

## KAZAKH DIASPORA ACTIVISM BEFORE AND DURING 2022 JANUARY EVENTS: ATTITUDES, MOTIVATIONS AND ACTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Diaspora is believed to have a certain capacity to impact political processes in their original homelands through diaspora activism, mobilization, and bring democracy. The literature that looks at diaspora political activism perceived it as diaspora actions related to their country or place of origin, which are non-democracies or there is a struggle for independence, sovereignty. Brutal events, revolutions, uprisings, emergencies play the role of triggers of diaspora mobilization.*

*The beginning of January of 2022 for Kazakhstan became one of the darkest pages in the history of independence. The peaceful rallies against the policy of the ruling authorities turned to violence and looting that kept people in fear and feeling of helplessness. Demands expressed during rallies included social-economic, as well as political claims. However, the reasons and nature of the January events are still in debate and discussion.*

*In this period of turbulence in Kazakhstan, the Kazakh diaspora mobilized and tried to help and support their co-ethnics. In this sense, this paper is an attempt to better understand the Kazakh diaspora's activism during and before January of 2022 events, and the overall diaspora's attitude towards political development of homeland. It seeks to understand the factors of mobilization, the types, the motivation, and the barriers for the diaspora's activism. Moreover, one of the aims of this study is to advance understanding of the complexity of the relations between Kazakhstan and its diaspora and make input to broaden the literature on diaspora issues in the Central Asia region as interaction between post-socialist states in Central Asia and their diasporas remain understudied.*

*The paper uses observations from the cases of Kazakh diaspora activism in Europe and Turkey. The study is mostly based on a qualitative method of data analysis. Using media publications and social media of diaspora organizations and leaders the article tents to answer the main research question of the study: how and why did Kazakh diaspora mobilize during the January events in Kazakhstan?*

**KEYWORDS:** *Kazakh diaspora, diaspora activism, diaspora mobilization, Kazakhstan*

### ***Introduction***

The duality of diaspora nature: its preservation ties, feelings of belonging to home country and at the same time identification with, and integration to a host country, makes it valuable tool for both home and host countries internal and foreign policies. However, diaspora should not be seen as inanimate object in the political game. It lives and develops, pursues its own goals in the relations with homeland and host country, internal processes are going on inside the diaspora: formation of groups, their clashes and struggles for power, etc.

Diaspora can play a significant role in home country political development, democratization having impact on configuration of powers, political discourse, and agenda (Carment et al., 2021; Moss, 2020; Toivanen & Baser, 2020). It is called diaspora activism which is determined as the political activities of diaspora members who aim to influence the domestic or foreign policy of their country of origin. The literature on diaspora activism mainly focuses on diaspora actions, and intentions towards homelands that are non-democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian. Usually, such activism is more seen during revolutions, unrests, rallies, emergencies in the country of origin.

The Central Asian diasporas have been understudied in the perspective of diaspora activism. Partly it can be explained by the incompletely formed and consolidated diaspora of Central Asia countries, as well as inner processes of diaspora development, and nature of home country-diaspora relations. However, in recent years Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan actively implement diaspora engagement policy by updating diaspora policy strategies, establishing new institutions that maintain

relations with diasporas, building upgraded system of interaction with co-ethnics and compatriots living abroad, etc.

At the same time Central Asian countries experience significant development, changes in political, economic, social, ideological spheres that impact on state-diaspora relation on one hand, and on another on activation of diaspora mobilization, reaction on situation in home countries.

The January events in Kazakhstan that seemed as one of the stable countries in the region left speechless the world community. Kazakh diaspora in this time of emergency for its home country mobilized in order to support relatives and compatriots. At the same time, it could not to avoid the political agenda of the events in Kazakhstan.

This paper aims to study Kazakh diaspora activism as a reaction to the January events in Kazakhstan, and the overall diaspora's attitude towards political development of homeland. It seeks to understand the factors of mobilization, the types, the motivation, and the barriers for the diaspora's activism.

The paper uses observations from the cases of Kazakh diaspora activism in Europe and Turkey during last 10 years. The study is mostly based on a qualitative method of data analysis. It uses media publications and social media of diaspora organizations and leaders. Moreover, the study is based on author's observations that were collected during the participation in the research project "Kazakh diaspora living in Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Russia, China, Germany, and USA" in 2019; and evidence from her own participation in diaspora in Europe social media, messengers' groups.

### ***History of the Formation of the Kazakh Diaspora***

It is estimated that there are approximately 5 million Kazakh diasporas worldwide. The World Kazakh Association provides this figure. According to the 1996 support program for compatriots living abroad, there are 4.2 million Kazakhs. Mendikulova (2017) concludes, based on a field study conducted in 2007-2009, that the majority of the more than 4 million Kazakhs living abroad are an ethnic minority living in border countries formed during the process of dividing the borders, with only about 800,000 Kazakhs attributed to the diaspora.

However, the state considers all ethnic Kazakhs living outside their historical homeland to be part of the diaspora (Law on languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1997).

The origins of the Kazakh diaspora can be traced back to 17-18th centuries political, socioeconomic, and political-economic events, as well as the ups and downs of interstate relations. The nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakhs played an important role in the formation of the diaspora as well. For instance, the history of Kazakh migration to modern-day China and Mongolia is inextricably linked to the 18th-century relationship between the Kazakh Khanate, China, and Russia (Khurmetkhan, 1998). The Dzungarian military raids contributed to resettle a part of the Kazakh tribes into territory of Uzbekistan (Tukumov, 2000; Germonova, 2002).

The history of Kazakhs' migration to Europe and the formation of the diaspora can be divided into several stages: the 1920s; the 1940s; the 1960s; and from the 1990s to present.

The first stage is linked to political changes, specifically the establishment of Soviet power in Kazakh steppe. Those who disagreed with the new government fled, including to Europe, where a specific political emigration center was formed at the time. Mustafa Shokay stands out as a representative of political exiles of that period.

The second stage is related with the settling of Kazakh prisoners of war, as well as those who did not return to Kazakhstan after the liberation of Germany and the victory and remained in the country (Mendikulova, 2014).

The main flow of Kazakhs migrated to the region in the 1960s - 80s during the period of labor migration to European countries from Turkey. According to Mendikulova (2014), more than 100 Kazakh families from Turkey had immigrated to Germany by 1980. From Germany Kazakh emigrants moved to other European countries, including France, Sweden, Norway, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium. As a result, Kazakh communities have sprung up all over Europe. Aside from them, Kazakhs from Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and Iran also lived and worked in Europe, though in smaller numbers.

It is worth noting here that Kazakh migrants from Turkey were part of the Kazakh diaspora, which migrated from China in the 1930-50s due

to political pressure to Afghanistan, India, Iran, and partly settled in Turkey.

Following the demise of the Soviet Union and the ensuing political and economic crisis, as well as the launch of repatriation programs by European countries, a new wave of immigration began in the 1990s. Furthermore, the economic downturn aided in the emigration of highly skilled workers (brain drain). To this day, a certain level of migration to European countries exists, manifested in labor and study migration.

### ***The profile of Kazakh diaspora in Europe***

It is difficult to determine exact data on the size of the diaspora in Europe and Turkey because the countries' statistical agencies do not record information on the nationality of residents or migrants. Moreover, there are no comprehensive studies on the size of the diaspora from the Kazakh perspective. Mendikulova (2014) estimates that there are 5,000 Kazakhs living in Europe. Around 700 Kazakh families live in Germany, France, Sweden, and Austria, according to the World Association of Kazakhs (Lahanuly, 2016). However, it should be noted that Kazakhs today live in almost every European country. D. Satpayev (2019), for example, cites Turkish government data in his book, claiming that approximately 17 thousand Kazakhs live in Germany alone.

Same can be said about Kazakh diaspora in Turkey. There is no exact determined data on size of the diaspora. Different sources give various information on 10-15 thousand of Kazakhs living in Turkey (Rakhimbekov, 2009; Ipek & Aktash, 2019). The available data are based on information from representatives of the Turkish diaspora, and do not fully reflect the number of Kazakhs who migrated during the independence of Kazakhstan.

The modern internal structure of the Kazakh diaspora reflects the diaspora's migration history. Within the Kazakh diaspora, two large groups can be distinguished: part formed by Kazakh migrants from Turkey, China, Afghanistan, Iran and the part that migrated from the territory of modern Kazakhstan, that is, they have lived in their historical homeland. The vast majority of the modern 'Turkish' part of diaspora did not live in Soviet or independent Kazakhstan.

The diaspora formed by migrants from Turkey, China, Afghanistan, Iran spans several generations, and they have managed to accumulate some social capital. The majority of Kazakhs are employed; however, there is a layer of businessmen who have benefited from the capital amassed by the first labor immigrants from among the Kazakhs. Furthermore, this part of the diaspora is distinguished by a high educational level and social status, as the first generation of Kazakh immigrants was able to provide their children with an excellent education, and they now work as lawyers, dentists, and engineers (Zhakupova & Alishpayev, 2014).

It is also worth noting the institutionalization, and cohesion of the Kazakh diaspora, which created Associations of Kazakhs and cultural centers in almost every country of residence. In 2008, an umbrella organization Federation of European Kazakh Associations (FEKA) was formed to bring together ten Kazakh cultural centers from eight European countries: Germany, France, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. As part of its activities, FEKA holds joint celebrations of traditional holidays (Nauryz), Qurultai of the Kazakhs of Europe, and also cooperates with Kazakhstani organizations that implement diaspora policy.

A part of the diaspora, formed of migrants from the Kazakh SSR and independent Kazakhstan, has a diverse range of occupations and social status. It has not yet reached the stage of establishing its own institutions, despite the fact that communication between the active participants has been established, primarily through social networks. Furthermore, the Kazakh diaspora actively interacts with other post-Soviet diasporas, which is facilitated by a common language of communication, values, and social status in the host countries.

One characteristic of this part of the diaspora is maintaining contact with their homeland: many have relatives and friends in Kazakhstan with whom they keep in touch; some travel to their home country; and some have established businesses related to Kazakhstan.

Differences in migration history, values, worldview, and communication language have all contributed to a lack of interaction between the two groups within the diaspora.

### ***Kazakh Diaspora Activism***

During the Soviet period, the Kazakh diaspora in European countries took no political positions related to the motherland's political, social situation. This is due to the diaspora's weak consolidation, which was preoccupied with issues of survival and settling in new countries of residence. However, a part of the Kazakh intelligentsia was active in covering history, the situation in the homeland, and the diaspora.

In 1953, the Kazakh intelligentsia in Germany took part in the activities of "Azattyk" radio in Munich. A single editorial office "Turkestan" broadcast in Turkic languages within the framework of the radio. Later, the Kazakh service of Azattyk radio separated from the "Turkestan" editorial office (WKA, 2014). The Kazakh newspaper "Shalkar" was published in Turkey and distributed to Kazakhs in 28 countries (Ualtayeva, n.d.).

Despite the necessity and difficulties of adaptation, the diaspora maintained a strong bond with their motherland and expressed concern for its future. As a result, the diaspora greeted Kazakhstan's proclamation of independence with great excitement. The people's long-held desire for independence has finally been fulfilled. The leaders of the Kazakh diaspora voiced a wish to convene a gathering in their historical homeland during a meeting with the country's presidents N. Nazarbayev in Turkey, which led to the first Qurultai of the Kazakhs in 1992.

On the thrill of such a historic occurrence, the Kazakh diaspora around the world actively participated in establishing relations with the motherland and in the repatriation program in the early years of independence. Kazakhstan was also active in establishing relationships. A program to assist compatriots living abroad was established in 1996. Cultural centers are actively opened throughout the diaspora's places of residence during this time.

However, over time, with the strengthening of the regime, the elimination of the opposition, and the limitation of the diaspora policy to nominal measures in terms of preserving contacts with the diaspora, the policy's instability resulted in a certain level of dissatisfaction among the diaspora.

The lack of initiative of the World Association of Kazakhs, as well as a reduction in the implementation of the diaspora policy following the

program's completion in 2005, contributed to the diaspora's disillusionment with state institutions' actions. It reached to the point when the Kazakh diaspora in Turkey organized its own Qurultai, bypassing the WAK.

Furthermore, with the strengthening of Kazakhstan's super-presidential government, there has been an outflow of opposition activists as well as a rise in liberal-oriented population migration to Western countries, which has added to the diaspora over time. According to an International Organization for Migration report on youth migration in Central Asia, corruption, bureaucracy, ineptitude, and impunity of authorities, as well as inadequate management, are among the key reasons, along with socioeconomic factors (International Organization for Migration, 2019).

Kazakhstan has made headlines in recent years as a result of different political events in the country, mostly related to the population's displeasure with the country's socio-economic position, which is a result of the existing political regime, corruption, injustice, and other factors. The events of 2011 in Zhanaozen, the Land rallies of 2016 and related protests, the power transition and presidential elections of 2019, and the January events of 2022 are among them. These events did not go unnoticed by the Kazakh diaspora, with Kazakhs living in Western countries taking the lead. This can be explained by the cultural and ideological influence of the host countries, as well as maintaining an emotional and identification ties with their historical homeland while accumulating a certain level of dissatisfaction with the situation in Kazakhstan.

At the same time, the Kazakh diaspora in Europe has both an active and passive part; that is, the diaspora cannot be said to be united on the topic of the country's political growth, and there has also been no willingness to take active steps in this regard. It is appropriate to mention the activities of the minority, while the majority of diaspora members stay inactive.

There are several explanations for this, firstly, the isolation of the Turkish part of the diaspora from their historical homeland, the presence of minimal ties, and secondly, members of the diaspora who migrated from Kazakhstan are still under the influence of the Soviet, totalitarian



political culture, and are also still busy adapting to the conditions of the host country. They still have not accumulated enough socio-economic potential to reach the level of free expression of political views. In addition, it is worth noting that part of the diaspora has integrated into the local society and does not have any ties with their historical homeland.

However, in the event of an emergency, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the January 2022 events, most of the diaspora in Europe and Turkey stepped up to help: fundraising was organized to purchase medical equipment and send it to Kazakhstan; assistance was organized to ensure communication with relatives and friends during the January 2022 events, as well as to coordinate the activities of NGOs in Kazakhstan. The sentimental aspect, the presence of an emotional ties with homeland, as well as the presence of relatives, friends, and acquaintances in Kazakhstan, were the main factors in this case.

Pickets and demonstrations in front of Kazakhstan's embassy or in well-known places are the most common manifestations of Kazakh diaspora political activism, which are accompanied by various posters with slogans and declaring the meeting's goals and demands. Participation takes a small number of participants 20-40 people which is vary from country to country. At the same time, the majority of the attendees are young individuals, most of whom are Kazakhstani students. In addition, members of the diaspora actively give interviews about the events taking place in their historical homeland.

The main topic of the manifestations of discontent and demonstrations is N. Nazarbayev's political regime, governance, and dictatorship, while activists' rhetoric has remained unchanged since his departure from the presidency: corruption, total injustice, lack of freedoms, oppression of the opposition, and so on. However, it is worth noting that a nationalist tendency is particularly noticeable in the rhetoric of the Turkish diaspora: concern about the status and position of Kazakh language and culture, as well as the land question. The fact that this part of the diaspora is defined by a certain ethnic cohesiveness, a concern on the preservation and reproduction of ethnic values, culture, and customs, explains national-patriotic rhetoric. Furthermore, religion has an important role as one of the defining characteristics of ethnic identity (Rakisheva, 2009).

Concerns over the Kazakhs' situation in China are also present in the 'Turkish' part. The Kazakh diaspora, for example, organized a petition to the German Bundestag to introduce the Magnitsky Act, a bill targeted at assisting Muslim communities in China. The petition's main goal is to raise awareness about China's problem of minority mistreatment<sup>94</sup>.

The events of January surprised both the international community and members of the Kazakh diaspora. The study showed two opposite reactions to the events from the Kazakh diaspora in Europe that occurred. One group voiced concern about current events in their historic homeland, urging calm and backing for the president's efforts. The second actively propagated messages against the authorities' culpability, corruption, and the dictatorship of N. Nazarbayev, as well as nationalist calls to elevate the prestige of the Kazakh language and to break free from Russian control. Pickets were held at embassies as they had been in the past, particularly near Russian embassies, because news of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) forces' arrival sparked a wave of anti-Russian rhetoric, fueled by fears of losing independence and strengthening Russia's influence.

As previously stated, the diaspora's activity in Europe and Turkey was not limited to open expression of its own opinion or calls to support the authorities in this matter; the diaspora helped Kazakhstanis stuck in Turkey and Europe, and organized communication channels so that Kazakhstanis and diaspora representatives could communicate with relatives and friends in Kazakhstan. In this direction, there is a high level of mobilization and efficiency among the diaspora as well as migrant groups.

### ***Conclusion***

Despite the fact that the Kazakh diaspora in Europe and Turkey is relatively new, and is also subject to constant influxes of new migrants from Kazakhstan, resulting in the emergence of distinct groups within the same community, it has amassed some social, economic, and institutional capital.

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<sup>94</sup> [https://epetitionen.bundestag.de/petitionen/2019/10/01/Petition\\_99914.nc.html](https://epetitionen.bundestag.de/petitionen/2019/10/01/Petition_99914.nc.html)

The influence of host country values, the preservation of ties and emotional attachment to the historical homeland, and a certain level of dissatisfaction and disappointment with Kazakhstan's internal political development, particularly its diaspora policy, all play a role in the diaspora's political activism, particularly in Western countries. At the same time, the diaspora has not yet attained, or amassed, a sufficient level of capital and resources to intervene more directly in the motherland's domestic affairs. This is the uniqueness of Kazakhstan's political government, which is fearful of such intrusion, particularly on the ideological front, and attempts to prevent it in any manner possible.

The Kazakh diaspora is characterized by two positions on homeland political development: a neutral and opposed attitude. A part of the diaspora is marked by open nationalist rhetoric.

On the other hand, there is a high potential of the diaspora in the transfer of knowledge, ideas, social initiatives and projects. However, Kazakhstan's diaspora policy is still in its early stages of its development, and the country does not fully exploit it.

Finally, I would like to point out that the Kazakh diaspora, Kazakhstan's diaspora policy, political participation, and diaspora mobilization are understudied. This paper is one of the first attempts to understand diaspora action and mobilization during times of political unrest in the historical homeland.

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