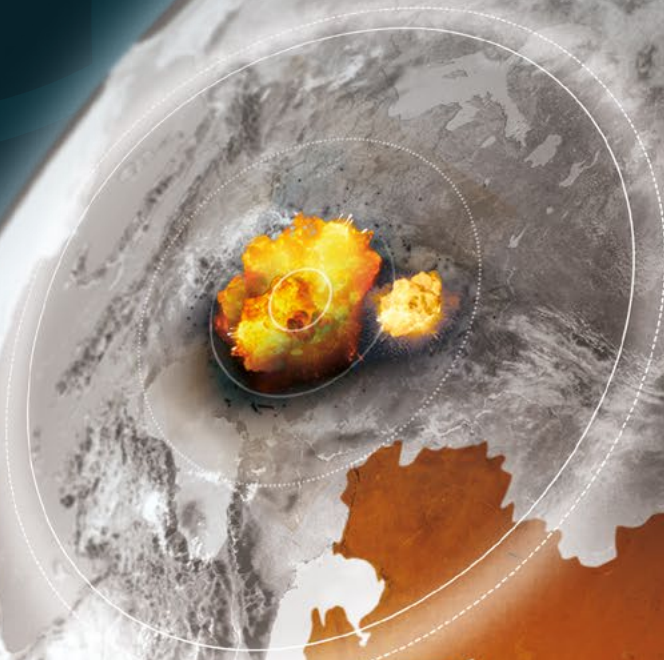


Central Asia

The impact of the war in Ukraine
on regional multi-vector policy



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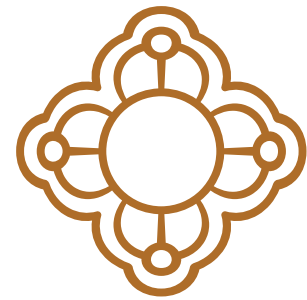
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Introduction

Dear Readers,

The mission of The Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs is to detect latent potential and identify non-obvious opportunities. Our work, therefore, focuses on topics that are often on the fringes of mainstream analyses, dictated by key geopolitical considerations. We pay attention to events and trends that may both directly and indirectly affect the political and strategic choices of Poland and our region.

Thus, we are proud to present our report “Central Asia. The impact of the war in Ukraine on regional multi-vector policy.” The genesis of this document lies in recognizing the urgent need to understand recent events and political trends in Central Asia in relation to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. **The conclusions in this report are the result of intensive expert discussions we held on September 25-26, 2023 and subsequent consultations.**

Knowing that a reliable description of key events, political developments, and regional dynamics requires an in-depth understanding of the Central Asian region, **we have rallied chief representatives of the analytical community - from countries in the region and Poland.** We would like to sincerely thank each expert for their involvement and contribution to the discussions and preparation of this publication.

We hope that this report will provide you with a valuable source of information and opinion on the countries of the region and will let you reflect on possible directions of cooperation, development and investment to the benefit of Central Asia and Poland.

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Is this already
a new setting?





Is this already a new setting?

The war in Ukraine has been going on for almost two years, and it is already clear that Russia's role and importance in the world is radically changing. It can also be seen in Central Asia, the largest post-Soviet region, traditionally viewing Moscow as a key partner and guarantor of security. The situation is not easy: on the one hand, at the peak of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Central Asian states, one after another, began to face internal political crises, and support from the Kremlin became an important factor of stability for the respective regimes. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that after the war in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin will not announce a "special military operation" aimed at rescuing citizens, for example, in northern Kazakhstan, where there are many ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking individuals while the Kremlin considers these lands to be "indigenously Russian."¹



Russian President **Vladimir Putin**

"However, sooner or later the countries of Central Asia will have to **decide how to live in the new realities and without looking at the Kremlin."**

So far, Central Asia has managed to strike a balance, maintaining relations with Moscow and, at the same time, intensifying relations with the West, China, Turkey, Iran and other countries. However, it is increasingly difficult to maintain such a state of affairs. Foreign partners, especially the United States and the European Union, are putting pressure on the region and calling

for an end to helping Russia evade sanctions imposed on the her². During the war in Ukraine the countries of Central Asia have become a "window to Europe" for Moscow. Through Tashkent, Bishkek, Astana, and Dushanbe, Russians now buy iPhones and iPads, while the Russian military receives dual-purpose goods used subsequently in the war in Ukraine³.



“Trade ‘grey areas’ have been so lucrative that simply banning them is not enough to stop them.⁴

However, the Central Asian countries will eventually have to learn to exist in the face of new realities without relying on the Kremlin. In order to achieve this, they must develop their armed forces, strengthen democratic institutions, ensure a smooth transition of power, combat corruption, guarantee unrestricted freedom of speech, diversify their economies, and reduce dependence on energy exports. Unfortunately, over the course of their thirty-two years of independence, the Central Asian states have not managed to accomplish all of these goals.

If the suppression of rights and freedom continues, the vulnerability of the region to both external and internal threats will only increase. The protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 and the crackdown on protests in Uzbekistan in July of the same year, which almost led to a coup, highlighted that authoritarianism is not a solution for domestic problems. If a crisis occurs, the personalist authoritarian regime⁵ will find itself in an

uncomfortable situation.

Focusing on the region does not mean that Central Asia should engage less with the world. On the contrary, expanding foreign relations, primarily with developed democratic Western countries, will be an important safeguard against internal upheavals. However, Western countries should also pay more attention and show greater interest in the region. Otherwise, a paradoxical situation will arise where Washington and Brussels will want to reduce dependence of post-Soviet countries from Moscow, but at the same time, not show much interest in the region.

Throughout the two years of war in Ukraine, the Western world’s interest in Central Asia was sporadic and primarily focused on preventing the export of dual-purpose goods to Russia via the countries of the region. Energy resources in the region attract attention as Europe sees them as an alternative to Russian supplies.⁶ However, the region’s situation is not analyzed, nor the reasons why Central Asian countries continue to cooperate with Moscow examined.



Astana, Kazakhstan

This report is one of the first attempts to analyze the changes occurring in Central Asia due to the war in Ukraine and its aftermath. The report devotes much attention to future relations between the countries of the region and Russia. Additionally, the report explores the extent to which the West can assist Central Asian countries in achieving independence from Russia.

This report will be of interest to political scientists, historians, economists, journalists and **all those who follow post-Soviet processes**, especially in Central Asia.

1. The specifics of the region





1. The specifics of the region

The region of Central Asia is comprised of five countries: **Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan**. It is located in the center of Eurasia, sharing borders with Afghanistan and Iran to the south, China to the east and west, and Russia to the north. Due to their lack of access to the sea, the countries of Central Asia face significant limitations on their economic and trade activities⁷. Therefore, diversification of routes and finding the shortest land routes leading to the sea are crucial tasks for the region's countries⁸.



Ethnography

After being a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries seceded in 1991, thus gaining independence and statehood. The administrative boundaries established between the countries of Central Asia and Kazakhstan - as the region was

called during the Soviet era - became the basis for state borders at the time of the declaration of independence. However, these borders were often arbitrary and did not align with the areas where large ethnic groups resided, thus resulting in conflicts for instance be-



Kazakh girl in folk costume

tween Kazakhs and Uzbeks in southern Kazakhstan, in northern Kazakhstan between Russians and Kazakhs, in southern Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between Kyrgyz and Tajiks, and in the oases of Amu-daria between Uzbeks and Turkmen⁹. Drawing borders that suit everyone is a challenging task, particularly since no country in the region is ethnically homogeneous.



Economy

Central Asia's socio-economic development is heavily reliant on agriculture and livestock farming. The region has a growing population of over 78 million people¹⁰, and urbanization and infrastructure development are putting a strain on the already limited water and natural resources¹¹. Central Asia is rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, uranium, gold, coal and various metals, which are primarily exported. The region also has mining, fuel and energy industries, metallurgy and chemicals. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are currently developing their mechanical engineering industry. Agriculture is a significant contributor to the economy of the region, with the main areas of irrigated land located in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. These countries export fruits, vegetables, cucurbit crops¹² and cotton.



Khorog, Tajikistan

Central Asia accounts for only 0.3% of the world's economy. With a share of the world's population amounting to about 1%, the region's economy in terms of GDP is 3 times too low¹³.



Tashkent, Uzbekistan



Government

All the states in Central Asia are governed under a presidential republic system where the head of state has full power. In 2010, Kyrgyzstan attempted to move towards a parliamentary form of government, however, in 2020 it established a presidential system¹⁴. The prevalence of unlimited presidential power coupled with underdeveloped parliamentarism, multiparty system, independent courts, civil society, free media, and secret elections lead to authoritarianism in these states. In almost all countries in the region, a change of power occurs very rarely, and the head of state remains in power until an old age¹⁵. This was the case with Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, who took office in early 1994, has been in power until today. In such super-presidential autocracies, the transfer of power is a significant political risk. Therefore, leaders prepare their successors in advance and make attempts to transfer power to them during their lifetime to avoid repeating the Uzbek scenario¹⁶. When Karimov died in 2016, it took the elites a long time to agree on a new presidential candidate, as he had left no successor. Eventually, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, previously serving as Uzbekistan's prime minister, became the new president. The first thing he did after assuming power was to get rid of the "Karimov group." In what became known as "the Uzbek case," the former president of Uzbekistan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, handed over power to his protégé Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2019. This move secured political immunity for Nazarbayev, his relatives, and his followers¹⁷. Similarly, in 2022, the president of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, handed over the presidential power to his son, Serdar¹⁸. Currently, a similar transition of power is being prepared in Tajikistan, where Rustam Emomali, the son of the current president, Emomali Rahmon¹⁹, is being groomed to take over as the next head of state.

The infrequent changes of power are attributed by the elites in the region to the lack of preparedness of Central Asian societies for a major shift towards democracy, and that too frequent changes of power allegedly prevent the president from fulfilling his election promises. This leads to instability that can be exploited by Islamist groups or other unfriendly entities both within and outside the region²⁰.

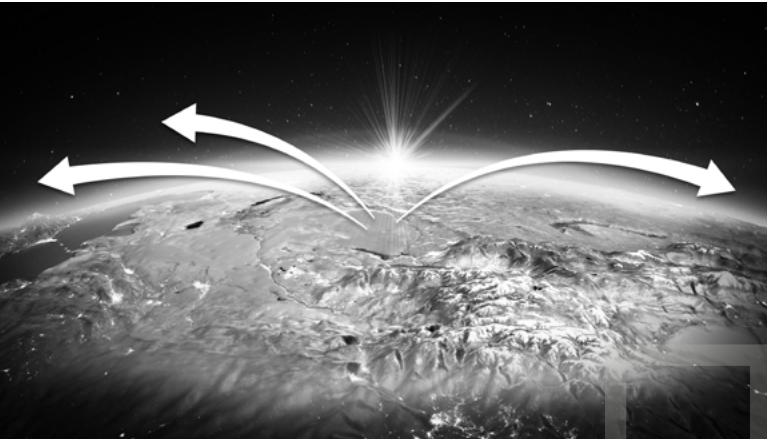


Statue of **Islam Karimov**, Uzbekistan

However, as the recent events in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan show, **all crises arise precisely because societies are tired of being ruled by ineffective leaders who fail to improve the living standards of citizens.**



Multi-vector policy



Central Asia's multi-vector policy

In terms of foreign policy, all Central Asian countries follow the principle of multi-vector policy²¹. This principle implies that relations with foreign partners are built based on their national interests. The geopolitical rivalry between world powers, whether it is between the United States and Russia, the United States and China, or the Arab world and Israel, Turkey, and Iran, does not formally affect the foreign policy choices of the Central Asian countries.

“In practice, the principle of **multi-vector policy** implies that priority is given to those countries, with which, in a given period, **cooperation is most profitable.**”

In practice, the principle of multi-vector policy implies that priority is given to those countries, with which, in a given period, cooperation is most profitable. In Central Asia, if a new “priority” partner offers better terms

than the previous “priority” partner, and requests to limit contacts with the latter, the Central Asian countries comply with the request. For instance, after 9/11, the United States became stronger in Central Asia, while Russia’s role weakened rapidly²². The West cooperated with the region by transporting goods through it to Afghanistan, where the military campaign against the Taliban and other terrorists was taking place. During that time, the Central Asian states were earning significant revenues from the transit of goods²³.

In addition, bases established by NATO or the US military have appeared in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. As a result, the political processes in these countries have come under particular scrutiny of the West. The regimes have been criticized for their human rights violations, and in 2005, sanctions were imposed on the authorities of Uzbekistan for forcibly suppressing anti-government protests in Andijan²⁴. President Karimov, who initially supported the Americans during their campaign in Afghanistan, was severely affected by this criticism and consequently switched sides to align with Russia. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, managed to balance between Moscow and Washington for a longer period of time. However, it was only under pressure from Moscow in 2010 that Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan dismantled Western military bases²⁵.

Turkmenistan, which declared neutrality in 1995, conducts the most closed foreign policy. While Moldova also declared neutrality, its definition of neutrality means non-participation in armed conflicts and not getting involved in military blocs. However, Turkmenistan’s version of neutrality means complete isolation from the outside world, with the country being entirely closed off.



Sphere of influence

It should be noted that Central Asia is not a major priority for world powers. In the West, the region is seen as an area dominated by Russia and China, which discourages active collaboration with it.

Moscow has a long history of treating Central Asia with contempt and derogatory language, referring to the region as its “southern underbelly.” Even though the Central Asian states have now become Moscow’s gate-



Kazakhstan President **Kasym-Jomart Tokayev** and Chinese leader **Xi Jinping**

way to the Western world, the contemptuous attitude persists. The Kremlin frequently accuses these states of violating the rights of Russian-speaking minorities, and when local leaders act against the Kremlin's interests, it often retaliates by conducting raids on economic migrants from Central Asian states who reside in Russian cities²⁶. Additionally, it has been known to block Kazakh oil shipments to Europe via Russian territory²⁷.

China is demonstrating in every possible way that Central Asia is an important strategic partner. However, all relations between the parties primarily focus on exporting energy resources²⁸.

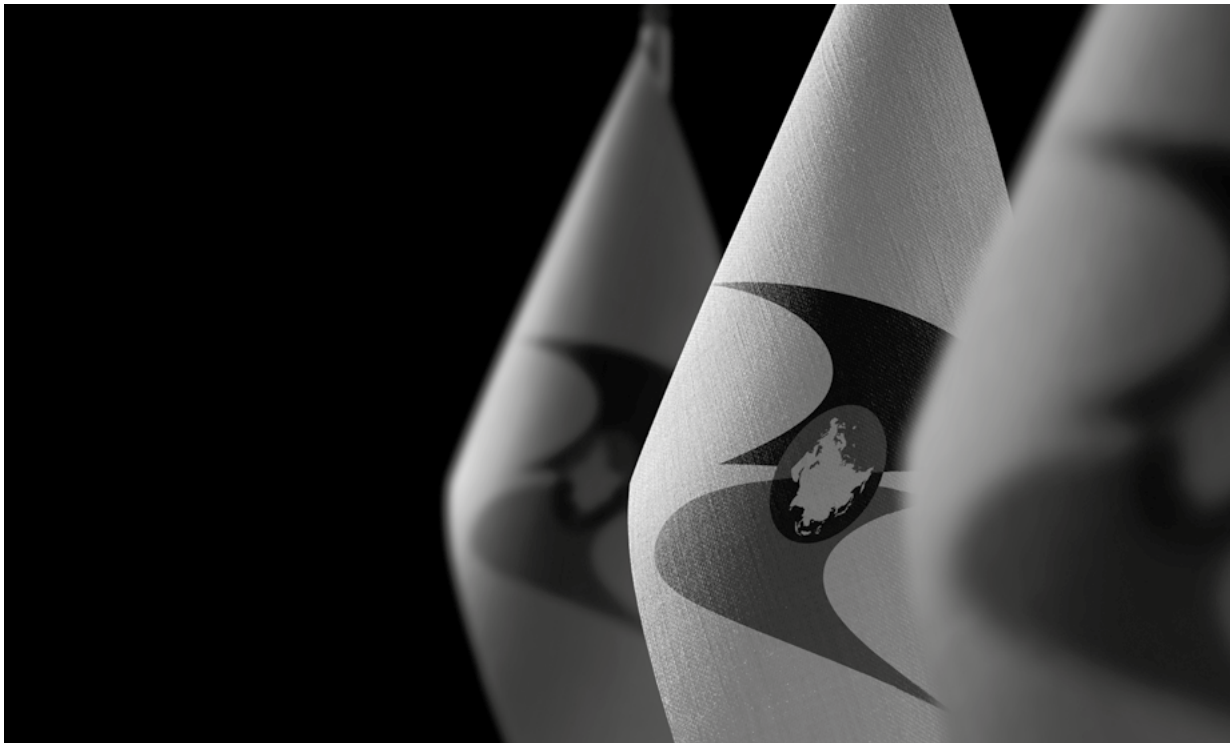
Traditionally, China was responsible for the economic development of the region, while Moscow focuses on security issues. However, Beijing has recently broken Moscow's monopoly and is meddling in military-strate-

gic issues in the region. For instance, two Chinese military bases have been built in Tajikistan to defend the republic against threats from Afghanistan²⁹. Although Russia disapproves of this move, it cannot object due to its own limited resources.



Integration

The Central Asian countries have complex relations among themselves. This is because of unresolved regional conflicts, border problems, resource deficiencies, as well as the fact that they have grown and developed differently over the past 32 years of independence³⁰. Kazakhstan, being a significant energy power in the region, has attracted more foreign partners, which has



Eurasian Economic Union

helped it establish friendly relations with most of them. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, was considered the most closed and authoritarian state in Central Asia until President Mirziyoyev assumed power. It had distanced itself from all foreign partners, including its neighbors in the region.

Kyrgyzstan was known as an “island of democracy” due to its government’s open policies and active efforts to build relationships with the Western world. On the other hand, Tajikistan, which experienced a civil war in the early 1990s, was the poorest country and was more

Despite this, they attempted regional integration and formed the Organization for Central Asian Cooperation (CAC) in 2002, but it dissolved in 2005. Later, the more promising concept of a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) emerged, though not all of the region’s countries became members of this pro-Russian association. As a result, discussions about Central Asian integration subsided.

The war in Ukraine, paradoxically, provided the impetus for the unification of Central Asia. In 2018, the heads of state of Central Asia proposed consultative

meetings for cooperation, but they were not very actively developed at first. However, these meetings unexpectedly became the main negotiating platform for the authorities of these countries to find common solutions³¹. In 2022 such

a meeting was held in Kyrgyzstan, and in 2023 in Tajikistan. One of the important results was progress in resolving border conflicts, especially the ones between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan³². In 2023, the main concern was the threat from Afghanistan, especially the Taliban’s construction of the Koshtepa Canal, which could

“The war in Ukraine, paradoxically, provided the **impetus for the unification** of Central Asia.”

aligned with Russia.

All countries in the region had recently gained their independence from the Soviet Union and were very protective of their sovereignty. They were not yet willing to transfer any of their sovereignty to a supranational level, which was necessary for regional cooperation.



deprive Central Asia of drinking water³³.

At this point, it is too early to say definitively whether Central Asia is prepared for regional integration. In previous years, mutual distrust has intensified, and Central Asian countries have little to offer each other, as they all share the same natural resources, industrial potential, and similar models of government. However,

the very fact that they are reconsidering their place in the international relations system and recognize that a coordinated regional approach to problem-solving strengthens their positions and enables them to pursue a more independent policy, regardless of Russia or China, is a positive development.



Khursand Khurramov

Central Asia is currently facing a period of geopolitical turmoil. However, the region has never formed a regional identity due to internal problems such as varying levels of economic development and similar interests that often lead to rivalry instead of cooperation. Additionally, external factors such as Moscow's lack of interest in the subjectivity of the region and the entry of China into the region, which has led to an increase in its influence, have also played a role. Now, under the pressure of various forces, the heads of state are trying to coordinate their positions and establish the institutionalization of integration. However, it seems that achieving real results still requires more time.

Nargiza Muratalieva

Authoritarianism is on the rise in Central Asia, leading to increased repression against those who hold different opinions and the opposition. This is hampering the development of democracy and contributes to the proliferation of autocrats and dictators across the world. In addition, the region is facing economic challenges including rising unemployment and inflation, which are forcing many residents to seek work abroad. Russia remains the primary destination for labor migration, which exacerbates the region's dependence on its so-called "Big Brother".



2. The condition of Central Asian countries before February 24, 2022





2. The condition of Central Asian countries before February 24, 2022

Important political events occurred in Central Asia on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, affecting the **elites' perspective on Russian aggression**.



Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, an attempted coup was prevented just before Russian invasion of Ukraine. Protests against the rising gas prices started in Zhanaozen, which is the largest oil-producing city in Western Kazakhstan, and soon spread to other cities. The initial demands of the protesters were socio-economic, but they also had political demands. The protesters used the slogan “Shal, ket” (which means “Old man, go away” in Kazakh) to direct their dissatisfaction towards Kazakhstan’s first president Nursultan Nazarbayev. Although Kasym-Jomart Tokayev replaced him in 2019³⁴. Nazarbayev still held all the instruments of power and officially was the head of the Security Council. In reality, he controlled everything, including the security apparatus, business, and even crime³⁵. He also controlled his successor, President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev. This created a dual power situation where the elites ignored the decisions of Tokayev until they reached an agreement with Nazarbayev, who was the de facto the head of state. As a result, the state apparatus stopped functioning effectively because of the fear of being held accountable for the new president’s orders.

Relatives of the first president controlled entire sectors of the economy³⁶. They also held important positions in the government. Meanwhile, Nazarbayev’s eldest



Monument to oil workers in Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan



daughter, Dariga, openly expressed her desire to become president and even entered into a confrontation with Tokayev over the matter³⁷.

New projects and reforms that were associated with

Unlike in other post-Soviet countries, protests in Kazakhstan were not uncommon.

Tokayev have now stalled. Inequality has widened, corruption is flourishing, rights are being violated, and aspirations for freedom are being suppressed within society. The rise in gas prices has caused bitterness among the people, leading to protests. Initially, the authorities did attach much importance to these protests. However, unlike in other post-Soviet countries, protests in Kazakhstan were not uncommon. People had already taken to the streets to demand protection of the environment, more freedom for young people, and greater reforms³⁸. Furthermore, protests had already taken place in Zhanaozen in 2011, but they were suppressed by force. At that time, Nazarbayev was heavily criticized for it³⁹. However, it seemed that the authorities had already gained experience and knew how to respond to the new discontent of the masses. The elites, however, failed to recognize the enormous disillusionment and public tiredness with Nazarbayev's rule.

After the protests reached Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan and a significant hub of political and

civic activities, the authorities struggled to bring the situation under control. The protestors were joined by agitators, leading to violent clashes and the seizing and burning of administrative buildings. Consequently, a state of emergency was declared in the country, and security forces resorted to using force against the crowd. The official figures revealed that over 200 people died, with most of them being civilians⁴⁰.

According to one version of events, Nazarbayev's supporters, including some of his family members, sent provocateurs into the crowd of demonstrators to overthrow Tokayev, take over the presidency, and regain full influence⁴¹.

In the second version, Nazarbayev and Tokayev themselves provoked the mass protests without taking any steps to normalize the situation in the first days. This was done to shift the responsibility for the unrest to Karim Massimov⁴², the head of the State Security Committee. He had been Nazarbayev's confidant for many years and enjoyed high esteem. Many people wanted Massimov to be the next president after Nazarbayev's transfer of power, but to prevent him from revealing sensitive information about Nazarbayev's rule, he was accused of organizing the January protests and imprisoned.

There are four different theories regarding the riots that occurred in Almaty. The first is that the riots were caused by the opposition, who wanted to overthrow the government. The second is that the riots were caused by economic issues.

The third, which Tokayev believes, is that the riots were triggered by foreign forces⁴³, although the authorities have not produced a single piece of evidence to support this theory. The fourth suggests that neither Tokayev nor Nazarbayev anticipated the level of public discontent and, fearing that the protests may lead to the collapse of the political system, they provoked the demonstrators to use violence. This allowed them to initiate an „anti-terrorist operation,“ declare a state of national emergency, and use force against the demonstrators⁴⁴. It remains uncertain as to what exactly happened in January 2022 in Kazakhstan as the investigation is still ongoing. However, it is evident that President Tokayev was unable to control the situation and sought help from Russian President Putin and the pro-Russian military-political bloc, CSTO. Peacekeepers were sent to the country to mainly guard strategic facilities in Almaty, but the elites correctly interpreted the move as



Riot police in Almaty, Kazakhstan



“**Tokayev** found himself in the position of being indebted to Putin for his **help in foiling the coup**. As a result, he could not openly condemn the Russian aggression against Ukraine, despite the strong anti-Russian sentiment in Kazakh society.”

a signal that Putin and Russia were backing Tokayev, hinting at the end of dual power. As a result, the protests were forcefully suppressed.

The events that took place in Almaty in January 2022 have had a significant impact on the relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia. In particular, they have influenced Astana’s view on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Tokayev found himself in the position of being indebted to Putin for his help in foiling the coup. As a result,

he could not openly condemn the Russian aggression against Ukraine, despite the strong anti-Russian sentiment in Kazakh society. The previous trade and financial interdependence of the two countries has deepened, making it impossible for Astana to criticize the Kremlin too harshly⁴⁵. As the war in Ukraine escalated, any initial criticism of the invasion by Tokayev disappeared.

Dimash Alzhanov

The events that took place in Kazakhstan in January 2022 were the result of various issues such as inequality, lack of political rights and freedoms in society, and fatigue with the unchanging power. The protests started as a peaceful demonstration but gradually spread throughout the country. The authorities, fearing that the movement could lead to the fall of the regime, skillfully and cynically turned it into a violent confrontation. This enabled them to justify launching an “anti-terrorist operation” and implement a state of emergency in the country. As a result, force was used against demonstrators, including firearms.

However, the main issue that still remains unresolved is the inability of the authoritarian regime to establish effective governance and fair access to economic activity. Kazakhstan’s strong centralization of power has led to high levels of corruption and a lack of stable channels for the transmission of information. Therefore, the government has no knowledge of what is happening in the other regions.





Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, no less dramatic and tragic events have taken place, although they have been overshadowed by the protests in Kazakhstan and the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Meanwhile, in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in western Tajikistan, which is considered the center of the opposition, protests have taken place against the government, and severe purges of the region have followed. These events are linked to the impending transfer of power to President Rahmon's son, Rustam Emomali.

The conflict between GBAO and Dushanbe has its roots in the 1990s, when a civil war broke out in Tajikistan between the United Tajik Opposition and the Popular Front. Many of the oppositionists came from the GBAO. The Popular Front, headed by Emomali Rahmon, was the heir to the Communist Party of Tajikistan⁴⁶.

After the peace agreement was signed in 1997, the opposition - including GBAO field commanders - retained power and became informal leaders of the region. Although they did not interfere with politics, they were popular among the residents and were viewed as instrumental in placing effective pressure on any local official to solve the problems of the population struggling with poverty⁴⁷. This led to the emergence of dual power in GBAO. Rahmon was afraid that former field commanders would undermine his authority, so he made several attempts to purge them from the region. However, he was never successful in getting rid of the popular field commanders.

Before the transfer of power, there were concerns that the informal leaders of GBAO would become a threat to



Tajikistan President **Emomali Rahmon**

the successor. Considering that their authority is much greater than that of inexperienced Rustam Emomali, Rahmon decided to eliminate them. In May 2022, he carried out the most brutal and bloody purges in the region⁴⁸. All local activists were killed, imprisoned, or expelled from the country. According to official figures, eight people were killed. However, unofficial data suggests that the number of those killed was several times higher. A mass exodus of residents from the region began, primarily men.

Opponents of the regime who survived or left GBAO now seek revenge against Rahmon, but their resources and influence in Dushanbe remain limited.



GBAO's Pamir Mountains



The international community has failed to condemn the violent suppression of protests and the ongoing lawlessness in Tajikistan. Russia, unlike the West, understands perfectly well what happened in GBAO, but turns a blind eye. Meanwhile, Rahmon, does not condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine as a token of gratitude.

There is one more key condition for a successful transfer of power in Tajikistan – getting approval from Russia for Rustam Emomali’s candidacy. This is related to the fact that Russia is considered a guarantor of Dushanbe’s security and an essential economic part-

ner. However, the Kremlin is not yet convinced that Rustam Emomali is sufficiently prepared to maintain power successfully. To gain Putin’s approval for the transfer of power, Rahmon acquiesces other actions by the Russian authorities as well. During the year and a half of the war, the Tajik authorities never publicly condemned Moscow. This relationship can be characterized as Tajikistan choosing not to criticize Russia’s actions in Ukraine, while Moscow, in turn, approves of Rahmon’s successor.

Although Tajik authorities pretend that the war in Ukraine has not had any impact, one can notice **decision-making evasions**. During the year and a half of the war, Rahmon never agreed to join the EEU⁴⁹ and intensified contacts with Western and Asian allies.



Khursand Khurramov



President Emomali Rahmon is grooming his son Rustam to be his successor, but he constantly faces new threats. For example, Rahmon has recently carried out the most severe and extensive purges in Upper Badakhshan, where he believes disloyal oppositionists and field commanders still remain. It would seem that everything was ready for a smooth transfer of power. However, Rahmon’s plans have been dashed by the war in Ukraine that has subsequently weakened Russia’s economy and reduced the flow of remittances from migrants working in Russian cities. His plans have also been impeded by regular clashes on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border and difficult relations with the Taliban. The transfer of power has therefore been postponed once again.

The failure of power transfer in Tajikistan poses a serious threat to the country’s statehood. Tajikistan has completely dismantled the institutions of civil society, opposition, and independent media, which are the foundation of a democratic state. All the formal and informal institutions established during the post-Soviet period were centered on the current president’s personality. His departure could be a fatal blow to the country.



Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is considered the most isolated country in Central Asia and refrains from interfering in the affairs of its neighbors. This has also been the case of its reaction, or lack thereof, to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, several significant events have taken place in the country recently.



Statue of Turkmenistan President in Ashgabat

During the height of Russian aggression in the spring of 2022, a transfer of power took place in Turkmenistan⁵⁰. It is unlikely, that President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov deliberately orchestrated the handover to his son Serdar at a time when Moscow had entered the war with Kiev. However, this event diverted the attention of the world, and the transfer of power went smoothly without any issues.

At the same time, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov has not given up his power completely as he currently leads the Upper House of Parliament. In the spring of 2023, this position was granted supreme status over all national institutions. In the event that current President Serdar Berdimuhamedov fails to govern effectively, power will likely return to Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov⁵¹. Despite his former role as president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov continues to attend international

summits and meetings with foreign leaders.

The decorative change of power in the country has not resulted in any positive impact on its socio-economic situation. Despite having substantial gas reserves, which are sold to foreign markets for huge profits, ordinary people are still struggling to access basic food supplies. Getting food in social stores, where prices are much lower than market prices, is almost impossible. People have to wait in long queues for days⁵². Other restrictions are also in place, such as a ban on women visiting beauty parlors, and strict dress codes⁵³.

Meanwhile, the persons associated with the former president, are making money on profit shares from exported energy resources. Berdimukhammedov nephews Khajymurat and Shamurat Rejepov have gained control over various sectors of the economy in Turkmenistan. They own luxurious properties abroad and distribute subsidized products with the help of their men⁵⁴.

The conflict in Ukraine has opened up new opportunities for the Turkmen family-clan regime to enrich themselves. As the West has reduced its cooperation with Russia's Gazprom, they have turned to alternative energy suppliers. In comparison to Putin's regime, Berdimukhammedov's government appears to be relatively respectable. This is why when European and American officials visit Ashgabat, they tend to focus on discussing energy cooperation rather than human rights issues⁵⁵.

During the year and a half of the war, Turkmen-Russian relations also improved. Moscow is attempting to persuade Ashgabat to work with them instead of the West, in order to prevent the West from replacing Russian gas with Turkmen gas. Gazprom, for instance, has promised to aid Turkmenistan in the development of their energy sector and has almost tripled its purchases of Turkmen gas⁵⁶. The Turkmen authorities are trying to maintain a balance between Russia and Europe, attempting to befriend both.

The authorities are not commenting on the ongoing war in Ukraine. However, in the spring of 2022, it was announced that **humanitarian aid** would be sent to Ukraine. The cargo included **medicines and textiles**⁵⁷. Through this help, Ashgabat reminded Kiev of possible bilateral cooperation and also suggested resumption of gas cooperation. Currently, when the supply of Russian gas to Europe has almost stopped, Turkmen gas can become an alternative and transit through Ukraine one of the desired export routes.



Women in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Galiya Ibragimova

In early 2022, Serdar, the eldest son of Berdymukhammedov, became the president without much of a challenge. His eligibility was confirmed in the operetta elections, and his father took over as the head of the chamber of the upper house of parliament, which was established specifically for him in 2021.

However, the question now is whether the new president can handle the problems that have accumulated before his appointment, and there are quite a few of them. These issues include the aftermath of pandemics, disruptions in the supply of basic goods, rising unemployment and inflation, which has exceeded 14% even according to official estimates. The severity of the situation is already evident as the country's residents, despite severe repressions, continue to take to the streets to protest.





Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, **nothing extraordinary happened at first glance** on the eve of the Russian attack on Ukraine. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was re-elected for a second term in 2021 and initiated constitutional reforms⁵⁸. However, it seems that these ordinary events in the summer of 2022 led to a **serious internal political crisis**.

Since taking office in 2016, Mirziyoyev implemented a series of reforms and opened up Uzbekistan's economy. He also worked towards normalizing relations with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, which had been complicated and weakened by the previous president, Islam Karimov. However, as Mirziyoyev consolidated his power, the country's mode of governance began to resemble that of the first authoritarian president, Islam Karimov⁵⁹.

Freedom of speech is being restricted, citizen activists are being persecuted, regionalization is on the rise, and inequality is increasing.

Mirziyoyev has successfully projected himself as a reformer, often comparing Uzbekistan before his presidency, depicted as closed off, and now, thanks to his



Uzbekistan President **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**

leadership, open. This enabled the country's citizens to give approval to constitutional reform.

However, when the authorities released the first version of the updated constitution, it became evident that the public was against it. The primary reason for the discontent is the deprivation of Karakalpakstan of its status as an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan.

For the first time in many years, Karakalpakstan activists announced a possible secession from Uzbekistan.

The authorities forcefully suppressed the protests, which tarnished Mirziyoyev's image as a reformer. Eventually however, Karakalpakstan still managed to retain its autonomous status⁶⁰.

In May 2023, the constitutional reform was finally implemented. Karakalpakstan had already eradicated nationalist sentiments in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, due to Moscow-fueled separatist movements in Ukraine, Moldova, and Kazakhstan, the Uzbek authorities were cautious and decided to strip the Karakalpaks of their autonomous rights in the Constitution. This sparked massive protests in Nukus in July 2022.



Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan.



In addition, early presidential elections were held in July under the new constitution. As a result, the previous presidential terms of Mirziyoyev no longer count and he can now remain in power until 2037. It seems that the events in Karakalpakstan have no connection to the developing Russian-Uzbek relations, especially with the war in Ukraine. However, like other authoritarian leaders of Central Asia, Mirziyoyev is trying to gain Moscow's support to overcome internal political crises.

The Kremlin supported Tashkent without paying much attention to the events in Karakalpakstan, while Mirziyoyev adopted a neutral stance on the war in Ukraine.



Registan Square in Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Rafael Sattarov

Despite of the protests in Karakalpakstan, the Uzbek authorities went ahead with constitutional reforms. One week after the referendum Mirziyoyev scheduled early presidential elections, which he won in July 2023. There was no intrigue in this. The results were already known beforehand. Although people are now voting as they should, it does not necessarily mean that the Uzbek government can expect years of peace ahead of it. The public's growing expectations for the reforms initiated by Mirziyoyev will not disappear, and it will become increasingly challenging to align them with the government's actual priorities.

The Uzbek government understands this, which is why they are actively preparing for new crises.

It is known that since 2020 Uzbek officers from the ministries responsible for the military and law enforcement have been regularly visiting Belarus to learn from their experience in providing law enforcement public order. **At the same time, an increasing number of acquaintances and family members of the president have been seen in his entourage.**





Kyrgyzstan

In January 2021, just before the Russian invasion, there was a change of government in Kyrgyzstan. Sadyr Japarov, a former parliamentary deputy, became the President after mass protests, similar to the ones in 2005 and 2010. The Kyrgyz people did not accept the results of the parliamentary elections held in the fall of 2020. During the chaos and turmoil that followed, Japarov, who was serving a prison sentence under the charge of „hostage-taking,” was released.

A key role in his release was played by his former party colleague, Kamchibek Tashiev. One of Japarov’s first appointments as president was to designate Tashiev as the head of the State Committee for National Security (UKMK). Subsequently, a duumvirate was formed, with Japarov as the president. However, all key decisions are made in consultation with Tashiev⁶¹.



Kyrgyz President **Sadyr Japarov**

The change of power in Kyrgyzstan and the emerging **new political reality** determined also how the country began to build relations with its neighbors. Bishkek’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been influenced by its efforts to **win Moscow’s favor**.

Given Putin’s negative attitude toward the leaders of countries that took power as a result of protests, Japarov redoubled his efforts to please the Kremlin and assure them of his loyalty and that the Russian-Kyrgyz relations are not in danger.

Since February 24, 2022, Japarov has repeatedly asserted that he understands Russia’s interests in stabilizing



Parliament in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan



the security situation in Europe⁶². Such loyalty also stems from the fact that Kyrgyzstan is a poor and unstable country in Central Asia. Over 30% of its budget revenues come from remittances sent by labor migrants who mainly work in Russia. Moscow is a key economic partner. Considering the ongoing transformation of Kyrgyzstan into an autocracy under the leadership of Japarov, who has expressed his desire to “end democracy,” the experience of being under the protection and guidance of a “big brother” is particularly valuable⁶³. Kyrgyzstan was once regarded as the most democratic country in Central Asia, where freedom of speech was respected, Western NGOs were active, and the extremist group “Hizb ut-Tahrir” was banned. However, the situation changed after Japarov came to power. First, he carried out constitutional reforms, switching the government from parliamentary to presidential. Soon the pressure to limit freedom of expression began, and the persecution of human rights defenders and civil society activists intensified. The system of government now appears to be a super-presidency, with decisions being made by only two people: Japarov and Tashiev. The support from Kremlin plays a significant role in the successful establishment of authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan. If Putin endorses the current government, this will be an important guarantee of success. Moreover, if there are renewed street protests in the country or an attempted coup, Moscow will validate the legality of the

existing government.

One more reason for Japarov’s increased loyalty toward Russia is the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan⁶⁴.

The Kremlin usually sympathizes with Dushanbe. President Rahmon is close to Putin, hence his actions are more understandable to the Russians. Japarov is therefore trying to convince him, that Bishkek’s position is also important. Hence the submissive attitude of the Kyrgyz authorities toward Russian aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, during international meetings Bishkek declares that it supports the principle of the territorial integrity of states⁶⁵.

Thus, it can be concluded that before the Russian invasion Central Asia went through complex events and political processes. Given that the main goal of all authoritarian leaders of countries of the region is to maintain their own power, no one wanted to spoil their relations with Moscow. The Kremlin’s backing of these regimes is a guarantee that Moscow will come to their aid or at least remain silent if the authorities purge their opponents, as happened in Tajikistan’s GBAO or Uzbekistan’s Karakalpakstan. It’s hard to call such a policy far-sighted.

If Russia suffers a defeat in Ukraine, all regimes in Central Asia will **face a legitimacy crisis**.



Temur Umarov



The status of Vorukh is an obstacle in the ongoing border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. De facto it is a Tajik enclave situated on Kyrgyz territory, connected to the main part of the country by a single road. Dushanbe wants to make this road its territory, so that the enclave will simply turn into a far-flung part of Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan is against this proposal and both countries do not intend to give up their claims. Similar disputes in Central Asia have already been successfully resolved, without the need for external mediation. For example, not long ago Uzbekistan reached an agreement with Kyrgyzstan on the status of its enclave of Sokh, and also completed the demarcation of its border with Tajikistan. However, Tashkent has a fairly strong army, and with the coming to power of Shavkat Mirziyoyev it has shifted to a peaceful policy in the region.

However, Bishkek and Dushanbe have publicized their conflict too much and, in this case, external mediation will most likely make the situation worse.



Mountains in Kyrgyzstan



Yurt in Central Asia

3. Weakening of Russian security guarantees for the region



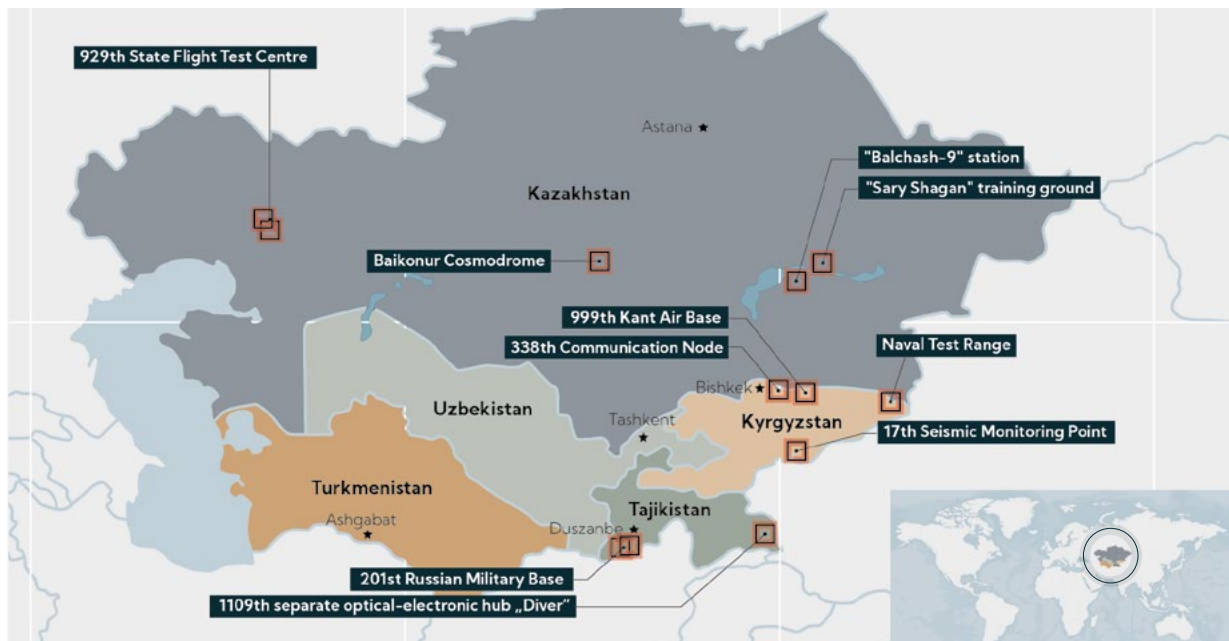


3. Weakening of Russian security guarantees for the region

Central Asian countries began **building their armed forces** in the early 1990s. Soviet units remained in the region, but not all countries managed to take them over.



Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan



Russian military facilities in Central Asia

In Tajikistan

there was, for example, the 201st Motorized Rifle Division, which was deployed here after World War II and remained under Moscow's control⁶⁶. The Kremlin explained that the region borders Afghanistan, and the Tajik-Afghan border is the longest. Tajikistan alone would not be able to confront the threats, especially since in the 1990s the republic plunged into civil war. After the situation returned to normal and Rahmon came to power, the Soviet motorized rifle division was transformed into a full-fledged 201st Russian military base⁶⁷. Today it is recognized as the largest land base being part of the CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Force. In addition, Tajikistan is home to the 1109th separate optical-electronic hub „Diver,” which is part of the space control system and is a strategic facility important for the defense capabilities of Central Asia and Russia⁶⁸.

In Kazakhstan

Russian military facilities are also present. Among them are the Baikonur “Cosmodrome” and the “Sary-Shagan” training ground for testing anti-missile weapons. In addition, Russian military facilities in Kazakhstan include the “Balkhash-9” radio engineering center and the “Dnipro” radar set, which is part of it. These facilities are designed to monitor missile and space activity, and provide early warning in the event of a missile attack⁶⁹.

In Kyrgyzstan

since 2003 there has been a military airbase, Kant, formally part of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force CSTO, but actually controlled by Russia. This airbase has emerged against the interests of the US, which after 11 September 2001 established the Manas military air base in Bishkek⁷⁰. Under pressure from Moscow, the US base was closed, while the Kant base remained. In addition to the Kant air base, Kyrgyzstan has a Russian test base at Lake Issyk-Kul, a long-distance communications hub in the village of Chaldybar, and a stand-alone seismic station in the town of Mayлуу-Suu⁷¹.

In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan

there are no Russian military facilities. Both countries have a negative attitude regarding a foreign military presence. However, it is assumed that in the event of security threats, Moscow will provide military support to the entire region, which is why it has been assigned the role of a guarantor of Central Asian security.



In reality, the situation is unfolding in a different manner. Even in the face of serious threats to the security of the region, Russia, and then the pro-Russian CSTO try to distance themselves as much as possible from the problem.

For example, in 2010, during a coup in Kyrgyzstan clashes spread to the south of the country and escalated into an ethnic conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks residents⁷². Bishkek requested Moscow's assistance and asked to send CSTO troops. The Kremlin refused, reasoning that the Kyrgyz-Uzbek mass killings in the southern city of Osh were an internal matter of Kyrgyzstan, and CSTO intervenes only in cases of external security threats⁷³.



Tajik-Kyrgyz border, the Kyzyl-Art pass

Another example of Russian and CSTO inaction concerns the regular clashes between Tajiks and Kyrgyz over the incomplete delimitation and demarcation of borders. As of now, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan still have many disputed sections of the border. Out of the 971 km of shared border, only 664 km have been settled so far. The deadliest clashes between the two nations occurred in 2021. About 40 people were killed, mostly from the Kyrgyz side⁷⁴. Russia, as before, refused to provide aid, stating that it was an internal affair of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and that CSTO is focused on eliminating external security threats. This approach was not accepted and Bishkek refused to participate in CSTO military exercises in 2022⁷⁵.

“In such a situation, rather than the guarantor of the security of Central Asia, Moscow becomes the guarantor of the security of personalistic authoritarian regimes.”

Thus, the presence of Russian military facilities in Central Asia is used by authorities in the region to intimidate their political opponents. Rather than serving as the guarantor of the security of Central Asia, Moscow has become the guarantor of the security of personalistic authoritarian regimes. The legitimacy of most of these regimes is based on the support of the Kremlin and Putin himself.

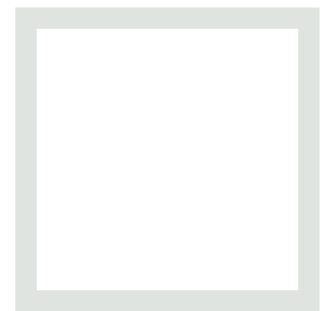
The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which overturned the myth of Russia's army being the second most powerful in the world, has forced Central Asia to reconsider its attitude toward Moscow. On the one hand, the region's political elites realize that post-Soviet concerns about the restoration of the empire has proven to be fully justified. On the other hand, if Russia is defeated on the battlefield and Putin's regime collapses, then relations with the region will be adjusted. There is no guarantee that the new Russian government will also support autocratic regimes in the region. Central Asian countries are seeking to balance their cooperation with Russia by establishing contacts with foreign partners such as the US, Europe, Turkey, South Korea, and Japan. Cooperation is not limited to political or economic spheres. Foreign partners are increasingly being considered as alternative suppliers of arms.



Reducing dependence on Russian arms and diversifying supplies is another important issue facing the countries in the region.

For instance, Kazakhstan and Turkey agreed on the production of Bayraktar drones last year, which will be based on Kazakhstan Engineering company⁷⁶. Other major arms suppliers to Central Asia include China, South Korea, France, Spain, the US, and Canada⁷⁷.

Central Asian states, who are members of pro-Russian organizations CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), have started to contemplate their usefulness⁷⁸. And while there is no indication yet of states planning to leave these structures, the trend is clear – **Central Asia is trying to reduce its dependence on Russia**. All the more so, given the weakness of the Russian army and its lowered morale, **it is unclear whether Moscow will be able to address security threats in the region**.



Russian tank destroyed in Ukraine

4. Strengthening of economic ties with Russia





4. Strengthening of economic ties with Russia

Before the invasion of Ukraine, **Russia was considered a key partner in Central Asia.**

Exports of cotton, agricultural products and energy resources from countries in the region were mainly directed to the Russian market. Large numbers of labor migrants travelled to Russia for employment. Ties were further strengthened with the entry of the countries of Central Asia into the pro-Russian Customs Union and the EEU.

The West was less interested in the region due to the geographical remoteness of Central Asia from European markets and underdeveloped logistics. Russia is closer, more understanding, and does not place high demands on the producers as does the EU. Nevertheless, in the year before the war (2021), the trade turnover of Uzbekistan with the EU amounted to \$15.7 billion⁷⁹, and with the EEU \$11.2 billion in the same year⁸⁰. Similarly, Kazakhstan's trade turnover with the EU in 2021 was \$23 billion⁸¹, and with EEU countries it was \$26.1 billion⁸². At the same time, the population of the EEU countries is 184 million people⁸³, and the population of the EU is twice as large. Although Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine came as a shock to the Central Asian countries, none of their leaders publicly criticized it. The anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the West were a cause of serious concern for the region, as they posed risk for Central Asian countries as well. While the authorities of all the countries in the region pledged to comply with the sanctions, they did not plan to impose their own. After February 24, 2022, leaders of Central Asian countries visited Western nations more frequently, though they did not intend to sever ties with Russia. This is because they are heavily dependent on Russia economically, and even if they wanted to, it would be difficult for them to distance themselves from Moscow. Although the region exports oil, gas, and uranium to the Russian market and also to China, there is no de-

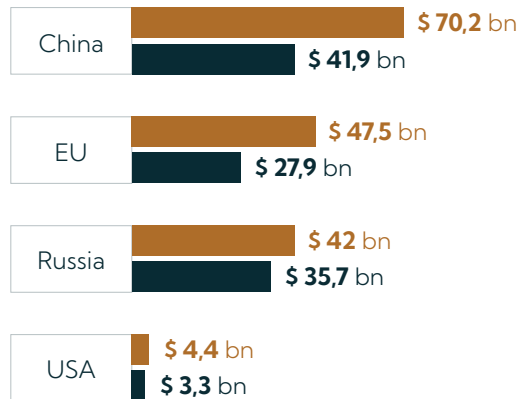


Uzbek traditional textiles

mand there for other products from Central Asia, such as textiles, auto parts, or food items.



Central Asia's trade turnover with key partners.



Source: rbc.ru ■ 2022 ■ 2021



Western gate of the old part of the city of Khiva, Uzbekistan



Sanctions

With the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions, **Central Asian countries have discovered that they can make profit on them.**

While before the war virtually all consumer goods from Europe went to the region via Russia, now Central Asia has become a gateway for re-exporting European products to Russia. This „gray zone” has allowed Russian consumers to continue receiving iPhones, computers, and other consumer goods from the EU and the US, even under strict Western restrictions.

The West is aware that through Central Asia, Russia is also receiving dual-purpose goods that can be used in weapons production. There are warnings that if these supplies are not stopped, further sanctions will be imposed.

Uzbekistan's Promcomplektlogistic company found itself⁸⁴ under U.S. sanctions last year for cooperating with the Russian military-industrial complex. In July 2022, the United States imposed sanctions on four Kyrgyz companies for their involvement in trying to evade anti-Russian sanctions. These companies had exported⁸⁵ electronic components or sensitive dual-use goods to Russia for use in the defense sector.

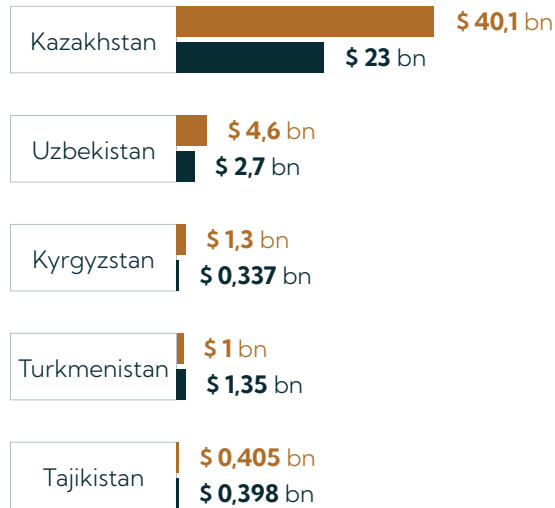
The Central Asian states deny all allegations, and yet they haven't been able to provide a clear explanation for the rapid increase in economic cooperation with Russia in 2022. Obtaining accurate data is also proving to be difficult. For instance, the trade turnover with Kazakhstan is said to have increased by 5%⁸⁶, whereas Moscow claims the increase was 10%⁸⁷. The trade with Uzbekistan increased by almost 40%⁸⁸ (according to the RBC by about 23%), with Tajikistan by 24%⁸⁹ (or 17% according to RBC), with Kyrgyzstan – by 40%⁹⁰, exports from Kyrgyzstan increased by 250% and exceeded \$960 million⁹¹. Trade with Turkmenistan increased by 45%⁹² (or 16% according to RBC).

The increase in trade indicators generally suggests that the region has become a **commercial center** for the shadow economy.

The investment inflow in Central Asian countries has been aided by the acceptance of Russians who left their country after the Russian invasion and the military mobilization announced in September 2022. In the first year of the war up to one million Russians⁹³ left their motherland, and although not all of them remained in the region, 200,000 settled in Kazakhstan alone⁹⁴. Given the shortage of skilled workers in the region, the influx of people benefited the economy.

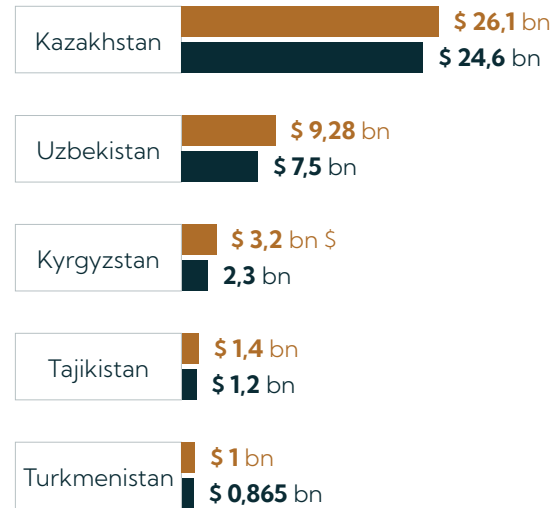


Central Asia's trade turnover with the EU.



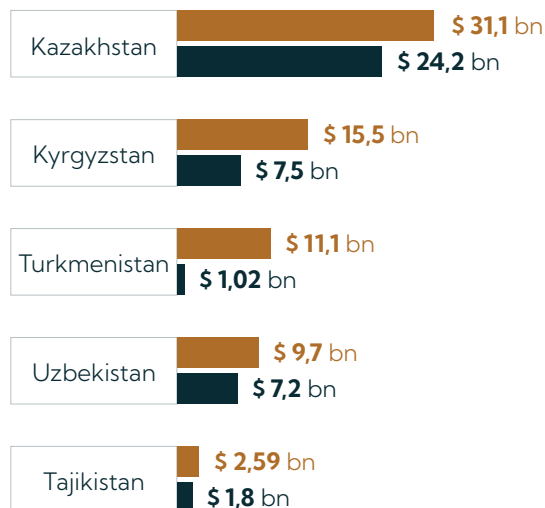
Source: rbc.ru ■ 2022 ■ 2021

Central Asia's trade turnover with Russia



Source: rbc.ru ■ 2022 ■ 2021

Central Asia's trade turnover with China



Source: rbc.ru ■ 2022 ■ 2021



Transport and logistics

The lack of possibility to sever ties with Moscow also results from the fact that almost all of Central Asia's transportation infrastructure and logistics is linked to Russia.

Although alternative routes through South Asia or the Caspian Sea have been available since the early 1990s, overland routes through Russia are considered the most functional.

Diversification of transportation requires large investments that Central Asian countries cannot afford. They are currently participating in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative. If this route is built, roads connecting China with Europe will pass through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan⁹⁵. Though Russia is not involved in this project, there is a plan to connect the Eurasian Economic Union with the "One Belt and One Road" initiative. It provides for the expansion of economic and infrastructure connections between these projects⁹⁶. It is important to note that the "One Belt and One Road" initiative was launched back in 2013. Nearly ten years have passed, and the project is not even half finished. Therefore, it is too early to say whether



Central Asian roads will soon replace transportation through Russia.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, built in 2017, has gained a new reason for development. It runs through China, Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and across the Black Sea to Europe. In 2022, cargo shipments on this route increased 2.5 times to reach 1.48 million metric tons⁹⁷. Kazakhstan's cargo exports have increased 6.5 times compared to 2021 and amounted to 891 thousand metric tons⁹⁸. This route has enormous potential and bypasses Russia. However, apart from Kazakhstan, it is not used by other Central Asian countries. Therefore, it cannot be considered a full-fledged alternative to Russia's transportation infrastructure.

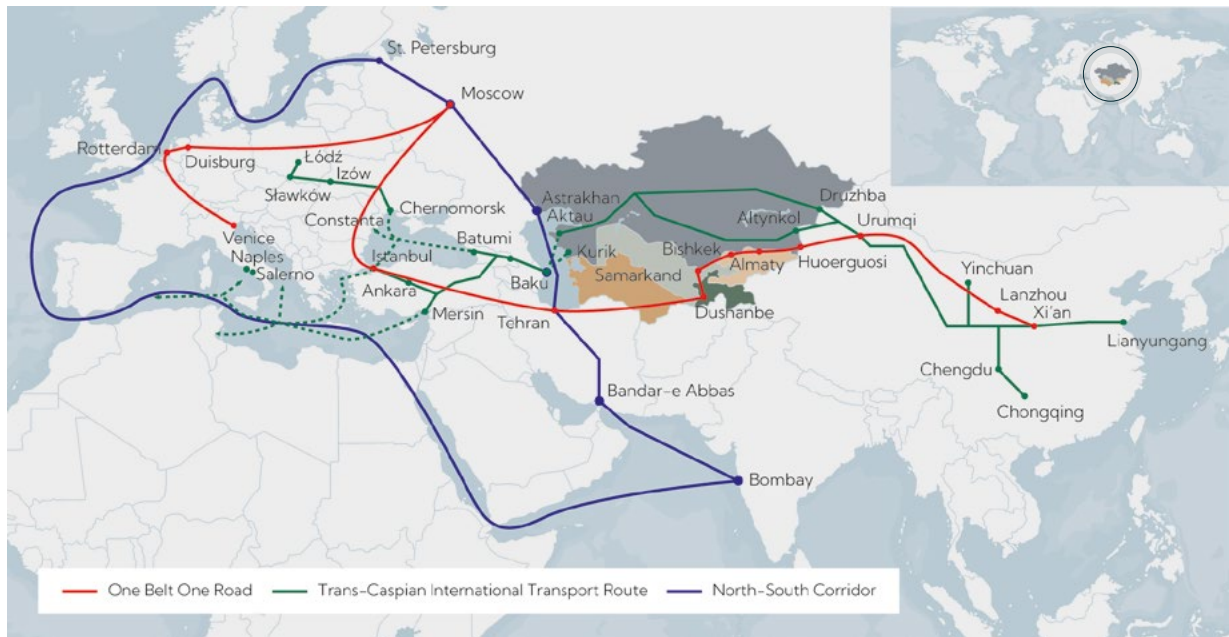
Russia, however, does not remain passive. The more sanctions isolating Moscow, the more actively it undertakes efforts to implement new projects that will enable it to stay connected with the world and bypass Europe. Currently, the Kremlin is actively developing routes to access Asian markets through the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

For instance, since 2022, Russia has shown a strong interest in the “North-South” transport corridor, not only through the western route via Azerbaijan, but also through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan⁹⁹. Considering that all products will be delivered to Russia via Asia in the coming years, the Kremlin will probably try to implement it fully. Furthermore, the logistics of this project have greater advantages compared to the traditional and constantly busy “West to East” route.

Central Asian countries that do not have access to seas and commercial ports do not have a fixed position on logistical dependence on Russia.

If the Moscow-promoted **projects** prove **beneficial to the countries of the region**, they will participate in them.

At the same time, they will not refuse to participate in alternative route projects that bypass Russia, if such projects help to move the region from a geographical “dead end.”



Trade routes in Central Asia



Energy

Central Asia's dependence on Russian energy is growing. Unlike Europe, which has given up on Russian gas, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are increasing their purchases from the Russian Federation. That is because they lack suf-



Key gas pipelines

ficient resources of their own, although for many years the region was seen as an exporter rather than an importer of oil and gas.

This is due to an annual increase in gas consumption of 7–10%¹⁰⁰, expansion of the housing stock and industry development. Another serious problem is the outdated energy infrastructure. During the years of independence countries of the region failed to modernize it.

In 2022, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, for the first time, faced a serious gas deficit. Initially, both countries tried to obtain additional volumes from Turkmenistan, where the annual gas production reaches 80 billion cubic meters of gas¹⁰¹. However, Ashgabat could not help due to the poor condition of its pipelines. During the cold winter, gas transmission simply stopped, which almost led to socio-political instability: in Uzbekistan, people lit fires in the streets to prepare food, and long lines formed at gas stations¹⁰². In January 2022, protests erupted in Kazakhstan precisely because of gas, and the new crisis could entail serious consequences for President Tokayev.



Ruslan Tuxhatullin

Reducing Russia’s influence is hampered by the disintegration of Central Asia. If joint, mutually beneficial regional projects emerge, including those initiated by the European Union, they can stimulate integration within the region, increase openness and mutual accountability among state governments.





When in early 2023, Putin announced the creation of a gas union, discussed since the fall of 2022, with the participation of Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Presidents Tokayev and Mirziyoyev agreed to the proposal, despite the negative international reaction. Tashkent and Astana regarded it as an expansion of cooperation, a trilateral gas union project. Russian gas would be supplied to both countries via the “Central Asia – Center” gas pipeline, restored as it had been in the Soviet times¹⁰³. This is expected to prevent energy shortages in the upcoming winters.

Although the Uzbek and Kazakh markets will not replace the European one, as it is impossible to sell 150 billion m³ of gas to Central Asia, the region is nevertheless developing, the population is growing, so the expansion of Russian gas in this direction is possible.

In addition, Moscow’s long-term goal is to ship additional gas volumes to China through the regional pipeline infrastructure, in particular the “Central Asia – China” gas pipeline. While Turkmenistan is opposed to the idea¹⁰⁴, there is little the country can do to stop Russia, since it has inefficient gas infrastructure. Since countries in the region have no production capacity of their own, Moscow can justify its participation in the project of the Central Asian gas supply to China.

It is to the advantage of the Central Asian states that Russia has become patriam non grata: they can negotiate discounts and dictate their terms of cooperation. Having to choose between the threat of internal social instability and continued cooperation with Russia, the Uzbek and Kazakh elites prefer the latter. This is because the first scenario could escalate into mass protests and even deprive them of power.



Nargiza Muratalieva

When the war in Ukraine started, the Central Asian region assumed the role of a „gray zone” allowing it to evade Western sanctions, which further tied it to Russia, despite the widespread perception of the country’s declining influence in the region. The countries of Central Asia indirectly support the vitality of the Russian economy, which means that the region’s importance to Moscow will grow. But the opposite trend is also apparent: against the backdrop of Russian aggression against Ukraine, there is an evident desire on the part of Central Asian countries to diversify their foreign policy.



Labor market

Central Asia remains dependent on the Russian labor market. The war in Ukraine has not yet significantly contributed (only 5%) to reducing the inflow of labor migrants from the region¹⁰⁵. There are currently about 3 million citizens of Central Asian countries working in Russia. These are mainly citizens of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the case of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, the share of their remittances to their home country budgets is 30%¹⁰⁶; whereas in Uzbeki-

stan, migrant remittances account for 11.6%, a significant amount for a country with a population of 35 million¹⁰⁷.

In the midst of the ongoing war in Ukraine, there are increasingly frequent cases of Russia trying to grant labor migrants citizenship to send them to fight¹⁰⁸. The authorities of Central Asian countries ignore this issue, as they are unable to provide those migrants with jobs and competitive wages in their respective countries.



In addition, if the number of working age men in the region's countries increases, the risk of socio-political tensions will increase.

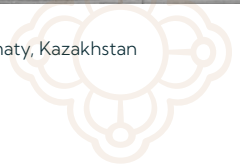
Turkey, South Korea, and, surprisingly, the Baltic States are becoming alternatives to the Russian labor market. This trend began in 2019, and during the war, Central Asian migrants from Russia headed to various foreign cities¹⁰⁹. However, there are ten times fewer of them in those countries so far, than in Russia. And Europe is not a priority destination for migrant workers from the region.

Russia has succeeded to maintain good relations with Central Asian countries, with continued understanding and support of their societies. For example, Russian television has always enjoyed wider popularity in the region than local media. Over the past ten years, "Rossotrudnichestvo"¹¹⁰ has expanded its activity in the region, and the number of scholarships for higher education at Russian universities has increased. Over the past ten years the promotion of the "Russian world" (русский мир) in Central Asia has also involved the Russian Orthodox Church¹¹¹.

Of course, there are quite a few citizens in the region who condemn the war in Ukraine. A discussion has begun on the decolonization of Central Asia and the importance of learning national languages. However, only a minor and educated portion of the population participates in this debate. Many residents, especially adults, sympathize with Russia in the war against Ukraine. In general, however, the highest percentage of the population represent a neutral attitude - in Kazakhstan, for example, approx. 60% do not support any side of the conflict, 21% support Ukraine, and 13% support Russia¹¹².



Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan



It turns out that the war not only **failed to limit Russia's ties** with Central Asia, but also opened up **new prospects** for cooperation.

Although most publications and think tank reports speak of deteriorating ties between Central Asia and Russia, in reality this is not the case. Russia remains Central Asian countries' closest and most understood partner, making it increasingly difficult for those seeking to divert from it.

Khursand Khurramov



There are three important problems that will either lead to future regional cooperation or to new conflicts in Central Asia. The first: the problem of hydroelectric power deficit. The second: unregulated borders and transport and logistical isolation. The third: the issue of Afghanistan, including the construction of the Kushtepa Canal by the Taliban, which threatens the security of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. If the countries in Central Asia manage to find common solutions to these problems, this will spur regional cooperation and integration.



5. Search for alternative partners by the countries of the region





5. Search for alternative partners by the countries of the region

Although geographically, Central Asia lies in the center of Eurasia, it is considered a **peripheral area**. Nevertheless, Central Asia regards itself as the most attractive part of Eurasia. Since the early 1990s, the region has used Rudyard Kipling's term "**The Great Game**"¹¹³. The writer used it to describe **the geopolitical rivalry** in the 19th and early 20th century **between the British and Russian empires** over Central and East Asia. After the collapse of the USSR, the West, China and Russia took a renewed interest in the Central Asian states, which gave rise to the belief that "The Great Game 2.0" was happening again. These predictions proved, however, to be exaggerated¹¹⁴.



Eurasia



Waves of interest

The aforementioned new wave of U.S. and EU interest in Central Asia involved the launch of a NATO military campaign in Afghanistan at the beginning of the 21st century. The region began to be seen as a buffer zone to deter Afghan threats. Such cooperation contributed to an influx of Western investment into the area. Companies from the U.S. and the EU entered the Central Asian market out of growing interest in the region's energy potential and signed contracts for oil and gas development, and production. After the war in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the war fought in eastern Ukraine, Central Asia disappeared from the West's purview. However, it has attracted attention from time to time.

The EU has regularly updated its Strategy for Central Asia. The last one was adopted in 2019. It emphasized the importance of cooperation and the development of long-term relationships. However, if one examines the EU assistance programs for the region, it becomes clear that Central Asia is not a priority. For the period of 2014–2020, the European aid package for the region amounted to \$1.1 billion¹⁵. For Central Asia's population of more than 78 million people, such aid over six years is very modest and incomparable to the financial support, loans, and aid programs from China, Turkey, or even Russia.

Formally, ties with the region are also maintained by the Americans. In 2015 the "Central Asia + U.S." negotiating project was created under Barack Obama's presidency¹⁶. It involves annual meetings of foreign ministers of countries participating in the program and discussions on regional security issues, problems related to Afghanistan and the fight against terrorism. Central Asian elites initially enthusiastically welcomed this dialogue format. However, it soon became evident that the Americans were not ready to discuss more important issues beyond declarations.

The West, once again, turned its attention to the region after February 24, 2022. Joe Biden personally invited the leaders of Central Asian countries to meet in the CA+U-SA format in September 2022 during the UN General Assembly. In addition, during the year and a half of war in Ukraine, European diplomacy in Central Asia has become active. As a rule, however, any negotiations with countries in the region have two goals: 1) to convince Central Asian elites not to export prohibited goods and



Fighting storks monument, Independence Square in Tashkent, Uzbekistan

technologies to Russia that could be used in the war in Ukraine; 2) to expand cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in the energy sector to compensate for the supply of Russian gas.

One can say that the Russian aggression against Ukraine has not led Western countries to a more in-depth revision of their attitude toward post-Soviet countries, especially the Central Asian states. They are often seen not as a self-sufficient entity of international relations but as a peripheral, pro-Russian or pro-Chinese region. The intrinsic value of the region as such has not yet been appre-

They are often seen not as a self-sufficient entity of international relations but as a **peripheral, pro-Russian or pro-Chinese region.**



ciated although there are already signs of an imminent change in this approach (e.g., in October 2023, the EU adopted a roadmap for closer relations with Central Asia).



Strengthening economic ties

Nevertheless, there is increasing demand in Central Asia to expand its contacts with the West, especially after February 24, 2022. The countries of the region fear that Moscow will threaten them as well. For example, the border between Russia and Kazakhstan is 7.6 thousand kilometers and is considered the longest land border in the world. It means that the Russian military could physically enter Kazakhstan if there is a deterioration of relations between the two countries.

Kazakhstan, meanwhile, is considered to have the closest ties with the West. In 2022, Kazakhstan's trade turnover with the United States amounted to \$3.1 billion¹¹⁷, while with the EU, it reached approximately \$40 billion¹¹⁸. It is the highest trade level with the West among all Central Asian countries. In Kazakhstan's oil industry, the leading role in production is played by US companies. In 2019, their share in the country's oil production was about 30%¹¹⁹.

Between 2004 and 2019, the US supplied Kazakhstan with arms worth \$43 million - more than to all countries in the region combined¹²⁰. Due to the war in Ukraine, Kazakh oil exports to Europe carried out through Russia and the ports of the Black Sea are cur-

rently at risk. While crude oil transit through Russia saw a 19% increase in the first half of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022¹²¹, the authorities are looking for new routes that bypass Russia and are seeking to buy tankers for this purpose¹²². If the West lends support to Kazakhstan, it will significantly help to reduce the country's dependence on Russia, at least in the energy sector.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are also interested in closer ties with the West. However, unlike Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (which have uranium and gas, although limiting its exports), they do not have large reserves of energy resources, and as a result, they have little to offer.

As for Turkmenistan, although the country has **abundant reserves of gas**, its supply to Europe is hampered due to the **lack of a developed gas transmission infrastructure**.

It is worth mentioning that in the wake of Russian aggression of Ukraine (and influenced by the intensification of Turkmenistan's energy diplomacy) Western officials have become increasingly interested in the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline project, which was abandoned in early 2010. It was assumed that Turkmen gas to Europe would be delivered via Azerbaijan on the bed of the Caspian Sea¹²³.

However, no one is ready yet to invest in this project. The construction will take many years, and currently the priority is not the pipeline gas but liquefied natural



Drilling near Betpakdala, Kazakhstan



gas (LNG). As a result, Western investors are concerned that the funds invested in the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline may not pay off. Nor are they ready to invest in developing the infrastructure of Turkmenistan's tankers due to its isolationist political system.

Moreover, Turkmenistan itself is not prepared to expand contacts with the West. It is satisfied with supplying almost all its extracted gas to China. From 2019, Moscow has also resumed purchases of Turkmen gas, which were halted in 2009 due to a scandal in Moscow's relations with Ashgabat: in an effort to limit the purchases of Turkmen gas and not be held responsible for violating the obligations of contacts, „Gazprom” caused an explosion on a section of the „Central Asia - Center-4” pipeline¹²⁴. The volumes of resumed gas purchases are now quite symbolic but show that Russia



Trans-Ili Alatau, Kazakhstan

„The West could with greater commitment and in a coordinated way support the region in the development of renewable energy sources.”

intends to strengthen relations with the region in order to achieve its export objectives, such as China.

In addition, this sunny region has potential for renewable energy sources (RES). The UN and other international organizations are examining the issue,

but there is still no significant investment in solar energy development.

The West could with greater commitment and in a coordinated way support the region in the development of renewable energy sources. In the medium term this



Tajikistan



would solve the problem of the shortage of energy resources and thus save the region from the dependence on Moscow for gas supplies.

Another problem is the lack of water resources, that places a severe strain on Central Asia's agriculture. The amount of water for irrigation is dwindling, and the region lacks adequate irrigation methods to conserve water resources. The border conflict between

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is related not only to the disagreement of the authorities on border delimitation and demarcation, but also the fact that each country seeks to define the borders in such a way so as to have access to water resources. The West could help the region introduce technology for economic irrigation of agricultural land, which could reduce the risk of armed conflict.



Strengthening cultural ties

Central Asia is also interested in expanding cultural, educational and public relations with Western countries. It is essential for the EU and the US to respond to these expectations. Initially, until the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, the West actively encouraged cultural exchanges with Central Asian countries, and young people received scholarships in large numbers to study in America and Europe. However, with the rise of authoritarianism in the region, Western interest in Central Asia declined, and as a result, the socio-cultural ties have deteriorated.



Tajik National University, Dushanbe

There are no simplified procedures for obtaining Schengen visas for students, tourists or local entrepreneurs.

At the same time, Russia and China simplify the admission procedures as much as possible to their universities and open branches of their universities in the countries of the region.

Therefore, it is crucial for the West to expand, rather than withdraw, its influence in the social-cultural sphere Central Asia.

Moreover, it is desirable for the West to support the discussion, which began in the region after February 24, 2022, on post-colonialism and the importance of learning national languages.

This by no means implies a desire to reject the Russian language in the region. However, it is possible to create in the Central Asian countries many more language centers allowing a free study of the English, French, Polish and German languages.

It is also important for the West to continue to promote the issue of human rights and democratic development in the region. Although Central Asian elites see this as interference in state affairs, these issues are extremely important for the region's civil societies. Particularly when repression of those displeased with the regime is intensifying, media are censored, journalists and human rights activists are imprisoned.



Upholding the tradition in Kyrgyzstan



The need for subjectivity

The most irrational approach of the West would be to treat the countries of Central Asia merely as an alternative source of energy resources, which, to some extent, could compensate for the severed oil and gas ties with Moscow. Rather, the West should treat the region as a valuable area in and of itself.

“It is also important, moreover, that the West does not conflate each country of Central Asia as one and the same. Despite similarities, **the countries of the region are developing differently.**”

It is also important, moreover, that the West does not conflate each country of Central Asia as country of Central Asia as the same. Despite similarities, the countries of the region are developing differently. Therefore, the approach of cooperation taken with Uzbekistan should differ from the relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

At the same time, it would be premature to assume that Central Asia’s increased interest in cooperation with the West will translate to severing its ties with Russia or weakening those with China. The region’s borders with Russia and China implies that it is bound to interact with them. The West, by expanding its cooperation with Central Asia can help the countries of the region strengthen their sovereignty and thereby contain Moscow’s imperial ambitions to recreate the Soviet Union 2.0.



Khursand Khurramov



Russia sees labor migrants from Central Asia as a source of cheap labor force. To make matters worse, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities are trying to mobilize them for war. The migrants are resisting this and are looking for new countries for labor migration. Many of them head to the West.

The European Union does not like these trends. However, the more severely it restricts the influx of migrants, the sooner they become a force that gets out of control. If we regulate the sphere of migration, Europe can acquire a fully skilled labor force capable of adapting to the new cultural environment.



Ruslan Tukhbatullin



In addition to Russia, China is an active player in the region. The construction of infrastructure—roads, schools, hospitals, kindergartens, government institutions – all of this is being implemented using Chinese loans. In Turkmenistan, thanks to Chinese investments, the largest deposit of the Galknysh and three tracks of the „Central Asia–China” gas pipeline were developed. A fourth line is currently under construction.

China has so far shown no desire to expand its political influence in Turkmenistan. In 2021, the Chinese Foreign Ministry promised Ashgabat to expand its „traditional and non-traditional” security support without specifying what this means. It remains uncertain whether China intends to protect the existing Turkmen government or is interested in the stability and preservation of its gas infrastructure, regardless of the ruling regime.



6. Changing perceptions of Central Asia in the West





6. Changing perceptions of Central Asia in the West

After February 24, 2022, **the Western countries admitted that they had not given Ukraine due attention** as an independent actor in international relations. Even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the EU and the United States maintained the view that Ukraine remained in the Russian sphere of influence and, therefore, tried to justify Moscow's actions.



Perceptions and desires

However, recognizing the failure in the relations with Ukraine has not prompted the West to reconsider its attitude towards other post-Soviet countries, and especially Central Asia. The region still remains at the mercy of Russia and China. The most important thing that unites the interests of Russia and China in Central Asia is to limit the influence of the United States and the EU in the region.



Bartosz Teślowski

At the same time, recent events, including the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, are causing a decline of Russia's importance in the region, as well as dramatically weakening its soft power. Moscow is losing image-wise as a guarantor of stability in the post-Soviet area, and is becoming a revanchist and neo-imperialist state. The Central Asian states are aware of this, and although Russia's role in the region is still crucial, distance from the Kremlin will grow, and the Russian political projects in the region will be verified.

Besides this process, it will also be possible to witness the rise of China's regional importance and balancing attempts carried out by respective capitals. Countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have already been able to counterbalance the influence of Russia and China with strategic interactions with the broadly understood West and third countries. Now, the role of balancing in the foreign policies of local players will grow.





Mount Bolshoye Bogdo on the border of Russia and Kazakhstan

Besides, there is a stereotypical belief in the West, that Central Asia could become the same breeding ground for radicalism, extremism, and drug trafficking to Europe as Afghanistan or the countries of the Middle East. Another negative belief is that the region's residents could exacerbate Europe's migration crisis, especially since they have already organized terrorist attacks in the EU and the US¹²⁵.

From an economic exchange perspective, Europe is not particularly interested in Central Asia, even though the region's 78 million-strong market could become a very promising area of cooperation. EU countries varying degrees of economic ties with Kazakhstan. In 2016, an agreement was signed on Expanded Partnership and Cooperation. Uzbekistan sought to sign a similar accord with the EU; however, this has not yet been realized.

In reality, Central Asia had not been a top priority for European and American diplomacy for a long time. It seems that the war in Ukraine should have changed this approach. In 2022, Brussels actually intensified contacts and invited the countries in the region to create the "EU-Central Asia" cooperation format. The first meeting was held in October 2022, and the second in

June 2023. In September 2023, a summit was organized under the new "Central Asia + Germany" format. Interestingly, a few weeks later, in the wake of sanctions imposed on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan imposed a ban on the export of 106 types of goods to Russia. The list of banned goods included drones and their components, specialized electronics, chips, and similar products¹²⁶.

The development of negotiation platforms between the West and Central Asia is a positive trend, the most important being that quantity has turned into quality.

The more practical attention Europe devotes to this region, and the deeper it explores the situation of each country, the stronger the guarantee that Russia's influence will begin to decline.

However, in past summits, Brussels and the Central Asian countries have expressed different interests and expectations regarding their mutual cooperation. When the European Union pressed during two previous meetings for the region to stop helping Russia



Copper mining in Kazakhstan

in evading sanctions, the leaders of the Central Asian countries urged Brussels to develop trade ties, industry, the construction of transport corridors and ways to export energy resources bypassing Russia, as well as coordinate environmental issues. The countries in the region made it clear to the EU that they expect its active participation in the post-war development of not only Ukraine, but of other post-Soviet countries as well.

„Because of mutual **distrust**, the region still **remains on the periphery** of European interests.“

However, the EU remains cautious towards Central Asian countries, believing that Russia can also gain from expanding contacts with the region and more effectively avoid sanctions. Central Asia, however, argues that the stronger the Western presence, the weaker the Russian influence. Either way, because of mutual distrust, the region still remains on the periphery of European interests. Therefore, increasing

trust is an essential first step towards a qualitative rapprochement between the EU and Central Asia. Another area of mutual distrust are the security issues. The EU assumes that Russia controls this aspect of Central Asia and therefore avoids discussions on this issue. Meanwhile, the countries in the region are in favor of the increased Western interest in the security issues, including threats from Russia, Afghanistan or unresolved internal conflicts, such as the Kyrgyz-Tajik territorial dispute.

These represent strong grounds for cooperation. Already since the 1990s, the countries of Central Asia have participated in the NATO's "Partnership for Peace." Therefore, it makes sense to resume such contacts, not for the purpose of accession considerations, but rather to show Russia and China that the EU and US will intervene on their behalf in case of security threats.

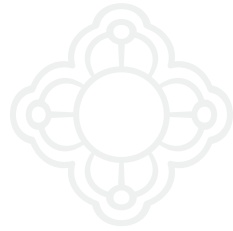
It is important for the West to take part in the discussion regarding the future of Russian military bases in Central Asia. If there is a demand to withdraw these bases, the West should support it. Even the formal participation of Western countries in such talks will signal to Russia that the region is not alone and Western partners will support its activities.

Central Asia's military and political support from the



West is also essential from the point of view of persistent threats from Afghanistan. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021 represented a significant blow to the region, whereby Western partners effectively left the Central Asian states alone to fend off any threats posed by the Taliban movement. At mini-

imum, the West could increase the participation of military personnel in the region, and provide educational programs on border security, customs control, etc.



What makes Europe strong and attractive?

The West's presence in the region is also necessary for axiological reasons. It is crucial that the EU continue to encourage Central Asian elites to respect human rights and the rule of law. The West remains virtually the only partner in the region that is able to mobilize local authorities to develop democratic institutions. Moreover, it is important that its position on these issues be principled and consistent.

In previous years, the EU has held regular meetings on human rights with Central Asian countries, during which they discussed judicial reform, human rights violations, pressure on freedom of speech, etc. Debates need to be intensified, especially with the ensuing war in Ukraine, with the region facing serious problems regarding building relations with foreign partners in the new realities. It is also essential that the dialogue between the EU and Central Asia actively involves civil society, experts, analysts, journalists and lecturers. Such an approach will allow the parties to better understand each other, grow relations and ensure that the dialogue between the parties is long lasting and systematic.

Another area where EU activities have always proved enormously effective was education, culture and regional cooperation. Therefore, the EU should also develop bilateral individual programs with the Central Asian countries, encompassing the primary and vocational education. There is equally a need for young professionals from Central Asia to gain professional experience. The EU could develop professional internships, apprenticeships and scholarship programs in European institutions, companies and civil society organizations.

Cooperation in education could include the establishment of European universities in each Central Asian country, including the establishment of online universities, courses and training programs. The visit of young professionals in Europe would also enable them to gain professional educational experience and skill sets that they could utilize back in their homelands.

European youth can be motivated to gain experience in Central Asia.

In the long term, this will promote mutual rapprochement and understanding between the two regions.



Turkmen family



It is also important that the dialogue between the EU and Central Asia actively involves civil society, experts, analysts, journalists, and lecturers.



Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan



Nargiza Muratalieva

Central Asia is an established region, though it continues its path toward complete self-identification and self-determination. For the sake of the region, first and foremost, it is necessary to develop cooperation among the [region's] states. It is equally important to encourage pragmatism in relations with all foreign partners.





Khursand Khurramov

Russia's international isolation, on the one hand, increases the problems of the economies of Central Asian countries, which are dependent on Russian imports and exports. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in the region as a logistic hub between North and South, West and East. China is most actively trying to exploit the region's transit potential by engaging countries in the „One Belt and One Road” project.

Russia, not minding its isolation, is increasingly actively engaged in developing transport infrastructure through Asia and is expanding the “North-South” transport corridor through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Turkey is developing contacts with Central Asia, including Persian-speaking Tajikistan. At the same time, Ankara tends to support Bishkek's side in the Tajik-Kyrgyz border dispute. Iran, on the contrary, demonstrates support for Tajikistan. At the same time, Tehran is developing transportation and logistics cooperation with countries in the region.

The United States is also becoming more active. It is said that after withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, Washington may open a military base in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. All this seems to indicate that the region is attracting more attention, despite the unfavorable circumstances of the war in Ukraine.



Marcin Popławski

Over the past 30 years, the political relations of Central Asian states with the West have been characterized by low dynamics. They increased periodically – right after their independence, as well as during the initial phase of the operations of Western countries, led by the US, in neighboring Afghanistan. Western corporations actively invested in the region's resource and mining sector, mainly in oil fields in Kazakhstan, but also, for example, in the extraction of uranium (in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) and gold (in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan). Above all, however, the West viewed the region through the prism of geographical remoteness (not conducive to the development of transportation, trade and people-to-people ties), autocratic governments and the strong influence of Russia and China in the political, economic, cultural and security dimensions. Transportation or energy initiatives, which would allow Central Asian countries to be more economically tied to Europe (thus gaining greater political influence), have not yet materialized (such as natural gas exports from Turkmenistan).. →

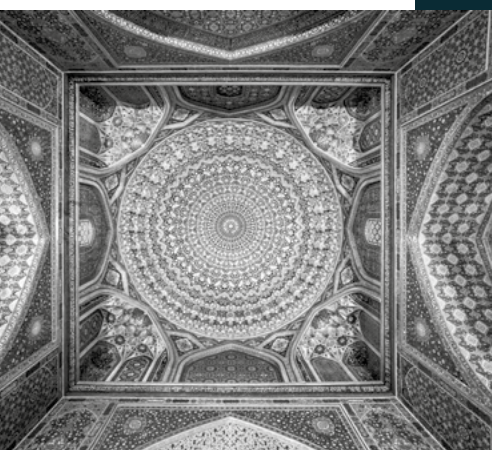




The current rise in the importance of the “Central Asian Five” in the EU and US policy is related to their cautious stance toward full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine. In principle, the countries in the region have not supported Moscow’s invasion of Kiev diplomatically, let alone militarily. They also announced that despite their lack of support for imposing a sanctions regime on Russia, they will abide by it. The main reason for this stance appears to be fears of repeating the “Ukrainian scenario” against them. It is especially true with regard to Kazakhstan, which borders the Russian Federation and is inhabited by a 15-percent Russian minority. Colonial justification for the war, concerns about the desire to restore the empire, and also setbacks in Ukraine have all tarnished Russia’s image as the main stabilizer of the region and guarantor of the authoritarian governments operating there. In social terms, images of the brutal invasion have led to an increased discussion of the issue of decolonization from the Russian-Soviet past in the public debate of some countries in the region (mainly Kazakhstan, but also Kyrgyzstan). Possibly, from the perspective of Central Asian countries, the invasion of Ukraine represents the beginning of the end of the post-Soviet period of their history.

The sum of the factors outlined above has opened the way for the intensification of mutual relations between the West and the countries in the region, but also for the search of other solutions, especially regarding the strengthening of the solid ties with Beijing. This is reflected, among other things, by an unprecedented number of official state visits, both bilateral and multilateral, the taking up by the countries of the region of EU’s bid to develop the so-called “Central Corridor” (a transport route connecting Europe with China, an alternative to the routes through Russia) or 2023 agreements to export mineral resources to the West (oil to Germany, uranium to France). At the same time, the lively dialogue between Brussels, Washington, and the capitals in the region focuses on the issue of compliance with the sanctions imposed on Russia. Central Asian countries are drawing economic profits from the current situation, because they function as routes enabling Russia to evade sanctions. This has made them more important to Moscow. To some extent, this may explain Russia’s rather restrained reactions to the enhanced balancing of the foreign policies of the region’s countries, including the development of contacts with the EU and its respective countries, with the US, but also with Turkey or the countries of the South Caucasus.

The region’s current greater openness to cooperation with the West and other international political actors appears to be driven by the pursuit of short-term economic and political benefits. This has translated into the extinguishing of tensions (e.g., on the issues of border delimitation and demarcation), an increase in coordination among its leaders (as seen in the frequent meetings between the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and in the development of the regional format), as well as into the record mutual trade turnover (conditioned to some extent by the flow of sanctioned goods toward Russia). Despite some setbacks in the institutionalization phase of internal cooperation, significant achievements →



Golden mosaic
in Samarkad,
Uzbekistan



have been made in all five countries. Not long ago, in the autumn of 2022, there were bloody armed clashes between the Kyrgyz and Tajik forces in connection with the border conflict. In this context, it should be added, that the support for regional cooperation and for the “full-fledged regionalism” since the beginning of mutual relations after 1991 has been on the agenda of U.S. and European policy toward the region.

Further development of Central Asia’s relations with the West depends on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Until then, it is unlikely that the countries in the region will dramatically shift the direction of their policies. In the long term, the state of an international conflict between the West, the Russian Federation, and People’s Republic of China will result in more challenges and threats than potential benefits. Its persistence or deepening will also make it more difficult to respond to pressure from world powers. Among the biggest threats to the region are a potential “unwinding” by Russia of the defeat in Ukraine with “substitute political successes” in its surrounding areas, but also the loss of sovereignty of states as a result of subordination to Beijing (in the event of a permanent weakening of Moscow). In a negative scenario this could lead to a sharp deterioration of relations with the West and their downgrading to the raw materials cooperation.



Solar panels on a building roof in Astana, Kazakhstan

The consolidation of the West’s presence in the region (in the future – its expansion) is hampered due to the time perspective, and a number of factors beyond the control of Brussels and Washington. These include, among other things, maintaining the will to develop relations on the part of Central Asia and its leaders. It seems that the current modus operandi of this cooperation has been developed over the past two years. The joint agenda, accepted by all parties, includes raw material cooperation, development of transport and trade, cooperation in „green” energy and water management, and „soft” impact (education, capacity building, development projects). Especially promising is the prospect of cooperation between the West and the region in the areas of raw materials (in particular, rare metals), transportation and „green” transformation.

What remains critically important is the level of economic modernization in the countries of the region and the reduction of their dependency on the export non-renewable raw materials (this applies to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, but also to some extent Uzbekistan), which perpetuates the authoritarian status quo in the region. Unagreed attempts to expand cooperation, especially in terms of promoting democratization and human rights, may lead to a diminishing commitment by the region’s ruling elites as well as counteractions from Russia and China. It is important that the West maintains long-term, empowering activities →



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(internships, student exchanges, scientific programs), in parallel with building a mutually beneficial interdependence at the intergovernmental level (development of agreed fields of cooperation, but also support for reforms) with Central Asian countries.

Bartosz Teślowski



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The opening of Central Asia to new partners is an opportunity which the European Union in particular, can take advantage of. The EU is regarded in high esteem among the public, particularly in its use of soft power. Brussels could successfully use its trust and good reputation to strengthen its position and deepen cooperation, especially in the economic area, but also sharing its experience in the field of administration or legislation.

With this in mind, it is important to remember that promoting democratic values is of least importance for the countries in the region. Brussels, in formulating its policy towards Central Asian countries, should avoid conflating economic, political, or military agreements with expectations of transforming political systems in the region.

What may raise concern among policymakers in the European Union itself, regarding increased activity in the region, is the potential harsh reaction from Moscow. The Kremlin has consistently emphasized its view of the former Soviet Union as its sphere of influence and regards the growing role of other players in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, or Central Asia negatively. However, the defeat of the „second army of the world” in a three-day campaign to capture Kiev has exposed Russia’s weaknesses, signaling its inability to fulfill its threats or allied commitments. A clear example of this weakness is the recent resolution of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which came under Azerbaijani control after years of independence, despite Russia’s desire to maintain the status quo in the region.

7. Poland and Central Asia





7. Poland and Central Asia

Among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, **Poland demonstrates the most systematic interest in Central Asia**. Former president **Aleksander Kwaśniewski** played a significant role in this by undertaking a five-day visit to Central Asia in October 2002, during which he visited **Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan**. After joining the EU, Poland promised to be a **representative of the interests of Central Asian countries**, due to its understanding of the challenges facing the region.

Over time, Kazakhstan has become a key partner of Poland in Central Asia. The importance of this country was related to the presence of a large Polish diaspora. In the first decade of the 21st century, Kazakhstan was home to some 50 thousand Poles¹²⁷. A Kazakh–Polish commission for trade and economic cooperation was established, and a Declaration on the development of friendly relations was signed. In the document Kazakhstan pledged to ensure the cultural rights of the Polish community.

Poland, like other European countries within the framework of diversification of supplies of raw materials, is interested in energy cooperation with the Central Asian countries. The special area of cooperation with Kazakhstan includes oil supplies to the Polish market bypassing Russia. There have been talks with Kazakhstan and other Caspian countries for many years about exporting oil through the Odessa–Brody pipeline all the way to Plock, as well as about financing the construction and operation of an additional spur line leading to the Polish port city of Gdansk on the Baltic Sea¹²⁸.

Kazakhstan initially agreed to participate in the expansion of the oil pipeline project, but then began to insist on Russia's involvement. This caused a cooling of relations with Warsaw. Now that Kazakhstan is looking for solutions to bypass Russia when transporting energy resources, Poland could resume the aforementioned

project. Oil could then be shipped across the Caspian Sea to the ports in Odessa and then to Poland. Long-term plans also included the construction of a gas pipeline that would provide gas supplies to Poland and Europe from the Caspian region through the Caucasus and Ukraine, including via a spur line that runs parallel to the Odessa–Brody oil pipeline.

As the demand of the Central Asian countries to **interact with the EU is growing, Warsaw could play an important role in contributing** to the intensification of dialogue in all areas of cooperation.



The Plock refinery, Poland



Michał Sadłowski



One should note that the statehood of the countries created after 1991 on the ruins of the USSR in this region is unquestionable for Poland. The stability of this region in various aspects, including religion and terrorism, is in the interest of Poland and actually of the EU and NATO. Warsaw is interested primarily in the security and sustainable development of the Central Asian region. At the same time, the markets of the Central Asian countries still appear attractive. Nevertheless, the development of trade cooperation should yield mutual benefits, which may provide incentives to consider implementing, for example, joint investment and development projects in selected spheres. In this regard, the following spheres seem to require further development within the Poland–Central Asia relations, including the academic and scientific field, agriculture, energy, forestry, modernization of management processes and systems, including ISO in administration and in enterprises (private and those state-owned).

All of this, of course, may seem attractive when it comes to implementing Polish foreign policy towards the Central Asian states. First however, it is necessary to answer basic questions about the strategy of the Polish policy, namely:

- Why should Poland cooperate with Central Asian states?
- What can Poland offer these countries, and how can the countries of this region reciprocate to Poland?
- How can Poland's foreign policy toward the Central Asian states be correlated with Poland's policy toward NATO, the EU, China, India and Russia?



Expo 2017 in Kazakhstan



Bartosz Tesławski

Central Asia is certainly not a region that appears in the headlines of the Polish media on a daily basis. It is also difficult to find numerous teams of analysts who would actually be familiar with the region. It is undoubtedly a weakness of the Polish analytical world but also of the Polish foreign policy.

„Poland’s relations with the region are determined more by **temporary interests**, rather than a medium- or long-term strategy.”

As a result, the role of the European Union, not to mention Poland, as a player in the region is much smaller than that of China or Russia.

Poland is much less likely to pursue a broad policy towards the Central Asian region than the European Union or its most prominent members. However, it should not give up on nurturing relations with the region and should strive to deepen the cooperation in two key areas.

The first is migration policy. The Polish economy is in a great need of seasonal workers and migrants to support the labor market. Central Asian countries are already an important source of labor to help fill the existing gaps, and especially since the war in Ukraine is restricting the mobility of men from that country. Expanding the cooperation with respective capitals in the region will allow Poland to benefit from the labor pool of their residents and solve the administrative or legal problems that arise in such situations.

The second area should be the cooperation with civil society representatives and the scientific community. The Polish universities, despite less attractive offering than their West European counterparts, still enjoy recognition among the citizens of the former USSR countries. In addition to this, the soft power and a positive image of Poland itself provide an opportunity to build an attractive offer for young people and attract a generation of „ambassadors” of cooperation with Poland from among the students from the region admitted to the Polish universities.

It should be in Warsaw’s interest to find common ground with the middle class and representatives of the elites in the region. Central Asian societies are trying to resist the Russification and the marginalization of their history and cultures by Russian propaganda. Poland has experience in such activities to share at little cost (compared to administrative or economic projects).



Building a good image of Poland among the region's residents can provide a foundation for further activities in the economic sphere.

The next rational step in the medium term should be the promotion of Poland in the region, as well as the promotion of Polish goods. Kazakhstan is the only country in this region with a significant share of Poland's foreign trade, which still does not exceed 1% of the total value, both in exports and imports. Better recognizability and popularity of Poland could translate into an increase in exports of Polish products, particularly those reaching the consumers.



Youth Alley in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan



Conclusions





Conclusions

Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, **the importance and influence of Russia as Central Asia's strategic partner will continue to decline**. On regional issues the countries will be increasingly less concerned about the Kremlin's opinion. At the same time, **they will expand relations with other foreign partners: Turkey, China, the US, the EU, South Korea, Japan, India, Iran**.

Reducing Russia's influence in the region does not mean radically severing all contacts with it. Central Asia's economic, energy, logistic and political dependence on Russia remains enormously high, and finding an alternative quickly is not possible. Diversification of partners will begin when other investors become interested in the region, including Western countries, but for now this solution remains in the realm of wishful thinking.

Moscow's interest in Central Asia, on the contrary, will continue to grow. Smuggling routes will continue via the countries of the region to Russia. However, the threat of Western sanctions, will gradually diminish its scope. Russian business will continue to invest in the region, and in the event of a new wave of military mobilization in Russia, even more Russians will flow into the region.

Central Asia's economic, energy, logistic and political **dependence on Russia remains enormously high**, and finding an alternative quickly is not possible.



Dushanbe, Tajikistan



Wojciech Wojtasiewicz



The goal of Western policy, including Poland, in Central Asia in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine should be to strengthen its political and economic presence in the region. Above all, the United States and the European Union should support pro-democratic and emancipation trends (political and economic independence from the superpowers – the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China) in the Central Asian republics. In addition, the West should use instruments to strengthen the respect for human rights, media freedom, rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary in Central Asian countries. Moreover, it should support them financially and investment-wise so that it’s not worth it for them to assist the Russian Federation in evading the sanctions imposed on it by the West. It is also important to develop cooperation in the field of energy (EU gas and oil imports) aimed at continuously strengthening the natural resources that are an alternative to those of Russia, which the EU renounced after the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Another challenge is the stabilization of the region in the context of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.

Any acute crisis in Central Asia and the refusal of assistance by Russia will put a question mark over the chances of the region’s current elites, whose legitimacy rests mainly on the support of the Kremlin, to main-

“The strategic importance of Russia for Central Asia will be determined by the first major **regional crisis.**”

tain power. The most adverse scenario for Central Asia is the collapse of Putin’s regime. If he is replaced by a new democratic government the authoritarian Central Asian leaders will not find it easy to establish relations with him. In such a scenario, Moscow’s relations with the countries in the region could undergo a radical revision.

While Putin is still in power, the countries of Central Asia will begin auditing pro-Russian organizations and unions, such as CSTO, EEU and the Customs Union. If, before the launch of the Russian aggression, the countries in the region believed in the strength and power of the “second army of the world,” in the face of

its military setbacks in Ukraine, they are increasingly wondering whether CSTO will be capable of helping them overcome a potential crisis. Participation in the EEU in the context of growing anti-Russian sanctions

also poses additional risks for the region. A question about the advisability of joining this union will appear more and more often. It has been raised since February 24, 2022, also in Kazakhstan.

If the countries of the region manage to avoid threats or overcome possible intra-regional conflicts on their own, be it a border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, or the water-energy

disagreements between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, then the unifying trends will intensify until the creation of a full-fledged supranational integration, such as the one that existed in the first decade of the 21st century in the for Central Asian Cooperation Organization.

In foreign policy, Central Asian countries will increasingly seek multi-vector solutions, balancing between Russia, China and the West in accordance with their own interests. However, the issue of cooperation with the West will dominate.



Countries in the region are interested in **expanding** cultural, educational, and public **relations** with Western countries, and **it is essential that the EU and the US respond to these initiatives.**

So far, the West has focused on attempting to halt the exports of dual-use goods to Russia through the Central Asian region. Another attractive area for the West are Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's energy resources. At the same time, the West is not yet ready to build long-term ties with the region, invest in the economy and help in the modernization of the armed forces of the republics.

Geographically, Central Asia is situated on the periphery of Eurasia, which is why it is unprofitable for the West to develop close trade relations with this region, in particular due to poor logistics and transport corridors. Moreover, the region continues to be perceived as a zone of influence for neighboring states, if not Moscow, then Beijing, Ankara or Tehran.

It is essential that the West continues to promote the issue of human rights and development of democracy in the region. Despite the fact that the Central Asian elites see this as an interference in the internal state affairs, these issues are of utmost importance for the civil societies in the region. Particularly now that the repressions intensify against those dissatisfied with the regime, the media are under censorship, journalists



Day of State Symbols in Kazakhstan

and human rights activists are imprisoned. The West should not view Central Asia as a unity. Despite similarities, the countries in the region are developing differently, so the approach to cooperation with Uzbekistan should differ from how relations are forged with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan. However, it should be emphasized that Central Asia is surrounded by Russia and China and therefore is bound to interact with those neighbors. The West, by expanding its cooperation with Central Asia can help the countries of the region strengthen their sovereignty and thereby contain Moscow's imperial ambitions.



Stone sculptures in Kyrgyzstan



Chimgan, Uzbekistan





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