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# **POGROMS IN POST-NAZARBAYEV KAZAKHSTAN**

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**POGROMS IN POST-NAZARBAYEV'S  
KAZAKHSTAN: FROM PERCEPTIONS  
TO VIOLENT PRACTICES**



## INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has branded itself as a model for interethnic peace and harmony (Zhussupova, 2021; OSCE Kazakhstan, 2009). In official discourse, especially Russian language material, the country's leadership has maintained the importance of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity as cornerstones of a new Kazakhstani nation (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Tutumlu and Imyarova, 2021). Kazakhstan has created several institutions to ensure representation of ethnic minorities in politics, such as the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and the World Congress of Leaders of the World and Traditional Religions. It has also introduced several doctrines and national programs to create a sense of unity among the people and to provide a common vision for living together, such as the Doctrine of National Unity, Mangilik El: One Country, One People. The policy of the 'friendship of peoples' was a cornerstone for Nazarbayev's regime who showcased social stability in the country in various multilateral fora as being a result of deliberate government efforts.

However, the official picture of public diversity and unity has been frequently tarnished due to recurrent cases of intercommunal violence between ethnic minorities and the titular majority. In February 2020, a simple brawl between private individuals snowballed into mass violence between ethnic Dungans and



Kazakhs that left 11 people dead, 192 injured (including 19 police officers), and the mass exodus of some 24,000 Dungan fleeing into neighboring Kyrgyzstan (ADC Memorial, 2020). The violence occurred in the four Dungan-majority villages of Masanchi, Sortobe, Bular Batyr, and Aukhatty. About 5000 ethnic-Kazakh marauders were mobilized to the villages after news had spread that a Dungan man had broken an old Kazakh man's leg during a driving incident and tried to evade arrest (ADC Memorial, 2020). The resulting violence caused \$4.5 million USD (1.7 billion Tenge) worth of damage, including the destruction of 168 homes and some 122 cars (Vaal, 2020). The violence lasted for just 13 hours and was eventually put down by the National Guard.

Three years after the violence, this study aims to achieve the following. First, although a lot has been written about the chronological development of the pogrom in local media, nobody has addressed the perceptions and motivations of the actors involved. By using the Korday pogroms in February 2020 as a case study, we map out the actions of major stakeholders in order to explain the process of intercommunal violence in post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan. Second, we want to create a more dynamic explanation for the violence by outlining the progress of conflict through stakeholder mapping at the beginning of the pogrom, during the unrest, and then during the trial in order to illustrate the repositioning of various actors and the establishment of "alliances" and/or divisions. The comparison between these maps will allow us to discern gaps in the conflict resolution methods and produce a set of recommendations for addressing them.





To investigate the perceptions and map them we ask the following questions:

- *How did the positionality of major actors change throughout the conflict?*
- *What kind of recommendations and lessons can be derived from this analysis?*

Although cases of interethnic violence have been periodically taking place in Kazakhstan, they have been largely absent from the academic literature since most scholars preferred to concentrate on interethnic relations during times of peace to highlight the importance of the Soviet legacy (Burkhanov, 2020; Rees, 2020), or Kazakhstan's nation-building strategies (Isaacs and Polese, 2015; Kamrava, 2020), and the growth of nativism and populism (Laruelle, 2022). Scarce, but growing literature interpreted intercommunal conflicts through the prism of economic deprivation and mediation (Lim, 2021). Attempts to model interethnic violence in Kazakhstan have begun to emerge in recent years (Abiyev et al, 2020; Tursyngaliyeva et al, 2021) but they often lack specific policy recommendations on how to address the unrest.



## METHODOLOGY

In order to map out specific positions and practices of major actors during the conflict, we used stakeholder analysis in three stages of conflict (before the violence, during the pogrom, and during the trial) to derive recommendations. We applied a power/interest nexus to examine the violence. In total, we identified 51 stakeholders which we grouped into the following categories: government representatives, which included district akims, local municipalities, Nurotan wing, Ministry of Internal Affairs, presidential statements, prosecutor's office, police, rapid response forces (aka SOBR), and intelligence services, Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, advocates appointed in the legal process; community representatives of the minority, and majority with data derived from the legal proceedings where interviews were impossible, including in-depth interviews with elders; leaders of national-patriots whose data we obtained from various public platforms and social media; and mass media which included registered news sources. Out of 51 stakeholders, we managed to obtain 33 interviews with the rest of the stakeholder analysis taken from their media profiles and public statements. The visual actor-mapping allowed us to illustrate the alliances and rifts between actors and map relative power/interest dynamics between a wide range of stakeholders involved in the process.

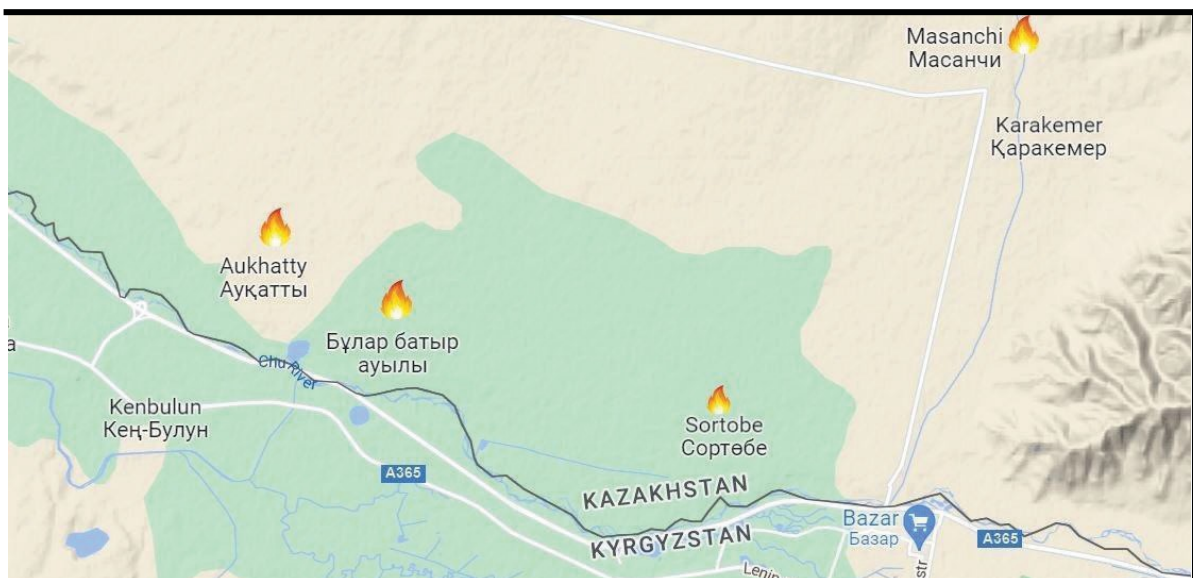


## POGROMS VIA STAKEHOLDER

*Actors before the conflict: Predatory*

Karakemer is a Kazakh village of about 3000 residents who are mostly involved in raising cattle and selling it to the meat processing plant, which unofficially belongs to the Akim of the village. Others offer transportation services to the residents and poorer residents seasonally work in the fields that Dungans plant. Karakemer is only 300m away from Masanchi, a largely Dungan village whose residents are mostly involved in agriculture. They work and live in a closed community establishing chains of support for disadvantaged families. The skewed economic well-being with Dungans being better-off offered plenty of opportunities for extortion from local municipality officials, border guards, and police forces. It also offered Kazakh residents of Karakemer informal opportunities to make money.

**Map of the Dungan and Kazakh Villages in Korday region**



Source: Mr. Farkhad Imyarov



The Kazakh community perceived Dungans on average as “too wealthy” and accused them of paying bribes to local officials to avoid penalties and engage in various illegalities, mostly contraband (Trotsenko, 2020; Mauletbay, 2020). Since Dungan communities live in closed settlements with 90% Dungan, 5% Kazakh and 5% Russian (Bazhkenova, 2020), the lack of knowledge and interaction with the minorities also leads to stigmatization of minority groups as “guests” on Kazakh land. The expectations from the majority are not only that minorities should speak Kazakh (which they do with an accent), but also that they recognize the formative (read: superior) status of the ethnic majority (Кәшібай, 2020). Local Kazakh police view Dungan wealth as a product of informal links with officials and family connections abroad, which justifies the collection of rents, and imposition of demeaning practices, which is no longer perceived as extortion, but as a legitimate income due to their official status.

The predatory system that existed at the local level created a fertile foundation for pogroms. Namely, when on February 5, 2020 a “Dungan” truck loaded with produce did not give way to “Kazakhs” in the sedan car. The Kazakhs interpreted it as a show of disrespect to their superior ethnic status and wanted to “teach” them a lesson (for the interview with the Kazakh family, please see multiple posts by Кәшібай, 2020 on Qamshy.kz). During a fist fight, an old Kazakh man fell and broke his leg. The elders from the Dungan community paid for his healthcare recovery costs and apologized (ADC Memorial, interview with a representative of a Dungan community). Two days later, Kazakh police officers and 14 cars came to the region and stopped every vehicle extorting exuberant bribes for minor improprieties (interview with Dungan community representative). When a Dungan driver who was stopped went to get his driver’s license at home to avoid the bribe, he was chased by the police, but resisted the arrest (Interview with Dungan community representative).





When a Dungan driver who was stopped went to get his driver's license at home to avoid the bribe, he was chased by the police, but resisted the arrest (Interview with Dungan community representative). Both incidents were filmed and widely publicized on social media. National-patriots interpreted it as proof that Dungans were acting so boldly that they no longer recognize the power of the police (Bazhkenova, 2020, for statements please see Smagul 2020, Taizhan, 2020). Under the cover of public outcry, local Kazakh officials found an opportunity to enlarge their economic benefits and also ensure that the Dungan community remains dependent on them. The Kazakh majority also took an opportunity to get richer by engaging in looting and punishing the minority for misrecognition of their status.

#### *Actors during the conflict: Opportunists*

The striking nature of the 2020 Korday pogrom was premeditated and planned execution. There were two groups of specific actors who used a private brawl opportunistically, i.e. for private economic gain. According to the perceptions of the Dungan population and opposition media, local government officials, especially law enforcement agencies, such as Committee of National Security (KNB), Border Guards, local police, and Prosecutor of Korday Region were involved in organizing and executing the pogroms. It is possible to infer that the unknown armed groups together with the local population from the Kazakh villages were also in alliance with local government officials, as they were highly organized and knew how to “maximize” the gains from looting specific households. The premeditated planning was also visible in the scale of the conflict, which had from 4000 to 10 000 participants drawn from the southern and eastern regions of Kazakhstan (video testimonies, Prosecutor's Office 2020, and interviews with Dungan communities 2020, 2021).



Second, local officials and local law enforcement agencies controlled the narrative that was shared with the government and other state institutions. They framed their perceptions and voices, which undermined the possibility for an impartial investigation after the pogroms.

Between February 5 and 7, unknown group with links to the law enforcement agencies managed to do the following:

1. They marked Dungan households the night before;
2. Despite cordons between the regions, they organized transportation from the nearby regions and Altyn Orda market (the largest in the nearest proximity to Korday) calling Kazakhs who come from the whole country to trade, to defend their ethnic group against the Dungan minorities (Orda.kz);
3. They armed thousands of Kazakh participants with guns and Molotov cocktails.

The indirect evidence of links to the local law enforcement bodies point to the following inconsistencies: someone ordered local police to allow a convoy of cars packed with young men to cross the regions and not to interfere with the violence for 13(!) hours before the deployment of SOBR (Special Forces) and the National Guard (interview with Dungan advocate, 2021, and Dungan community representative, 2020). Someone also ordered local state workers not to come to work at schools and daycares on February 7 (Interviews with Dungan farmers, 2020; ADC Memorial, 2020) – only Dungan kids came to school and found out that classes were canceled. They could not leave school due to unraveling violence. There are video recordings of police officers engaged in looting or standing by as violence skyrocketed in size and scale (video from the camera recording by the witness, 2020).



However, it remains unclear who was at the center of organizing the operation.

The Kazakh community was also well organized. They already knew where the Dungan households were located and operated in three separate groups. The first group came into the house and extorted money and gold from the families (interview with Dungan community 2020, 2021). They were privy to the fact that each family has custom-made gold pieces as wedding gifts (Testimonies from legal proceedings, 2021). Many of those pieces were later found in pawn shops (interview with Dungan community 2020, 2021, 2022). The second group either followed or came together with the first one. They were mostly interested in cattle-rustling and operated outside the house involving mostly men from the household who tried to defend their property (Testimonies from legal proceedings, 2021). The third group followed the same path as the other two, setting houses and properties on fire. As a result of such operations, 11 people were killed. Among them 10 Dungans who tried to defend their property against the mobs and 1 Kazakh who was engaged in looting (Interview with a lawyer, 2020). In total, 122 cars and 168 houses were burnt. Around 1000 heads of cattle were stolen and “disappeared” in the nearby meat-processing plant that belongs to the Akim of Karakemer (Interview with a Lawyer, 2021). The type of activities that the Kazakh community was engaged in during the pogrom clearly illustrate the type of grievances that they share towards the Dungans, who are perceived to be economically richer in comparison to the ethnic majority. The immense destruction of property was seen as the “disciplinary” mechanism, i.e. a punishment for the ability to be better-off (Кәшібай, 2020, 2021).

The role of the local groups, including law enforcement and governors in controlling the message is illuminating.



The stakeholder analysis shows that there were only three actors during the conflict with the power to change the narrative. Namely, the Dungan governor of Sortobe village who appealed to the central bodies and Presidential Administration to stop the violence. And then KazTAG, a news agency, which issued a short first statement about ethnic violence on February 7. However, the former was overpowered by local law enforcement, including the police and prosecutor's office who allied into a group and misinformed the President that the conflict involved 70 youth and remained under control (President twitter on 7 February at 23:00 which was later deleted). The latter was also reprimanded by the Presidential Administration that threatened with a criminal case accusing the news agency of "inciting interethnic hatred" (Kaztag, 2020 February 7). The third actor who had the power to intervene is the Member of Parliament, an ethnic Dungan Mr. Khakhazov, who was in contact with Mr. Daurov, a Dungan community representative, but failed to act. The rest of the local actors, especially the local Prosecutor, Governor of Karakemer, KNB, Border Guards and the Police were operating in sync and coordinated the responses on the ground before the National Guard stepped in. Mass media, the Dungan MP, and the central Government had the responsibility to share information and react to crisis situations were outnumbered and overpowered despite numerous consultations behind-the-scenes. It was also highly unhelpful that minority communities had no support from the local actors, except for some residents of Kazakh villages who hid Dungan families in their houses and the mosque and/or transported them away from the scene (Interviews with Dungan community, 2020).

### *Actors after the conflict: Inverted Justice*

The alliance among the local actors largely continued after the pogroms: they utilized administrative resources and informal pressure to ensure that





representatives of Kazakh community walk free or with minor sentences, while most blame is shifted on the representatives of the Dungan communities, including attacking the police, and initiating a fight between drivers. By controlling courts, police, and extorting evidence from the minorities through torture, KNB and police ensured that their “story” reported to the Presidential Administration is performed in court (Interview with a Lawyer, 2021). The success of this operation was embedded in fear of personal persecution, as well as the threat of resumption of violence, since the voice of the minorities was effectively silenced by the same actors who were now in charge of accusing and sentencing them (Interview with a Lawyer, 2021).

Although interviews with the local Akim of Karakemer failed to materialize, conversations with the representatives of local community representatives show that KNB officers played a primary role in the last phase of the conflict. Together with local state representatives they engaged in the following activities during the investigations and trials. First, the Akim of Karakemer accused three people in conducting pogroms with whom he had bad personal relations (testimony in the court, 2020). The cherry-picked trio blamed him for covering-up for the rest of the participants who largely escaped justice (Interview with the Lawyer, 2021). The Akim kept a very low formal public profile during the investigations. Similar approaches of selective justice were adopted by the local General Prosecutor of Korday region who asked for light sentences for the ethnic Kazakhs, despite the existence of multiple evidence, including video and eyewitness testimonies against the perpetrators. Other Kazakh participants were instructed on how to plead and publicly regret their behavior, which allowed them to walk free from the trials (Interviews with the Lawyer, 2021). We also noted that Akim of Sortobe, a Dungan village joined the local government officials and stopped his attempts at reaching the Presidential Administration to share his version of the pogrom.



Instead, he collaborated with the KNB, which promised the Dungan community peace and stability should they follow KNB's instructions (interview with Dungan community representative, 2020, 2021). Local police officers were also taking part in the trials and extorted "evidence" from the Dungan community through torture (interview with Dungan community 2020, 2021; see also KazTAG, 2020; Coalition of NGOs Against Torture, 2020) and other forms of violence instructed to 'put down the Dungan revolt' (interview with the Lawyer, 2021). One member of the Dungan community died in custody, and many received severe physical injuries while in prison (interview with Dungan community 2020, 2021; Azattyq, 2020). It remains unclear which actor gave such an order, but representatives of the Dungan community are inclined to think that the order came from the KNB, which was in charge of ensuring that the trial reflects the official story in the way that accuses Dungs of violence and disrespect.

Such accusations are possible, as there are testimonies of KNB instructing local people, both Dungan and Kazakh communities what to say during their meeting with the President of Kazakhstan, Mr. Tokayev (Interviews with Dungan community, 2021). As a result of these methods, actors who could have had a chance of intervening and protecting an ethnic minority, such as Tokayev and his Administration or central government officials and law enforcement representatives were largely blind of the informal pressure and fake confessions. Tokayev also offered two different messages when meeting with the Dungan community vis-à-vis the Kazakh community. First, the President met with the Dungs and said that they should draw the lessons from what happened and recommended them to resettle. A Dungan elder was forced to apologize for the tragedy in public by security forces. Then the President went to Karakemer where he had dinner with Kazakhs and visited Kazakh school with presents. Nationalist press used hate speech acts and blamed Dungs for disrespecting and even challenging Kazakh culture and traditions



(Taizhan 2020), accusing Dungans for dodging the military draft and proposing to deport them back to China (Smagul, 2020B).

With violence and the informal pressure to ensure an unfair trial, many Dungans attempted to engage international actors and international mass media. They reached out to major organizations, such as UN ICERD to amplify their voices (UN ICERD, 2022; ADC Memorial, 2020). Representatives of international organizations directly responsible for checking compliance with the country's respect of human rights covenants selectively met with government officials and pro-government civil society representatives (interview with Dungan community, 2020, 2021) ignoring the Dungan community. Those journalists who came to inquire, received little information since the local officials allied with local law enforcement bodies posed continuous threat to those who would dare to speak (interview with Dungan community, 2020, 2021). Regional Akims disappeared from the scene, not only because a special Government Committee was in charge of the investigations headed by the former Vice-President (new Akim of Jambyl region), but also by choice. Unknown groups also disappeared as quickly as they appeared. Instead, the conflict acquired the message of 'kolkhozniks fought,' banditry, and hooliganism.

The absence of justice for pogroms presents a major challenge to small ethnic minorities in the future. A group of local officials who had formal power and opportunities to informally collaborate not only controlled the message and interpretation of the conflict in mass media and higher levels of government, but also ensured that justice was not served. Thus, such collaboration opened possibilities of more pogroms in the future.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The report adopted dynamic stakeholder analysis that was based on the in-depth interviews with major participants in the conflict to understand specific actions of these groups throughout the conflict. Such a method allowed us to do several things: first, we derived preconditions of the conflict and set pogrom within the existing cleavages. We also traced the nature of formal and informal involvement of actors showing the crucial importance of local law enforcement agencies who not only controlled the narrative and information flow, but also collaborated between each other to ensure coherence and absence of dissent among the victims. Third, we also illustrated that the pogroms were characterized by inverted justice, where representatives of ethnic majority received substantially lighter sentences in comparison with the Dungan communities, which were the victims of violence. Confessions obtained through torture represent a common practice that Kazakhstan's law-enforcement bodies. Thus, the outcome of the tragedy forces minorities to be uncertain about their future.

The authors would like to make the following recommendations. The role of independent mass media in such conflict remains vital and crucial. They could have asked important questions that scrutinized the official story line and established alternative narratives. They also could have given the voice to the Dungans and seconded hate speech by the nationalist actors putting the barriers to outright illegal behavior by mobilizing shame. They also should have illustrated multiple violations in courts offering a possibility of keeping law enforcement bodies accountable to law. The absence of independent investigations and the ability of local officials to control the narrative enabled a whole range of negative outcomes from the beginning to the end of pogroms.





Second, the presence of armed groups and the absence of law-enforcement during the 13 hours of the conflict show that specific officials were involved who gave an order for such an operation to take place. Although we may never find the names behind these groups, it is important to be vigilant and ready for such clandestine operations strengthening the alternative channels of whistleblowing and increasing participation of minorities in local governance. Specifically, local private conflicts must be resolved on the spot in a transparent manner with the participation of major local stakeholders who take responsibility for the secured solution achieved through a mutually agreed procedure. Further research must develop an open and transparent system of conflict prevention to enable both communities to interact with each other in the formal institutional setting sharing the parity of rights and responsibilities. Both communities suffer from multiple negative myths about each other, while being economically interdependent. As a result, it is possible to conceive the existence of peace engines within the communities that are interested in fostering cooperation, rather than conflict. Kazakh communities can benefit from the establishment of internal institutions of support networks and stronger collaborations with their neighbors on equal basis. There are international experiences that have practiced similar cooperation in conflict settings where ethnicities had to share natural resources, access to parks, and infrastructure to provide food security, among other things (Ide and Tubi 2019; Ali 2019; Huda 2021).

Third, the judicial system has been ineffective in administering justice. Those who were accused in the Kazakh community were not the main instigators of the conflict. The legal proceedings and interviews with the lawyers show that justice was not served creating further grounds for similar violence in the future. In order to alter the system, a radical change in the institution is necessary, where judgements in these cases can be given by the



jury trial, rather than a single judge broadcast freely with the participation by national and international media, and advocacy organizations.



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## APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES AND SOURCES OF DATA COLLECTION

### *Government Representatives:*

1. Deputy governor of Korday region
2. Assistant of governor of Sortobe
3. Assistant of governor of Masanchi
4. Representatives of Nur Otan/Amanat Party
5. Two Dungan representatives of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan at the District level
6. Representative of Dungan community in the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan at the Oblast level
7. Two legal advocates of Dungan defendants
8. Two non-local police representatives that were brought to Korday
9. (11 people)

### *Community Representatives:*

1. Representatives of Dungan communities in Masanchi, Sortobe, Karakemer (22 people)

### *Official statements and social media posts were used for:*

1. Ministry of Internal Affairs, Mr. Yerlan Turgumbaev and his staff members: [here](#).
2. Presidential statements: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), additional: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)
3. Prosecutor's Office: local reports are [here](#),
4. Police of Jambyl Oblast: [here](#)



5. Committee of National Security (KNB): [here](#)
  6. Akim of Jambyl Oblast, Mr. Askar Myrzakhmetov: [here](#), Saparbayev [here](#), [here](#),
  7. MP from APK KZ: [here](#), [here](#)
- Border Police: [here](#)

#### *National Patriots:*

1. Mukhtar Taizhan: [here](#), [here](#) (reposted from Bakhytbek Smagul Facebook on Feb 7),
2. Qamshy.kz: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#),
3. Zhanbolat Mamay: [here](#), [here](#)
4. Serik Maleev: Altyn-orda.kz (now closed)
5. Abai.kz: [Arman Kani](#)
6. Adyrna.kz: [here](#)

#### *Kazakh participants:*

1. *Legal proceedings of two criminal investigations were used to trace activities of Kazakh participants*

#### *Mass Media:*

1. KazTAG: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#),
2. Gulnara Bazhkenova and Orda.kz: many, but [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)
3. ADC Memorial: [here](#), [here](#)
4. Azattyq.kz: [here](#), [here](#),

*Total: 51 stakeholders*

