

The Future of Kazakhstani-Russian Relations

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE CSTO

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 806

October 2022

Pauline Jones¹

University of Michigan

Regina Smyth²

Indiana University

President Vladimir Putin’s escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 has critical implications for the future of Russia’s relationship with Kazakhstan. One important indicator of the direction of this relationship concerns the Russian-led security organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Conflict among CSTO members and increasing signs of withdrawal from the organization have been largely analyzed through geo-politics focusing on Russia’s [reduced](#) military presence, changes in members’ national strategies, or a reflection of an elite power struggle. We add another layer to the analysis by examining how public opinion might impact the Kazakhstani leadership’s attitude toward the CSTO.

Specifically, we establish a baseline measure of popular support for the CSTO that captures the effects of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s decision to mobilize CSTO troops to contain mass protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Our findings suggest that popular support for the Russian-led CSTO is weak – only a slight majority of respondents (55 percent) support continued membership. They also reveal significant variation in that support among men, ethnic Russians, and residents of major cities. Using this baseline, subsequent work will capture the effects of continuing challenges to the alliance.

A Timely Survey

We report evidence from a survey list experiment piloted in Kazakhstan between September 1 and 14, 2022, eight months into Russia’s war on Ukraine.³ The timing is crucial because it sets a baseline measure of public opinion before three important events

¹ [Pauline Jones](#) is Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan and the Edie N. Goldenberg Endowed Director for the “Michigan in Washington Program.”

² [Regina Smyth](#) is Professor of Political Science at Indiana University.

³ This study is a part of a NSF-funded project (Award 2227795; Collaborative Research: RAPID: A Novel Framework & Toolkit to Measure Protest Legacies in Non-democratic States).

that both question and may define the future of the CSTO: 1) the outbreak of two conflicts among four CSTO members, 2) the collapse of Russian defenses in eastern Ukraine, and 3) Putin's decision to introduce mass conscription.

We argue that these factors will contribute to a decline in popular support for the CSTO and influence Kazakhstani foreign policy in two ways. First, they will facilitate Tokayev's reevaluation of the costs and benefits of membership in international organizations, like the CSTO, that rely on Russia. Second, they will reinforce Tokayev's commitment to a multi-vector foreign policy that has focused on China, the South Caucasus, and Turkey. The United States should take advantage of these developments by bolstering its economic ties with Kazakhstan and addressing the regional security concerns exacerbated by its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

International Implications of CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan

Putin [forged](#) the CSTO in 2002 to address the weaknesses of the Yeltsin-era Commonwealth of Independent States and the Collective Security Treaty (or Tashkent Agreement). The CSTO initially focused on defense policy but evolved after the color revolutions and Arab Spring to [support](#) regime stability in the face of internal and external threats. This redirection reflected Russia's growing [concern](#) about the contagion of political unrest and regional security. Despite its rhetoric, the CSTO was not active or effective in managing regional crises. By 2021, it seemed to be in decline, if not obsolete. This perception was many years in the making but was sealed when Armenian leaders [criticized](#) the CSTO's inaction in response to renewed aggression from Azerbaijani troops.

Tokayev's request for CSTO troop deployment to restore order in Almaty in January 2022 seemed to [rehabilitate](#) the CSTO. The protests, which [began](#) on January 2 in the city of Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan over a state-ordered increase in energy prices, quickly spread across the country, prompting violence in Almaty – one of the country's largest cities and former capital. By the evening of January 5, Tokayev [requested](#) CSTO assistance to contain the violence. On January 6, the CSTO [responded](#) to the request and deployed troops to Almaty. CSTO members sent about 2,500 troops, including 2,000 Russian soldiers. On January 11, in his speech to the parliament, Tokayev [claimed](#) that the CSTO mission was complete, and by January 19, the CSTO troops [withdrew](#).

Most analysts portrayed CSTO engagement in Kazakhstan's domestic politics as signaling a significant change in Kazakhstan's foreign policy as defined by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Some argued that CSTO intervention [reversed](#) the multi-vectorism that balanced relations with the United States, Russia, and China. Others focused on Russia's role as the sole [guarantor](#) of political stability in Central Asia. Conversely, Nargis Kassenova [claimed](#) that while Tokayev's reliance on CSTO troops was a victory for Russia, it was unlikely to return Kazakhstan to Russia's orbit. Consistent with this assessment, Tokayev has continued to balance the country's international relations,

[agreeing](#) to cooperative treaties with Moscow while demonstrating a marked [lack](#) of support for Russia's war against Ukraine. Kazakhstan also abstained in UN votes to condemn Russia's invasion, [rejected](#) Russia's request that Kazakhstan contribute troops, [refused](#) to help Russia evade sanctions, [blocked](#) Russian state television, and [paused](#) weapon sales to Russia.

Domestic Implications of CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan

We shift attention from the international implications of Tokayev's decision to invite CSTO troops to the potentially critical domestic effects—namely, its impact on public opinion toward CSTO membership. This shift in focus is appropriate for several reasons. First, there is evidence to suggest that popular support for CSTO intervention was tepid at best and [opposed](#) outright in some parts of the country. Second, our related work on state narratives in Kazakhstan suggests that the regime has become more sensitive to public opinion following the protest events in January 2022. For this reason, Tokayev has backed [away](#) from the anti-Maidan-like narrative he initially used to justify inviting CSTO troops into the country.

Third, and related, there seems to be very little popular support for Russia's war against Ukraine. For example, a Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) poll [indicated](#) that only 20 percent of Kazakhstanis are supportive and that the majority of these respondents are ethnic Russian. As the KSE report indicates, the greater support among ethnic Russians is likely related to a greater willingness to believe the Russian state narrative that its goal was to protect native Russians in the Donbas region. Most Kazakhstanis have rejected this narrative and instead fear that Kazakhstan could be the Kremlin's [next target](#). During the state-sanctioned anti-war demonstration in March 2022, Kazakhstanis held signs that read, "Yesterday Georgia, today Ukraine, tomorrow Kazakhstan?" The proximity to CSTO intervention was likely a chilling reminder of [similar claims](#) that Russian state officials have made about Kazakhstani statehood since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Finally, the Kazakhstani government aligned with public opinion concerning Russia's war against Ukraine. As aforementioned, it [allowed](#) an anti-war rally in Almaty in early March 2022. The rally, attended by 3,000-5,000 participants, [was](#) the biggest action in any of the CIS member countries to date. The government also engaged in symbolic action by banning Russian military symbols and [canceling](#) events to celebrate Victory Day in May.

For all these reasons, we expect public support for the CSTO to be weak in this baseline study. Weak support is important because it will affect how the Kazakhstani government manages the Russian-led organization while [creating](#) opportunities to enhance ties with China. Some indication of this is already apparent in Tokayev's [remarks](#) at the May CSTO summit in Moscow, in which he insisted that the organization's scope remain limited to its original intent of "strengthen[ing] peace and stability as well as international and regional security, and protect[ing] the territorial integrity and sovereignty of its

member states.” Moreover, we expect future work to show a decline in public support for the CSTO because of the war in Ukraine and its economic and political consequences for Kazakhstan.

Research Design and Results

Asking respondents directly about whether they support a potentially controversial government policy in an authoritarian country raises the concern that respondents will not (or cannot) reveal their true opinions. There is some reason to believe that the CSTO intervention, and President Tokayev’s characterization of the January 2022 protest events as terrorism, might create an incentive for respondents to falsify their preference and report that they support CSTO membership. Thus, we embedded a list experiment into a nationally representative pilot survey to elicit true assessments.

The list experiment is a deceptively simple tool to measure attitudes about politically sensitive topics that might be vulnerable to social pressure and could lead respondents to misrepresent their beliefs. This tool has been used to assess popular attitudes about sensitive topics, from racial attitudes in the United States to [support](#) for Putin and [the war](#) in Russia. The survey firm randomly assigned respondents to two groups: the control group and the treatment group. The control group is shown a list of four items related to a series of political events or outcomes. The treatment group receives a list of five items, which includes the potentially sensitive item. In both groups, respondents are not asked if they agree with each item but to say how many items they support.

In our experiment, the potentially sensitive attitude is support for CSTO membership.⁴ The questions read as follows:

I’m going to hand you a card that mentions various government policies, and I would like for you to tell me if you approve of those policies or not. Please, do not tell me which ones, only how many.

- *Encouraging foreign investment in Kazakhstan’s economy.*
- *Continuing Kazakhstan’s membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, which currently includes four other countries: Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.*
- *Promoting tourism to bring more attention to Kazakhstan’s rich cultural heritage*
- *Maintaining open borders to allow labor migrants to work freely in Kazakhstan.*
- *[TREATMENT ADDITION: Continuing Kazakhstan’s membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which currently includes five other countries: Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.]*

⁴ To address concerns about floor and ceiling effects that can arise when a respondent is against (or supports) all the factors included in the list, we included policies that were unlikely to be correlated with attitudes toward Russia or the CSTO. We have also reduced the variation for the baseline list by limiting the degree to which options have disproportionate effects on identifiable social groups.

Respondents in our control group were offered a card with the first four choices, and the treatment group received a card with the fifth option regarding CSTO membership. **Table 1** reports the preliminary results.

Table 1. Support for CSTO Membership

		Mean N of Responses		Support (percent)
		Control	Treatment	
Entire Sample		2.76 (mean)	3.32 (mean)	55.9
Gender	Male (45.0)	2.62	3.49	87.3
	Female (55.0)	2.87	3.17	30.0
Education	Secondary or Less (48.6)	2.83	3.49	65.8
	University (51.4)	2.69	3.07	37.9
Ethnicity	Kazakh (60.5)	2.83	3.20	42.3
	Russian (30.0)	2.90	3.54	64.1
Region	Almaty (21.8)	2.81	3.36	27.0
	Nur-Sultan (13.0)	2.71	3.0	29.2
	All Others (64.0)	2.81	3.36	63.6

Sample N = 400. Support percentages calculated from responses to list experiment. Subgroup numbers are the sample percentage and do not add up to 100 because of missing data or omitted categories.

The interpretation of the list experiment is straightforward. The differences between the number of responses reported in treatment (five responses) and the control group (four responses) provide an estimate of the mentions of the sensitive item, in our case, support for the CSTO. The mean number of items listed by the treatment group is 3.32, while the mean for the control group is 2.76. This finding implies that 55 percent of our respondents support continuing membership in the CSTO. As we clarify below, we interpret this number as weak support for Kazakhstani membership in the CSTO, confirming our expectations.

To unpack the structure of social attitudes, we replicated the analysis by looking at different groups within society. The small sample size of our pilot study renders this a preliminary interpretation, but it is nonetheless illuminating. We find that a university

education,⁵ self-reported ethnic identity,⁶ and residence in capital cities⁷ all significantly decrease support for CSTO members. There is also a striking gender difference in responses: men report significantly higher support for CSTO membership than women. These findings largely comport with what we might expect given theoretical expectations about citizens who are most vulnerable to state narratives and might access different information about the war and the Russian threat.

We are cautious about these numbers because although the pilot sample is nationally representative, group samples are small. Nonetheless, the findings provide an important baseline for future data collection. Our next step is to repeat the experiment using a full national sample, with an oversample in Almaty and Astana. This design allows us to test whether respondents who experienced CSTO deployment in Almaty in January 2022 have lower support for sustained membership. We expect to find that public support for the CSTO has declined further in response to Russia's ongoing war and its economic and political consequences for Kazakhstan.

U.S. Policy in Kazakhstan

Many speculated that the CSTO's intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 might boost the collective security organization and undermine Kazakhstan's long-standing multi-vector foreign policy. Neither appears to be the case. We investigated whether Tokayev's decision to invite CSTO troops to restore order in his country negatively affected popular support for continued membership in the CSTO—a salient proxy for public opinion toward maintaining close ties with Russia.

Our findings suggest that popular support for the Russian-led CSTO is weak—only a slight majority of respondents (55 percent) support continued membership. The lackluster support echoes previous findings that Kazakhstani [support](#) for ties with Russia varies by the type of linkages. For example, Marlene Laruelle and Dylan Royce [argue](#) that Kazakhstani citizens hold positive views of economic ties with Russia but are less positive regarding Russia's foreign policy and international politics. This support is moderated by a desire to pursue multilateral ties with the West and China. Importantly, admiration for Russia was rooted in attributes perceived as strengths that the war against Ukraine has shown to be weaknesses: the military, technology, space program, and economic development. At the same time, the war has [revealed](#) what an unreliable economic partner Russia is as economic sanctions increasingly affect Kazakhstan.

⁵ We ask a standard question about education: What is your level of education? And provide the following responses: 1) 7th grade or lower, 2) Secondary education (8-9th grade), 3) Full general secondary education, 4) Secondary specialized education (trade school), 5) Incomplete higher education, 6) Full higher education. We recode this variable highlighting the effect of higher education (responses 5 and 6).

⁶ The question used here is: What is your ethnicity? We report the responses for Kazakh and Russian respondents and do not report other groups because of the small sample sizes.

⁷ The interviewers reported the city of interview.

Our findings also suggest significant variation in support for continued membership in the CSTO. We expect this to shift dramatically as the war in Ukraine continues. While men reported significantly higher support for the CSTO than women, for example, we expect that this level of support will decline in response to Putin's introduction of mass conscription.

In sum, the CSTO may have lost its luster. Although it has been a strategic [tool](#) of international politics for Kazakhstan, and Afghan [security concerns](#) may create incentives for continued membership, it is a potential domestic liability. Changes in public opinion can reinforce Tokayev's support for multi-vectorism. Thus far, the greatest beneficiary is China, though Kazakhstan has also sought to strengthen ties with countries in the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe. As Russia becomes an increasingly polarizing and unreliable partner, Tokayev's need for alternative international partners will grow, providing the United States with an important opportunity. Success will require a commitment to bolster Kazakhstan's economic development and address the regional security concerns exacerbated by the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. One concrete way for the United States to signal its intentions to re-engage, while also serving its own interests, is to acknowledge the [potential](#) social, economic, and political costs of Russian wartime migration and to assist in managing these costs.