For several years, the Kazakhstani state has been actively expanding its participation in different spheres of public life and concentrating resources in the financial, political, and media sectors. Several so-called umbrella structures work together in a corporatist logic inside the state structure. This highly centralized political system is strongly personified and has effectively created stability for the elite. Well-established political institutions could play the role of collective successors and would guarantee a stable transition and modernize the country; however, they are still lacking, and this could weaken the Kazakhstani system in a period of crisis.

At the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transition of the newly independent states took several forms. In the case of the Baltic states, the transition was a progressive, qualitative evolution. In the case of Russia, it moved toward a kind of retrospective patriotism, a new philosophy or ideology that it used to mobilize the population around the old Soviet battles. The third form, the ones we see in many Central Asian countries, is regressive—the rollback to closed systems. The fourth form is a hybrid one. It’s a combination of different elements. I call it the “Frankenstein Syndrome”. Kazakhstan is an example of this fourth hybrid form. Why? Because if you take a look at Kazakhstan’s political and economic system, you will see that it is a patchwork of different models, including some foreign models that were embedded into our current status. For example, the Kazakhstan National Fund was created after the Norwegian model. The National Welfare fund, Samruk-Kazyna, was created after the Singaporean model. The previous retirement fund, which is...
no longer in effect, was created after the same system in Chile. And right now, Astana is thinking about creating an international fund just like in Dubai. Kazakhstan’s constitution is often compared to the French one. It is constructive to compile different models, but it sometimes sounds like these pieces do not thrive in Kazakhstan’s soil. It was more form than content that was borrowed. And this hybrid form, or assimilation, has more disadvantages than advantages for us. If we were to look at the political system of Kazakhstan, you could see several particular trends or features.

Kazakhstan’s Political System and its Features

A highly personified regime

First of all, it is a classic autocracy. In Russia, if you remember, in the mid-2000s, the Kremlin was calling the Russian government a sovereign democracy. In Kazakhstan, famous theater director Bolat Otabayev called our form of government an “autocratic democracy.” Wherever it is, it is without a doubt an autocracy, and in a very highly personified form. This is an advantage, as it has ensured stability inside the elite for a long time. But it is also a real weakness, as we have failed to create strong political institutions over the course of 20 years—-institutions that could participate in a stable transition of power and serve as collective successors. You know that pre-term presidential elections were held in Kazakhstan on April 26, 2015. Slightly over 97% of the population voted for Nursultan Nazarbayev.

But what is the difference between Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian countries? Our president has an additional legal status—that of being ‘the leader of the nation,’ a status he received in 2010. If N. Nazarbayev leaves his presidential position, he becomes a senator for life. He also has powerful levers of influence, for example, an attempt on his life would be equal to an act of terrorism. At the same time, the first president is immune to detention, arrest, or any responsibilities vis-a-vis the law for any action he committed during his presidential terms. It is a certain legal guarantee for the future. But practice demonstrates that even legislative guarantees are not enough to provide complete security—especially when the politician leaves the political stage completely. A famous Polish writer, Stanislaw Jerzy Lec, said something quite interesting: “Whenever you demolish a monument, do not demolish the platform. You might find it useful in the future.”

Why were these pre-term elections necessary? In my point of view, the reasons were not so much political as they were social. In 2014, representatives of the Kazakh business community started talking about the deterioration of the economic situation in the country, and that in 2015 it would be necessary to adopt some unpopular steps. Given the situation in Ukraine and the war of sanctions and countersanctions, the Russian currency plummeted. According to the National Bank of the Republic of Kazakhstan, over 18% of Kazakh businesses experienced some distress because of the ruble fall. When the Russian ruble is low, Kazakh products lose their competitiveness. At the same time, we experienced a serious hit due to the low oil prices. Another unpleasant surprise was found in the delay at the Kashagan field. The commercial production was rescheduled again, now delayed until 2018. Although, given the low oil prices, the cost-effectiveness of Kashagan is a big issue. Another unfavorable factor was the economic slowdown in China, which is one of our largest trade partners. China devalued the yuan, and that, here too, unfavorably affected the tenge. Another serious risk was the growth of unemployment.

It thus turns out that the rationale behind the pre-term elections was actually quite sound and justified. After them, the country’s situation started rapidly deteriorating, and in August, the national currency was allowed to float freely. For the first time, the President recognized publicly that he made this decision under the influence of the Kazakh business community. Essentially, he admitted to the very powerful lobbying capabilities of the National Entrepreneurship Chamber of Kazakhstan, overseen by Timur Kulibayev, the son-in-law of the president.
A Corporatist Logic

Another typical feature of our system is that it shows some signs of corporatism. This has to do with the fact that the government is actively broadening its role in a number of economic, financial, and media outlets. In the 2015 strategy, there was one line that I thought was interesting: that Kazakhstan should be reminiscent of a large corporation. According to our civil servants, the most important person in this corporation should be the functionary himself.

Stability based on the intra-elite balance

If you were to look at and trace all of Kazakhstan’s conflicts that have taken place since 2000 with the participation of the elite, you would see a strong economic component within all of them. Look for instance at the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan issue, in the early 2000s, when the elite threw the gauntlet at the president’s then first son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev. The original motivations for a conflict were economic, and then became political. When Aliyev fled the country a few years after, the reason for his escape was economic, but here too he tried to orchestrate a political opposition from abroad. All of that speaks to the fact that, in Kazakhstan right now, the critical actors are not political parties, institutions, nor civil society organizations, but rather economic actors. That's why there are some “shadow” rules that are not part of the constitution; in other words, in the case of the transfer of power, the constitution will not be able to play the role of a roadmap accepted by all actors, because what is really at stake is outside the constitution’s scope.

Oligarchical pluralism

The fourth feature of Kazakhstan's political regime is its oligarchic pluralism. It is a term coined by Russian political scientists, but it is quite apropos for Kazakhstan as well. If the public sphere of Kazakhstan is quiet and peaceful, like a cemetery, then inside of the elite there is turbulence and underwater movements. But there is a common feature to all our elite groups: they do not form on the basis of a particular ideology. It’s hard to say whether they are liberals, social democrats, or national-patriots. Elite groups are sorting themselves based on the names of their leaders, and their positioning inside of the regime itself. We can identify two distinct groups that can be considered “pillars” of stability within the elite: The presidential family and the representatives of the so-called "old guard".

A weak oppositional field

Last but not least, the Kazakhstani political system lacks any consolidated opposition. But the weakness of our legally recognized opposition parties could potentially lead to the radicalization of some protest moods among the population.

The Trojan Horse of the Supercentralized System

Kazakhstan today has arrived at a paradox. During the past twenty years, we have created a supercentralized system where everything focuses on one person, the country’s leader. Yet, at that same time, the executive vertical is deconstructed and largely inefficient. There is a distinct gap between the different levels of our bureaucracy. High-ranking officials often develop quite decent economic development programs, but the rest of the bureaucratic machine is not suitable for the implementation, assessment, and oversight of these reports. Kazakhstani officials failed to create the executive mechanisms that would implement their decisions. That’s why once every three years, we undergo an administrative reform.

Another interesting feature is the decrease in loyalty on the part of the bureaucratic machine vis-a-
vis the leadership. This feature is very rarely discussed, which I find interesting and strange, because any change of leadership touches upon both the middle and low management and has both advantages and disadvantages for them. Any change in power leads to instability, but it also means that the glass ceilings may be broken, and upward mobility is possible. Right now, a number of Kazakhstani functionaries cannot move forward in the administrative ladders nor can they place their children there. This creates social pressures on the administration because many positions are not given to real specialists, but to relatives, outside of any meritocratic system. We then see the development of what was called, in the Soviet Union, the ’kitchen syndrome’; at home, one is an oppositionary, reading newspapers from the opposition and criticizing the regime, at work one is a functionary displaying total loyalty.

Another feature of this system—this time not typical to Kazakhstan—is intra- and inter-agency competition, and weak synchronization of the government’s processes. The information loop is working very weakly within the Kazakh bureaucratic machine: the input information is warped somewhat and the outgoing results are different than what was expected. At every level of bottom-up information movement, the information is distorted with an adjustment towards the positive. As a result, the decision-making center operates on warped and incorrect data, and it therefore makes incorrect decisions. We even have a joke about the co-existence of these two dimensions, the governmental one and the societal one: an elderly person is sitting in front of his television watching Khabar, one of the official channels, and says to his wife, “I would really like to live in the country that is shown here on TV.” Here I clearly state that the ineffective workings of the information loop can threaten Kazakhstan’s national security laws. The National Security Law of Kazakhstan, Article 23, about information security, stipulates that the president, the parliament, and other leadership should not be isolated from correct information.

A Twilight Zone: Three Key Questions

Let’s now move to the speculations about what will happen in Kazakhstan during the transfer of power. There are three key issues:

First, are there any elements indicating that preparation for the transit of power has been already begun? I see at least four of them.

I see some signals in the opposition. For example, there has been a new purging of the oppositionary mass media. There isn’t a single strong player left there. In 2015, several official figures made statements about the fact that Facebook, VKontakte, Classmates, and other social media websites required stronger, additional government oversight. Two prominent sites have been blocked: Ratel.kz and zona.kz. In the past, whenever a site was blocked, it always had to do with specific denunciations or accusations. This time, however, there was not any explanation, and the sites themselves were not openly in the opposition. The last nail in the coffin of the opposition happened this year when the old Communist Party was prohibited. The problem of our country is not only that our leadership is so much personified, but also that our opposition is the same. When a particular prominent person from the opposition leaves the political stage, his party disappears with him. In Soviet times, we were facing what we were calling the syndrome of Swan Lake. Whenever any important political events were taking place in the Soviet Union, all one could see on television was Swan Lake, the ballet. Perhaps we are not watching Swan Lake per se in Kazakhstan today, but we may be watching presidential movies.

I also notice an active mobilization of resources under the roof of the previously mentioned umbrella structures. For example, the national welfare fund Samruk-Kazyna controls national companies. The national holding Baiterek controls the development institutions. The National Chamber of Entrepreneurs controls small, mid-size, and large businesses. The Unified Accumulation Pension Fund united all former retirements systems. Pro-presidential party Nur Otan controls all the party fields. The Civil Alliance united a number of civil society organizations that are living on govern-
ment grants and orders. Some say that even the Blogger Alliance, recently created online, is also a state-controlled umbrella organization launched to secure the Internet.

The launch of trial balloons regarding a possible transformation of the presidential system into a presidential-parliamentary one is another sign that the transition is underway. In 2013, our alliance of analytical organizations published a book, Twilight Zone. Traps of the Transition Era, exploring the different models for a post-Nazarbayev era. One of the options we proposed in this book was to start a discussion about creating a parliamentary/presidential structure. Kazakhstan indeed needs to strengthen its political institutions, in particular the parliament, in order to create real electoral strategies and parties. Both the President and the parliament speaker, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, announced that Kazakhstan will gradually transition to the presidential parliamentary system. But we don’t see the details yet. There is a risk that it will go no further than just words, as usual.

Last but not least, it is interesting to note the strengthening of some members of the presidential family and representatives of old guard, each of whom can play a role in the forthcoming transit of power. A case in point is Dariga Nazarbayeva’s nomination as Deputy Prime Minister. If one takes a closer look at key positions in the government, one will see that they are held by representatives of these two powerful groups: the presidential family and the old guard.

Our second main question is the following: when will the ‘zero hour’ come? This is the million dollar question. I thought it would come immediately after 2010, when all the legal pre-requisites for the president to quietly leave his post while remaining the ‘leader of the nation’ were secured. The more we are losing time, the more we risk moving toward a Turkmen scenario. But Kazakhstan is not Turkmenistan. Mr. Berdymuhamedov had it easy because he didn’t have so many figures on the chess board to deal with. In Kazakhstan, there are many more figures, rich, ambitious, and powerful.

The third question to ask ourselves is how the system operates without a supra-system player. Knowing who the successor is going to be is not so important. Whoever he is going to be, he will have to change the system, to transform it after his own image. The current system is custom-made for the current leader—both for his charisma and for his political weight. The new president will not be the ‘leader of the nation’ anymore, but one among many others who consider themselves as equal to the successor. The system will have to adapt to this new feature. One can identify three groups. The first one is the status quo group: all those, among elite and the bureaucracy, whose main goal is to preserve the current system and stability, even if the stability is beginning to be reminiscent of stagnation. The second group is that of reformers, i.e. members of elite who are proponents of an evolutionary development. A third group is that of radicals, i.e. members of the elite who would like to completely change the rules of the game and activate grassroots movements in support of their claims for change.

Kazakhstan’s society is not monolithic. It consists of a number of groups, each of which lives within its own space and uses its own sources of information. Some gain their information from the Internet, some watch Russian media, some read extremist sites; all of them have their own perception of Kazakhstan. In our book we tried to identify the two main “mainstreams” of the future: national-patriotism, and religious patriotism. In another one of our books, Molotov Cocktail, we address the issue of youth resentment and its relationship to religious ideology. These two ideological mainstreams could go in parallel, but at some point they could collide. Both may seem far away from established power, but both are in fact growing among younger representative of the elite, and they will participate in shaping the future of Kazakhstan.