



KAZAKHSTAN COUNCIL ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Andrey Chebotarev

# POLITICAL REFORMS IN KAZAKHSTAN: New course of the President TOKAYEV

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ANALYTICAL REPORT

Nur-Sultan  
2021



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## **Introduction**

The change of national leadership in Kazakhstan in March 2019 marked the end of the first crucial political chapter – 28 years long – of the history of the independent Republic. It was therefore an important opportunity for a consolidation of those achievements, reevaluation of the relationship between the state and society and a reset of the country's political system, leading to implementation of those political, social, and economic transformations necessary to face a new generation of modern challenges.

At the same time, the initial two years (March 2019-March 2021) of the presidency of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev were marked by serious tests of strength for him personally, for the government, and for the country itself. The most far-reaching of these tests is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with enormous negative health, economic, and social consequences in almost all areas.

In response to this crisis, the President took many measures for the stabilization of the situation and the further development of the country. He should also be credited with continuity and consistency in the implementation of the reform process he declared at the very beginning of his inauguration.

This report presents an objective assessment of the political and socio-economic changes taking place in Kazakhstan in the context of the political course of the current leadership of the country.

# 1. Conceptual Foundations of the New Course of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

On assuming the office of the Presidency of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had to comprehend and determine the key contours of his future political direction. Considering the state of development of Kazakh society and of the government prevailing at that time, it was a rather difficult task.

On the one hand, as a result of almost 30 years of leadership by Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan had emerged as a well-established and internationally recognized sovereign state with all the necessary attributes. The political, economic, social, spiritual, and cultural foundations of the state were in place, ready for the further development of the country. Clear strategic guidelines for this had been set, including goals like Kazakhstan becoming one of the 30 most developed countries of the world. A system of national values had been consolidated, including interethnic and interfaith harmony. A proactive ‘multivector’ foreign policy had also been designed and put into action to strengthen Kazakhstan's role and participation in international processes at the regional and global levels.

On the other hand, some problematic factors continued to hold back the progressive development of Kazakhstan and therefore had to be addressed. These factors included the predominance of commodity production, low competitiveness of the manufacturing sector of the economy, lack of access for small and medium-sized enterprises to long-term lending, and disproportionate social and economic development of the country's regions. Residents of different regions suffered from unequal access to utilities and state services, particularly in the urban-rural context. In the field of human capital development, many shortcomings at all levels of education resulted in a shortage of qualified personnel. Similarly, some measure of corruption, opacity, irresponsibility, and incompetence among officials of different levels plagued systems of public administration.

## A. Three key principles: Continuity, Justice, Progress

In this regard, in his campaign for President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev designated **the following three key principles of his future political course:**

1. **Continuity** – the effective continuation of the political course set by the First President and Leader of the Nation, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and the

preservation of all positive achievements in the interest of the country's further development.

2. **Justice** – equality of rights for all citizens, regardless of their social, ethnic, religious, or other affiliation; creation of opportunities for each of them to achieve personal success and increase their well-being.
3. **Progress** – social renewal in all spheres of society; the implementation of constructive changes for the benefit of people with the aim of becoming one of the leading countries of the world. [1]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: “For me as a President, the most important measure of progress is not the overall figure of economic development, but the real well-being of all citizens. Therefore, when making decisions on strategic issues, the view of the people will be considered. The formula of our state governance: a strong, empowered President – an influential, capable Parliament – the Cabinet accountable to the people. It is this political system that best meets the needs of our state, responds to complex geopolitical realities, and contributes to the implementation of the strategic tasks facing us. At the same time, the political transformation of society will keep on. The political structures and institutions must align with wide-ranging economic transformations, otherwise, the reforms may be stifled. This is clearly evidenced by international experience.” (excerpt from the inaugural address by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, June 12, 2019)*

These principles were elaborated in the “*Well-being for all! Continuity. Justice. Progress*” Action Plan for the Implementation of the Election Program of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and proposals received from citizens during the “Birge” (Together) national campaign approved by the Decree of the President of Kazakhstan dated June 20, 2019. This document identifies 106 actions to be implemented in 19 thematic areas in the short and medium-term.

The principle of **continuity** means not only adherence of the Head of State to the political strategy of his predecessor, but also implementation of earlier decisions made on various issues, including concepts, state programs, and other official documents approved at different times. This includes, in particular, the achievement of key national indicators of the *2025 Strategic Development Plan*, which aims to position the country to become one of the 30 most developed countries in the world, and the continued implementation of the “*100 Concrete Steps*” Plan to implement the *Five Institutional Reforms of the Leader of the Nation*.

In turn, the principle of **progress** implies improving and further developing various mechanisms for the functioning of the political system, economy, and social sphere of Kazakhstan. The key direction is a transformation of the political system, which provides

for the introduction of advanced international standards for the transparency of the state decision-making process, the improvement of the multi-party system, the development of local self-government bodies, the expansion of citizen participation in the decision-making process and control over implementation, the transfer of certain state functions to a competitive environment, etc. [2]

As for the accompanying principle of **justice**, its implementation on the one hand combines measures to improve the quality of human capital (through education, health care, social security, labor, and employment), and on the other hand it is designed to deliver the rule of law, equitable justice, public safety, eradication of corruption and good governance. In other words, the achievement of justice implies the adoption of measures not only of a social but also of an administrative and legal nature. Increasing the responsibility and accountability of state structures and their officials closely overlap with measures within the framework of political transformation.

At first glance, there may appear to be a semantic dichotomy or at least tension between the principles of **continuity** and **progress**. While continuity implies preservation of the existing state of affairs in the country and its political system as much as possible, progress is focused on carrying out certain political and other transformations.

However, these three principles are in fact, according to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, mutually reinforcing and designed to improve the activity of the state and its bodies and their interaction with society. It is also noteworthy that in his electoral program he spoke in favor of the democratization of society and the transformation of the state system based on democracy.[3] Thus, the Head of State emphasizes the importance of appropriate reforms not just to further modernize the country, but also to continue to advance the country on the path chosen for it at independence, namely of building a democratic rule-of-law state.

Key conceptual aspects of the new political course were also reflected in the two State of the Nation Addresses of the President, his speeches at meetings of the National Council of Public Trust, the Supreme Council for Reforms, within the framework of other events and in the *“Täuelsizdik bärinen qymbat” (Nothing is More Precious than Independence)* article.

## **B. Main Attributes of the Reforms**

One of the main indicators of change was the revision of approaches to the further development of Kazakhstan through a set of **political and administrative reforms**. In this regard, in his first *State of the Nation Address “Constructive Public Dialogue - the Basis of Stability and Prosperity of Kazakhstan”* on September 2, 2019, the President highlighted

the need to carry out political reforms within the framework of the formation of a modern effective state. The main attributes of the new political and administrative reforms are the following:

**1. Pragmatism and quality**, implying reforms to advance the country's further development and ensure its continued stability, as a consequence, avoiding unsystematic reforms and the manifestation of populism, which may risk destabilization of the internal political situation or even loss of statehood.

**2. Universality**, implying that the corresponding transformations will benefit the absolute majority of citizens and strengthen national unity and social cohesion.

**3. Continuity and gradualism**. According to the Head of State, “We will carry out political reforms without getting ahead of ourselves, thoughtfully and gradually, but not lagging behind.” [4]

**4.** The formula of **“A strong Presidency – an influential Parliament – an accountable Government”**. While ensuring the continuation of the country’s presidential system, emphasis is placed on increasing both parliamentary participation in government decision-making and overall government efficiency by strengthening responsibility and accountability to society. This lays the foundation for the transformation of the extensive presidential system – established historically according to the personal and political strength of the First President of Kazakhstan – and the further institutional rather than personal strengthening of the political institutions of Kazakhstan.

**5.** The precept **“Different Opinions - One Nation”**, which implies the official recognition of political diversity, pluralism of opinions and alternative points of view, as well as the formation of a new political culture through constructive dialogue. [5] In practical terms, this formula, in particular, implies the development of a multi-party system, political competition, and the improvement of legislation on peaceful assemblies.

**6. The concept of the “Listening State” [can we say ‘Attentive State’?]**, focused on a constant dialogue between the authorities and society, the establishment of effective feedback between them, the obligatory fulfillment by the authorities of their promises to the people, the timely and effective response of the state to all requests of citizens, and the involvement of civil society representatives in the discussion of the most pressing national tasks and questions.

**7. Prioritization of the protection of the rights and security of citizens through reform of the judicial and law enforcement systems**. This implies, first, a shift in emphasis from the humanization of legislation to its toughening in terms of punishment for sexual violence, pedophilia, drug trafficking, human trafficking, domestic violence against women, poaching, and other serious crimes; second, a change in the image,

reputation, conduct and activities of the police from an instrument of control of the state into a public service body preserving law and order and ensuring public safety for citizens. [6]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: "Democracy should serve development and creativity, and not disunity and disintegration. There is a demand for further political transformations in society, we know that. We will build our work based on the highest development goals. There should be no place for populism. The National Council of Public Trust must feel responsible to the people and meet the country's expectations. We must understand that it is unacceptable to carry out reforms for the sake of reforms. We need to carefully consider new initiatives and achieve tangible results. It is very important. The main goal of the reforms is to give a new impetus to our development. The authorities are ready for any positive changes that will benefit the future of our state" (from the statement at the second meeting of the National Council of Public Trust, December 20, 2019)*

### **C. COVID-19 and Necessary Adjustments**

During 2020, **the COVID-19 pandemic made necessary certain adjustments** to the content and list of proposed political and administrative reforms. At the same time, the reform process itself endured. The pandemic revealed weaknesses in the system of state power and administration and its interaction with society and institutions. This provided an additional incentive for defining and implementing new reforms. In this regard, special attention was paid to:

**1. Changing approaches to public administration, personnel policy, decision-making system and responsibility for their implementation.** Particular emphasis is placed here on the development of the state planning system through its institutionalization within the framework of the established Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms and the involvement of the private sector and society as full partners at all stages (planning, implementation, evaluation).

**2. The principle of the "Fair State", a derivative of the concept of the "Listening State".** In this formulation, it is not enough to hear and see the problems of citizens but to correctly and objectively respond to them in service to the interests of society. It is obvious that in this case the development of the principle of justice is observed.

**3. Increasing involvement of citizens and civil society institutions in the process of reforming and governing the country,** increasing the efficiency of the functioning of the state and its agencies, and improving the standard of living of the population. [7]

In practical terms, this involves the introduction of the election of rural akims by the population of specific villages, the development of local self-government, including its delimitation with local government, an increase in the status of gatherings and meetings of local communities, the introduction of the institution of associations of property owners in cities, etc.

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: "Political reforms are not a matter of one day or even one year, but they cannot be dragged out either. The authorities must always feel their responsibility to the people. We are moving on to the election of rural akims, which will strengthen the system of local government, starting from the grassroots level. After that we will hold elections of district akims. If the new system shows its effectiveness, we will move on to the election of akims of the next level. It is unacceptable that forcing political modernization and populist slogans should lead to a crisis of the state system. From the experience of some countries, we can see where the sudden paradigm shift is leading. Law and order must reign in our country based on full respect for human rights. It is obvious that anarchy and permissiveness will not lead to good ... Our goal is to leave the next generation a strong state with a powerful economy and strong spiritual and moral foundations. For Kazakhstan to continue its movement forward, we must educate it in the spirit of patriotism and devotion to national interests." (excerpt from the "Täuelsizdik bärinen qymbat" (Nothing is More Precious than Independence article published on January 5, 2021)*

## D. Connecting Economic and Social Reforms

**Economic reforms** proceed from the need for the national economy to increase the well-being of the population and an equitable distribution of national income. On this basis, the Head of State in his *second State of the Nation Address "Kazakhstan in a new reality: time for action"*, delivered on September 1, 2020, outlined the following **key principles of the country's new economic course**:

- 1. Equitable distribution** of benefits and responsibilities.
- 2. The leading role of private enterprise.**
- 3. Fair competition**, opening up markets for a new generation of entrepreneurs.
- 4. Increased productivity, increased complexity and technological effectiveness** of the economy.
- 5. Development of human capital**, investment in a new type of education.
- 6. Greening the economy**, protecting the environment.
- 7. Public accountability.** [8]

In the interests of implementing these principles, the President, in particular, announced a revision of the role of the state in the country's economy as an owner and regulator. In turn, this entails the creation of favorable conditions for doing business, including the introduction of the principle of "regulation from scratch" and the creation on its basis of a qualitatively new system of "smart regulation" of business, continuation and completion of the privatization program implemented since 2016, revision of the mission, role and the functions of the quasi-public sector. [9]

As for the **social dimension** of the new course of President Tokayev, its conceptual foundations are the following:

**1. A new social policy paradigm** through the unification of laws and regulations governing this area and the development and adoption of a Social Code of Kazakhstan.

**2.** The orientation of the **system of social protection** of the population towards promoting work and self-reliance and preventing the manifestations of dependency and paternalism among citizens.

**3.** Emphasis on **human capital** as the main indicator of the state's success and improving its quality as one of the basic components of state policy. In turn, this implies, in particular, improving the quality of education at all levels, including reducing the gap in its quality between different social groups and regions and ensuring the quality of teaching, creating conditions for the training of scientific personnel and modernizing the health care system. [10]

**4.** Ensuring **enhanced education for the 21st century generation**, and teaching the values of tireless work, discipline, responsibility, justice, honesty, frugality and solidity. According to the President, "A strong system "Responsible State – Responsible Society – Responsible Person" must be rooted in our country." [11]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: "We must concentrate all our efforts on building an effective state and a just society. The main priority is to improve the quality of life and increase the well-being of the population. People expect real results, not artificial ones. People want economic and social programs to be successful. We will involve all active citizens in this large-scale work. Each of them should know that they are directly involved in making decisions that affect the fate of the country. It is important that they feel that they are contributing to the common cause. This is the essence of the concept of a "Listening State" that I proposed. We can only move forward and succeed if we harness the creativity of a nation." (excerpt from the statement by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the opening of the first session of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan of the seventh convocation, January 15, 2021)*

## 2. Role of the National Council of Public Trust

On June 12, 2019, the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT) was established. Its main goal is to develop proposals and recommendations on topical issues of state policy based on a broad discussion with representatives of the public. The Council is responsible for conducting public expert review of draft concepts, government programs and regulatory legal acts; considering significant strategic issues taking into account the views of civil society; and ensuring a constructive dialogue between representatives of the public, political parties, the non-governmental sector and government agencies. [12]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: "Our citizens are deeply concerned about the development of dialogue between the government and the society. This dialogue should be based on the recognition of pluralism of opinion. Different views, but one united nation. This is the main guideline. That is why I have decided to establish the National Council of Public Trust. This Council shall embrace all the representatives of society, including the youth... The authorities are obliged to fulfill their promises to the people. It is its primary mission. It is the only way to strengthen the unity of the nation and maintain stability in the country." (excerpt from the inaugural address by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, June 12, 2019)*

### A. The Distinctive Nature of the NCPT

Some elements of the media and other commentators have compared the National Council of Public Trust to earlier mechanisms of political dialogue as the permanent Meeting on the development of proposals for further democratization and development of civil society (2002-2003), the National Commission on Democracy and Civil Society (2004-2005) and the State Commission for the Development and Specification of the Program of Democratic Reforms (2006-2007).

However, these structures, operating during the presidency of Nursultan Nazarbayev, had a completely different political purpose, including an attempt to establish a dialogue between the government and the political opposition. Moreover, their activities were designed for the short term. Finally, of these, only the State Commission for the Development and Specification of the Program of Democratic Reforms was directly headed by the Head of State himself. The rest of the structures were headed by representatives of the Executive Office of the President or the government. The concept, features, and operation of the National Council of Public Trust are qualitatively different.

**Firstly**, this body was initially headed by the President of Kazakhstan and he personally participates in all its meetings, meeting from time to time with other members of the Council on various issues of the activities of this body. Thus, the Head of State assumed full responsibility for the work of the Council and the practical implementation of decisions made by it on various issues.

**Secondly**, considerable care has been taken in the composition of this body. As a result, at first the Council consisted of 47 people, including the President himself, two representatives of his Executive Office, the ombudsperson for human rights, child rights and protection of the rights of entrepreneurs, and 41 representatives of political parties, NGOs, the media and the expert community with some authority in the country.

**Thirdly**, a rotating procedure for the composition of the NCPT ensures the participation of interested representatives of the Kazakh public in its activities at certain periods. In this regard, from March 2020 to January 2021 there were three rotations. It should be noted that such well-known public figures, representatives of the expert and media community as Daniyar Ashimbayev, Seidakhmet Kuttykadam, Aruzhan Sain, Mukhtar Taizhan, Ermek Tursunov, Arman Shurayev, etc. were members of the NCPT at different times. Each of them contributed to the work of the Council and the implementation of certain transformations. At the same time, the arrival of new people in the NCPT affects the expansion of the general agenda of this body and the consideration of new topics and proposals.

**Fourth**, the Council meets regularly, at least three times a year. Depending on the agenda, the meetings can be of a general plenary or thematic nature. The main activities of the NCPT are carried out by the working groups of the Council. Following the organizational meeting of the NCPT, held on August 28, 2019, three working groups on political, economic and socio-cultural modernization were created. Later it was decided to divide the latter into two groups - one group on social modernization and the second group on spiritual and cultural modernization.

**Fifth**, the activities of the NCPT include:

- 1) Council meetings chaired by the Head of State;
- 2) meetings of the working groups, including those related to developing recommendations and proposals on various issues for their subsequent presentation at the Council meetings;
- 3) meetings of the President of Kazakhstan with separate members of the NCPT to discuss various matters;
- 4) meetings of Council members with members of the government. In 2020, 13 relevant meetings were held online which included discussions on pressing

issues of implementing new transformations and improving the situation in various spheres of life of Kazakh society and state;

- 5) participation of the NCPT members in working meetings at the Executive Office of the President, the government, working groups of the Mazhilis and the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan, events of various ministries and other government agencies to discuss draft laws, concepts or certain issues regarding which the Council members made comments and proposals.

**Sixth**, various media outlets cover the activities of the NCPT. First of all, the Council has its own official website, <https://ulttyq-kenes.kz>, which contains detailed information about its work, members, events, implemented orders of the President based on proposals and recommendations of the Council members, etc. In addition, the Council has its own Facebook and Instagram pages, as well as Ul'ttyq Keńes Telegram channel.

## **B. Composition and Main Meetings To Date**

The first NCPT meeting was held on September 6, 2019. In addition to the Head of State, 11 members of the Council made statements. Overall, they considered pressing state policy matters and main proposals on political, socio-cultural and economic modernization made by the working groups. In particular, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev suggested to the National Council's working groups to work out in detail the initiatives expressed in his State of the Nation Address.

Some 67 proposals from the Council members were formulated and submitted to the Executive Office of the President for further work based on the results of the events held under the auspices of the NCPT from August to November of 2019.

During the second meeting held on December 20, 2019, the Head of State summed up the interim results of the work of this agency and outlined specific measures that constituted the first package of political, economic and social reforms: "This work will give a powerful impetus to strengthening of democracy and increase public confidence in the authorities. Our experience is highly appreciated by international organizations. In general, it was recognized as an example of a responsible and constructive dialogue. Most importantly, the National Council justifies public trust. There is another essential aspect. We are building a new political culture through constructive dialogue". [13]

The third meeting was held online on May 22, 2020, under the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was dedicated to the development of human capital. In addition to the initiatives of the Head of State, the NCPT members made their proposals on improving the education sector and healthcare system.

During the fourth meeting of the NCPT, held online on October 22, 2020, the Head of State raised issues concerning the reform of the public administration system, and the

need to address social and environmental problems, protect the rights of children, combat human trafficking, etc. Moreover, representatives of the NCPT working groups made statements with specific proposals on the issues of political, economic, social, spiritual and cultural modernization.

In addition, in 2019-2020, Nur-Sultan and Almaty hosted individual meetings of the President with 24 NCPT members to discuss various matters included in the agenda of this agency. Thanks to these meetings, the Council members were able to present their assessments and proposals on relevant issues of Kazakhstan's development in more detail. On the part of the Head of State, this was an additional demonstration of the importance of this agency as well as obtaining new arguments in favor of the measures introduced in certain spheres.

Currently, there are 46 NCPT members, most of whom have been working in this agency from the very beginning of its establishment. In different proportions, they represent government agencies, political parties, non-governmental sector, human rights advocates, mass media, educational and expert communities. Moreover, it is important to note that for many current and former members, their participation in the Council has become a steppingstone for the further development of their professional and political careers.

For example, a member of the first composition of the NCPT, an IT entrepreneur, Bagdat Mussin, was appointed Advisor to the President of Kazakhstan on digitalization and innovative technologies in 2020, and then headed the Ministry of Digital Development, Innovation and Aerospace Industry of Kazakhstan. According to the results of the parliamentary elections held on January 10, 2021, nine members of the NCPT became members of the Mazhilis of Parliament of Kazakhstan, including well-known representatives of the expert community such as Berik Abdygaliuly, Kanat Nurov, Yerlan Sairov and Aidos Sarym, who are members of the parliamentary group of the Nur Otan party. This reflects the level of effectiveness of the Council's work and its influence on the political life of Kazakhstan.

In general, the National Council of Public Trust has strengthened the discourse on political liberalization, encouraged good-faith dialogue between the government and society and confirmed that general civil consensus is a necessary condition for the successful implementation of political and socio-economic modernization. Its fundamental purpose is to increase trust between the authorities and society and reduce the distance between them. The public dialogue initiated by President Tokayev within the NCPT is intended as a tool for political modernization and the creation of truly democratic institutions, as well as progressive social and economic reforms based on a national consensus. [14]

### 3. Political Reforms

Following the announcement of urgent political and socio-economic transformations in 2019, the President of Kazakhstan began their implementation. Proposals made by members of the National Council of Public Trust were also taken as the foundation for relevant decisions, thereby increasing the legitimacy and authenticity of the NCPT as a generator of socially significant initiatives.

Despite the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the reform process continued throughout 2020-2021 and was supplemented by new measures reflected in the President's second State of the Nation Address and in his speech opening the first session of the Parliament of Kazakhstan.

#### A. Three Packages (2019, 2020, 2021) of Political Reforms

The political reforms consist of **three packages** of relevant initiatives. *The first package of political reforms* announced by the Head of State on December 20, 2019 at the second meeting of the NCPT has been fully implemented and is reflected in the adoption of the following laws:

**1.** The Law on the Procedure for Organizing and Holding Peaceful Assemblies, dated May 25, 2020. It replaced the previous principle of permission with that of notification of organizing and carrying out peaceful assemblies. The law clearly defines peaceful assembly (rallies, demonstrations, processions, picketing), and the rights and obligations of organizers, participants and media representatives. The competence of local executive bodies includes rendering assistance to the organizers of peaceful assemblies.

The intent of this law is to lay the legal foundation for a qualitatively new culture of relations between society and the state when it comes to the constitutional right of citizens to freedom of peaceful assembly. Under this new law, arrangements were agreed with local executive bodies during 2020 despite the existing restrictions necessitated by the pandemic, including rallies on September 13 to demand a credit amnesty and a ban on leasing land by foreigners; on September 18 against the Code on Public Health and the Healthcare System adopted on July 7, 2020; on October 31 in Almaty for political reforms and ending political persecution; on October 10, for animal protection; and on November 9 in Nur-Sultan for political reforms.

**2.** The Constitutional Law on Amendments to the Constitutional Law of Kazakhstan on Elections in Kazakhstan dated May 25, 2020. It established a 30% quota for women

and youth representatives on electoral party lists. Similar amendments were made to the Law on Political Parties.

This reform was implemented in time for the elections of MPs of the Mazhilis of Parliament of Kazakhstan and maslikhats of all levels on January 10, 2021. From November 10 to December 4, 2020, a total of 8,334 candidates were nominated by the participating political parties, including 3,721 (44.6%) women and citizens under the age of 29. In particular, the Adal party had a 65.6% representation, 59.8% in the People's Party of Kazakhstan, 53.4% in the Auyl People's Democratic Patriotic Party, 52.3% in the Ak Zhol Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, and 40.5% in the Nur Otan party. [15]

**3.** The Law on Amendments to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Political Parties dated May 25, 2020, which reduces the number of members required for the establishment of political parties from 40,000 to 20,000 people.

**4.** The Law on Amendments to the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Status of its Members dated June 2, 2020 and the Law on Amendments concerning Parliamentary Opposition to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Committees and Commissions of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated June 2, 2020.

As a result, for the first time Kazakh legislation reflected the concept of the parliamentary opposition as an important actor in political life. The opposition parties represented in the Mazhilis of the Kazakh Parliament are guaranteed the chairmanship of one standing committee and secretaryship of two standing committees of the Chamber. They also received the right to initiate parliamentary hearings at least once per session and to determine the agenda of government hours at least twice per session.

These reforms were implemented following the parliamentary elections and formation of the MP corps of the Mazhilis. The status of the parliamentary opposition was acquired by the Ak Zhol Democratic Party of Kazakhstan and the People's Party of Kazakhstan, represented in the Mazhilis by 12 and 10 MPs respectively. On January 14, 2021, the leaders of the Nur Otan party constituting the parliamentary majority, Ak Zhol and the People's Party held consultations to determine the standing committees with the election of chairs and secretaries from among the parliamentary opposition. [16] Consequently, Erlan Barlybayev, MP from Ak Zhol, was chosen to head the Committee on Agrarian Issues, while Alexander Milyutin, the MP from the People's Party, heads the Committee on Ecology and Environmental Management of the Mazhilis.

**5.** The Law on Amendments to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Improving Enforcement Proceedings and Criminal Legislation dated June 29, 2020.

This law decriminalizes Article 130 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Libel, transferring this offense and penalty for it to the Code on Administrative Offenses.

Secondly, Article 174 of the Criminal Code of Kazakhstan on Foment of Social, National, Tribal, Racial, Class or Religious Enmity was clarified and mitigated so that it now makes reference instead to “incitement”. The penalty of imprisonment for two to seven years was supplemented by a fine of 2,000 to 7,000 MCI.

6. The Law on Ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aimed at the abolition of the death penalty, dated January 2, 2021. Kazakhstan joined this international legal document on September 24, 2020, following its signing at the UN Headquarters by Permanent Representative of Kazakhstan to the UN Kairat Umarov. With this signature and the new law, Kazakhstan has officially abolished the death penalty. There had been a moratorium on the death penalty since 2003. It should be noted that Kazakhstan retains the right to use the death penalty in wartime against persons found guilty of committing especially grave crimes of military nature. [17]

*The second package of political reforms* was announced by the President of Kazakhstan on September 2, 2020, in his State of the Nation Address, “Kazakhstan in a new reality: time for action”. It includes the following measures:

1. Designing a new Concept for the Development of Local Self-Government and adopting a package of related laws that reflect the following guidelines:

- gradual differentiation of the powers of local government and local self-government;
- expansion of property rights and increase in the revenues of the budgets of rural districts, which should become the next stage in the development of “public participation budgets”;
- strengthening control over the process of approving local budgets, including conducting a public review of socially significant expenditures on infrastructure and social initiatives, including via online surveys;
- strengthening the audit commissions of maslikhats;
- raising the status of local community gatherings and assemblies and taking into account by regional maslikhats of their opinions on pressing local issues for making specific decisions.

2. Direct elections of akims of rural villages in 2021. In this regard, the authorized government agencies developed a Draft Constitutional Law on Amendments to the Constitutional Law of Kazakhstan on Elections. According to its authors, direct elections of akims of villages, settlements and rural districts will increase the participation of

citizens in the full implementation of their constitutional rights, fully carry out the concept of a “listening state”, better learn the capabilities and professional capacities of candidates, and contribute to increasing the perceptiveness of local government to the needs and problems of the population. [18]

**3.** Development and adoption of the Law on Public Oversight designed to ensure greater openness and accountability of government agencies and quasi-public sector to society. According to the Minister of Information and Social Development, Aida Balayeva, the draft law provides for the implementation of public oversight based on such principles as prioritizing human and civil rights, publicity, openness, legitimacy, impartiality, reliability of results, prohibition of obstructing the public oversight implementation, etc. [19]

**4.** Establishment of a single legitimate online petition institution for citizens to initiate reforms and make proposals.

**5.** Adopting new measures to protect human rights, including measures to protect children from cyberbullying, and joining the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure.

**6.** Improving national legislation to combat torture and bring it in line with the provisions of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

**7.** Improving the practices of pre-trial investigation of human trafficking related criminal offenses by law enforcement agencies. [20]

Lastly, on January 15, 2021, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced ***a third package of political reforms*** at the opening of the first session of the VII convocation of the Kazakh Parliament. It contains the following measures:

- 1.** Reducing the threshold for political parties to enter the Mazhilis of Parliament from 7% to 5%.
- 2.** Introducing the “None of the above” ballot option for elections of all levels.
- 3.** Introducing the elections of district akims to build on the elections of rural akims.
- 4.** Adoption of a separate law on the Human Rights Ombudsperson, defining their status, powers and streamlining their activities in various areas and sectors;
- 5.** Strengthening the office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson, including the establishment of regional offices.
- 6.** Further improving the public oversight system.
- 7.** Legislating online petitions.

8. Introducing the Youth Development Index, which can form the foundation for assessing the activities of local executive bodies in the youth policy implementation.
9. Expanding measures on encouraging charity, including the provision of tax and other benefits to enterprises and individuals participating in charitable events and volunteer projects. [21]

## **B. Additional Measures**

In addition, other measures of a political and legal nature announced by President Tokayev within the NCPT or at various events have also been carried out during his presidency.

First of all, the Concept of the Civil Society Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan approved by President's Decree dated August 27, 2020, bears mentioning. It aims to:

- create conditions for the development of civil society and its institutions, including in social and political spheres;
- support and development of civic engagement;
- increase the level of participation of citizens and civil society institutions in the decision-making and public affairs management;
- strengthen the capacity of civil society institutions;
- involve civil society in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Kazakhstan. [22]

The implementation of this document will take place during 2020-2030 in two stages. On December 29, 2020, the government approved an Action Plan for the first stage (2020-2025) of the implementation of the Concept of the Civil Society Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which includes 33 events. The final results of the process under consideration are expected to be: an increase in the number of citizens engaging in civil society institutions and volunteer activities, active non-governmental organizations and other civil society institutions, government functions transferred to the civil sector, an increase in the contribution of relevant institutions to socio-economic development of the country, etc.

In addition, the following laws were also adopted:

1. The Law on Amendments to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Counteracting the Legalization (Laundering) of Illegally Obtained Incomes and Financing of Terrorism, dated May 15, 2020. This law reduces the financial restrictions on persons who have served their sentences under Article 174 of the Criminal Code of the

Republic of Kazakhstan and have received positive feedback from law enforcement and special agencies.

**2.** The Law on Amendments to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Activities of Public Councils, dated January 3, 2021. In particular, it provides for the establishment of public councils in the entities of the quasi-public sector (national holdings and companies). The powers of public councils have also been expanded, including receiving information from the heads of law enforcement agencies of certain administrative divisions on ensuring the rule of law and observing the rights and freedoms of citizens.

**3.** The Law on Amendments to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Road Traffic, dated February 1, 2021. Drivers of vehicles who are citizens of Kazakhstan are no longer required to have with them their driver's license, a registration certificate, insurance policy and vehicle inspection certificate. According to the Minister of Internal Affairs Yerlan Turgumbayev, the elimination of the obligation to carry and present these documents is one of the steps aimed at the development of a modern technological “service” police. [23]

The above-mentioned law became the 12th piece of national legislation adopted at the recommendation of the National Council of Public Trust. Seven more draft laws are at various stages of consideration.

## 4. Modernizing Public Administration

### A. Changes to the Structure of the Government (2019)

As the Head of State, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev prioritizes improving the efficiency and quality of work of the state and its agencies in managing the country's affairs and interacting with citizens as legitimate consumers of public services. In 2019, as part of modernizing the public administration system, the President made executive changes to the structure of the government and government agencies accountable to him, including:

**1.** On June 13, 2019, the Civil Service Affairs and Anti-Corruption Agency was reorganized and divided into the Civil Service Affairs Agency and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (Anti-Corruption Service). Anar Zhailganova, previously an MP of the Mazhilis, and Alik Shpekbaev were appointed as the chairpersons of these agencies. This decision was important from the perspective of distinguishing between activities for the civil service development and control over quality compliance of public services, on the one hand, and anti-corruption activities, on the other.

**2.** A new Ministry of Trade and Integration was established on June 17, 2019. The Ministry is responsible for the formation and implementation of domestic and foreign trade policies, international economic integration, consumer protection, technical regulation, standardization and ensuring the uniformity of measurements, coordination of activities in the export promotion. [24] In particular, this decision was intended to strengthen the mechanisms for promoting the interests of Kazakhstan as part of its participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Former akim of Nur-Sultan Bakhyt Sultanov was appointed Minister of Trade and Integration.

**3.** A new Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources was also established on June 17, 2019. The main functions of this agency are governance and coordination of management processes in environmental protection, green economy development, waste management, protection, control and supervision of the rational use of natural resources, state geological exploration, mineral replacement, use and protection of water resources, forestry, wildlife and conservation areas. [25] Former Deputy Minister of Energy Magzum Mirzagaliyev was appointed Minister of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources.

**4.** The Ministry of Digital Development, Defense and Aerospace Industry was transformed into the Ministry of Digital Development, Innovation and Aerospace Industry on June 17, 2019 with the addition of functions in geodesy and cartography, innovation,

scientific and technological development of the country. [26] Askar Zhumagaliyev remained the head of the ministry.

**5.** The Syrbar Foreign Intelligence Service was merged and strengthened on June 17, 2019 with the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

**6.** The Central Communications Service (CCS) was established under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on July 22, 2019. This agency ensures the interaction of government agencies with the media and was transferred from the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

**7.** The Division for Monitoring the Consideration of Appeals of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan was created on July 22, 2019 with the appointment of Aida Balayeva as its head, who previously headed the Department of Internal Policy of the Administration of the President. She was appointed Assistant to the Head of State, in the interest of implementing the future concept of a «Listening State».

**8.** The Agency for Regulation and Development of the Financial Market was created on November 11, 2019 through reorganization of the National Bank. The Agency is designed to provide an adequate level of protection of rights and legitimate interests of consumers of financial services to promote financial system stability and development of the financial market, responsible for public administration, control and supervision of the financial market and financial organizations. [27] Madina Abylkassymova, who was previously Deputy Chairman of the National Bank of Kazakhstan, was appointed Chairwoman of the Agency.

## **B. Renewing Public Human Resources**

Naturally, the change of the country's leadership and the renewal of the official political course have influenced the demand for people with new views and approaches to take up various leadership positions in the system of public authorities and management in Kazakhstan. In order to gradually renew the management staff, the Head of State initiated the formation of the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve on a competitive basis. The corresponding tasks were assigned to the created National Commission on Youth Personnel Reserve under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on August 27, 2019.

Participants of this Reserve must not be older than 35 years, with higher education and work experience of at least 5 years, applying for vacant leadership positions in the system of public administration and the quasi-public sector. The selection process was conducted during September-December 2019 in six stages (acceptance of documents, testing of candidates' abilities, verification of testing, assessment of candidates' potential,

interview with members of the expert commission and consideration of candidates in the National Commission on Youth Personnel Reserve under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan).

Initially, 13,212 citizens showed their interest in participating in the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve. Following the selection process, 300 people were eventually enrolled in the Reserve. Among them are 106 representatives of the private sector, 98 employees of the quasi-public sector and 96 civil servants. Their average age is 31 years. [28]

Although enrollment in the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve is not a condition for mandatory appointment to a particular position during their tenure, the Head of State instructed the Agency for Civil Service Affairs to resolve the issue of employment of reservists of the first composition in the near future. As a result, by the end of 2020, 166 of the 300 reservists were employed. Twelve of them were appointed to political positions, one to a position in the corps "A", 92 in the corps "B", 3 in law enforcement agencies, and 58 in quasi-public and other organizations. [29]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: «The process of renewal is one of the priorities of my domestic policy. The work on the formation of the personnel reserve does not end here, and it will continue. It will include other motivated and worthy young people. In the coming period, we will actively support a new generation of entrepreneurs, scientists, cultural figures, innovators and other talented young people who are ready to build a successful state of the 21st century. We need a team of managers of a new formation in different areas, who are not afraid to take responsibility and make innovative and effective decisions. It is such people who are now able to give the results that our country needs». (from the speech at the meeting with participants of the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve, 15.01.2020)*

## C. Responding to the Pandemic

A new set of institutional reforms was implemented in 2020 to improve the public administration system based on the lessons of the pandemic.

First of all, in order to develop and implement in a timely manner anti-crisis measures, a certain strengthening of the presidential power was required. In this regard, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted on March 16, 2020 a Decree on Measures to ensure socio-economic stability. In accordance with the Decree, as the highest official in the country, the Head of State has expanded his powers to amend, if necessary, order of regulation in the socio-economic sphere on taxation, formation,

refine and use of the state budget, the importation and exportation of certain goods, public procurement, establishing maximum tariffs and prices for food and other products, etc. [30]

## **D. Additional Measures in 2020**

The next measures to modernize the public administration system were taken in the development of the second Address of the Head of State, including:

**1.** Creation of the Supreme Council for Reforms under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on September 14, 2020 consisting of 10 people, including Prime Minister Askar Mamin, Chairman of the National Bank Yerbolat Dosayev, external adviser to the Head of State Suma Chakrabarti, etc. The main purpose of this body is to consider and make decisions on the implementation of new reforms.

**2.** Creation of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan on September 9, 2020 that is directly subordinate and accountable to the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The mission of this body is to prepare materials and proposals for the formation of reforms and to assist in their effective implementation, the carrying out of state policy in the areas of strategic planning and state statistical activities, participation in the improvement of the system of public administration and the quasi-public sector. [31] Kairat Kelimbetov, Managing Director of the Astana International Financial Center, was appointed Chairman of the Agency.

**3.** Creation of the Ministry for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Kazakhstan on September 9, 2020. This decision was made in order to improve the efficiency of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan by exempting it from non-core functions. The recreated Ministry for Emergency Situations is authorized to deal with the prevention and elimination of natural and man-made emergencies, civil defense, fire safety, etc. The former Vice-Minister of Internal Affairs, Major General Yuri Ilyin, was appointed Minister for Emergency Situations.

**4.** Creation of the Agency for Protection and Development of Competition of the Republic of Kazakhstan on September 9, 2020. The mission of this body is to create equal conditions for market participants by protecting and promoting competition, limiting monopolistic activities and preventing unfair competition. [32] Serik Zhumangarin, former Minister in charge of Competition and Antitrust Regulation of the Eurasian Economic Commission, was appointed Chairman of the Agency.

**5.** Reorganization of the Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of National Economy into the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms on October 5, 2020.

**6.** The adoption of the constitutional Law on Amendments to the Constitutional Law on the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated December 30, 2020, abolishing the institution of responsible secretaries of the ministries. This measure was adopted in order to increase the responsibility of ministers for the activities of their bodies. At the same time, the decision on administrative and personnel issues is entrusted to the heads of the ministries' offices.

**7.** Reduction of the number of civil servants by 25%. In accordance with the order of the Head of State, the number of civil servants was reduced by 10% in 2020, mainly due to the reduction of vacancies, the retirement of employees and the change of jobs with the departure of people to the private sector or other organizations. [33] Relevant decisions will be made in 2021 to reduce civil servants by the remaining 15%.

**8.** Introduction of the factor-point scale of remuneration of civil servants beginning from July 1, 2021, which is designed to strengthen their responsibility and motivation.

In addition, the President of Kazakhstan instructed to conduct another competitive selection for the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve in 2021, while reducing the number of candidates selected, taking into account the needs of state bodies. [34] In accordance with this instruction, the preparation of the selection for the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve 2.0 was carried out.

According to the Chairman of Agency for Civil Service Affairs Anar Zhailganova, "Our main goal is to form a reserve of people who are guided by public interests, not personal ones. And focus the selection on transformational leaders. These are people who have the skills to implement successful reforms". [35] The Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve 2.0 is scheduled to start accepting applications by the end of spring 2021, without any restrictions on the number of participants.

## **E. Next Steps (2021)**

On January 26, 2021, speaking at an expanded meeting of the government, the Head of State raised the issue of strengthening the fight against the "shadow" economy, with the aim to reduce its level to 15% by 2025. [36] In this regard, he announced his intention to create the Financial Monitoring Agency directly subordinate and accountable to him. The corresponding decree was adopted on January 28 this year. The main tasks of this body are to counteract the legalization (laundering) of proceeds from crime and the financing of terrorism, to prevent, detect, suppress, disclose and investigate economic and financial crimes and offenses. [37] Zhanat Elimanov, who previously headed the Committee on Financial Monitoring of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Kazakhstan, was appointed Chairman of the Financial Monitoring Agency.

Finally, during the third meeting of the Supreme Council for Reforms held on January 29, 2021, the President of Kazakhstan raised the issue of developing:

- 1)** a new State Planning System, designed to build a more flexible architecture of program documents, increase the interconnectedness of strategic and budget planning, and clearly establish the direct responsibility of the heads of state bodies and organizations for the implementation of plans and programs;
- 2)** a Concept of Public Administration Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan through 2030, designed to ensure the transition from an administrative and control orientation to a service model of interaction between the state and the population, in which the main values will be the individual and his/her well-being. The draft of this document defines approaches to improving the professionalism of the state apparatus, its accountability to society, improving regulatory policy, improving the efficiency of public services, optimizing the quasi-public sector, developing local self-government, etc. [38]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: «The new system must be free from dogmatism and formalism. Less beautiful words, and more quality content. It must be absolutely practical to leave room for the executives. It is extremely important not to burden the executives with extra work. Burnout should be minimized, but not to the detriment of other efforts. I would like to emphasize that the government must work in close cooperation with the expert community and the public» (from the speech at the second meeting of the Supreme Council for Reforms, 9.12.2020)*

## 5. Economic Reforms

The economic and social measures implemented in 2019-2020 or planned for 2021 are based on the conceptual aspects detailed above. In practice, they combine a focus on supporting various strata and groups of Kazakhstan's society in the context of the pandemic and improving the situation and the mechanisms that ensure this in the relevant areas. A set of measures were outlined in both Addresses of the Head of State, as well as at the second and third meetings of the National Council of Public Trust.

### A. Improving Taxation, Land-Use, and Foreign Labor (2019-2020)

1. The imposition of a moratorium on the creation of new state-owned companies and quasi-public sector entities to reduce state participation in business activities and create conditions for the development of the private sector.

2. Exemption of micro and small business entities from paying taxes and the introduction of a ban on their inspections by authorized state bodies for three years, commencing from 2020.

3. Order to postpone the introduction of mandatory payment by employers of a 5% contribution to the Unified Accumulative Pension Fund until 2023.

4. The widespread introduction of non-cash payments and the development of non-bank payment systems with appropriate regulatory rules. [39] At the same time, the President imposed a ban on the implementation of the initiative of the government that is unpopular among the population on the introduction of taxes on non-cash transfers of citizens.

5. Order to seize unused agricultural land from irresponsible landowners ("latifundistas"). As part of its implementation, the following measures were implemented:

- Adoption of the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan on taxes and other obligatory payments to the budget (Tax Code); and of the Law on Introduction of the Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan on taxes and other obligatory payments to the budget (Tax Code) dated December 10, 2020. In particular, it is aimed at increasing the base tax rate from 10 to 20 times in order to tighten measures for the irrational use of agricultural lands.
- Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Legislative Acts on issues of improvement of the public administration over the use and protection

of lands. The document provides for the return of unused agricultural land by terminating the relevant lease agreements through judicial procedures on the basis of data from satellite monitoring and reducing the necessary inspections and the terms for the return of these lands from two years to one year.

- Implementation of a pilot project for satellite monitoring of agricultural land in Akmola, Kostanay, East Kazakhstan and Mangistau regions during 2020. According to its results, 8.3 million hectares of unused land were identified, 7.6 million hectares of which are pasture land, the remaining 0.7 million hectares are arable land. 4.2 million hectares were returned to state ownership, and 4.8 million hectares were involved in agricultural turnover. [40] On the basis of all this, the government decided to conduct satellite monitoring on the entire territory of the country commencing from January 1, 2021.

6. A 40% reduction in the quota for attracting foreign labor. In 2020, this quota was 29,292 units, compared to 48,700 units in 2019, or 0.32% of the total labor force in Kazakhstan.

7. Conducting annual inspections at enterprises that attract foreign labor. In this regard, appropriate changes were made to the Criteria for Assessing the Degree of Risk and Checklists for Compliance with the Labor Legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. On this basis, as of November 1, 2020, 71 enterprises employing more than 30 foreign workers were inspected. As a result, 608 violations of labor and migration legislation were revealed, 113 statutory notes were issued to employers, 50 administrative cases were initiated for the amount of more than 8.3 million tenge, 32 permits were revoked and 2 foreign employees were expelled from the country. [41]

8. Development by the Ministry of Finance and the National Bank of the Unified Register of external debt in the form of a digitized database with its placement on the *official website* of the Ministry of Finance.

## **B. Industrial Policy, Foreign Investment, Regulation (2020-2021)**

Additionally, a Presidential Decree dated September 14, 2020 approved the National Action Plan on implementation of the President's *State of the Nation Address on September 1, 2020 «Kazakhstan in a New Reality: Time For Action»*, in which 42 of 149 measures are related to issues of economic development. Noteworthy among them are the following:

1. Development and adoption of the Law on Industrial Policy, designed to define the basic principles, goals and objectives of the development of the manufacturing industry. On February 5, 2021, this draft law was presented in the Mazhilis of Parliament. It focuses

on the development of the manufacturing industry and the diversification of sources of economic growth. It also provides all the necessary basic concepts for the full regulation of the formation and implementation of industrial policy and ensuring effective support and development of industry in the country. [42]

**2.** Implementation of the new Support Instrument for Investors – a strategic investment agreement that provides land grants, concessional financing, partial guarantees, full-fledged export support mechanisms, etc.

**3.** Development and adoption of a law regulating the procurement of the quasi-public sector.

**4.** Development of a new national project to develop the agro-industrial complex through 2026, which provides for the formation of at least seven ecosystems for the production and processing of agricultural raw materials around major investment projects, a package of measures to stimulate cooperation in rural areas, the formation of human capital in agriculture, etc.

**5.** Development of a new regulatory framework for small and medium-sized business activities aimed at changing the regulatory policy, including by prioritizing common sense and content over strict legal forms and state regulation in order to protect the health of citizens and the environment.

**6.** Implementation of the export accelerator program aimed at supporting medium-sized non-resource enterprises in order to expand access to foreign markets.

**7.** Measures to reorient the excess liquidity of second-tier banks to lending to small and medium-sized businesses and to stop currency speculation.

**8.** Conducting an audit of the Tax Code and regulations thereunder to minimize the number of taxes and payments, as well as studying the issue of differentiation of tax rates to diversify the economy and replenish the budget.

**9.** Profound simplification of the execution of tax obligations, including through digitalization.

**10.** Improving international taxation to strengthen controls on capital outflows and to encourage reinvestment of profits in the country, as well as strengthening controls on transfer pricing and capital outflows.

**11.** Implementation of the «expanded budget» covering the activities of extra-budgetary funds, including the State Social Insurance Fund, the Social Health Insurance Fund, and the Unified Accumulative Pension Fund.

**12.** Adoption of measures to improve the regulation of commodity exchanges, including those aimed at ensuring equal access to trading for stockbrokers and suppliers of goods.

**13.** Formation of a legislative mechanism for public administration of the activities of public and private operators authorized to perform certain economic functions and provide monopolistic services

**14.** Reduction of unproductive costs and redundant subsidiaries in the quasi-public sector.

**15.** Creation of the unified development institution by combining «Baiterek» NMH» JSC and «KazAgro» NMH» JSC with a twofold reduction in portfolio companies and with a corresponding adjustment in the number of staff. [43]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: « The creation of a truly diversified, technological economy is not just a necessity for us, but a scenario where there is no other alternative. At the same time, the economy must work to improve the well-being of the people. We must find a positive answer to the growing public demand for a fairer distribution of benefits arising from the growth of national income and for effective social “lifts” ... people cannot be blessed with the abstract growth of GDP, they need permanent jobs, good roads, hospitals and schools, quality food. Economic reforms are justified and supported only when they increase the income of a country’s citizens and ensure higher standards of living. We must always keep this in mind» (from the State of the Nation Address to the People of Kazakhstan «Kazakhstan in a New Reality: Time For Action», 1.09.2020)*

## 6. Social Reforms

### A. Social Protection of the Population

1. Adoption of the Decree on Measures to reduce the debt burden of citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan on June 26, 2019, according to which the government and the National Bank were instructed to repay the debts on loans of low-income citizens in second-tier banks and microfinance organizations. The latter category includes 629,000 people, including large families, families with disabled children or those who have lost their sole breadwinner, as well as orphans. [44]

2. Order to study the issue of targeted use of part of their pension savings by working citizens for the purchase of housing, education, etc. As part of its implementation, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the restoration of economic growth was adopted on 2.01.2021. It provides an opportunity for interested citizens of the country to use their pension savings to improve housing conditions and pay for medical treatment. According to the statement of the Head of State, in 2021, 700,000 depositors of the Unified Accumulative Pension Fund can use this right. [45]

3. Adoption of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on compulsory social insurance, social security and public-private partnership in the field of healthcare on 26.12.2019. In particular, it is aimed at strengthening social protection measures for disabled people and large families.

4. Introduction in April 2020 in the Mazhilis at the initiative of the deputies of the draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on issues of protection of the rights of the child. In particular, an amendment to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Housing Relations is proposed, which provides for the exclusion of the requirement for orphans and children left without parental care and permanent residence for at least three years in the capital, in cities of national significance when placing in the queue for housing.

5. Development by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population of the draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on issues of social protection of certain categories of citizens aimed at strengthening measures to support persons with disabilities.

**6.** Creation of 12 social rehabilitation centers for persons with disabilities through means of placement of a state social order and the use of public-private partnership mechanisms. [46]

**7.** Development of the concept of the Social Code (Code on Social Security).

**8.** Introduction of mechanisms for subsidizing rent payments with the reorientation of part of the funds provided for the construction of rental housing in the regions (with coverage of at least 100,000 families) through the "Otbasy Bank", created on the basis of "Zhilstroyserbank", as well as subsidizing the costs of employers in the construction of rental houses in rural areas.

**9.** Expansion of work on providing land plots for individual housing construction with communication lines, including through public-private partnerships. [47]

## **B. Healthcare**

**1.** Order to create the unified digital healthcare space with the inclusion of 90% of medical organizations and the introduction of electronic health passports.

**2.** Approval of the Comprehensive Plan for the Development of the Pharmaceutical and Medical Industry for 2020-2025 by the Order of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 132-p dated 06.10.2020. The implementation of this plan is designed to increase the share of national manufacturers in the domestic market of Kazakhstan of essential pharmaceutical products from 39% to 50%.

**3.** Development of the draft concept of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Biological Safety of the Republic of Kazakhstan. [48]

**4.** Launch of the special program "Ansagan Sabi" commencing from 2021 with the provision of 7000 quotas for In Vitro Fertilization (IVF).

**5.** Ensuring that by 2023 the level of wages of medical workers is 2 times higher than the average wage in the economy.

**6.** Determining the list of basic medicines and medical products that should be produced in Kazakhstan, and adoption of appropriate measures to achieve this goal.

**7.** Complete revision of approaches to the organization of primary healthcare in the direction of greater mobility and accessibility to a wide range of the population, including those living in rural areas.

**8.** Taking measures to strengthen transport medicine to serve remote regions.

**9.** Provision of all remote and nearest inhabited localities with medical and obstetrical stations and outpatient clinics in the next 3 years.

**10.** Formation of a long-term ten-year forecast for the provision of medical institutions with personnel, including in such areas as epidemiology, infectious diseases, resuscitation, pulmonology, cardiology. [49]

## **C. Education:**

**1.** Increasing the level of salaries for teachers. On August 16, 2019, the Head of State, participating in the annual Teachers' August Conference, instructed to double the salary of secondary school teachers. [50] In his second Address, he announced the decision to increase the salary of all teaching staff by 25% from January 2021, with an additional allocation of 1.2 trillion tenge for this purpose over the next three years.

**2.** Introduction of a special exam on solving pedagogical cases for applicants who have chosen to be teachers to determine their aptitude for this profession and increase the entry requirements. It will reveal these individuals' ability to communicate with children and act with humanity, patience, justice, and care, including children with special educational needs.

**3.** Increasing scholarships for future teachers from 26 thousand to 42 thousand tenge, and doctoral students - from 102,498 to 150,000 tenge, since 1.09.2020.

**4.** Increasing the grant values for higher and postgraduate education to increase the salaries of university teachers.

**5.** Gradual digitalization of school textbooks by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

**6.** Introduction of amendments to the order of MES of RK № 344, dated 24.07.2012 "On approval of Rules of organization of work on the development, evaluation, testing, monitoring and publication of textbooks, teaching materials and teaching guides" in terms of increasing requirements for the quality of scientific and pedagogical expertise and testing.

**7.** Addressing the granting of academic independence to technical and vocational education institutions, including the right to develop educational programs and introduce a credit system. [51]

**8.** Establishment of a single integrated online educational platform with all the functions necessary for a full-fledged educational process.

**9.** Development of systematic measures to create equal opportunities for children to receive a quality education, regardless of their residence and language of learning.

**10.** Development of measures to support secondary schools to bridge the gap between urban and rural education.

**11.** Development of the Concept of lifelong learning (continuous education), aimed at improving the level of literacy of citizens, their digital competencies, active introduction of alternative options for non-formal education, recognition of independent learning results, certification of professional skills, etc.

**12.** Opening sports sections and resuming the work of “children's clubs” in all regions, cities of national significance, the capital, large district centers.

**13.** Addressing the issue of accepting “patronage” from large businesses over regional universities' scientific activities.

**14.** Allocation of 500 grants to provide scientists with internships in leading scientific centers of the world and the allocation of 1000 grants to young scientists under the project “Zhas galym”. [52]

*Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: “All children, regardless of their place of residence or social status, should have access to quality education. I must say that in a number of states face a similar challenge - the gap in education between the urban and rural populations. We should take a practical and realistic view of this situation, but without overdramatization. We need to take action. To reduce the gap, it is necessary to provide rural small schools with qualified teaching staff... Another factor that directly affects the quality of education is the status and professionalism of teachers. I support the proposal that state should support the status of our teachers in every possible way to make them distinguished and respected members of our society” (from the speech at the third meeting of the National Council of Public Trust under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 27.05.2020)*

## 7. Interim results (2019-2021) and prospects for progress

The relatively short period of the last twenty-four months has featured a high degree of complexity in Kazakhstan, juxtaposing an important generational transition of power and a highly disruptive COVID-19 pandemic. The country therefore is experiencing, under the new leadership of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a rather interesting and critical new stage in its development that combines at once elements of evolution, fundamental reform, and crisis response.

Using the solid leadership experience that he has gained during previous positions in Kazakhstan's government since 1993, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev quickly mastered the modus operandi of a President. Furthermore, he demonstrates the ability to respond promptly to various processes and events and make quick but well-thought-out and adequate decisions.

Leading the country during the pandemic has been a serious challenge to the Head of State. Less than a year into his first mandate, he had to make an unprecedented decision in the history of sovereign Kazakhstan, i.e. to impose a state of emergency on the entire country for 56 days (from March 16 to May 11, 2020). This difficult but necessary measure helped contain infection and prevented the destabilization of the country while protecting the social well-being of a specific part of the population.

In 2020, Kazakhstan's leadership had to focus heavily on anti-crisis work, including the mobilization of all state and substantial non-state resources. This allowed the country to gradually stabilize the social and economic situation and prevent the negative consequences of the pandemic from becoming political. This included a set of measures to assist citizens from various strata and groups of the population and private business entities.

At the same time, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev managed to maintain his political course, focused on implementing new political, administrative, and socio-economic reforms. Overall, 251 measures are being adopted, including the President's election programme "*Well-being for all! Continuity. Justice. Progress*", the proposals he made in 2019 during the national action "*Birge*" and in the *Action Plan for the implementation of the second State of the Nation Address by the Head of State dated September 1, 2020* "*Kazakhstan in a new reality: a time for action*".

In particular, nine laws and one concept have been so far adopted in implementation of political and legal measures. Notably, the first package of political

reforms announced within the National Council of Public Trust framework under the President of Kazakhstan has been fully implemented.

The National Council of Public Trust, whose membership reflects various views, ideas, and positions, social and political interests, is now operation and headed by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. It plays a critical political role in support of the new path of reforms. The unique nature of the NCPT also lies in the fact that it is a mechanism for establishing a dialogue between the authorities and society and between different segments of society itself. As its work and reputation grow, this agency will help the Head of State position himself as an ombudsman for the national interest and those of the entire Kazakh community in all its diversity, rather than small parties or groups' interests.

By pushing to improve the government as well as the effectiveness of its agencies and public officials - including expanding the role of parliament in the state decision-making and increasing the government's accountability to parliament and society – Tokayev consciously strengthens the vertical of executive power and accountability. Six of the agencies created in this period are accountable to him personally, an indicator of his sense of personal responsibility for the country's situation overall and in certain areas in particular. This is also proved by the frequent personal response of the Head of State to various critical problems in the country, especially in the pandemic context.

Assessing the main results of the past three decades of Kazakhstan's sovereign development, Tokayev outlined the development priorities for the new period. He defined the formation of a just society and an effective state as the primary goal of the fourth decade of independence. [53]

The recent policy article of President Tokayev, *“Täuelsizdik bärinen qymbat” (Nothing is More Precious than Independence)*, published on 5 January 2021, reveals not only a commitment to all of his earlier decisions and plans but also a willingness to address and improve key areas of the life of Kazakh society and the state through additional packages of relevant reforms. Importantly, the President repeatedly emphasizes that the government should always feel its responsibility to the people. His intention to introduce district mayoral elections to follow the recent first elections of rural mayors is illustrative in this regard.

These principles and reform efforts are clearly resonating with the population of Kazakhstan. In particular, according to the results of a survey conducted by the Institute of Eurasian Integration in the autumn of 2019, President Tokayev enjoys a high level of trust (74.9%) and direct support (70.3%) from the population of Kazakhstan. Besides, more than 70% of respondents believe that presidential initiatives can help increase the people's well-being and ensure the country's development. [54]

In the quarterly ranking of Kazakhstan's managerial elite, compiled by the Strategy Center for Social and Political Research, Tokayev has consistently held the first position in all major indicators (credibility, efficiency, prospects) since 2019. From the second quarter of 2019 to the second quarter of 2020, his overall rating increased from 5.4 to 5.13. And in the fourth quarter, the rating of the Head of State was 5.26 points. [55]

According to the study "Monitoring corruption in Kazakhstan for 2020", issued by the Civic Foundation Transparency Kazakhstan, the President of Kazakhstan heads five official institutions that enjoy the highest level of public trust - 70%. Moreover, compared with the results of a similar study in 2019, his trust rating increased by 9%. [56] It is vital to note that non-State structures conducted all these studies.

The achievement of the relevant tasks is facilitated by the fact that the leadership has managed to stabilize the country's situation in the context of the pandemic and optimally combined anti-crisis and reformist measures in its activities.

In general, all the results achieved so far under extremely challenging conditions form a sound basis for further progress as the country recovers from the pandemic. According to the international financial institutions, economic recovery will be slow and difficult, including in Central Asia. Full recovery and simultaneous progress in political, administrative, and socio-economic reforms will take time and continued effort by all concerned.

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