

Statement of  
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission,

Thank you for the invitation to address the Nazarbaev government's record on political reform on the eve of Kazakhstan's assumption of the OSCE Chairmanship in January 2010. My colleague, Yevgeny Zhovtis, ably demonstrates in his testimony that, despite Mr. Tazhin's encouraging pledge to advance human rights and political liberalization in advance of Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship, few substantive reforms have taken hold since the Foreign Minister's November 2007 statement. The goal of my testimony is to offer potential explanations for this lack of substantive political reform.

I divide my comments into six points. My first point is one of methodology: in order to understand Kazakhstan's autocratic continuity we must look beyond Kazakhstan. In points two through five I address comparative social science explanations of regime change and continuity: modernization theory, survival theory, winning coalition theory and the resource curse. Lastly, I conclude with what I see as the most promising pathway to future Kazakh political reform—the transformative role of international organizations such as the OSCE and the commitments member countries make to these organizations.

### *Grounded Comparative Analysis*

The intuitive starting point for understanding Kazakh autocratic continuity is the empirics of the Kazakh case. The pitfall of this approach, though, is that while any number of hypotheses could be offered to explain Kazakh political stasis, none of these hypotheses can be refuted. Thus, one could attribute continued illiberal rule in Kazakhstan to President Nazarbaev's leadership style, to the persistence of Kazakh "tribal" or "clan" identities, to a Kazakh cultural predilection to autocratic rule. Absent political variation, however, we cannot probe these hypotheses and assess their validity. An alternative approach, and the one I offer here, is to begin with hypotheses that are grounded in comparative studies of democracy and authoritarianism and then assess what insights these broader theories hold for the Kazakh case.

### *Modernization Theory*

Perhaps the most prominent explanation for the presence or absence of political reform is modernization theory. At its most basic, modernization theory predicts democratic reform is

more likely as individuals and countries become wealthier. Modernization theory has both an economic and a normative logic. On the economic side, democracies based on the rule of law are perceived as more likely to protect individual wealth and property than are capricious dictatorships. And on the normative side, individuals who are wealthy, that is, who can afford education, are more likely to demand just and legitimate governance than are individuals whose driving concern is day-to-day survival.

Kazakhstan, with a 2007 Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of over \$5,000 would seem a likely candidate for political reform. Much of the USAID program in Kazakhstan, moreover, is predicated on this observation. That is, given Kazakhstan's comparative wealth, market-oriented aid can further assist economic growth and, in so doing, better the prospects for political reform.

### *Survival Theory*

Problematically though, and at odds with US policy toward Kazakhstan, recent social science theory suggests that the likelihood of political transition declines as countries become wealthier. That is, although existing democracies are more likely to remain democracies as citizens' incomes increase, so too are existing autocracies more likely to survive as autocracies as economies expand. Though the reasons for this survival are many, one clear causality of autocratic survival emerges in the Kazakh – Kyrgyz contrast. Kyrgyzstan, since the Soviet collapse, has remained in economic desperate straits (Kyrgyzstan's 2007 GNI per capita was \$610). At the same time, Kyrgyzstan is the Central Asian country most closely associated, both in the region and internationally, with fitful attempts at political reform. One conclusion a Kazakh citizen might arrive at, and a conclusion certainly encouraged by Nazarbaev's frequent emphasis of a "Kazakh path" to post-Soviet economics and politics, is that an autocrat's steady hand is preferable to the economic instability that appears to accompany Kyrgyzstan's contested politics.

### *Winning Coalition Theory*

Complementing this potential economic growth claim to autocratic legitimacy is the institutional nature of Kazakh patronage politics. Comparative studies of regime change demonstrate that polities defined by (1) a narrow winning coalition of political elites and (2) by a large body of potential replacement political elites encourage high degrees of executive loyalty. The reason for this loyalty is straightforward: those who are lucky enough to be in the current winning coalition of ruling elites recognize that, should they shift their loyalty from the current leader to a rival, the likelihood that they will be in the new leader's winning coalition is small. Thus, though a Nazarbaev rival might assure potential supporters jobs in a future winning coalition, members of the current ruling elite are neither guaranteed this rival will be successful nor that he will keep his word, should he be successful.

### *The Resource Curse*

Importantly, belonging to the winning ruling coalition would not be so desirable if membership did not offer attractive economic privileges. The ability to offer these privileges, the extensive literature on natural resource wealth and authoritarianism demonstrates, is directly linked to a

leader's access to easily exploitable revenue streams. Kyrgyzstan, for example, is similarly defined by a narrow winning coalition and a large body of potential replacement elites. Kyrgyz president Bakiev, however, has few resources with which to ensure the loyalty of this coalition. President Nazarbaev, in contrast, can draw on Kazakhstan's vast oil wealth to fund patronage politics and insure the loyalty of political appointees. In short, though oil wealth is a boon for Nazarbaev and his supporters, this same wealth stifles the political contestation that is necessary for democratic openings.

### ***The Transformative Role of International Organizations and Agreements***

The preceding points illustrate that a sober review of the democratization literature provides few reasons to anticipate that either President Nazarbaev or members of his ruling coalition would seek or be compelled to engage political reform. Modernization theory, the one logic that might provide some hope for Kazakh democratization, has found only limited empirical support in recent studies of regime change. And the other causalities reviewed—survival theory, winning coalition theory and the resource curse—all point to continued Kazakh autocracy rather than political reform.

Absent thus far from this analysis, and what is lamentably absent in many studies of regime change, is the potentially transformative role of international organizations and agreements. Few analysts, for example, anticipated that the August 1975 Helsinki Final Act would produce any meaningful political reforms in Moscow. Indeed, a *New York Times* article marking the one year anniversary of the Final Act concluded: “only a fatuous optimist would have expected its [the Soviet government's] attitudes to be transformed by the Helsinki Declaration.” Helsinki, as this commission is testament, fundamentally altered Soviet politics. More specifically, the Declaration provided activists a language for opposing autocratic rule and a real measure of protection from the worst abuses of autocratic rule.

For Kazakhstan, Foreign Minister Tazhin's November 2007 Madrid pledge to deepen media freedoms, religious tolerance and political reform may prove no less important than Brezhnev's committing the Soviet regime to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. Granted, there is a paradox here; what made Brezhnev's pledge meaningful was not the General Secretary's questionable personal commitment to human rights, but rather, civil society activists' concerted efforts to mobilize and hold the Soviet leadership accountable to this commitment. The enthusiasm with which Kazakhstan has pursued the OSCE Chairmanship suggests we have good reason to believe the Foreign Minister and President Nazarbaev's commitment to freedoms and rights is more genuine than that of their Soviet predecessor. Ultimately, though, the meaning of Madrid will be shaped as much by the efforts of Kazakh social activists as it will by the actions and policies of the Nazarbaev government.