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**Kazakhstan will hold a referendum on constitutional amendments and a package of reforms to transform the country from a super-presidential system to a “presidential system with a strong parliament” on June 5. How are the preparations of the referendum going on, including cooperation with the OSCE/ODIHR?**

For Kazakhstan, this is an extremely important event. The previous referendum dates back to 1995, when the Constitution was adopted under which we have lived for 27 years, although there were numerous amendments introduced through Parliament.

I think it is critical to understand why President Tokayev went ahead with the referendum. The reason is that the scope and the magnitude of the reforms are so huge that he decided it would be more appropriate to have the opinion of the entire population eligible to vote on those reforms. Amendments are being made into the thirty-three articles of the Constitution, which in total contains 98 articles. In other words, one third of all articles of the Constitution are going to be changed – if the people vote for them.

These are very far-reaching reforms that President Tokayev outlined in his state-of-the-nation address in mid-March. The fundamental goal is to change the political system of the country from a super-presidential one to a presidential one with a strong Parliament.

At the moment, there is an ongoing campaign in the country. All (six) registered political parties are campaigning for the referendum, supporting the changes because they view them as an important step to democratise the political system and society.

We have sent invitations to observe the referendum to numerous organisations including the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). There will also be observation missions from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Organisation of Turkic States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), among others.

Technically, we did not have to send invitations because typically the aforementioned organisations observe elections (both parliamentary and presidential), not referenda.

However, because of the importance of this referendum for our country, a decision was made to send the invitation to all these organisations.

We hope that the people react in a positive way. What we are observing in the general mood of the people, is that the reaction is very positive.

The biggest challenge is to convince people that this is a real chance for them to influence the fate of the country and that they need to go and express their will at the ballot box, because there is a risk that some people may support the referendum and the amendments, but decide not to cast their vote as they consider it a done deal. This is why we have a campaign to encourage citizens to go and vote!

Under the Kazakh law, we have a 50 percent turnout requirement in order for the referendum to be valid. And a 50 percent requirement for the vote in favour for the decision to pass.

**Importantly, the proposed reforms will readjust the powers of state institutions, creating a better balance between the different branches of power. Under the proposed reforms, what new powers will the legislative branch of government (the parliament) gain vis-a-vis the executive branch?**

First of all, there will be a Supreme Audit Chamber that will now report to the Majilis, the lower house of the Parliament. This Chamber will replace the State Accounting Committee, which reported to the President on how the budget is used and spent.

The Majilis will be a fully directly elected chamber, consisting of 98 members, with 70 percent of the members elected through party lists and 30 percent elected in single-vote constituencies, strengthening the link with the voters.

The lower house of the parliament will be given – if the people vote for the changes – the power to adopt the laws. In the past, the lower house reviewed the draft bills, and sent them to Senate, which is not directly elected. Now it will be the lower house – the directly elected chamber – which will be voting on whether to pass or not to pass the laws.

Furthermore, there is a quota for the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, a unique non-governmental organization, right now in the lower house, which will be moved to the Senate – and it will be reduced from nine to five members. The President's quota in the Senate will be also reduced from 15 to 10 members, and it will include

those five members that will be recommended by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan.

These are some of the items that will strengthen the parliament and demonstrate the devolution of power from the President.

The President will also need to relinquish his/her party position during the time of office, as will have to be done by the Chairperson and members of the Central Election Commission, and several other top officials.

The uniqueness of this referendum lies in the fact that this is a case where a President is putting forward a referendum, a set of amendments that limit his powers, instead of strengthening them, as is usually the case. This is done in order to strengthen the resilience of the political system through enhancing its competitiveness.

In this context, one of the proposed further changes is the reduction in the number of signatures required to register a new political party, from 20,000 to 5,000.

Constitutional changes will open the way for the introduction of twenty new laws, all to be reviewed and adopted before the end of the year. These are laws dealing with political parties; on elections; on the Prosecutor General's Office; and on the Human Rights Commissioners, which will become, for the first time, a constitutional position.

**What is your message to those sceptical voices that say that the reality will not match the ambitious rhetoric we are hearing from Kazakhstan's leadership?**

My message is that judge us by the practice. It is, of course, understandable why there would be scepticism, but we are genuine in our desire to build a New Kazakhstan, to build a fair Kazakhstan. A fair political and economic system. There is no reason why the President would have been proposing such deep reforms if he did not genuinely believe in them.

Certainly, the challenge will be in the implementation, many efforts will be required to push the entire state apparatus to live by the new laws and the vision of the president. But President Tokayev is absolutely committed to seeing those changes through, which is a reflection of the wishes of the Kazakh population to see more democracy, more freedom, and more economic opportunity in their country.

**Talking about relations with the EU, in the current geopolitical environment there is a renewed emphasis on the Middle Corridor (or Trans-Caspian route) to ensure the smooth flow of goods between Asia and Europe. How is Kazakhstan working with the EU to expand the potential and capacity of this corridor?**

For now, the work is being done with our neighbours, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, to strengthen this corridor and expand its potential.

Kazakhstan has two ports on the Caspian Sea – Aktau and Kuryk. The throughput capacity of these two ports is 27 million tons a year but this capacity has only been used to one fifth of its full potential.

For now, we need to agree with our neighbours on arrangements such as the schedule of trains, tariffs, provision of locomotives, rolling stock, etc.

With the EU, what I think is going to be important is to agree on the further chains of connection to destinations across Europe. The EU supports these efforts, this is the message we are constantly hearing and for which we are thankful. But I think it is important for the EU to support this in practical terms by also supporting the further expansion of infrastructure facilities along the route.

**Another important area of Kazakhstan-EU work is on climate change and the green economy. Both sides have ambitious targets to achieve carbon neutrality by the middle of this century. As a major exporter of raw materials and carbon-intensive goods to EU, how will Kazakhstan's strategy be adapted? What new opportunities can this bring (for example, in green hydrogen)?**

We are actively working with the EU to make sure our interests are also taken into account. Currently, 80 percent of Kazakhstan's oil is shipped to Europe. The plan for this year is to ship 60 million tons of oil. We see that the demand for oil is still there, and oil is one of the major sources of income for Kazakhstan.

Beyond oil, we would like to build a nuclear power station and the EU has identified nuclear as a green transition energy. For us, it is an important decision because it opens up cooperation opportunities with the EU, but we are also the world's largest

uranium producing and exporting country. We produce 22,000 tons of natural uranium annually, and export 99 percent of that.

We are very much mindful of numerous initiatives within the EU such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which is basically a tax.

Furthermore, another subject of conversation we are having with EU officials right now is that we would like to ensure that we do not fall victim of sanctions on Russia. We generally think sanctions are unfortunate and unwelcome instrument of global politics. We do not wish to be on the receiving end of secondary sanctions.

As more packages of sanctions – the sixth package is being discussed, which includes a ban on import of oil produced in Russia – we need to make sure this does not affect oil-producing Kazakhstan.