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Understanding Organized Crime and Violence in Central Asia

By Lawrence P. Markowitz and Mariya Y. Omelicheva



Kazakh police block an area to prevent protests against presidential elections in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, on June 10, 2019. (Photo by Alexei Filippov/AP)

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Summary

- Organized violence in Central Asian states is complex and varied and often involves an organized criminal element. Criminal influence can manifest itself in episodes of violence not only amid “noisy” periods of upheaval and heightened mobilization of civilian populations but also during “quiet” periods when political order remains intact and mobilization is low.
- The report identifies four ways in which organized criminal actors engage in violence in Central Asia: in confrontation with the state; in open conflict amid state breakdown; in collaboration with regimes to wage state violence; and in competition with one another for assets and influence. Country case studies illustrate these variations.
- In Kyrgyzstan, “quiet” periods have been characterized by political assassination, murder of business competitors, and other types of intergroup violence.
- In Kazakhstan, regional and local criminal groups have exploited weakened government control and ethnic divisions in society to target competitors.
- In Tajikistan, the postwar consolidation of power has constricted opportunities for criminal groups, leading them to engage in violence either through collaboration with the regime or through confrontation when the state encroaches on their illicit economic activity.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

Organized crime is often overlooked as a driver of both political violence and civil conflict in Central Asia. This report looks at complex and variable conflicts in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, with recommendations for reducing violence both in periods of upheaval and in quiet times of low mobilization. Research was supported by the Central Asia Program at the United States Institute of Peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lawrence P. Markowitz is a professor of political science at Rowan University in New Jersey, and Mariya Y. Omelicheva is a professor of strategy at the National War College in Washington, DC. They are the co-authors of *Webs of Corruption: Trafficking and Terrorism in Central Asia*, an examination of the nexus of organized crime and terrorism in post-Soviet Eurasia, published by Columbia University Press in 2019.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: (202) 457-1700
Fax: (202) 429-6063
E-mail: usip_requests@usip.org
Web: www.USIP.org

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Supporters of Kyrgyzstan's Prime Minister Sadyr Japarov attend a rally in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on October 15, 2020.
(Photo by Vladimir Voronin/AP)

Introduction

On October 15, 2020, Kyrgyzstan's president Sooronbai Jeenbekov announced his resignation in a bid to avert more of the turmoil and violence that was engulfing his country after rigged parliamentary elections. Mass protests against government corruption and electoral fraud are anything but new in this Central Asian nation, which has seen two other presidents toppled by popular revolts since 2005. What is distinctive about the latest wave of unrest in Bishkek is the conspicuous influence of criminal interests on political processes through vote buying, mobilization of protests, instigation of violence, and irregular voting in the Parliament session that resulted in the change of government in Kyrgyzstan.¹

Outbreaks of violence, primarily intrastate violence, have long defined the political landscape in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan's neighbors—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—have also experienced notable state-society clashes in the last two decades. These episodes of violence have usually been studied through a singular lens, whether of clan politics, interethnic tensions, center-periphery relations, the ongoing struggle with religious extremism and terrorism, or (more recently) the rise of social and youth activism seeking social justice and transparent and accountable government. But much of the violence within Central Asian states is complex and varied and often involves an organized criminal element; it cannot be reduced to a single dimension. Civil war in Tajikistan during the 1990s was followed by two decades of sporadic center-periphery conflicts that often encompassed competing regional and local officials with deep criminal ties. Regime turnover in Kyrgyzstan



MAP 1. CENTRAL ASIA

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock. The boundaries shown on this map are approximate and do not imply official endorsement or acceptance on the part of the authors or the United States Institute of Peace.

in 2005 and 2010 empowered criminal groups, which exploited intra-elite competition and lack of political order to assert their interests, exacerbate violence, and strengthen their foothold in various state institutions.² State violence in Uzbekistan’s Andijan Province in 2005 was a response to an uprising partly driven by the province’s economically and politically marginalized population, but led by displaced local elites who had long exploited their positions to accumulate wealth. In a region characterized by endemic corruption, weak justice systems, and few economic opportunities, organized crime has emerged as an important player in political economies and societies of the Central Asian republics. It has often been a central, if underappreciated, player in organized violence.

This report systematically examines the complex and variable intersections between organized crime and violence in Central Asia. To examine organized criminal violence in relation to and in conversation with other forms of organized violence, the report distinguishes between “quiet” and “noisy” periods in state governance. Quiet periods are characterized by low mobilization of populations in the absence of overt challenges to the regime. Noisy periods are defined by heightened mobilization (in which protests or violence include one hundred or more participants) that takes place amid conflict or regime turnover.³ Most of the corrosive influence of organized crime takes place during the quiet periods, when organized crime erodes good governance, deepens the

fault lines of conflict, and exerts its influence through intimidation and targeting of political and economic rivals. During these periods, criminal interests can mobilize public dissent and channel it into protest, which has the potential of turning violent. In noisy periods, which are often triggered by government transitions, protests, or local disturbances, criminal actors become an amplifying force. Taking advantage of political turbulence, criminal interests exploit the tensions and incite violence by spreading disinformation or engaging in criminal agitation in order to capture a greater share of the criminal market or advance politicians sympathetic to their criminal interests.

The findings of this report are supported by evidence from thirty-five expert interviews in three Central Asian republics (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan). The report also draws on past research in the region and provides additional evidence from a range of secondary sources. Using this information, the report examines the ways that organized criminal actors exploit mobilization and weaken state controls in episodes of violence, as well as the consequences of their involvement in those violent outbreaks. It focuses on selected cases of organized violence—understood as the deliberate and systematic use (or threat) of force for purposes that include a political dimension—to examine the motivations for and drivers of violence and the role played by state actors. These cases include Tajikistan’s civil war and outbreaks of violence in eastern Tajikistan in 2008, 2010, and 2012; violence in Kyrgyzstan accompanying President Bakiyev’s effort at power consolidation in 2005–07, interethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan’s southern provinces in 2010, and the 2020 postelection upheaval; and violence in Kazakhstan related to miners’ protests in Zhanaozen in 2011 and interethnic Dungan-Kazakh clashes in 2020.

Organized Criminal Violence: Character and Conditions

As carried out by continuing criminal enterprises established to elicit unlawful profit, organized crime can involve a range of illicit activities. Some, like robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and extortion, are inherently violent. Others, like trafficking in illicit commodities, often entail the use of intimidation and force, but violence is not integral to the criminal activity itself.⁴ Criminal groups engaging in both types of crime began to appear in the 1990s in Central Asia, as the breakup of the Soviet Union left weak states and unregulated political economies in its wake. Criminal groups exploited opportunities to operate locally in places where state control and the rule of law were weak. Often teaming up with political actors and security offices, criminal groups provided protection (a “roof” or *krysha*) to nascent businesses, helped to settle familial and business scores, or forced their “services” on young entrepreneurs through threat and extortion. Concurrently, opaque privatization and new divisions of property within the post-Soviet political economy created fertile ground for the emergence of criminal enterprises involving government officials, businesspeople, and criminals of all stripes that often blurred the line between legitimate and illegitimate activities in Central Asia.⁵

Today the Central Asian crime scene consists of more sophisticated criminal groups engaged in drug and human trafficking, smuggling, tax and tariff evasion, trade-based fraud, money laundering, and other crimes, often involving public officials. Robberies, homicides, and kidnappings continue, often linked to the predatory crimes of low-level criminal organizations as they seek

to maintain revenue and increase their market share. All Central Asian states have developed systems of political power dependent on the redistribution of rents; these arrangements are partly a legacy of the patronage system that emerged out of Soviet-era scarcities, and partly a response to opportunities presented by the turbulent post-Soviet transitions.

While there is important variation in the scope and character of public officials' involvement in rent seeking and corruption, in all Central Asian countries the largest and most lucrative industries and enterprises need political support, and politicians benefit from financial backing by the legal, quasi-legal, and illicit enterprises. As a consequence, relationships of mutual accommodation between state agents and representatives of the business-criminal world have emerged at multiple levels of state administration, establishing a state-sponsored protection racket that guarantees impunity to criminal interests in exchange for their support.⁶

Organized criminal violence against the state has been a rare event in Central Asia. According to an interview in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, criminal actors prefer co-optation of state agents rather than confrontation with them. This report identifies four ways in which organized criminal actors engage in violence in Central Asia: (1) in confrontation with the state, (2) in open conflict amid state breakdown, (3) in collaboration with regimes to wage state violence, and (4) in competition with one another for assets and influence.⁷ The first two ways are prevalent during noisy periods of heightened mobilization, and the second two during quiet periods of low mobilization (see table 1). Each is described below.

Organized criminal actors can be involved in violent confrontation with the state due to quasi-legal interventions by a state that seeks to extend its writ (type 1 in table 1). Criminal groups seeking to operate autonomously and avoid tightening government control can also exploit insurgent and terrorist attacks targeting government authorities to weaken state security offices and carve greater room to maneuver for their activities. These venues of organized criminal violence are most clearly evident in Tajikistan's conflicts between the central government and local elites in the Rasht Valley in 2008 and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in 2010 and 2012. According to interviews, as the regime sought to extend its influence, it came into conflict with these elites, who are themselves part of (or associated with) organized criminal groups. Several experts in Kazakhstan likewise noted the role of the regional *akim* (governor), who protected and allied with local organized criminal interests in Zhanaozen. Local abuses of power led to the region's 2011 labor protests and the violent state crackdown that followed—a dynamic not unlike the 2005 Andijan uprising (and crackdown) in Uzbekistan. A variant of this form of violence is also exemplified by the 2016 terrorist attacks in Aktobe, Kazakhstan, which involved criminal actors.

Organized crime groups can also exploit opportunities to engage in violence during episodes of mobilization and open conflict (type 2 in table 1). During rare moments when state authority breaks down, criminal actors use instability to gain political and economic advantage, often through alliances with insurgent, militia, or other mobilized groups. This type of organized criminal violence was prevalent during the most violent years of Tajikistan's civil war (1992–93) and was also part of the 2010 ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations in southern Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, extensive studies of the civil war and interviews with experts in Tajikistan identify the pervasive role of organized criminal groups that merged with or served under commanders during the civil war (on both sides). Many of these groups participated in wartime abuses, “ethnic cleansing,” and other forms of collective violence against civilians. Similarly,

TABLE 1: HOW ORGANIZED CRIMINAL ACTORS ENGAGE IN VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

	“Noisy” periods (high mobilization)	“Quiet” periods (low mobilization)
Regime controls much of illicit economy	<p>Type 1: In confrontation with the state</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tajikistan 2008, 2010, 2012 • Kazakhstan 2011 <p>Motive: To mobilize violence, often directed at state authorities</p>	<p>Type 3: In collaboration with regime waging state violence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tajikistan 2000 • Kyrgyzstan 2005–10 <p>Motive: To exploit collusion with regime to access limited economic opportunities</p>
Regime controls little of illicit economy	<p>Type 2: In open conflict amid state breakdown</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kyrgyzstan 2010 • Tajikistan 1992–93 <p>Motive: To exploit instability to acquire political and economic advantage</p>	<p>Type 4: In competition with one another over assets and influence, including political influence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kazakhstan, ongoing • Kyrgyzstan, ongoing • Tajikistan 1993–97 <p>Motive: To eliminate opposing business interests</p>

interviews in Kyrgyzstan and documented reports by international agencies have described the central involvement of organized crime groups in the 2010 violence.⁸

A third type of organized violence by criminal groups involves collaboration with a regime carrying out state violence, including extrajudicial killings, human rights abuses, and other forms of violence targeting regime opponents (type 3 in table 1). In a context in which the regime controls significant portions of the illicit economy, criminal actors’ collusion with government authorities provides access to limited economic opportunities. Experts in Tajikistan described the collaboration of organized crime with a regime that has become increasingly autocratic since 2000, and several described the security apparatus’s use of criminal actors to carry out “dirty work” that they do not want to do. Similarly, observers of Kyrgyzstan have documented ties between President Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s family and organized crime networks, and his use of those networks during his time in office (2005–10) to retain control over political and economic interests in southern regions and the capital.

Finally, organized crime groups can engage in violent competition with one another over assets and influence, including control of public institutions that are used for collecting rents on legal and illicit activities (type 4 in table 1). This competition frequently involves political assassinations, territorial disputes, and other intergroup attacks. In a context of weakened government control over illicit economic activity, violent conflict emerges as groups target and eliminate those with opposing economic interests. In 1992 and 1993, beginning immediately after civil war broke out in Tajikistan, open competition for assets and jockeying for positions in government led to low-intensity violence between demobilized militias that morphed into criminal organizations.⁹ In Kazakhstan, interviews suggest that this type of activity constitutes the bulk of the country’s organized criminal violence, in which numerous district- and city-level criminal groups (at times defined by ethnicity) engage in small-scale disputes over assets. This type was also seen in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. When President Askar Akayev’s regime was weakening, organized criminal networks increasingly penetrated

national politics—Kyrgyzstan’s Parliament, Zhogorku Kenesh, in particular—resulting in a period of political violence and targeted assassinations of political and economic leaders. According to experts from Kyrgyzstan, organized violence may also be an unintended consequence of popular protests mobilized by criminal groups seeking closure of or rents from competing business projects and exploiting popular frustration over socioeconomic or environmental problems.

The state is a critical mediating factor in organized criminal violence. The strength of the state vis-à-vis criminal actors, the nature of political economies, and the degree and specific configuration of state collusion in crime combine to condition patterns of organized criminal violence. When the mutual accommodation between the state and criminal world becomes unsettled or breaks down as a result of intra-elite turnover, illicit profits and guarantees of impunity enjoyed by organized crime are endangered. In a bid to recover these benefits, capture a larger share of the criminal market, or replace their opponents, criminal groups can resort to violence, intimidation, and co-optation as leverage in negotiating the state-sponsored protection racket with the new political authorities, especially at local levels. As a result, violence is more likely to spike during regime transitions (or local elite turnovers) and elections, as relations between criminal groups and state officials or political candidates are reshuffled. Conversely, where state-sponsored institutions of protection exist and are not in flux, levels of organized criminal violence can be expected to be low.¹⁰

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has seen the merger of the shadow economy with political power. However, no political regime in Kyrgyzstan, with the exception of Bakiyev’s in its last years, has been able to consolidate its control over the illicit economy. Instead, state-sponsored protection rackets—informal relations between public offices and criminal interests characterized by selective enforcement of laws or preferential treatment of criminal interests in exchange for a share of their profits—have cropped up in Kyrgyzstan. Because Kyrgyz law enforcement institutions are weak and illicit markets are fragmented, organized crime groups have repeatedly engaged in violent competition with one another over assets and influence, including access to and leverage over public offices (such as positions in Zhogorku Kenesh) that offer immunity and guarantees of continuity in illicit activity. Political assassinations, murders of business competitors, and other types of intergroup violence have been the hallmark of organized violence in Kyrgyzstan during quiet periods. The breakdown of state-sponsored protection rackets, usually due to intra-elite competition, and the ensuing power vacuum have opened opportunities for criminal interests to exploit instability to acquire political and economic advantage during noisy periods.

Kyrgyzstan’s early political and economic liberalization in the 1990s was not accompanied by a concerted effort in state building.¹¹ With the breakdown of basic state services, people turned to informal client-patron relations, while the post-Soviet elites took advantage of lawlessness and institutional weakness to acquire profitable state assets. The first family—that is, the relatives of President Askar Akayev—was no exception to these practices. Access to Kyrgyzstan’s strategic sectors by the family members of the presidential administration introduced powerful economic incentives into the exercise of political authority and gave rise to the growing nepotism.¹² As their access to rents from profitable businesses and foreign aid diminished, local and national elites



An ethnic Uzbek woman and her husband inspect their burned house following interethnic violence in Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan, on June 17, 2010. (Photo by Zarip Toroiev/AP)

diversified their economic holdings, including through ties with the growing criminal underworld in Kyrgyzstan. Conversely, criminal interests began seeking positions in government and Parliament (which afforded them prosecutorial immunity).¹³ These changes further attenuated local and national elites' ties to and support for the Akayev regime, setting the stage for intra-elite turnover.

While there were authentic public protests spurred by dissatisfaction with corruption and the state of Kyrgyzstan's governance and economy, the toppling of Akayev was a consequence of the intra-elite revolt. The role of organized criminal interests in the 2005 events that became known as the "Tulip Revolution" is contested, but their influence was clearly felt during the quiet period of Bakiyev's rule. The first years of the Bakiyev administration were marked by cutthroat competition among multiple groups of elites, in which politicians, entrepreneurs, and criminal leaders fought over access to resources, property, and authority in the power vacuum left by the revolution. Assassinations reached an unprecedented level, with over a dozen contract killings of high-profile political and criminal leaders in 2005–06.¹⁴ This was the period of criminal actors' entrenchment in politics through electoral participation that brought many representatives of organized crime into the Kyrgyz Parliament, and that shaped public acceptance of criminal kingpins as influential participants of Kyrgyz politics.¹⁵

Experts concur that Japarov's political and electoral success during the January 2021 presidential election is due to the patronage of influential people, including a number of criminal kingpins.

Two criminal bosses—Bayaman Erkinbaev and Rysbek Akmatbaev—offer chilling examples of criminal actors' competition over assets and political influence accompanied by organized political violence. Erkinbaev was a leading business figure in the south of Kyrgyzstan with alleged links to organized crime. A parliamentary seat in Zhogorku Kenesh (gained in the 1995, 2000, and 2005 elections)

offered Erkinbaev immunity from criminal prosecution. Erkinbaev is named as a key figure sponsoring the March 2005 events that brought down President Askar Akayev. Assassinated in 2005, Erkinbaev likely fell victim to competing business-criminal interests, though an expert interviewed in Kyrgyzstan suggested an alternative explanation, one that links Erkinbaev's premature death to President Bakiyev's effort to root out organized crime and corruption and Erkinbaev's failure to secure patronage from the new cabinet.¹⁶ Another criminal boss, Ryspek Atkambaev, decided to enter politics following his brother's murder in a prison revolt. His publicly stated goal for getting into the Kyrgyz Parliament was to claim the chairmanship of the Committee on Security, Rule of Law, and Information previously held by his brother. As Johan Engval writes, this is an unsettling example of how an agency responsible for the rule of law becomes a target for individuals who view the rule of law as an obstacle to their activities.¹⁷

After a two-year period of competition over the redistribution of assets, authority, and state sponsorship of criminal interests, President Bakiyev managed to consolidate his rule. His family members took direct control of the country's economy and security structures as well as large segments of the criminal market, especially drug trafficking. During the second—quiet—half of Bakiyev's rule and especially in advance of the 2009 presidential elections, multiple journalists, politicians, and opposition figures were assassinated as organized criminal actors waged state violence in collaboration with the regime. Kyrgyzstan's opposition leaders impugned the regime for co-opting criminal elements so they could carry out the killings of regime critics.¹⁸ However, the government's reliance on extrajudicial tactics for eliminating opponents and on a repressive security apparatus for clamping down on public discontent did not prevent Bakiyev's fall. Bakiyev's power-grab strategy alienated many powerful elites and eventually backfired, leading to another intra-elite revolt in 2010.

Following Bakiyev's ouster in April 2010, massive political turbulence exposed a deep intra-elite rift that moved the country into a noisy period of public unrest. Bakiyev's allies in the southern Osh region were quickly dispossessed of the advantages they had enjoyed under the president. A large and heterogeneous group of Bakiyev supporters was reportedly involved in the drug trade, and the fall of their patron opened up competition for control over trafficking rents in the south that at times escalated into violence. Indeed, some of the interethnic clashes that occurred in June 2010 in the streets of Osh and Jalal-Abad were criminally motivated, as Kyrgyz criminal-political groups tried to assume predominance over ethnic Uzbek criminal groups for control of drug routes through this part of the country.¹⁹

Under Alazbek Atambayev and Jeenbekov, the next two presidents, the pattern continued: criminal groups, often with political ties, targeted their rivals and law enforcement officials. Experts interviewed in Kyrgyzstan, including a lawyer, political scientist, and former government official, cited multiple examples of criminal groups spurring public unrest, during which agitators,

often outsiders, resorted to acts of violence to halt a commercial project or a new investment opportunity. Shrouded in the slogans of social justice or environmental concerns, these “protests” have become powerful instruments of pressure on legitimate businesses and local authorities.

Just as in 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2015, powerful patronage networks were acting behind the scenes for competing political parties in the run-up to the October 4, 2020, parliamentary elections. An important difference in 2020 was the involvement of two new parties—the Birimdik (Unity) party founded in 2020 and the Menekim Kyrgyzstan (My Home Kyrgyzstan) party (spun off from the Respublika/Ata-Jurt union in 2015); both were loyal to the highly unpopular President Jeenbekov. Heavily funded by Raimbek Matraimov, a former customs boss at the center of a money laundering scandal, widespread vote buying and voter intimidation allowed the Birimdik and Menekim Kyrgyzstan parties to claim victory with 47 percent of the combined vote, which would have given them a supermajority of 107 out of 120 seats in the Parliament.²⁰

This outcome threatened the old political elites at the forefront of Kyrgyzstan’s politics since the country’s independence; it would have excluded them from Kyrgyz politics, as their parties failed to meet the 7 percent threshold for seats in the Parliament.²¹ What ensued amounted to another intra-elite revolt that quickly transformed into a noisy period of mass mobilization, protests, and organized violence. The opposition to President Jeenbekov split into competing coalitions that were unable to reach an agreement. As a consequence, the new “revolution” was hijacked by the old political guard, with some political elites cooperating with the criminal interests. The fastest and most determined of them turned out to be Sadyr Japarov. Members of the Menekim Kyrgyzstan party proposed fresh-from-prison Japarov as Kyrgyzstan’s prime minister, while some of the parliamentary deputies publicly objected to intense pressure to support Japarov’s candidacy applied to them by criminal elements.²² While Japarov has the biggest social media following of any Kyrgyz politician and has skillfully exploited public rancor against the inept and corrupt government, his social media presence and popularity among supporters can’t account for his meteoric rise.²³ Experts concur that Japarov’s political and electoral success during the January 2021 presidential election is due to the patronage of influential people, including a number of criminal kingpins seeking to advance their business-political interests.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a resource-rich country with significant fossil fuel reserves and deposits of rare minerals and metals. The country’s natural wealth, which has fueled Kazakhstan’s economic growth, has offered far greater opportunities for rent seeking than other sectors and types of criminal activity. Kazakhstan’s long-serving former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, managed to consolidate both formal and informal control over strategic sectors of the national economy by steering his family members into positions of authority and extending patronage to loyal political and financial elites.²⁴ Kazakhstan is plagued by corruption and periodic episodes of intra-elite rivalry (which Nazarbayev exploited to his advantage); but it has avoided the infiltration of criminal interests into top government positions at the national level.²⁵ At the local level, however, where extraction and transportation of fossil fuels are controlled, regional and local criminal interests have occasionally found themselves in confrontation with the state over the



Firefighters attend the scene of a fire after ethnic Kazakh-Dungan clashes in Masanchi, Kazakhstan, on February 8, 2020.
(Photo by Vladimir Voronin/AP)

management of lucrative energy resources. During the rare noisy periods of high mobilization, criminal interests have incited violence directed at the state; in the Mangystau region in 2011, for example, criminal interests provoked a deadly clash between security forces and striking workers in the city of Zhanaozen. During the quiet periods of low mobilization, criminal groups have targeted competing criminal interests, at times using violent means, and have exploited weakened government control over illicit economic activity. This type of organized violence—in which district- and city-level criminal groups, at times defined by ethnicity, engage in disputes over the management of illicit activities—constitutes the bulk of Kazakhstan’s criminal violence.

According to a journalist interviewed in Kazakhstan, analysts of organized crime in the country believe that Kazakh criminal interests lack the capacity to openly challenge the state. Kazakhstan’s extensive territory and the mix of sub-ethnic and regional identities within its population have hindered the emergence of powerful nationwide criminal enterprises.²⁶ The majority of criminal groups are local or regional and operate in the traditional markets of drug and human trafficking, gambling, entertainment, real estate, commercial smuggling, and export-import of strategic materials and agricultural products. Some of the groups specializing in transborder criminal activity have transnational ties, particularly with criminal networks in Russia. Like other

Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan was overwhelmed with organized criminal activity in the 1990s, and in response the government made a more concerted effort at uprooting criminal groups. Prosecutions of organized crime cases spiked in the early 2000s. However, as in other Central Asian republics, it was often low-level criminals who were apprehended, while many others survived by obtaining political support for their economic interests or protection from the local governments and law enforcement agents.²⁷ The ties between state officials, criminals, and businessmen have become less confrontational over time and are now more partner-like relationships that shroud organized crime. While there is a threat of politization of criminality in quiet periods, this threat has been diffused through the periodic crackdowns on the criminal pyramids challenging state interests at the local and national levels.²⁸

Another characteristic of organized crime in Kazakhstan is the ethnicization of some criminal groups operating at the local level. The Kazakh government has traditionally extolled inter-ethnic peace and stability in the country, which is home to over 100 ethnic groups. While Kazakhstan has avoided the large-scale ethnic conflict that plagues neighboring Kyrgyzstan, it has experienced strife between ethnic Kazakhs and minority ethnic groups. These violent confrontations have occurred during the quiet periods of low mobilization and include clashes between ethnic Kazakhs and several groups: Chechens in 2007, ethnic Armenians and ethnic Tajiks in 2015, and ethnic Dungans (also known as Hui) in 2020.²⁹ According to experts, the official model of civic national identity has given way to an “ethnocratic” model of governance, in which representatives of ethnic minorities face significant obstacles for career advancement on one side and are pressured by corrupt law enforcement and local authorities on the other. An expert in conflict resolution interviewed in Kazakhstan explained that in these circumstances, ethnic organized criminal groups have become a means of survival and protection for national minorities, especially in ethnic enclaves. Some experts contend that ethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan have been fostered by a complex mix of interethnic challenges taking place against a backdrop of socioeconomic hardships, weak law enforcement, and competition by criminal interests for control over illicit activities.

The following two examples of organized violence in Kazakhstan, one in a noisy and one in a quiet period, exemplify criminal interests’ confrontation with the state (events in Zhanaozen, 2011) and criminal competition at the local level (Dungan-Kazakh clashes, 2020) respectively.

Violence accompanied riots and a police crackdown in Zhanaozen, a city in the southwestern Mangystau region, in December 2011, a noisy period in Kazakhstan. In an effort to advance their interests and play a greater role in controlling Kazakhstan’s resource-based development and financial flows, regional criminal-political actors weaponized peaceful protests by striking oil workers. Cited by nearly all interviewees as a precedent of criminal organized violence, events in Zhanaozen have their roots in the long-standing labor problems in Kazakhstan’s oil industry. Strikes by oil workers began in 2009 over wage and other labor disputes between employees and subsidiaries of the national oil and gas company, KazMunaiGas, controlled by the Samruk-Kazyna national wealth fund. Government repression against the union’s representatives sparked peaceful protests that spread around the region in the summer and fall of 2011. On December 16, 2011, Kazakhstan’s Independence Day, a peaceful strike turned violent when a group of agitators in workers’ uniforms began destroying private and state property, prompting a violent response by

According to interviews in Kazakhstan, criminal interests have both fomented and exploited ethnic clashes in order to weaken competitors and regain control over the large shares of local illicit economy.

the police. At least sixteen unarmed protesters were killed and dozens injured as a result of police fire.³⁰

An independent investigation conducted by Kazakh journalist Gennadi Benditsky in 2013 and cited by several of those interviewed concluded that violent agitators, none of them locals, were supplied to Zhanaozen by Bergei Ryskaliyev, then akim of Atyrau region.³¹ Ryskaliyev

was later charged with the creation of a “criminal community” that embezzled budget funds, engaged in money laundering, and committed other offenses.³² Experts interviewed in Kazakhstan, including a journalist and a political scientist, believe that the criminal violence had several goals: damaging the property of KazMunaiGas, putting pressure on the management team of the state-owned companies, retaliating against the decision to appoint new leadership to an oil refinery in Atyrau (the company’s management had failed to bow to the governor’s wishes), and placing Ryskaliyev’s underlings in a position of authority in Zhanaozen. Ryskaliyev’s principal competitor for power was Timur Kulibayev, Nazarbayev’s son-in-law and then head of the Samruk-Kazyna national wealth fund.³³

A more recent outbreak of deadly organized violence took place during a quiet period of low mobilization in southern Kazakhstan, where Dungans—members of a local Muslim ethnic minority of Chinese origin—were attacked by Kazakh neighbors in February 2020. More than ten people were killed; nearly two hundred were injured; private property was destroyed; and thousands of Dungans fled to Kyrgyzstan after the conflict escalated. The government has denied any ethnic component to the conflict, characterizing it instead as a brawl between Dungans and local Kazakh policemen that occurred during a traffic incident and that social media blew out of proportion.³⁴ Many experts, however, state that interethnic tensions, spitefulness, and mistrust among ethnic groups residing in villages in Kazakhstan’s Zhambyl Province have spilled over into the criminal world, in which smuggling of Chinese consumer goods is controlled by ethnic Dungan and Kazakh criminal authorities under the patronage of local law enforcement. According to interviews in Kazakhstan, criminal interests have both fomented and exploited ethnic clashes in order to weaken competitors and regain control over the large shares of local illicit economy.

Experts cite several factors to support the contention that criminal groups participated in the Dungan-Kazakh conflict. The border region has been notorious for corruption. Representatives of all ethnicities—Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Dungan, and others—have been targets of extortion rackets, forced to pay bribes for crossing borders, transporting consumer goods, and running local businesses; but local experts assert that ethnic minorities have been charged at higher rates than Kazakhs.³⁵ Civil rights groups have accused local governments and police of corruption and “unlawful methods of resolving disputes” involving ethnic minorities.³⁶ One person interviewed maintained that the sheer scale of the ethnic riots—conflict engulfed five villages, included outsiders, and involved the use of firearms and Molotov cocktails—suggests the involvement of criminal elements. Eyewitnesses cited by experts reported that assailants rampaged through villages with impunity under the watch of local police, who were loath to intervene, although officials claim that local law enforcement was quickly overwhelmed and waited for backup by security forces.³⁷

Tajikistan

The case of Tajikistan demonstrates that intersections of organized crime and violence are fluid and can change as shifts occur in the state's involvement in illicit economic activity and levels of mobilization. Tajikistan experienced Central Asia's only large-scale conflict, a five-year civil war that opened opportunities for criminal actors to engage in violence (and for militia commanders to engage in criminal activity). In the "quiet" years following the civil war, organized criminal actors gained entry into public office, often collaborating with the regime while retaining considerable autonomy in their economic operations. As the government consolidated power and gained control over Tajikistan's illicit economies, opportunities constricted for organized criminal groups, leading them into confrontations with the state during noisy episodes of high mobilization.³⁸

During the country's civil war, organized criminal actors emerged and joined with militias, exploiting instability and open conflict to establish control over local economic assets and gain political influence. During this noisy period of mobilized militias amid state breakdown, criminal actors often seized opportunities to merge with local commanders (some of whom became organized criminal leaders themselves). Interviews in Tajikistan indicate that on the pro-government side, groups were formed under military leaders who were also criminal bosses, including Sangak Safarov (leader of the Popular Front, an amalgamation of pro-government militias), Rauf Saliev, Gafur Sedoy, and Yakub Salimov (among others). On the opposition side, military leaders and local rebels in Rasht and GBAO tended to combine religious ideologies, assertions of regional autonomy, and criminal activity. According to an interview in Tajikistan, field commanders financed themselves through racketeering, smuggling (primarily in GBAO), seizing resource deposits, and controlling retail outlets (mostly in the Rasht region); these activities continued into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Many field commanders also engaged in collective violence against civilians, committing war crimes and what several interviewees called "ethnic cleansing." As one interviewee summarized, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a mutually beneficial relationship emerged in which criminal groups "realized that this was their chance to take power into their own hands, or at least to tear off their piece," and "political agitators" persuaded these criminal groups to join them "because they needed military force."

While a 1997 power-sharing agreement ended the war and installed Emomali Rahmonov (now Rahmon) as president, the national government was weak. The Rahmon regime was forced to pursue a strategy of rule that ceded control over key institutions (including parts of the security apparatus) to former commanders and prominent regional politicians, allowing them to establish ties to organized criminal groups and the drug trade.³⁹ During this quiet phase, many of those involved in organized criminal activity became part of or openly collaborated with the Rahmon government, which in turn took little action against their growing control over illicit economic spheres. Experts interviewed in Tajikistan reported that at one point, ex-commanders constituted 40 percent of Parliament. They explained further that postwar criminal groups were locally based and hierarchical, organized around influential criminal or political leaders of a region who used family, ethnic, and parochial ties, as well as direct payments, to retain lower-level followers. In Garm and GBAO, interviewees said, groups positioned themselves as religious; some leaders built mosques and hospitals—or sponsored athletes—so they could rely on the support of the masses in the event of

a conflict. At the same time, many groups were connected to and invested in various legal businesses (both for commercial gain and to launder money from illicit enterprises).

By the 2000s, however, the Rahmon regime's consolidation of power had led to the gradual elimination of rival elites (mostly former civil war commanders), growing authoritarian control, and the extension of state power into the regions. The most prominent form of organized criminal violence in postwar Tajikistan, therefore, has been violent conflict in the eastern regions of the country arising from direct confrontations between local leaders and state authorities. Since criminal organizations and regional political influence are mutually reinforcing, organized crime forms a critical backdrop to these center-periphery conflicts. As one expert noted in an interview, "The authorities could not cope with local criminals . . . [because] most of the criminal leaders were an authority in politics." Criminals "deprive the authorities of large profits, because any criminal group will gradually gain influence, and finance then turns into an alternative force, and the authorities fear this more than criminal activity as such. They fear competitors more than criminals."

Beginning with the 2003 dismissal (and 2005 arrest) of Mahmadrusi Iskandarov (former head of the Tajikgaz energy company) and the 2006 dismissal of Mirzo Ziyoev (former minister of emergency situations), efforts to incrementally push out opposition elites spurred cycles of violence in Rasht Valley and GBAO.⁴⁰ Both Iskandarov and Ziyoev were believed to be involved in drug trafficking and other illicit economic activity. Two government operations in Rasht Valley in 2009 led to violent confrontations between regional leaders and the regime. In May 2009, a government operation in Tavildara District led to dozens of arrests and the deaths of Ziyoev and his nephew (also a prominent local leader). Some of those arrested were involved in a prison break later that year, and a military convoy sent in to recapture the escapees was ambushed and suffered heavy losses, leading to further arrests of local leaders (ex-commanders who were implicated in criminal activity in the region). By 2011, with government control established over the Rasht Valley, this cycle of violence largely ceased. According to interviews in Tajikistan, this was partly due to the limited role of illicit economic activity in the mountainous region. Most former commanders' economic activity in the region centered on local businesses and shops, and having sought to legalize their criminal activity, they had no need for government action to eliminate remnants of the opposition in Rasht.

Similar events in GBAO, however, led to recurring episodes of violence that have not subsided, and regional criminal and political networks have remained intertwined. During quiet periods, local leaders in the region have worked with the Rahmon regime, while at other times episodes of violent conflict have accompanied confrontation with the national government. An interviewee in Tajikistan reported that GBAO is being run by an informal network of local elites, known as the "Authorities" (Avtoritety), who have sought to supplant members of the Dushanbe-appointed local government and who are deeply involved in the drug trade and other illegal activity.⁴¹ Though the Rahmon regime tolerates criminal activity due to its limited reach into the region, it has also pointed to criminal activity among the local elites as a justification for the use of government force in GBAO. As one expert in Tajikistan explained, political leaders can be considered organized criminal groups in the sense that they "still violate the law to enrich [themselves]," but "at the same time, the Authorities themselves politicized them [criminal groups]" by engaging in conflict over control.



On September 17, 2010, posters on a bus window in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, show prison escapees. An ambush on a military convoy in the Rasht Valley the previous month left at least 26 soldiers dead. (AP Photo/Dalton Bennett)

According to one interview in Tajikistan, actors in several of the conflicts between the center and the regions used the struggle against the criminal activities of local leaders as the main pretext for taking what were largely political actions. In July 2012, Tajikistan's authorities accused Tolib Ayombekov, a former commander and a chief of a GBAO border unit, of murdering a Kyrgyzstan National Security regional official. A prominent local leader, Ayombekov had a history of criminal activity, including human trafficking, drug smuggling, and trading in contraband cigarettes. A large government raid followed, killing several dozen "militants" and capturing forty more. The raid had limited success, however. Tolib Ayombekov, supposedly under house arrest, lives freely in GBAO.⁴² In fact, the conflict may have strengthened the political and economic networks of the Authorities group in GBAO, as the group partnered with civil society organizations to form a monitoring group designed to defuse regional tensions.⁴³ An expert interviewed in Tajikistan also reported that a mismanaged 2014 police operation in GBAO's capital, Khorog, triggered public outcry and the burning of the local police station. A joint government commission of inquiry issued a critical report on the action. Over the course of 2018, tensions escalated after President Rahmon told local authorities to rein in criminal activity in Khorog and five or six criminal leaders in the region were arrested. Police were transferred to the region, seized

weapons, and carried out searches (for weapons and narcotics) among the general population. According to an interview in Tajikistan, the police wounding of two men in November 2018 led to widespread protests in Khorog, despite a ban on public gatherings.⁴⁴

These incidents are emblematic of the struggle between the government and the region's smuggling networks run by the former members of the opposition to the regime. Each of these regional conflicts had distinct triggers, but they often involved attempts by the central government to extend control over the eastern regions. According to an interview in Tajikistan, however, these conflicts also enabled regional and local elites (who were reportedly deeply involved in criminal activity) to further entrench themselves in local communities as well as bargain for some concessions from central authorities for themselves. The organized criminal networks that are behind many of these ongoing tensions lie at the heart of Tajikistan's recurring outbreaks of violence. Organized criminal violence has been central to Tajikistan's conflict-ridden history, manifesting itself during the civil war as well as amid the quiet years of post-conflict state building that absorbed illicit economies under the Rahmon regime.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Organized crime is a security threat in Central Asia that deserves closer scrutiny. While its pernicious influence on governance and the rule of law has long been recognized, the degree to which organized criminal actors have been integral to episodes of violence in the region is less broadly understood. Criminal groups have permeated everyday politics during quiet periods, at times collaborating with regimes waging state violence and at times coming into violent competition with one another over territory, resources, and illicit markets. They also have been intimately involved in noisy episodes of violence, exploiting opportunities during open conflict or coming into violent confrontation with the state. In each of these cases, organized crime's motives for violence vary; hence ameliorating the rising threat of criminal violence in Central Asia will require specific approaches to meet differing circumstances.

Criminal violence during noisy periods, such as ethnic violence or civil conflict, demands rapid intervention to prevent criminal interests from exploiting disorder. Developing a preemptive set of actions that (temporarily) remove criminal groups (and their well-known leaders) from outbreaks of violence would deprive mobilized forces of the fuel that inflames them. Rapid response plans should be developed through collaboration among Central Asian governments, relevant international agencies, and peacebuilding institutions. Likewise, foreign governments and international institutions should consider sanctions against those organized crime kingpins who promote violence during breakdowns of political order. Finally, post-conflict reconstruction initiatives should include a focus on combatants who have become organized crime bosses to prevent their integration into emerging governance structures.

Organized criminal violence in quiet phases, such as collusion in state violence or criminal violence between competitors, requires a broader, more durable set of political and administrative reforms. When criminal interests collude with regimes, such as during the Bakiyev era in Kyrgyzstan or the early Rahmon era in Tajikistan, initiatives should promote political pluralism,

target parliamentary immunity and opaque funding mechanisms in legislation, and prevent candidates with criminal histories from running for public office through new laws and required asset declarations. Additionally, the international community and foreign governments should support the effective functioning of civil society organizations and investigative journalism, which are vital for disclosing the role of organized criminal interests in political and economic sectors and for raising awareness of their connections to political elites. More specifically, international agencies and foreign governments should invest more resources to foster the capacity of journalists and civil society actors to collect data and report on political corruption and organized crime.

Judging from the political events of 2020–21 in Kyrgyzstan, organized crime may be becoming more sophisticated in its use of media and manipulation of public opinion to exploit and influence ethnic, regional, and religious identities. Tackling the influence of organized crime and lessening the risk of violence requires wider recognition of the fundamental threat of organized criminal interests to the political order of Central Asian republics.⁴⁵ This recognition is essential for the success of these and other recommendations, and for the ability of governments, international agencies, foreign donors, and civil society groups to assess the threat organized criminal violence poses to Central Asia and develop strategies to combat it.

Notes

All views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not represent an official position of the US government, Department of Defense, or National Defense University.

1. US Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, “Statement on Threats to the Kyrgyz Constitutional Order,” October 13, 2020, <https://kg.usembassy.gov/statement-on-threats-to-the-kyrgyz-constitutional-order/>. The political crisis of October 2020 paved the way for the early presidential election and a constitutional referendum on January 10, 2021, in Kyrgyzstan. While there was no organized violence on the day of the election, concerns about the influence of organized crime were raised throughout the campaign. One of the determinants of Sadyr Japarov’s electoral success was his ability to rally political and criminal interests around him and to raise 67 million soms (670,000 euros) in campaign contributions, more than seventeen other presidential candidates combined. International Election Observation Mission, Kyrgyz Republic—Early Presidential Election 10 January 2021, “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,” OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/4/475541.pdf.
2. Alexander Kupatadze, “Organized Crime before and after the Tulip Revolution: The Changing Dynamics of Upperworld-Underworld Networks,” *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 3–4 (2008): 279–99.
3. Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. Philip Williams, “Illicit Markets, Weak States and Violence: Iraq and Mexico,” *Crime, Law & Social Change* 52, no. 2 (2009): 324–25. Several interviewees specifically distinguished between organized criminal actors for whom violence is an end, and those for whom violence is secondary to other types of illicit activities, such as trafficking in drugs or arms, formation of corrupt schemes involving public officials, and others.
5. Erica Marat, “The State-Crime Nexus in Central Asia: State Weakness, Organized Crime and Corruption in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” Central Asia–Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, October 2006, www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2006_10_SRP_Marat_State-Crime-Central-Asia.pdf; Saltanat Berdikeeva, “Organized Crime in Central Asia,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (2009): 75–100; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “An Assessment of Transnational Organized Crime in Central Asia,” 2007, www.unodc.org/documents/organized-crime/Central_Asia_Crime_Assessment.pdf.
6. Johan Engval, “Flirting with State Failure: Power and Politics in Kyrgyzstan Since Independence,” Central Asia–Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, July 2011, www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2011_07_SRP_Engvall_Kyrgyzstan.pdf. See also Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Lawrence P. Markowitz, *Webs of Corruption: Trafficking and Terrorism in Central Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
7. Some of these are adapted from Nicholas Barnes, “Criminal Politics: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Organized Crime, Politics, and Violence,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 4 (2017): 967–87.
8. See Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010,” https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_490.pdf.
9. This period is referred to as the “time of troubles” in Driscoll’s study of post-conflict reconstruction in Georgia and Tajikistan. Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). According to interviews in Tajikistan, this low-intensity violence spilled over into broader waves of political violence in which well-known individuals (professors, doctors, journalists, political leaders) were targeted, sometimes by criminal actors with military experience who became contracted assassins.
10. Richard Snyder and Angelica Duran-Martinez, “Does Illegality Breed Violence? Drug Trafficking and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets,” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 52, no. 3 (2009), 254.
11. Engval, “Flirting with State Failure.”
12. On the massive rents flowing into Akayev’s (and later Bakiyev’s) coffers for American and Russian use of Manas Air Base, see Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
13. Kupatadze, “Organized Crime before and after the Tulip Revolution.”
14. Engval, “Flirting with State Failure.” Interviews in Kyrgyzstan with a lawyer, an NGO activist, and a political scientist confirm these killings.
15. Scott Radnitz, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).
16. On the assassination see also Nurshat Ababakirov, “Kyrgyz Parliamentarian Bayaman Erkinbaev Assassinated,” *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, October 5, 2005, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/10338-field-reports-caci-analyst-2005-10-5-art-10338.html>.

17. Engval, "Flirting with State Failure."
18. See, for example, Erica Marat, "Bakiyev Regime Suspected in Political Assassination," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 16, 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/bakiyev-regime-suspected-in-political-assassination/>.
19. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Opiate Flows through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment," May 2012, 75, www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf; Alexander Kupatadze, *Organized Crime, Political Transitions and State Formation in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
20. Gavin Helf, "In Kyrgyzstan, It's Easier to Start a Revolution Than to Finish It," United States Institute of Peace, October 8, 2020, www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/kyrgyzstan-its-easier-start-revolution-finish-it.
21. Fourteen opposition parties competed in the October 4, 2020, parliamentary elections but only two managed to break the 7 percent threshold for taking part in the distribution of the Zhogorku Kenesh seats.
22. Eurasianet, "Kyrgyzstan: Japarov's Nomination as PM Pauses, Crisis," October 14, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-japarovs-nomination-as-pm-pauses-crisis>.
23. Gulzat Baialieva and Joldon Kutmanaliev, "How Kyrgyz Social Media Backed an Imprisoned Politician's Meteoric Rise to Power," openDemocracy, October 15, 2020, www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-kyrgyz-social-media-backed-an-imprisoned-politicians-meteoric-rise-to-power/.
24. Rico Isaacs, "Elite Fragmentation and Pro-presidential Party Consolidation: Understanding Party System Development in Kazakhstan Since 2001," *Journal of East European and Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 111–36.
25. Nazarbayev's frequent reshuffling of cadres has been compared to "the movement of pawns on the chessboard." See Prague Open Media Research Institute, *The OMRI Annual Survey of Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: 1995: Building Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 272.
26. This is not to say that Kazakhstan's national government has been immune to co-optation by crime. Interviewees cited examples of various officials—former prime minister Serik Ahmetov, former Customs Control Committee chief Serik Baimaganbetov, former minister of health Zhaksylyk Doskaliyev, and others—jailed on charges of corruption. All of these ex-government officials appealed for presidential amnesty and were pardoned by Nazarbayev after serving a short term in prison. A media expert interviewed in Kazakhstan indicated that Nazarbayev resorted to frequent rotations of government representatives to prevent the rise of political opponents at national or regional levels.
27. Berdikieva, "Organized Crime in Central Asia"; Bakhyt Nurgaliyev, Kanat Lakbayev, and Alexey Boretsky, "Organized Crime in Kazakhstan: The Past, the Present, Development Tendencies and Social Consequences," *Journal of Applied Sciences* 14, no. 24 (2014): 3436–45.
28. One example of the conflict between state and criminal interests where the state prevailed is the case of Kuandyk Bishimbayev, the former minister of economy and a graduate of the famed Bolashak Programme, which allowed him to get an MBA from George Washington University in the United States. According to interviews with two experts in Kazakhstan, Bishimbayev got caught in the middle of an elaborate network involving criminal authorities with links to local oligarchs on one side and top managers of the state holding companies and parliamentarians on the other. He was charged with bribery and embezzlement along with twenty-two other defendants.
29. Rebecca Fradkin, "Perspectives: How Kazakhstan Is Jeopardizing Ethnic Cohesion," Eurasianet, February 21, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-how-kazakhstan-is-jeopardizing-ethnic-cohesion>.
30. International Crisis Group, "Kazakhstan: Waiting for Change," Asia Report no. 250, September 2013, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/kazakhstan-waiting-for-change.pdf>.
31. Bergei Ryskaliyev held the post of akim of Atyrau region between 2006 and 2012.
32. Bergei Ryskaliyev and his brother Amanzhan Ryskaliyev, a member of Kazakhstan's Parliament, fled the country in 2012. Both were tried in absentia in 2019. In 2020, Kazakhstan's appellate court made an unexpected and unprecedented ruling in favor of restoring some of the assets of the business-political-criminal magnates; this decision raised speculations about the ongoing influence of Ryskaliyev on national politics in Kazakhstan. See Paolo Sorbello, "Courts in Kazakhstan Return Assets to Criminal Group," *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/courts-in-kazakhstan-return-assets-to-criminal-group/>. Ryskaliyev even attempted to influence US politics, paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to a US congressman to argue before the House of Representatives that Ryskaliyev's case was politically motivated. "Addressing the Situation in Kazakhstan Concerning Bergei Ryskaliyev" (Hon. Duncan Hunter), *Congressional Record* 165, H2943, April 2, 2019, www.congress.gov/116/crec/2019/04/02/CREC-2019-04-02-pt1-PgE386.pdf.
33. Sorbello, "Courts in Kazakhstan Return Assets to Criminal Group."
34. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Kazakh President Replaces Regional Governor Following Deadly Ethnic Clashes," February 10, 2020, www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-president-orders-sacking-of-regional-officials-following-deadly-ethnic-clashes/30426603.html.

35. Tamila Varshalomidze, "Ethnic Violence Blows Hole in Kazakhstan's Narrative of Tolerance," *Al Jazeera*, February 10, 2020, www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/10/ethnic-violence-blows-hole-in-kazakhstans-narrative-of-tolerance.
36. Varshalomidze, "Ethnic Violence Blows Hole in Kazakhstan's Narrative of Tolerance."
37. Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan's Dungan Community Stunned by Spasm of Deadly Bloodletting," *Eurasianet*, February 10, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstans-dungan-community-stunned-by-spasm-of-deadly-bloodletting>.
38. On the government's consolidation of power and increasing control over illicit economies, see Letizia Paoli, Irina Rabkov, Victoria A. Greenfield, and Peter Reuter, "Tajikistan: The Rise of a Narco-State," *Journal of Drug Issues* 37, no.4 (2007): 951–79 ; Filippo De Danieli, "Beyond the Drug-Terror Nexus: Drug Trafficking and State-Crime Relations in Central Asia," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 25, no. 6 (2014): 1235–40.
39. John Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009); Lawrence P. Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States*.
40. Edward Lemon, "Mediating the Conflict in the Rasht Valley, Tajikistan," *Central Asian Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2014): 247–72; Eric Hamrin and Edward Lemon, "Rasht Revisited: Five Years after the Conflict," *Central Asia Policy Brief* 29, October 2015, www.centralasiaprogram.org/archives/8842.
41. See also International Crisis Group, "Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan," Briefing no. 87, March 14, 2018, www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/tajikistan/b87-rivals-authority-tajikistans-gorno-badakhshan.
42. *Eurasianet*, "Tajikistan: Accused Warlord Speaks Out on Gorno-Badakhshan Violence," October 24, 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-accused-warlord-speaks-out-on-gorno-badakhshan-violence>. According to one observer interviewed in Tajikistan, Ayombekov is a leader of a criminal group in GBAO. A former opposition field commander, he does not recognize the Rahmon regime. His group's primary goal is to completely separate GBAO from the center, making the region a place for free criminal activity, primarily drug trafficking. At the same time, there are indications that he enjoys the support of the local population, and he is referred to as one of the "Avtoritety" ("Authorities").
43. See International Crisis Group, "Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan."
44. See also Khovar, "Gatherings Are Prohibited: Reports on the Activities of the Interdepartmental Headquarters for Security in GBAO" [in Russian], October 20, 2018, <https://khovar.tj/rus/2018/10/shodki-zapreshheny-itogi-deyatelnosti-mezhvedomstvennogo-shtaba-po-obespecheniyu-bezopasnosti-po-gbao/>.
45. The new US strategy for Central Asia for 2019–25, for example, overlooks the effects of organized crime as a potential driver of political violence and civil conflict in the region. US Department of State, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity," February 2020, www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/.

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