

ANALYSIS OF THE PROTEST MOOD IN THE WESTERN REGION OF KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, Kazakhstan has been riddled with terrorist acts, whereby the country's western region has become the hotbed of this activity. And whereas the first terrorist acts involved the murder of representatives of the defense and security structures, in 2016, the terrorists in Aktobe (Western Kazakhstan) chose gun shops and a military base as their targets. This shows the striving of terrorist groups to get their hands on weapons of war, as well as the growing radical mood in their ranks. The terrorist acts in Aktobe this year occurred on the rising wave of protest among the people

of Kazakhstan against the government's initiative to sell and rent land to foreign citizens. This protest was also aggravated by the general drop in the population's standard of living due to the global economic crisis. It is also caused by the problems in Kazakhstan's economy, such as the cutback in industrial production and export, devaluation of the national currency, increase in inflation, decrease in purchasing power, etc.

This article analyzes why the protest population in Western Kazakhstan has moved toward the use of extreme forceful measures.

KEYWORDS: *terrorist acts, Western Kazakhstan, protest population, radicalization.*

Introduction

On 5 June, 2016, a series of terrorist acts took place in Aktobe. Several groups of terrorists attacked gun shops and a military base. According to the authorities, the terrorists were Salafists who received their instructions from abroad.

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- First, the terrorist acts in Aktobe in 2016 demonstrate the terrorists' serious intentions, since their main goal was to obtain weapons at the military base.
- Second, the terrorists do not have any or, at least, not enough weapons.
- Third, the terrorists are a closed group whose members are only sectarians.

This gives rise to the fourth conclusion that the network of special service agents inculcated into the ranks of the radicals is either non-existent or very weak. Fifth, the terrorist acts were committed during an abrupt rise in the protest mood among the Kazakhstan population. For example, in the spring of 2016, a squall of meetings took place in Kazakhstan calling for cancellation of the amendments to the Land Code relating to sale or lease of farm land to foreigners. Disturbances occurred in almost every region of the country, but they began and have been most active in the western region.

The 2016 terrorist act in Aktobe was not the first in Western Kazakhstan. In 2011 and 2012, several terrorist acts took place at once in the Aktobe and Atyrau provinces committed by adherents to radical religious movements. All of the terrorist acts were targeted against employees of the defense and security structures.

In this article, I will try to analyze why Western Kazakhstan in particular became the hotbed of the most radical protest moods among the population.

The Reasons for a Rise in the Protest Mood in Western Kazakhstan

Geographically, the western region consists of the Western Kazakhstan, Atyrau, Mangistau, and Aktobe provinces. In terms of economic specialization (oil and gas production), the Kyzylorda province should also be added to this region. So hereafter the term "western region" will cover all five of the above-mentioned provinces.

Voting at parliamentary elections is essentially the only way for the people of Kazakhstan to voice their disagreement with current government policy.

An analysis of the voting results at the parliamentary elections in the western provinces should be carried out from 2004. Not long before the elections, in 2001, several big businessmen and high-ranking republic figures established Kazakhstan's Democratic Choice (KDC) movement. However, the government's decisive and strict action relating to the movement's members led to a split in the opposition's ranks. Some of the organizers founded a moderate party, Ak Zhol, while the KDC assumed a radical position.¹

As per the voting results at the 2004 elections according to party lists, the opposition parties, Ak Zhol, the CPK, and KDC bloc, received a total of the following votes: 43.85% in the Kyzylorda province, 36.31% in the Mangistau province, 17.63% in the Western Kazakhstan province, 13.08% in the Aktobe province, and 11.43% in the Atyrau province. The share of the protest electorate was very high, and this is keeping in mind that some of the protest population ignored the elections (the turnout in the western provinces amounted to 42.7-57.69%), while the government launched the administrative resource.²

¹ See: L. Karmazina, "Institutionalization of the Party System in Kazakhstan and Russia: A Comparative Analysis," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (55), 2009, pp. 115-126.

² See: S. Zhushupov, "Kakoi parlament my poluchili, ili Razmyshlenia posle vyborov," available at [expert.ru], 3 July, 2016.

At the extraordinary parliamentary elections in 2007, the moderate opposition was represented by Ak Zhol and the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan (CPPK), which began currying up to the government in 2006. The real opposition was represented by the National Social-Democratic Party (NSDP). According to the voting results, 6.38% of the electorate voted for the NSDP in the Kyzylorda province, 3.66% in the Western Kazakhstan province, 2.62% in the Aktobe province, 1.22% in the Atyrau province, and 0.98% in the Mangistau province. Trends toward a decrease in votes for the NSDP were also seen at the parliamentary elections in 2012 and 2016, when the NSDP gathered less than 2% of the electorate's votes.

So it is not possible to trace the dynamics of the protest electorate based on the parliamentary elections in the western region due to the widespread use of the administrative resource, which makes it impossible to see the real picture of support for the opposition party. This is particularly shown by the little difference in electorate votes among the provinces. For example, beginning in 2007, the electorate in 15 out of 16 of the country's regions has been voting for the parties in essentially the same way, with a difference of ± 2 —3%, and this is keeping in mind the structural heterogeneity of the regions in terms of natural-geographic, resource, economic, and social characteristics.

As researcher M. Kaznacheev notes, "the 'voting electorate' is not citizens, but entirely manageable and controlled election commissions that 'conjure up' any result at the elections."³ That is, "power in Kazakhstan is de facto not electoral and essentially does not depend on the moods of the electorate."⁴

Total control of the party field on the part of the government, elimination of real oppositional political parties, prohibition on meetings unsanctioned by the authorities, and state control over essentially all media have made it impossible for the protest electorate and citizens who disagree with the government's policy to express a different point of view. This has generated increased radicalism in part of society. It primarily applies to the followers of radical religious trends, since the very appearance of such ideas has been caused by the problems and factors with which these people do not agree.

At the current stage, several interrelated factors are having an effect on the protest moods in the western region.

In Western Kazakhstan, essentially only oil and gas production has been developing. This is related to the fact that the region is rich in oil and gas. This has had an effect on the imbalance in the region's development. For example, in the provinces of Western Kazakhstan, the ratio of industry to agriculture in the GRP structure is as follows: 89:11 in the Aktobe province; 98:2 in the Atyrau province; 95:5 in the Western Kazakhstan province; 99:1 in the Mangistau province, and 94:6 in the Kyzylorda province.

The favorable global situation with respect to energy resource prices has led to an increase in revenue from the oil production industry—the driving force behind the increase in the Kazakhstan economy at the beginning of the 2000s. This in turn generated an increase in the income of the employees of this industry, and the region became the main destination for most of the internal and external migrants.

However, despite the fact that the western region has the highest level of average salary, it also has the highest level of poverty. Employees of the oil-producing companies receive high salaries, while other sectors, particularly agriculture, lag 3-4-fold behind.⁵

³ M. Kaznacheev, "Sotsialno-politicheskie posledstvia devalvatsii tenge," available at [www.zakon.kz], 3 July, 2016.

⁴ D. Satpaev, "Bolevye točki politicheskoi sistemy Kazakhstana," available at [www.risk.kz], 3 July, 2016.

⁵ See: *Tsennosti i idealny nezavisimogo Kazakhstana*, Collective monograph, Published by Z.K. Shaukenova, Institute of Philosophy, Political Science, and Religious Studies of KN MON RK, Almaty, 2015, p. 304

Sociologist G. Ileuova writes that “wealthy citizens predominate in Mangistau: they account for 2% throughout the country as a whole and 8% in the province in particular.”⁶ That is, there is a clear contrast between the rich and poor population, which might account for the feeling of social injustice among the public. Furthermore, the oil industry employs only a limited number of workers who have the relevant education. However, it is in Western Kazakhstan that the percentage of educated people is the lowest: 41.6% in the Mangistau province, 43.7% in the Kyzylorda province, 47.1% in the Atyrau province, and 56.5% on average throughout the republic.

It is worth noting that the unsuitability of most of the region’s territory for farming means that the region has to import essentially all of its foodstuffs, and their price is high. For example, the cost of living is the highest in Aktau, Astana, Almaty, and Atyrau.⁷

The high salaries in the oil-producing industry have begun attracting internal and external migrants who represent the titular nation. For example, the western region is distinguished by the fact that the percentage of the Kazakh ethnicity in these provinces comprises the absolute majority: 81.68% in the Aktobe province, 92.12% in the Atyrau province, 95.98% in the Kyzylorda province, and 90.26% in the Mangistau province. The only exception is the Western Kazakhstan province, where the percentage of the titular nation amounts to 75.16%.

In terms of numbers of internal migrants, the Mangistau province comes second to only Almaty and Astana, while it yields only to the Southern Kazakhstan province in the number of immigrants. In turn, most of the immigrants are unqualified workers in the form of Kazakh repatriates—oralman, 8.7% of whom have a higher education, 20.5% a secondary special education, 61% a general secondary education, while 9.8% have no education.⁸

After the events of 2011 in Zhanaozen (the Mangistau province), when disturbances broke out organized by redundant oil workers, the government accused the oralman for stirring up these acts. However, the oralman are not integrated into Kazakh society.⁹ Since most local Kazakhs have a negative attitude toward Kazakh repatriates, the oralman respond in kind and do not accept the norms and customs of Kazakhstan society. Therefore, we do not think the government’s accusations of the oralman are entirely justified, since the local Kazakhs would be unlikely to heed the oralman’s call to carry out illegal acts in Zhanaozen.

As our study shows, the increase in number of crimes is not directly related to the increase in immigrants; a stronger interdependence is seen between the rise in crime and the increase in internal migration.

In 2015, the crime level increased by 10,000 people compared with 2005: 12.8-fold in the Mangistau province, 9.3-fold in Astana, 5.3-fold in the Western Kazakhstan province, 4-fold in Almaty, and 2.8-fold in the Atyrau province. That is, the highest increase in crime was registered in the host provinces of internal and external migrants. However, in the charts above, we see that the crime level rose despite the decrease in number of immigrants.

So it is possible that the deterioration in the crime situation in the western region is related to internal migrants, primarily from the rural areas. This is the first generation of rural residents to arrive in the cities, and it has brought all the elements of the rural culture, rural community, and rural system of relationships to city life, which means that intense marginalization of the cities is underway.¹⁰

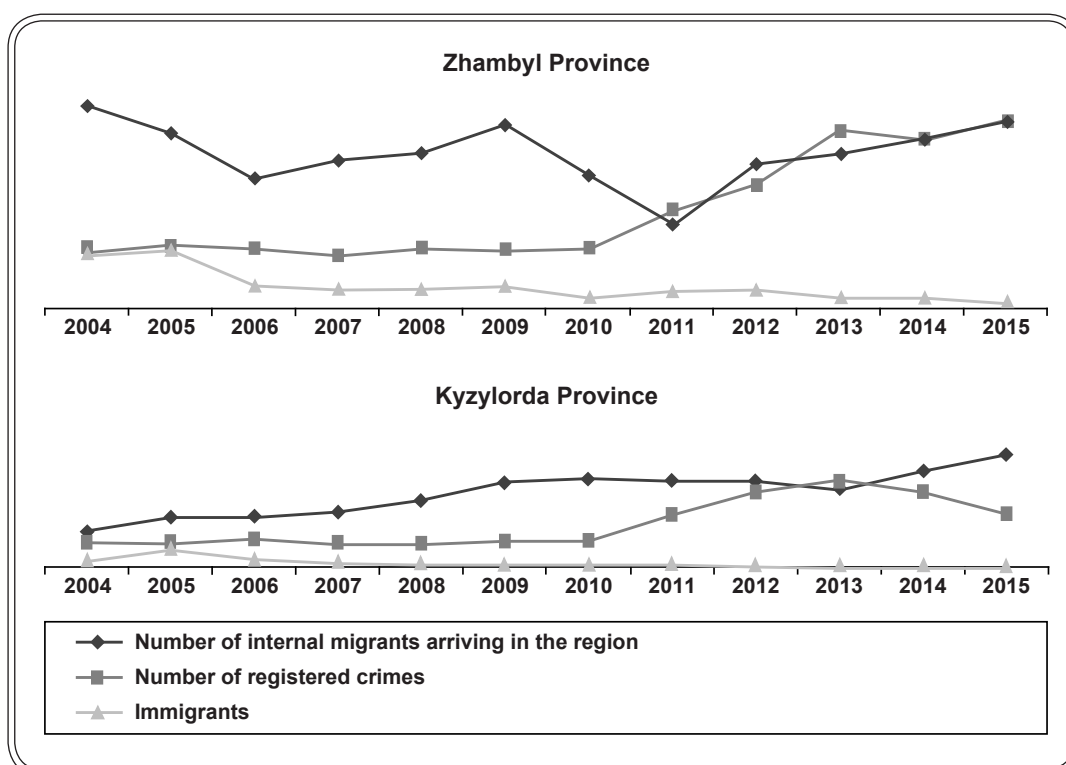
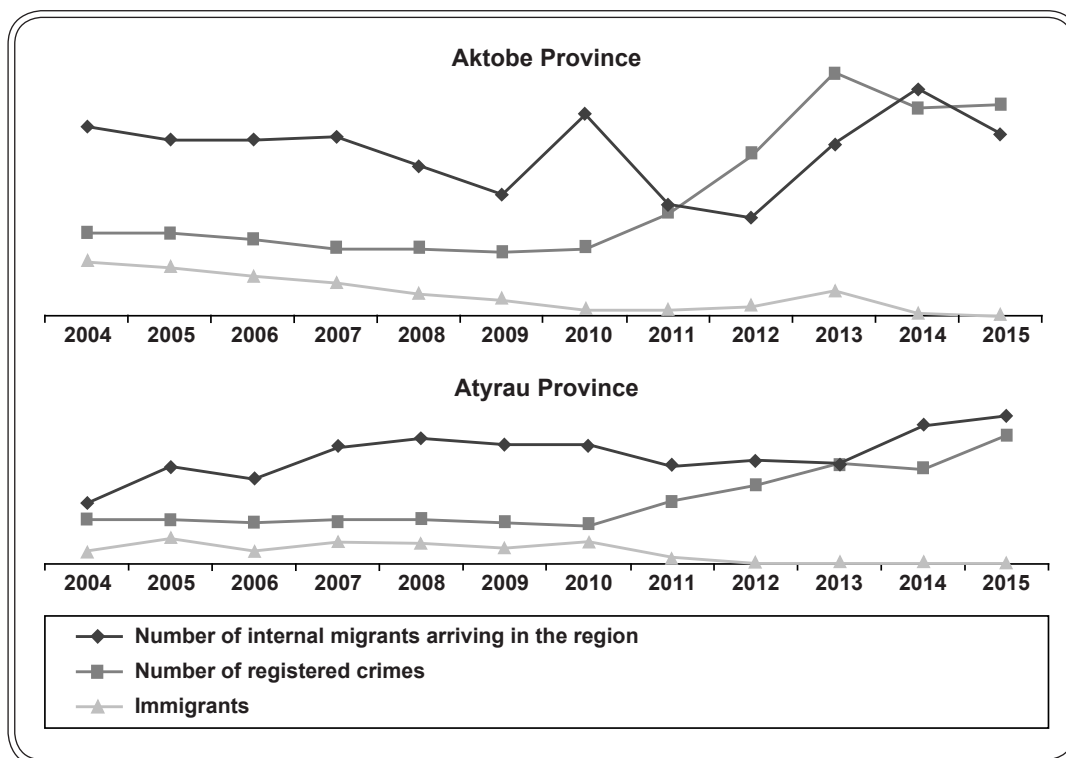
⁶ See: A. Ibraev, “Kazakhstan v razreze regionov. Interview with sociologist G. Ileuova,” available at [www.nomad.su], 3 July, 2016.

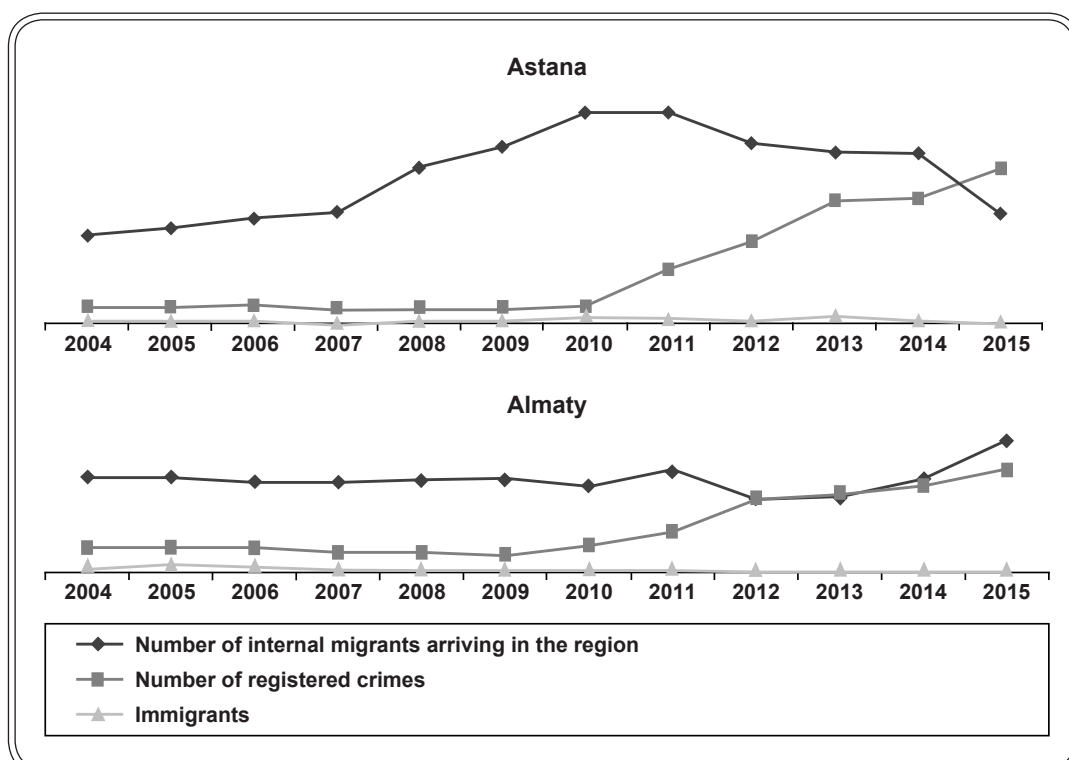
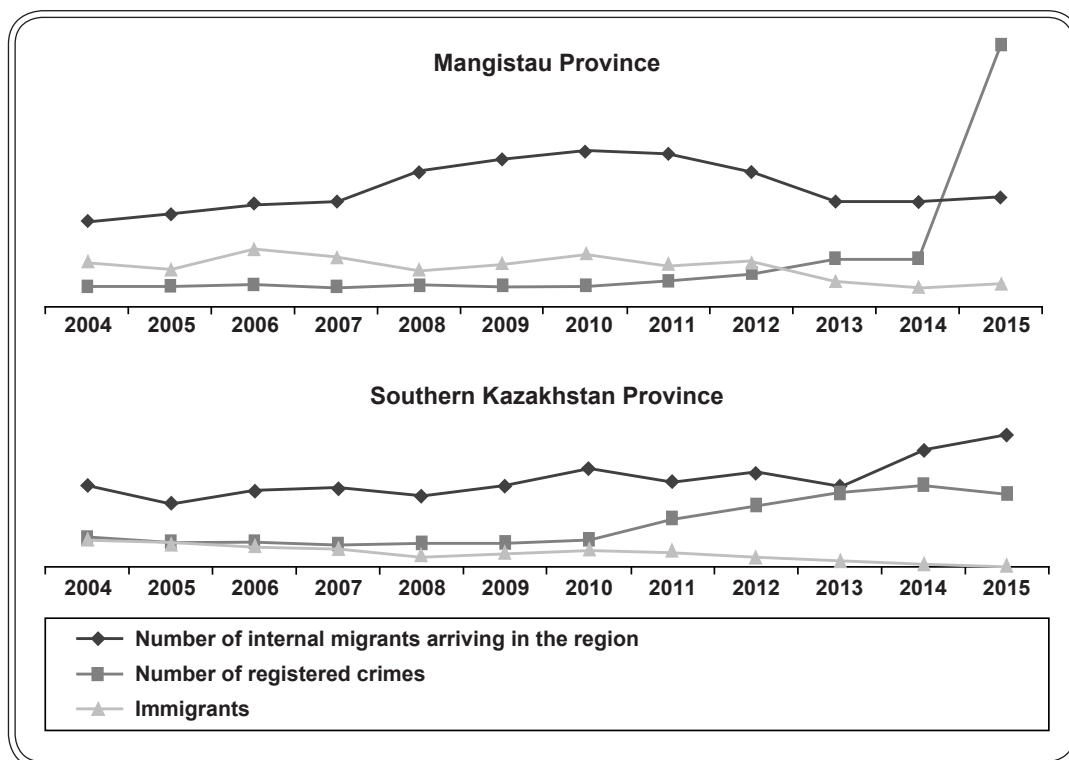
⁷ See: I. Kindop, “Gde v Kazakhstane zhit khorosho, ili reiting gorodov strany po stoimosti zhizni,” available at [dknews.kz], 3 July, 2016.

⁸ In 24 years, almost one million oralman have arrived in Kazakhstan [www.nur.kz], 3 July, 2016.

⁹ See: M. Shibutov, L. Shibutova, “Indeks sotsialnoi napriazhennosti v Kazakhstane v aprele,” available at [www.vlast.kz], 3 July, 2016.

¹⁰ See: V. Lim, “Gulmira Ileuova: Oppozitsia do sikh por ne mozhet priiti v sebja,” available at [www.nomad.su], 3 July, 2016.





Young people, 48.3% of whom live in the southern region, are the main driving force behind internal migration.¹¹ The main problem for the rural youth and people of working age is unemployment, the level of which reaches 60-70% in the rural regions.¹² However, after moving to the cities, rural residents encounter new problems: social, financial, economic, and psychological. Furthermore, the move of rural migrants to the cities also aggravates the situation for the urban residents, whose protest against the migrants and against the government increases due to the latter's inability to resolve the problems in the rural areas, which leads to the increase in migrant flows.

The population of the western provinces calls the lack of social structure the most important factor. For example, the number of general education schools per 10,000 people is one of the lowest in the Atyrau (3.4) and Mangistau (2.4) provinces. The Atyrau and Aktobe provinces are outsiders in terms of the number of children accommodated in preschool organizations. The Atyrau and Kyzylorda provinces have the lowest indices in terms of the number of physicians per 10,000 people.

The lack of social accommodation of rural migrants is aggravated by the financial problem. Most internal migrants spend more than half of their earnings on rent.¹³ Adaptation problems are also experienced by newcomers who have left their comfort zone and are trying to reconstruct it by forming tight-knit communities with others like them and settling in suburban areas.

On the one hand, the identity loss, change in social status, difficulty finding a job, and striving to feed their families experienced by rural migrants in the cities has led to an increase in crime, which has aggravated the crime situation in the cities. While on the other hand, false urbanization (with an increased demand for workforce) not only puts pressure on the urban social sphere, but is also one of the main vectors of pauperization of a large number of Kazakhstan citizens.¹⁴

The increase in poverty, marginalization, and low level of education create a breeding ground for radical religious ideas. For example, in recent years, representatives of Kazakhstan's titular nation have begun showing a greater interest in Islam. Whereas this religion used to be primarily widespread in rural areas, now Islamization is advancing in the large cities. In so doing, religiosity is growing most among young people. In the Kyzylorda province, 36% of young people call themselves believers and attend religious temples.¹⁵

The marginalized mass that is developing, particularly in the suburbs of large cities where rural migrants are living, represents a potentially explosive substance. As the amplitude of the economic crisis decreases in provisional terms, negative phenomena in the economy will consequently become more frequent and stronger. And if we add the opinion of several researchers that the time of high oil prices in particular and of oil in general has already passed, Kazakhstan's economy as a whole, which is strongly tied to the export of energy resources, can expect serious difficulties. And it will be the population of the oil-producing regions, where most of the internal migrants are concentrated, that will be the first to feel the consequences of these trends. In so doing, in 2013, the likelihood of protest campaigns arising was noted by 23.7% of the respondents in the Atyrau province and by 16.7% in the Mangistau province. The following reasons were given: wage arrears—34.3%, corruption—33.4%, and housing problems—28%.¹⁶

¹¹ See: D. Eshpanova, "Sotsialno-demograficheskie kharakteristiki molodezhi Kazakhstana," *Sotsialnaia aktivnost molodezhi Kazakhstana v sovremennykh sotsialno-politicheskikh realiakh*, IFPR KN MON RK, Almaty, 2014, p. 16.

¹² See: V. Lim, op. cit.

¹³ See: T. Mamyraiymov, "Protestny potentsial v Kazakhstane: riski i prognozy," available at [cabar.asia], 3 July, 2016.

¹⁴ See: Ibidem.

¹⁵ See: T. Umbetalieva, B. Rakisheva, P. Teshendorf, *Molodezh Tsentralnoi Azii. Kazakhstan*, Based on a sociological poll, Almaty, 2016, p. 115.

¹⁶ See: Z. Zhaukenova, op. cit.

Since then, more than four thousand employees have been made redundant at KazTransGaz (a subsidiary of KazMunaiGaz), while in 2017-2018, another 20% cutback is expected.¹⁷ In so doing, a high level of unemployment was seen in 2013 in the Kyzylorda (11.4%), Aktobe, Mangistau (9.7%), Atyrau (9.5%), and Western Kazakhstan (9.3%) provinces.¹⁸ That is, the western provinces are already experiencing a shrinking labor market and growing unemployment, and these trends will intensify in the next 2-3 years. This will cause a decrease in income in families where the salary of the head of a household who works in oil production is the main source of income, which will lead to even greater pauperization of the population in the western provinces.

In Kazakhstan, social differentiation has already reached a critical level—whereas 10 years ago, the ratio of minimum to maximum income of the decile groups of the population (the Gini coefficient) was 1:4, while today it is 1:10.¹⁹

On the whole, polarization of society is also causing stratification among young people—the elitization of certain types of higher education, the inability of most young people to gain access to elite jobs in the future, and the growing lack of understanding between the urban and rural youth. For example, 94% of young people in the Atyrau province feel that society is divided into classes.²⁰ All of this is already causing discontent in some young people, while it will lead in future to even greater social intolerance.

In so doing, “the horizontal mobility of young Kazakh people in search of a better job is often restricted by the government itself.”²¹ The state is trying to decrease migration from the village to the city using directive methods, such as fines for not living at one’s official place of residence, administrative prosecution of leasers who carry out fictitious registration of newcomers in their apartments, etc.

“The Kazakhstan authorities have promoted an increase the number of protesting people due to their incommensurable forceful measures. Villagers and internal migrants in the large cities essentially see the government and defense and security officials as the main source of their segregation and infringement on their social rights.”²²

Furthermore, the entire complicated economic situation and corruption is putting noticeable pressure on the financial situation not only of rural migrants, but also of all the country’s citizens. In turn, corruption is destroying the entire semblance of stability that has been created for many years in the state, which is undermining the authority of the current government.²³ For example, the Mangistau and Aktobe provinces rank the highest in terms of corruption among Kazakhstan’s provinces for 2016.²⁴

It should be said that the population often “points to high trust in the central power structures and relatively low trust in the local administrations and representative structures. This is due to the fact that the population blames the main social problems—unemployment, bureaucracy, inflation, corruption, etc.—on its immediate leadership.”²⁵

¹⁷ See: “Predstoiashchimi sokrashcheniiami v ‘KazMunaiGaz’ ozabotilis v transportnoi prokurature,” available at [ten-grinews.kz], 3 July, 2016.

¹⁸ See: S. Baltusheva, “Analiz razvitiia regionalnykh rynkov truda,” available at [articlekz.com], 3 July, 2016.

¹⁹ See: G. Ileuova, “Analiz ugroz natsionalnoi bezopasnosti RK na srednesrochnuiu perspektivu,” available at [www.counter-terror.kz], 3 July, 2016.

²⁰ See: T. Umbetalieva, B. Rakisheva, P. Teshendorf, op. cit.

²¹ See: T. Mamyraimov, op. cit.

²² See: Ibidem.

²³ See: D. Satpaev, op. cit.

²⁴ “Sotsiologicheskoe issledovanie ‘Delovoi klimat 2015’,” available at [palata.kz], 3 July, 2016.

²⁵ D. Ashimbaev, “Elektoralnye predpochtenia naselenia Kazakhstana v period izbiratelnykh kampaniy 2004-2005 gg.,” available at [www.nomad.su], 3 July, 2016.

However, in Kazakhstan, the central and local authorities are closely interrelated and the regions are extremely dependent on the central administration both in the economic and social, as well as in the political respect.²⁶

Remittances constitute the lowest percentage of regional income in the Atyrau and Mangistau provinces.²⁷ Consequently, these provinces are the least dependent on the republican budget and, on the whole, can provide for themselves, which means the western provinces are inclined toward greater independence.

The anticipated change in relations between the center and regions will objectively lead to comprehensive development of the fourth constant in the political system model—local self-administration.²⁸ In so doing, whereas the western provinces are interested in the development of local self-administration, the beneficiary regions of the south, the representatives of which also predominate in the upper echelons of power, oppose these trends. For example, based on an analysis of the origin of people's representatives alone according to the results of the elections to the Majilis in 2012, it can be seen that 14 out of the 107 deputies of the lower house come from the western provinces, while 15 come from the Almaty province alone.²⁹ This shows the low integration of the provinces of the western provinces in the existing political system.

In turn, alienation of the western provinces from the central power structures is leading to an increase in politicization among the youth. As social polls show, 79.4% of young people in the Atyrau, 45.7% in the Mangistau, and 36.4% in the Kyzylorda provinces strive to be engaged in politics.³⁰

However, the problem is that young people in Kazakhstan have difficulty realizing their political and civil potential since there are no real social lift mechanisms either in the government structures or in political parties.

So the population in the western region is encountering problems that are caused by the uncontrolled migration of rural residents, which is putting pressure on the local labor markets and social infrastructure. On the other hand, the internal migrants in the western provinces themselves are encountering a whole other set of problems, which is also arousing negative moods. Special mention should also be made of the growing corruption that is penetrating all spheres of vital activity and is one of the main problems in present-day Kazakhstan. It is also a factor aggravating society's protest against the government. By voting for the opposition parties, this group of the population is expressing its protest against the current situation. However, the affiliation of the opposition parties with the government and the absence of an alternative political force have led to society's lack of faith in its ability to change the situation through voting. As a result, protest groups prefer not to participate in the elections, while the most radical part of society has begun using extreme methods to fight the authorities.

Political scientist D. Satpaev relates radicalization of part of the population and the transfer to forceful methods to the fact that the authorities have actively weakened the internal opposition that tried to act in the legal field and could have drawn some of the protesters to its side.³¹

²⁶ See: S. Abdrakhmanov, "Sravnitelny analiz dokhodov i raskhodov mestnykh biudzhetrov za 2008-2014 gg.," available at [budget.kz], 3 July, 2016.

²⁷ See: Ibidem.

²⁸ See: M. Ashimbaev, "Faktorny analiz perspektiv politicheskogo tranzita v Kazakhstane," available at [bibliotekar.kz], 3 July, 2016.

²⁹ See: "Regiony Kazakhstana—lidery po kolichestvu deputatov v Mazhilise," available at [radiotochka.kz], 3 July, 2016.

³⁰ See: T. Umbetalieva, B. Rakisheva, P. Teshendorf, op. cit.

³¹ See: "Satpaev: vlastiam sledovalo zanimatsia ekstremistami, a ne mitinguiushchimi," available at [newskaz.ru], 3 July, 2016.

The main reason for the emergence of social apathy is the people's ever greater alienation from the government, the state, and political decision-making. The meetings on the land issue that encompassed the entire country in the spring of 2016 are noteworthy in this respect. According to several experts, the amendments to the RK Land Code only served to detonate the general discontent over the current economic situation. This particularly applies to the drop in industrial production due to the cutback in oil export, the main source of hard currency income, devaluation of the tenge and the ensuing inflation, decrease in purchasing power, etc.

Conclusion

The analysis carried out has shown that in Western Kazakhstan forceful struggle methods and the emergence of protest moods have developed due to the lingering inability to resolve the region's problems. This has been aggravated by uncontrolled and spontaneous migration to the western provinces due to the government's inattention to the problems.

In turn, the fact that the government has blocked essentially all channels for manifesting disagreement with its current policy has led to part of the population assuming a radical position. And whereas the protest groups used to demand resolution of primarily economic and social problems, which they contested at elections and meetings, now the radical groups have moved toward extreme struggle methods. And this is not only posing a threat to the state and government, but also to society. According to the convictions of radical religious groups, they reject contact with non-believers, among whom they include all those who do not share their ideology.

In turn, the economic crisis in Kazakhstan as a whole and in the oil-producing regions in particular threatens a further increase in advocates of radical ideas among the marginalized population of internal migrants. And in this respect, the consequences could be lamentable, keeping in mind that it will be this group that is the first to encounter the main brunt of the negative trends relating to a worsening of the situation.
