economic reforms in the country.”

The president said that in the context of a global economic crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, Kazakhstan has to take effective anti-crisis measures, ensuring sustainable economic development, and improving the well-being of the people.

He encouraged Kazakhs to participate in the elections. January is usually very cold in the Central Asian country, with temperatures in the capital Nur-Sultan often as low as minus 30 degrees Celsius.
The upcoming elections for the Majilis, the lower chamber of Kazakhstan’s Parliament, are a clear improvement in terms of representation and legislative changes, Samuel Doveri Vesterbye told EURACTIV in an interview.

Sam Doveri Vesterbye is managing director at the European Neighbourhood Council, an independent think tank. He spoke to EURACTIV’s Georgi Gotev.

Kazakhstan will hold parliamentary elections on 10 January 2021. The country is inviting observers and is apparently disappointed that because of the coronavirus pandemic, the elections will probably not get much international attention. I recently wrote that the elections are part of the process of “controlled democratisation” which is ongoing under the new President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Is this a fair assessment? What is your take?

‘Controlled democratisation’ is tricky. On one hand, OSCE reports clearly show legislative changes, which have led to degrees of societal openness being allowed by the government since 2017. Many such legislative changes were a direct result of recommendations from ODHIR.
One the other hand, it’s clear from the 2019 presidential election results and the country’s very young ‘multi-party system’, that concrete power continues to lay disproportionally in the hands of the government. Whereas ‘controlled democracy’ allows for degrees of liberty, it differs from real democracy in the sense that the business community, judicial courts and media groups remain less independent.

The competitive nature of multi-party governance, which democracies are famous for, remains in its infancy in Kazakhstan, but not without potential. The creation of democracy necessitates a social contract, where parties and citizens agree to fight for the government-office through commonly agreed boundaries and rules. But in order to get to that stage, the power balance in society must be representative for everyone competing.

In Kazakhstan today, the more marginalised groups on the left or liberal-right may not possess the same tools and funds to compete fairly with the government. You can also apply this to other countries, like the United States, where deregulated campaign funding rules often distort competition through monetary bias. It’s a very delicate situation, since history shows us how democratisation can lead to instability – a concern regularly voiced by Kazakhstan’s leadership.

However, it’s difficult to imagine true democratisation without some degree of friction and competitiveness. As monopolies rarely wish to give-up the reigns on power, friction is sometimes a necessity, yet the degree of instability which this may evoke is a valid concern that countries may have.

In Europe, for example, many political parties were linked to trade unions in the past. It was in large part because of the collective power to strike and the capability to disrupt the industrialist power-holders and monopolistic governments that European democracy and people’s rights were born. Historically, the need for arbitration came out of both ideas and necessity. The fact that many (not few) power-holders and different business existed meant that arbitration and independent courts were needed in order to avoid continuous instability.

Today, Kazakhstan seeks to pursue a different path – “controlled democracy” – which legitimately wants to avoid instability. The genuine paradox however remains: how much control is too much control when you control democratisation?

The presidential elections of June 2019 were a first sign that new political players – and new political forces – could get their share in the political landscape of the country. The establishment appears as centrist vis-à-vis the communists on the left and the liberals on the other extreme which you mentioned. This strategy reassures the voters, many of whom do not like to take risks, and who are generally satisfied by the steady improvement of living standards since the country’s independence from the Soviet Union.

Do you think that political forces other than the Nur Otan party in power will always remain marginal? Is this the reason why the establishment is so confident that the elections will be a success – no matter what is the result?

The upcoming elections are a clear improvement in terms of representation and legislative changes. It remains undeniable that the leadership of Kazakhstan followed several guidelines and ODHIR recommendations, particularly since the last presidential and parliamentary elections.

As a result of the 2017 constitutional reform, the Election Law of Kazakhstan was changed in 2017, 2018, 2019 and again this year, following a variety of recommendations from international actors including the OSCE. These legislative changes include the formation of the lower-level election commissions, voter registration reforms, and the securing of minimal representativeness of women and youth, among a variety of other amendments.

It’s important however to note that the Ministry of Information and Social Development, the Prosecutor General and the National Security Committee remain entitled to block websites and halt media outlet operations, without prior judicial oversight.

In terms of freedom of expression, it is also noteworthy to mention that ‘defamation’ was decriminalised in June 2020, which is a positive step. That said, the criminal code of Kazakhstan continues to prohibit...
any insults to the First President, his family and members of parliament.

As we can see in the United States today, what really matters is the judiciary and its independence. Without independent agencies, administration and courts, it’s difficult to imagine competitiveness among political parties and candidates.

Sometimes leaders genuinely function as neutral arbitrators (“real statesmen or women”) but the problem of mortality means that they don’t last forever. They are often replaced by less benevolent leaders, which leads to corruption, monopolies and interest-based or non-representative governance. A very comprehensive literature exists on this subject.

If legislative reforms continue to progress in Kazakhstan, then only time will tell to which degree “controlled democratisation” will institutionalise diversity of opinion, wealth accumulation and perhaps allow for genuine power distribution.

It’s unlikely however to occur if the definition of “control” doesn’t include wider aspects of society, including a more resilient and broader civil society, which is not only dependent on government funds, but equally relies on support from the European Union.

Post-Soviet countries have taken different courses and today some of them could be called failed states. This is by far not the case of Kazakhstan. The country is far from perfect under the chapter of human rights or press freedom, but it is increasingly prosperous, and a stabilising factor, both regionally and globally. And it doesn’t bother the EU asking for financial assistance or with impossible requests such as becoming a member. Perhaps this is precisely the kind of partners the EU needs in its neighbourhood?

Kazakhstan is a signatory of the Paris Agreement, Helsinki Accords and a full member of the OSCE, with an ODHIR office for election monitoring. It has participated in important de-nuclearisation efforts, while hosting the Astana Process and supports multilateralism both through its economic policies and diplomatic ties to Europe.

The European Union continues to be Kazakhstan’s most important trading partner for exports, and since 2015 it entered into an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, which positively affects trade and regulatory frameworks. As of March 2020, this year, it has entered into force.

In many ways, Kazakhstan is a very good Eurasian partner for the European Union in terms of policy-alignment, trade and stability. Kazakhstan could play a key role for Europe in several ways. Kazakhstan could lend support towards the stabilisation of the neighborhood, both in economic terms and also in terms of conflict prevention. Policy areas like digitalisation, border management, energy and preventing radicalisation (including Afghanistan) are areas in which the European Union and Kazakhstan largely see eye-to-eye.

But despite good diplomatic initiatives and growing trade relations, the European Union and Kazakhstan face the serious hurdle of global tensions between the United States and China.

Both are countries which stand to lose from an increase in US-Chinese rivalry. Due to Kazakhstan’s geographic position – located between Beijing and Brussels – it won’t benefit from deteriorating relations which will affect the Belt & Road Initiative, including European investments and the EU Connectivity Strategy, as well as supply-chains between Asia and Europe.

It’s therefore primarily through the deepening of trade and security relations with other small to medium-sized countries in Europe, including the Caucasus and Turkey, that Kazakhstan can play an important role for the European Union, and vice-versa. Capitalising on its membership at the OSCE may also serve as a springboard for diplomacy to showcase alignment with the European Union on key foreign, cultural and security policy areas.
Kazakhstan is holding parliamentary elections on 10 January, expected to further bolster the soft democratic reform process in the Central Asian country. In a wide-ranging interview, political scientist Mukhit-Ardager Sydyknazarov explained the political landscape and the stakes ahead of the ballot.

Mukhit-Ardager Sydyknazarov is a doctor of political science, director of the Institute of Contemporary Studies, Eurasian National University, L.N. Gumilyov, Nur-Sultan.

The President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, signed a decree on holding the parliamentary elections for the Mazhilis (lower house of parliament) on 10 January. Could you describe the political context ahead of the elections? Who are the main political candidates?

At the end of May 2020, the president signed the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Amendments and Additions to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan” and some other pieces of legislation which provided for the rights of the opposition in the Kazakh Parliament. Members of the parties representing the parliamentary opposition were given the right to speak at parliamentary hearings and at joint sessions of the Chambers. The legislation provides, which is especially important, the appointment of members of the parliamentary opposition as heads of parliamentary committees.

The initiatives on gender and youth quota, supported by the president and the Parliament, also meet the socio-political needs of the maturing Kazakhstani society.
Last October as you said the President said the decree on holding the parliamentary elections. The next 2 months pass for voters in a rather difficult political electoral campaign, plus, on the whole, because of the pandemic, the year itself is one of the most difficult in the history of Kazakhstan.

All except the ruling Nur-Otan party, according to the logic of the pre-election struggle and competition for the minds of voters, are opposition. I will answer your question about the main political contenders in (Cyrillic) alphabetical order (the interview was conducted in Russian).

**PARTY “ADAL” (“JUSTICE”).**

This newly formed party is based on the rebranding of the renaming of the Birlik party. The party intends to replenish its membership base primarily by business representatives. Interestingly, the choice of the name was carried out on a scientific basis, professional opinion polls were conducted. According to the leaders of the party, the choice of the new name of the party is explained by the demand of the population for renewal and justice. At the same time, people put a lot in the word of justice: from the fight against corruption to the transparency of decision-making.

**PARTY “AK ZHOL” (“LIGHTED PATH”).**

The party calls itself “the” parliamentary opposition. The party’s pre-election program was recently announced. It should be noted that its leader Azat Peruashev had earlier initiated a law on parliamentary opposition. The party's frontmen, in addition to the chairman, are Daniya Espaeva, ex-presidential candidate of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazybek Isa, Berik Dyusembinov.

After the President signed the laws providing for the rights of the opposition in the Kazakh Parliament, the leader of AkZhol Azat Peruashev literally said: “The main novelty of this draft law is that we are introducing the word “opposition” into the legal field. You know that we did not have this concept. We considered it correct that there should be a parliamentary opposition in the Parliament, which will express the opinion of the people and raise issues of concern to the entire population. That is, the parliamentary opposition is not just an opposition, it will have the right to express its opinion, it will also express the opinion of the people.”

At the party congress Peruashev noted that “this state faces many challenges and problems, the solution of which is no longer possible without wide participation and control from society”. He highlighted the need for a gradual transition from a super-presidential system to a parliamentary republic and from a monopoly of power to a system of checks and balances.

The AkZhol party has defined the main threats to Kazakhstan in the following terms: bureaucracy and corruption, social injustice and the growing gap between rich and poor; monopolization of the economy and power in Kazakhstan.

Perusheav has stated that further dragging out of reform may lead to a crisis of statehood, as it happened in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, and earlier in Ukraine.

**PEOPLE’S DEMOCRATIC PATRIOTIC PARTY “AUYL”**.

It’s one of the youngest parties in Kazakhstan, created in 2015 through the merger of the Kazakh Social Democratic Party “Auyl” and the Party of Patriots of Kazakhstan. It has participated in parliamentary and local elections in 2016. The frontmen of “Auyl” are its chairman, Senator Ali Bektayev and his first deputy, ex-presidential candidate Toleutai Rakhimbekov. The electoral list is headed by Rakhimbekov, an active politician who is very successful in social networks. The party successfully conducted a nationwide poll with the aim of monitoring the most pressing socio-economic problems, which, logically, should form the basis of the party’s electoral program.

In particular, “Auyl” proposes to introduce “children’s capital”, which provides for the payment of a certain amount of budget funds to each minor Kazakhstani from the moment of birth. This builds on the experience of the rich Arab monarchies of the Gulf countries. “Auyl” is focused on supporting large families, which are traditional in Kazakhstan.

**PEOPLE’S PARTY OF KAZAKHSTAN (FORMERLY THE COMMUNIST PEOPLE’S PARTY OF KAZAKHSTAN).**

On the basis of rebranding and renaming, it became a “people’s party”. The frontmen of the
People's Party are well-known and active deputies of the Mazhilis of the Parliament Aikyn Konurov, Zhambyl Akhmetbekov and Irina Smirnova. The first two also hold the positions of secretaries of the CPPK Central Committee. Zhambyl Akhmetbekov twice ran for president of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the elections of 2011 and 2019.

The People's Party aims at “uniting the left forces of the constructive opposition”. This is reasonable, since the communist legacy is not particularly popular among the mostly young Kazakh electorate. This is why instead on nostalgia, the party banks on the values of equality and brotherhood: egalitarianism, a socially oriented state.

NATIONAL SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (NSDP).

It’s the oldest political party in Kazakhstan. The faces of the party are its chairman Askhat Rakhimzhanov and his deputy, Aydar Alibayev. The party counts on a protest electorate, and there are quite a few such sentiments amid the economic recession. In fact, it has traditionally been an opposition party since its inception. The party has gone through serious perturbations during its difficult history. The two-time change of the party’s leadership in 2019, the withdrawal of a number of active members from the party were at one time newsworthy in the Kazakh media. The NSDP recently postponed its extraordinary congress to 27 November. Given the difficult situation inside and around the party, it is difficult to predict the readiness of their party lists. In the media, the NSDP has already announced its ambition to participate in the parliamentary elections and is not going to boycott them.

Before I ask you to describe the ruling party Nur-Otan, let me ask you the following: isn’t its strategy based on the assumption that after years of rising living standards since the independence from the Soviet Union, the vast majority of the electorate would prefer stability rather than experiments to the far-left or of a liberal kind? And the opposition will always remain marginal?

Let me say a few words about the Nur-Otan Party. This is the ruling party. The history of the formation and development of the Nur-Otan party is closely connected with the name of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Under his leadership, the party became the country’s leading political force. Nazarbayev is the ideological inspirer of the Nur-Otan party, he was at the origins of the birth and formation of the party.

Without any doubt, Nur-Otan has the most organized and ramified infrastructure in the country, it has various internal committees, a youth wing, its own media resources, etc.

Regarding pre-election matters, until mid-November of this year, there was a complete and unconditional dominance of the Nur-Otan party in the Kazakh media. The party, its organizers, represented by the first deputy chairman Bauyrzhan Baybek, have done a huge organizational, ideological, media and content work both in the center and, more importantly, in the regions. Particularly noticeable and unprecedented in scale and content were the party primaries of the Nur-Otan party, over 600 thousand citizens took part in them, there were 11 thousand candidates, of which 5 thousand passed the primaries. But it is also necessary to take into account the organizational scale, the number of members and the capabilities of the Nur-Otan party: the party has 80-90 deputies, and AkZhol has no more than 10.

The elections will be held according to party lists. Parties need to overcome the 7% threshold, and this is a high figure – the votes of hundreds of thousands of Kazakhstani. A multi-party parliament can exist only in the form of factions of political parties demonstrating different political platforms, reaching solutions through compromises in the name of the prosperity of citizens and the state. For this – the parliamentary opposition and a corresponding law has been adopted in Kazakhstan guaranteeing their powers.

Regarding the second part of your question: no, I do not believe that in the long term, as you said, opposition forces “will always remain marginal”. There is a party struggle, there are voters, therefore, everything depends on the activism and initiative of each party.

Recently I wrote that the elections are part of the process of “controlled democratisation”, which are underway under the new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Is this a fair assessment?

The choice of political science terminology is a non-stop process. And it is possible that your term will catch on: life will show.
I will say that the second president of Kazakhstan set new trends in all areas. My personal opinion is that we were very lucky with the second president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: he is a politician, a diplomat with vast Kazakhstani and international management experience, an expert and insider on international political processes, who speaks several key UN languages. He has a fresh outlook on many things, while the continuity declared by President Tokayev remains: this is very important, given our neighbourhood with two major powers: Russia and China, and the growing geopolitical threats and risks, the permanent instability, which has become new normalcy in international relations.

Due to the pandemic, there probably won’t be many international observers or journalists before and during the elections. Is this a setback?

Electoral campaigns in the world, including in European countries, and also in the US, took place during the pandemic, and the events showed that Covid-19 will not become a brake on political changes, on the contrary, it became their catalyst. I think that Kazakhstan will cope with this challenge, given the high degree of organization and well-established and efficiently functioning state institutions.

Also, the pandemic and social distancing, quarantine restrictions, less social contacts of part of the population have become a part of our everyday life, so going to the vote, on the contrary, will become an event in which they want to take an active part.

Holding elections in January, when temperatures in Kazakhstan are sometimes very low, can also be a problem?

Winter electoral cycles are not so rare for our country. In Kazakhstan, winter does not freeze citizens and country political processes. On the contrary, traditionally December, January, in general winter in Kazakhstan is a season of fateful political decisions: protests of student youth in 1986, which became the first harbingers of the collapse of the USSR, took place in December, the independence of Kazakhstan was also declared in December, the actual transfer of the capital from Almaty to Akmola (later – Astana, since March 2019 – the city of Nur-Sultan) was also a harsh northern winter. So Kazakhs are no stranger to being hyperactive in winter conditions.

In my subjective opinion as a political scientist, if there is a turnout of 60-70% of voters in these elections, it will be a great achievement.
Kazakhstan will hold its parliamentary election on 10 January with a clear intention to reach the democratic levels enjoyed in the European bloc. Despite the obvious challenges of voting during a pandemic, our government is committed to giving our citizens a voice, writes Aigul Kuspan.

Aigul Kuspan is the ambassador of the Republic of Kazakhstan to Belgium and Luxembourg, and head of the Mission to the European Union and NATO.

As we entered 2020, the international community was aware that this year was to bring a set of unique challenges, including to the countries of Europe.

The continent has had to deal with the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, an impending economic crisis and rising tensions between members of the bloc. With the addition of the unexpected pandemic, Europe had to rely on its core values to help it get through this difficult period and aim to come out of it more robust.

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The re-calibration of national development and the pursuit of bettering one’s country undoubtedly extend far beyond the EU bloc.

Kazakhstan – one of Europe’s major partners and collaborators in mutual development – has also been actively striving towards progress in all spheres of life.

In the face of the pandemic and shifting national priorities, Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev last month signed a decree scheduling parliamentary elections for Kazakhstan’s lower house of parliament on 10 January 2021.

Despite the obvious challenges of holding elections during a pandemic, our government is committed to giving our citizens a voice. This determination exemplifies the direction the country has been taking since the election of President Tokayev last year.

In the shadow of ongoing global events, it might be easy for Europe to miss the significance of Kazakhstan’s upcoming election. Yet it does hold genuine strategic importance. Kazakhstan remains one of Europe’s strongest economic partners, with thousands of companies and tens of thousands of jobs relying on our economic links.

Over 40% of Kazakhstan’s foreign trade is with the European bloc, which, in turn, accounts for 48% of inwards investment. Kazakhstan’s energy sector has also grown to become one of the safest sources of oil and gas for the bloc.

Our country, geographically sandwiched between the booming markets of the global East and Europe, acts as a natural and respected partner for ensuring smooth trade between each zone, including through the New Silk Road.

And with Italy’s ratification last year, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian nation to sign the Enhanced Partnership Cooperation Agreement with the EU, paving the way for a new era in the strengthening of ties.

This is not to say that economic relations are the sole foundation of Kazakh-European relations. Our ties have significantly expanded beyond the economic sphere and now cover cooperation across diplomacy, culture and societal development.

As a bloc with such an illustrious history, young nations like Kazakhstan look towards Europe for guidance and best practice for their own journey of development.

The values of democracy and freedom of expression have inspired Kazakhstan since our independence almost 30 years ago. These principles acted as a compass for one of Kazakhstan’s most significant political events – the resignation of First President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 2019 and the smooth transition of power following the presidential election.

As we prepare for January’s parliamentary election, we are reminded of the EU spokesperson’s statement at the time, who noted that Kazakhstan’s presidential election was administered efficiently by the Central Election Commission and offered an important moment for potential political reforms.

Since then, President Tokayev has remained consistent in his belief that Kazakhstan needs to foster open debate and a plurality of opinions in determining the course of the country’s direction.

In this regard, a number of major reforms have been implemented which were once initiated by Europe and which Kazakhstan seeks to emulate.

Firstly, the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT) has been established. It is an advisory body under the President, which conducts open dialogue with representatives of the public in order to develop specific proposals for reforming legislation and the public administration system.

Furthermore, the threshold for registering political parties has been reduced by half to 20,000 party members, making it much easier to establish a new party. In addition, legislation has been updated to make it easier to organise and hold peaceful rallies.

Moreover, a quota for political parties’ election lists of no less than 30% women and young people has been introduced for the first time in our country’s history to bolster the diversity of voices in the democratic decision-making process.

To ensure that our country strives for the highest democratic standards,
Kazakhstan has also approached European partners, including the OSCE and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), to observe the election and report their findings.

The participation of 30 long-term observers and 300 short-term observers, who will closely monitor the election proceedings, underscores Kazakhstan's commitment to transparency and learning from its European partners.

As this year draws to a close and the preparations for January's election intensify, Kazakhstan is aware that the pandemic is unlikely to disappear by the start of next year.

To ensure the health and safety of each voter, protective measures, including the disinfection of polling stations and provision of protective personal equipment for all the staff and volunteers will be ensured, and social distancing measures will be mandatory.

Holding a nationwide election is never easy – not least in the midst of a global health pandemic. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan will hold the vote with a clear intention to reach the democratic levels enjoyed within the European bloc.

As former European Council President Donald Tusk noted after his visit to Kazakhstan last year, the EU considers Kazakhstan an important partner and a nation of opportunity and cooperation.

I am confident that January's election will only strengthen the cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan, and usher in an era of mutual benefit for decades to come.
In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Parliament has yet to decide whether it will send observers to Kazakhstan’s parliamentary elections in January.

Andris Ameriks, a Latvian socialist lawmaker who is vice-chair of the European Parliament delegation for Central Asia and Mongolia, described the January election as a potential turning point for Kazakhstan’s relations with the European Union.

“In my personal opinion, we have to be observers in this election,” Ameriks said during an online event on Kazakhstan-EU relations hosted by EURACTIV on Wednesday (25 November).

He said, however, that the issue has not yet been discussed, and a lot depends on how the COVID-19 situation develops.

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“For the European Union this election period in Kazakhstan will be very important and we follow all activities in case of this political process,” added the social-democrat lawmaker who is a former deputy mayor of Riga.

PUSH FOR TURNOUT

The electoral commission announced plans to spend about €30.3 million on the elections, of which €676,000 is set aside for personal protective equipment.

Each participating party will contribute an electoral fee of about €1,200 for each candidate on their party list – with the exception of parties who passed the 7% electoral threshold during the last election and got into the lower house of Parliament, which includes the ruling Nur Otan party, the Ak Zhol faction and the former communists.

In announcing the decree setting the election date on 10 January, Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev called on “all citizens of our state to show active citizenship and take responsible part in the upcoming elections.”

The President’s call for people to participate in the election is actively promoted by top political figures and was accepted by the five opposition parties that will take part in the elections, although some disagree.

About 100 hundred people called for the boycott of the elections at the beginning of November at a protest authorised by the authorities, Azattyq reported.

“RESET” AND REBRAND

Of the six parties admitted to the elections by Kazakhstan’s Central Election Commission, the clear dominating force is the ruling Nur Otan party, which picked up 82% of the vote in 2016 and holds 84 of the 107 seats in the Majlis, the lower house of the bicameral legislature.

It was founded and is still lead by former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, a post he held from 1990 until his surprise resignation in March 2019.

After the first experiment with intra-party pre-elections in 2016, Nur Otan held its second primaries this year. This took place on a much bigger in scale, with more than 660,000 party members casting votes for 10 thousand candidates – an unprecedented process described as “a revolutionary idea” by an advisor to the former president.

“It can be explained by the fact that the Nur Otan is not so much rigid and bronzed party, but a monopolist party, which has a monopoly in the Majlis, the Senate and all local governments, has inevitably fallen into some kind of stagnation. What was needed was a very powerful shake, which was initiated by party leader Nursultan Nazarbayev,” Yermukhamet Ertysbayev said.

The focus on women and youth seems to have borne fruit – the representation of women for local and regional election party lists increased from 22% to 34%, while the number of young people rose to 24%.

For some, this shows that the President’s “reset” strategy is starting to work. According to a recent poll, 76.8% of Kazakhstanis are now ready to vote for Nur Otan compared to 65.8% a year ago.

The dominating ruling party is not the only one looking for a “reset.”

Based on the results of an opinion poll, the former Birlik (“Unity”) party rebranded itself to Adal, which means “justice”.

Party leader Serik Sultangali said
the fact that the name 'Adal’ won out of 10 variants is explained by “the public’s request for renewal, for fairness”.

“At the same time, people invest a lot in the word ‘justice’, ranging from the fight against corruption to transparency in decision making,” Sultangali said.

“The question is not about going to the Majilis or becoming a deputy. The main thing is to be able to convey the proposals and ideas to the persons making decisions,” Sultangali told the party's general assembly in November.

The formal opposition also seems to be active in electoral tactics.

Before rebranding, Adal offered to merge with Auyl, a five year old party itself created from the merger of two groups. Auyl formed a working group to study the proposal but ultimately rejected it because of Adal’s perceived low activity and disorganisation.

The head of Auyl, Kuanysh Seitzhanov, said the merger “will not bring political dividends and will not increase popularity”.

The communists too have gone through a rebranding process, and dropped the term “communist” from their party’s name which was rebranded into the People’s Party of Kazakhstan.

Current MP and party chairman Aikyn Konurov said the move was made in the hope of broadening the party’s base beyond its working class origins.

“At present, it is not right to be based on the principles of class struggle. We do not have classes as such, because our industry does not form a working class. It is in its infancy itself, everyone acknowledges this,” he said.

“There will be different factions within the party: communist, social democratic, extreme left,” added Konurov, who thinks “this has not shaken the position of the true Communists of the Party in any way.”

However, he later admitted that “the word ‘communist’ was a barrier for some.”

The party’s program, presented on 23 November, lists the electoral promises of the People’s Party of Kazakhstan: accessible and quality education and medicine, the reduction of the retirement age to 60 and “credit amnesty” for borrowers who pay back their loans — meaning their bad credit history will be written off.

“A loan amnesty will not solve anything,” previously said Azat Peruashev, the leader of the Ak Zhol Party (“Lighted Path”). Instead, he believes high interest rates are responsible for the “impoverishment of Kazakhstani people due to non-performing loans,” and proposes introducing a rate ceiling of 7 or 8%.

The National Social Democratic Party (NSDP), one of the oldest parties, has not yet announced a rebranding campaign, though it may be in need of one after several leadership changes and exits by known members in recent years.