

Erosion of the post-Soviet system in Central Asia

Miłosz Szymański, Krzysztof Strachota

In 2022, post-Soviet Central Asia experienced a number of fundamental challenges that undermine and redefine the systemic foundations of order and stability that have been in place in the region over the past decades. Some of these challenges are typical for the region and have been particularly evident in the protests held in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but also in other cases. They are manifestations of a violent (in Kazakhstan) or evolutionary (in Uzbekistan) transition of these states' political systems and, to no lesser degree, of a social transformation and increased popular aspirations, especially in the region's two largest countries.

From the point of view of the regional order, the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine remain just as important. The war not only undermined Russia's credibility as a state interested in solidifying the former order in the post-Soviet area and capable of enforcing it, it also showed that the Kremlin is actively destabilising this balance. In addition – in part due to Western sanctions – Moscow's attractiveness as an economic partner has significantly decreased. The direct consequences of the war for the region are: increased tension within the elite and society, increased fear of Russia, and attempts to find alternative partners from outside the region (including China and the EU) who can replace Russia.

Both the internal transitions in Central Asia and the increasing 'revision' of Russia's role and of the mechanisms supervised by Moscow are components of an erosion process present within the regional order as a whole. Although at present it is difficult to forecast its dynamic and ultimate effects (both domestically and, for example, in relation to Russia's own position), this development seems irreversible and the risk of tensions is likely to have increased.

The post-Soviet order in Central Asia

Despite persistent concerns about internal problems, sharing a border with Afghanistan and the international rivalry, over the past two decades Central Asia has been characterised by surprising stability. In the region's states, authoritarian regimes have formed, with their keystones including strong leaders basing their rule on family structures, the security apparatus and business elites associated with those two elements. These regimes exercised tough control of society, which was disturbed neither by the (usually fraudulent) elections and anti-system movements (e.g. Islamist movements in Uzbekistan) nor by mass social protests (e.g. in Andijan in Uzbekistan in 2005, in Zhanaozen in Kazakhstan in 2011



and – to a limited degree – in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010). Nor has there been a permanent change of the elite (even in Kyrgyzstan, despite genuine political competition, power is held by specific interest groups on a rotating basis). The societies of Central Asian states have failed to take part in their countries' political life (with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, where mass protests have been decisive in achieving a government reshuffle on several occasions).

Russia continued to be the key factor channelling and stabilising all processes in the region (both when it comes to interstate rela-

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tions and to domestic affairs). Its ties with the countries of the region are extensive and multifaceted, they date back to the former Soviet legacy (e.g. within their current borders the Central Asian republics are the successors to the former Soviet republics) and include economic cooperation, military cooperation, economic migration etc. Russia has built its position based on integration structures which are political (the Commonwealth of Independent States), military (the Collective Security Treaty Organization) and economic (the Eurasian Economic Union) in nature. Moscow's position in the field of security so far remains equally strong, as Russia has military bases in the region, is a supplier of weapons, organises training events, is the guarantor of security in the event of external threats and the arbiter in intra-regional disputes (in recent years, for example, between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). Russia's intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 (upon Kazakhstan's request and with the participation of the CSTO) was the culmination of Russia's role as a patron and regional arbiter. It enabled a quick suppression of street protests, was conducive to the conflict within the local elite being resolved and corroborated the view that there is no alternative to Russia's role as the local guarantor of order. Moscow's position remained unchallenged despite a periodic US military presence (as part of the US mission in Afghanistan) and China's constantly rising economic and political role. Russia is a strategic (although not always the most important) trading partner, investor and transit route (e.g. for Kazakh oil exports). In addition, it is a principal destination for economic migration (which is an important element of socio-political stability, particularly in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and also a cultural reference point, due to the shared language and the strong position of the Russian media in the region.

Consecutive months of 2022 have cast a shadow on this reality: in the domestic aspect they revealed serious destabilising socio-political tensions, and in the external aspect the war in Ukraine has undermined Russia's former role as a preserver of the regional order and the arbiter guarding it.

A stability crisis

In 2022, Central Asia saw a number of events which indicate that the current socio-political system is being eroded. These mainly included the protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022, the brutally suppressed demonstrations in Badakhshan in Tajikistan and in Nukus in Uzbekistan. All of these events – albeit to a varying degree and with their own peculiarities – revealed major tensions within the elite at the central and local levels (which have also spread to the fraught relations between the centre and the regions) and, most importantly, resulted in an unprecedented increase in society's activity. In particular in Kazakhstan, and to a lesser degree also in Uzbekistan, society is becoming an important participant in the political process.

January 2022 saw the largest public protests in Kazakhstan's history. Although they were sparked by social issues (gas price increases), they soon turned political and targeted the country's de facto leader Nursultan Nazarbayev (one of the main slogans was: "Old man, go away!"). They triggered a conflict with Nazarbayev's influential family and a portion of the elite on one side and the incumbent president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on the other. The protests were instantly suppressed as a result of

a Russian-led (formally, CSTO-led) intervention which enabled Tokayev to remain in power (this was the culmination of Moscow's agency in the region).¹

Although quickly contained, the January 2022 crisis triggered the process of a profound revision of the previous political system: Nazarbayev, who was both the de facto and the symbolic keystone of the regime, was stripped of his powers, many of his relatives and collaborators were arrested or left the country. For the first time in Kazakhstan's history, the country's leader was changed due to pressure from society. Controversial price increases were withdrawn and, finally, the public avoided large-scale repression. The following months saw the beginning of the process of a formal adjustment (and liberalisation) of the political system: legal changes and amendments to the constitution were approved in a referendum (e.g. a simplification of the procedure to register political parties, increased powers for local authorities), an early presidential election was scheduled for November 2022, and an early parliamentary election was also announced. The concurrent profound changes affecting the system of governance and the staffing of state administration posts, the unresolved conflict within the elite (the Nazarbayev family is said to control around 30–40% of the country's economy and to have strong influence in the bureaucratic apparatus) and the fresh social aspirations all suggest that an advanced and irreversible process of a revision of the Kazakh political system is underway.²

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Another important manifestation of the erosion of the region's order is seen in the protests held in July 2022 in Uzbekistan – a country which for decades was character-

ised by the strongest fear of destabilisation and the most brutal methods of exercising the control of society (see the brutally suppressed protests in Andijan in 2005 and the constant fight against the “Islamic threat”). Mass protests were held in Nukus, the capital of the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan.³ They were triggered by proposed constitutional amendments which were intended to strip the republic of its autonomy and its right to secede. However, the more profound underlying cause was associated with social problems and with rising social aspirations resulting from a relative liberalisation under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (in power since 2016). On the one hand, the authorities chose to brutally pacify the rallies (according to likely understated official data 18 individuals were killed, 243 injured and 516 arrested), while on the other hand the draft amendments were withdrawn and the president – during his visit to Nukus – assumed an unprecedented conciliatory tone and launched a dialogue with Kazakhstan in order to defuse tension (Kazakhs are ethnically related to Karakalpakhs). Serious concerns about stability re-emerged in Uzbek political life, while both society and local elites started to act as participants in it with new mechanisms for managing the state's problems taking shape.

The brutal pacification of the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region in Tajikistan, which preceded the demonstrations in Nukus, was yet another important manifestation of tensions in the region.⁴ The protests were elements of a crisis ongoing in the region since autumn 2021; they were held in response to the government stepping up their authoritarian course (including acts of repression), to the de facto abolishment of the region's autonomy, as well as to instances of the abuse of power

¹ K. Strachota, 'Kazakhstan: the CSTO intervenes, the protests pacified', OSW, 10 January 2022, osw.waw.pl.

² W. Górecki, 'Tokayev's Perestroika. Kazakhstan in the face of internal and external changes', *OSW Commentary*, no. 456, 21 June 2022, osw.waw.pl.

³ K. Strachota, M. Szymański, 'Krwawo stłumione protesty w Uzbekistanie', OSW, 4 July 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁴ K. Strachota, M. Szymański, 'Walki w tadżyckim Badachszanie', OSW, 20 May 2022, osw.waw.pl.

committed by officials delegated to the region from the capital. All this happened in an isolated region characterised by divisions along ethnic and religious lines, affected by a difficult social situation and uncertainty posed by neighbouring Afghanistan. In their reaction to the demonstrations, the government limited themselves to brutally suppressing the rallies and chose not to attempt to introduce political solutions which could serve as a safety valve in the future (and which could be applied towards other regions).

Russia as a destabilising factor

Fundamental to the erosion of order in Central Asia has to do with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That is: the political gravity of the aggression (including the arbitrary undermining of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the post-Soviet area), the exposure of Russia's relative weakness (including its military potential), and finally the sharp decline in its economic attractiveness (key to which is the role of Western sanctions).

Paradoxically, Moscow has both challenged its willingness to stabilise the post-Soviet area and undermined its ability to guarantee or revise the regional order. From the Central Asian perspective, Russia has become the main challenge to the stability and development of the region and its specific states. Moreover, positive instruments (e.g. economic) that the Kremlin had at its disposal until the invasion, have been significantly reduced.

Despite the robust network of institutional and informal ties between Moscow and the region, the fact that Central Asia offered no political (let alone military) sup-

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port to Russia's invasion has been the most important manifestation of its concern about the situation and its distanced attitude towards Russia. This was particularly evident in President Tokayev's strong opposition to the idea of following Russia's example of recognising the independence of the Luhansk and Donetsk "people's republics" (e.g. during a public debate with Vladimir Putin in Saint Petersburg on 17 June 2022). Apart from that, there is a growing and openly expressed concern on the part of the media, the elite and society about Russia's recurrent suggestions that Kazakh statehood is artificial and about Moscow's claims to northern Kazakhstan (which is home to a large Russian minority). It is likely that concerns about their state's territorial integrity boosted the reaction put forward by the governments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the protests held in Badakhshan and in the Republic of Karakalpakstan (both are autonomous regions and Russia could refer to its historical ties with Karakalpakstan and to its strong social relations with Badakhshan). Alongside this, in each of the region's republics measures have been taken to emphasise their sovereignty and to isolate their societies from the conflict (this included blocking war-related symbols and rallies, recruitment to the Russian army etc.) as much as possible – despite the strong influence of the Russian media.

Until recently Russia was economically attractive in the region, which was significant; this is another important change. It happened despite short-term benefits associated with the capital flight and that of Russian companies to Central Asia and despite profits generated as a result of Moscow re-orienting its trade routes due to restrictions imposed on it. However, these profits fail to balance out the risk and cost resulting from a comprehensive sanctions regime introduced by the West with potential supply and demand limitations on the Russian market. The politicisation and instrumentalisation of dependencies are important examples of negative consequences of specific countries' ties with Russia. The most striking examples include repeated threats that the capacity of the most important export route for Kazakh oil will be closed or limited (around 80% of total Kazakh oil exports is sent through

the pipeline operated by the CPC consortium that runs to Novorossiysk) and Moscow's strong opposition to the planned construction of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline (which could potentially jeopardise Russian gas exports and could foster the region's political cooperation with Turkey and the West).

Another important process ongoing in the region involves increasing economic uncertainty, in particular in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The economies of these countries

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have for years been dependent on the Russian labour market and on remittances provided by labour migrants, which account for a significant portion of each country's GDP (according to 2020 data the proportion for Kyrgyzstan is 31%, and 27% for Tajikistan).⁵ The World Bank forecasts that in 2022 the value of these remittances will decrease and the GDP recorded for the region's states will decline – in Kyrgyzstan by 33% and 5%⁶ and in Tajikistan by 40% and 2%, respectively.⁷ The potential consequences of this process are important in at least three aspects. Besides the purely economic aspect, there is the social aspect: the loss of livelihood for more than half of the population and, in the more distant perspective, the threat of large numbers of frustrated migrants returning home. Finally, there are cracks in Russia's positive image in the eyes of the residents of the Central Asian states (economic migrants continue to be the promoters of this positive image).

Searching for alternatives

The process of a profound revision of Russia's position in Central Asia – the erosion of its role as it shifts from a preserver of the status quo to one destabilising the situation, combined with the rapid disappearance of positive elements in its policy – poses a major challenge to the region's states. Although their fear of Russia is strong (while they are aware of their region's endemic problems) and no clear alternatives are available, specific states have launched a number of measures to at least mitigate this risk, and ultimately to implement regional mechanisms that will enable them to replace Russia with other partners.

Over the last six months, there has been an unprecedented rise in diplomatic activity in the region and beyond (with the participation of Turkey, Iran, the EU, China, the US, and also Georgia, Azerbaijan and other countries) intended to prevent political tension and to define new areas of cooperation. Most importantly, tension was avoided in relations with Afghanistan, which has been ruled by the Taliban for a year and is riddled with numerous internal conflicts. In this context, Uzbekistan plays a special role as it is involved in political dialogue with Kabul, continues to develop its trade (and is probing opportunities for an expansion of transport routes via Afghanistan), and has a reserved attitude to armed border clashes. One important novelty is the de-escalation of traditional tensions inside the region: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan avoided the risk of a conflict over the Republic of Karakalpakstan; in 2022, for the first time in many years, there were no springtime border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan;⁸ several sessions of multilateral political talks were held in the region (including on delicate issues regarding the delimitation of borders) as well as in other locations (an increase in Turkey's attractiveness and activity was recorded, especially in its relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). The burden of Central Asia's stability and responsibility shouldered by its republics

⁵ 'Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic', The World Bank, worldbank.org.

⁶ 'The World Bank in the Kyrgyz Republic', The World Bank, worldbank.org.

⁷ 'The World Bank in Tajikistan', The World Bank, worldbank.org.

⁸ The clashes happened in September, during a particularly important period in the context of Russia's defeats in Ukraine and during the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, see K. Strachota, 'Fighting on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border', OSW, 19 September 2022, osw.waw.pl.

increases the region's importance as viewed by both China (which has reasons to be concerned about Moscow's ineffectiveness) and the West (the EU, the US, the OSCE). At the same time, the issue of stability prompts the region to show increased interest in partners who could be able to mitigate the potential threats posed by Russia.

The developments in the economic sphere are as intensive as in the political sphere. They include Central Asia's readiness to diversify its markets and transport routes. This has not been seen in decades and seems to be convergent with the interests pursued by China (especially in the transport sphere) as well as the West and Turkey (competition for access to resources and the promotion of transport routes). The renewal of talks on the possible export of Turkmen gas to Turkey/Europe and on the development of the export of Kazakh oil to Western clients (this is difficult to achieve in the short-term perspective) is of symbolic importance, while efforts by all interested parties to revive the "middle corridor" (which runs from Central Asia and China, via the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia onto Turkey or the Black Sea) are expected to bring more tangible results. In this context, Kazakhstan has announced the most ambitious plans including the expansion of onshore and offshore infrastructure (including tankers) to enable the transport of commodities to Azerbaijan (including oil, which would be sent via Azeri pipelines). Aside from the route running westward, topics of ongoing intensive talks include transport projects that run via Iran (to the Middle East, the Arabian Sea and also to Turkey) and Afghanistan (to Pakistan). This means that Russia is facing the prospect of a significant reduction in its economic influence combined with existential determination on the part of the region's states to find alternatives to economic (and political) cooperation with Moscow.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit held in Samarkand (on 15–16 September 2022) and Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan that preceded it were symbolic culminations of the present stage of the transition underway in Central Asia.⁹ The SCO's members and guests (including Russia, China, the region's states, Asia's largest states) emphasised their concern about the global consequences of Moscow's policy; their concern with regards to stabilisation of Central Asia under these new circumstances (Xi Jinping stressed this issue particularly strongly during his visit to Astana) and the need to develop new channels of cooperation in the sphere of transport as de facto alternatives competing with those used thus far, which were controlled by Moscow.

Outlook

In 2022, just as in the early stage of development of independent republics which was followed by a spell of unrest resulting from US/Western activity launched after 11 September 2001, Central Asia saw an accumulation of fundamental challenges to its internal order (at the level of specific states and of the region as a whole) and to the international system (which until recently favoured Russia) in which it operated. The tumultuous events in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan indicate both the importance of domestic problems (including social and political problems), limitations or even exhaustion of models of governance applied by specific countries, and the magnitude of accumulated effects of a transition associated with the generation gap and identity issues, which are becoming increasingly evident with each subsequent crisis.

In a negative scenario, the erosion of the order valid thus far may result in a rising threat of serious and accumulated disruptions that will be temporarily eliminated through repression (as in Tajikistan). In a positive scenario, a process focused on a revision and optimisation of the present systems will happen and will manifest itself for example in society adopting an increasingly subjective stance (first stirrings of this process are already evident in Kazakhstan).

⁹ K. Strachota, K. Chawryło, M. Bogusz, M. Menkiszak, 'Against the backdrop of war. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand', OSW, 20 September 2022, osw.waw.pl.

Increasing modifications to the region's internal policy have been significantly boosted by a parallel process of the system of dependencies on Russia becoming exhausted as a result of the war in Ukraine. The war has significantly weakened the positive instruments used by Moscow to influence the region and emphasised the negative ones. Once a preserving and stabilising force in Central Asia, Russia has now become a destabilising force. This results in Central Asian states cautiously but consistently searching for alternative stabilising factors, most importantly new economic partners (including Western ones). For the region, these processes are complex and risky and at the present stage they cannot be referred to as effective; moreover, they expose Central Asia to Russia's counter-measures (which Moscow can implement with the use of negative instruments).

While the further erosion of the region's previous model of relations with Russia seems irreversible, the immediate future of the area and its place in the world in any scenario will still be strictly determined by Moscow's position and policies. At the same time, the magnitude of challenges faced by Central Asia may have a major impact on China's policy as Beijing will be forced to increase its involvement in efforts to stabilise the region, to devise new instruments of cooperation with Central Asian states and to revise its strategic relationship with the Kremlin.