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**MAJLIS PODCAST: TRANSITION AND SUCCESSION IN KAZAKHSTAN**

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Kazakhstan's main television channels quickly cleared primetime broadcasting space on January 25 when it was suddenly announced that President Nursultan Nazarbaev would speak to the nation on a matter of great importance. Nazarbaev's surprise announcement turned out to be not so surprising -- amendments to the constitution.

He had already brought it up in an Independence Day speech in mid-December, and on January 11 he created a working group from representatives of parliament, the government, the Supreme Council, and other state organizations, headed by presidential chief of staff Adilbek Zhaksybekov, to work out how to transfer some presidential powers to the parliament and the government.

The changes themselves are not very significant but the fact there are changes is important. President Nazarbaev turns 77 on July 6 this year and his speech was about a transition and a reminder the post-Nazarbaev era might not be too much further in the future.

To look at the speech, the reaction of Kazakhstan's people, and what it might or might not portend for Kazakhstan's future, RFE/RL assembled a Majlis, a panel, to review what just happened and where these events might be leading the country.

Kazakhstan, journalist for the bne Intellinews.com website Naubet Bisenov participated. Our friend Dr. Luca Anceschi, lecturer in Central Asian studies at Glasgow University in Scotland, took part. This is a fascinating time in Kazakhstan, so I was happy to jump into the conversation also.

Schlager started by describing January 25. "Social media went quite hot in the afternoon because there was an announcement by the state-led media here in Kazakhstan that there will be this huge announcement by Nazarbaev in the evening," she recounted.

There was intense speculation about what might be coming. But Schlager said, "This speech was quite short and not so specific as we expected...he told [viewers] there are some changes to the constitution."

The specific proposed amendments were published the next day. Bisenov said, "What I can see is only some light, cosmetic changes to the relations between the government, the parliament, and president."

Bisenov noted that one change gives parliament the right to nominate candidates for key posts in the government, but "parliament is stuffed with representatives of the ruling party and other loyal parties...this is just a formality in my opinion."

But Anceschi said the significance of the proposed constitutional changes was that they are "not for the first-generation leader [but] rather for the second, so in that sense he [Nazarbaev] has acknowledged the fact that he's not going to be there forever."

Bisenov said there was another explanation for the speech, and the changes: "Kazakhstan has been experiencing a very serious crisis in the past two years and I think all this is part of distraction of public opinion to real problems."

Officially the amendments are now up for public discussion.

But as Schlager said, "People have economic problems after these devaluation moves during the last two years" and "I see that people are not really interested in politics."

The average citizen might not be closely following the changes in the domestic political scene, but the elite certainly are. And there have been many changes -- reshuffles, arrests -- starting back in September 2016, right after the president in neighboring Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, died at age 78, and continuing into January.

Anceschi suggested these changes could be "in order to create an establishment that is more conducive to preservation of power in a post-Nazarbaev era."

As far as the constitutional amendments, Anceschi said, "This is not going to lead to a democracy but we have to recognize that [even though] the actors on the scene may eventually change, the play will always be the same [and] it's a very authoritarian one."

It does not appear the amendments will be put to a national referendum; they will simply be adopted.

The panel discussed these and other aspects of the speech, the proposed changes to the constitution, and the possible significance for Kazakhstan's future. The Majlis also provided a chance to discuss the work on transition in Kazakhstan I was proud and pleased to co-author with Dr. Anceschi last September.

My thanks to members of RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, known locally as Azattyq, for our many conversations about this topic.

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Kaynak/Source: