

Uzbekistan's president in Moscow: limited cooperation, no trust

Wojciech Górecki, Prezydent Uzbekistanu w Moskwie: ograniczona współpraca bez zaufania

On 15 April Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, paid a visit to Moscow. His talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin focused on economic issues and regional security in Central Asia, especially in the context of the planned withdrawal of the ISAF mission from Afghanistan in 2014. Several economic and social agreements were signed, and it was announced that Uzbekistan may soon join the CIS countries' free trade zone agreement.

Commentary

- The main objective of the visit was to canvass the parties' mutual positions on issues related to wider security. On one hand, this is consistent with the logic of the dialogue between Moscow and Tashkent, which can be seen as a specific game. On the other, it is part of the process of intensive diplomatic consultations conducted by representatives of the global powers and the countries of the region in the face of the end of the ISAF mission. Karimov's apocalyptic vision of a "creeping" destabilisation in this part of the world was most likely intended to emphasise the importance of Uzbekistan, which borders on Afghanistan directly. It may also include the suggestion that Russia itself is exposed to an increasing threat of terrorism and extremism.
- Moscow and Tashkent do not have great trust in each other, but they are obliged to consider each other's interests. Uzbekistan, rich in natural gas and strategically located, has pursued an independent policy and has conspicuously refused to participate in Russia's integration initiatives (in 2012, it resigned from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation – for the second time). Over the past two decades, its periodic thaws in relations with Moscow have been purely tactical, for example after the Andijan massacre in May 2005, when the West *de facto* froze its relations with Tashkent. Currently, Uzbekistan's government is hoping that the withdrawing US troops will leave part of their armaments in the country, although it has refrained from any more detailed declarations or announcements. The extension of the CIS free trade zone to cover Uzbekistan is a success for Moscow, but it will not limit Tashkent's sovereignty.

- Moscow has tried to put pressure on Tashkent in a limited way. Last autumn during a visit to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Vladimir Putin repeated his support for the local hydroelectric power projects, which Uzbekistan is opposed to (Bishkek and Dushanbe would gain the ability to control water streams flowing into Uzbekistan). However, the Russian president avoided making a declaration concerning the largest of the planned power plants, at Rogun in Tajikistan – implementation of this particular project is a *casus belli* for Tashkent.
- The documents signed during the visit, although they are not ground-breaking, may be important to those most directly concerned. The agreement on support and mutual protection of investments may prevent the recurrence of incidents such as the Uzbek government's withdrawal last summer of the license for the Uzdunrobita mobile phone company (which is wholly owned by the Russian company MTS) and the seizure of all its assets – even though specific charges (of tax evasion) were brought against only four of the firm's managers. In Uzbekistan about 100 Russian companies and some 850 joint ventures are operating. Russia is Uzbekistan's largest trading partner, and its share of Uzbekistan's foreign trade amounts to almost 30%.