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# UKRAINIAN POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIAN STATES: WHICH BRIDGES DO WE NEED?

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*Central Asian states are often seen as a bridge between Europe and Asia. Given the importance of the region, Ukraine needs to reconsider deeply its policy towards the Central Asian states. The paper examines the specifics of governance in the Central Asian states, regional problems, interests of the Central Asian states and global actors in the dimensions of logistics, energy, and security. Suggestions for Ukraine's policy in Central Asia are presented through the article.*


## Introduction

In this paper, the term “Central Asia” will refer to five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Although regional integration is highly complicated, the image of a united Central Asia has a symbolic meaning, is reflected in the UN General Assembly resolutions, and may become more viable due to the restart of Uzbekistan's relations with neighbours after 2016.

Experts have found some degree of consensus in discussions on Ukraine's policy towards the states of Central Asia. Low level of cooperation is characterized by the lack of a strategic vision. Annual reports on the assessment of Ukraine's foreign policy presented by the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”<sup>1</sup> gave Ukraine's presence in Central Asia a poor rating. The first superficial look at the state of the art in

Ukraine's relations with the Central Asian states reveals Ukraine's recent diplomatic underrepresentation. Both political and economic cooperation is undermined by the fact that these landlocked states are close allies of the Russian Federation in a number of alliances and projects and have little space left for manoeuvre in light of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. One should not,

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**Low level of cooperation is characterized by the lack of a strategic vision**

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however, mistakenly remove that region from the agenda after Ukraine has officially chosen the pro-EU course, since being embedded in the patchwork of international relations, no state can allow itself a strictly black and white division.

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1 H. Maksak et al. (ed.), *Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2017*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Office in Ukraine: Kyiv 2018, p. 224.

Moreover, the current state of affairs challenges Ukraine in several dimensions. First, trade between Ukraine and the Central Asian states has recently become complicated due to restrictions imposed by the Russian Federation. Not to forget, law restrictions may result in the rise of informal mechanisms of cooperation or the rise of crime, such as corruption at border control. Secondly, the states of Central Asia usually move in the wake of Russian policy regarding Ukraine, for instance, while voting in the UN. Simultaneously, Kazakhstan emphasizes its readiness to take part in the UN peacekeeping mission to Ukraine in case of its deployment. It is not a case for Ukraine as Kazakhstan has strong ties in military cooperation with Russia and is a member of the pro-Russian Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to which Russia devotes much attention despite permanent institutional problems. Finally, cooperation with global actors in the region may present both a challenge and an interest for Ukraine.

### **Five Shades of Authoritarianism: Leadership and Regional Issues in the Region**

Divided by the Soviet rule, geographical peculiarities, water and climate-related disputes, religious and ethnic cleavages, the Central Asian states present five shades of electoral authoritarianism with different levels of regime consolidation and fragmentation of political parties<sup>2</sup>. Interstate relations are based on personal relations with authoritarian leaders, who direct both foreign policy and political life, while facing almost no institutional restrictions.

In terms of electoral cycles, elections are not happening often and are not the

regular way of changing a head of state. Even if elections happen, the influence of the previous rulers remains strong, as it is expected in Kazakhstan, where, even in the case of a transfer of power, the incumbent Nazarbayev would keep his influence in the frame of the National Security Council of Kazakhstan<sup>3</sup>. The modest success of reforms provided by Uzbekistan's new president should not give much optimism as together with making Uzbekistan more open to the world, these reforms rely on a repressive system. We are yet to see whether they would lead the country to what is called "democracy by mistake" or, at least, make Uzbekistan more attractive for other partnerships. Whether Uzbekistan's openness would result in re-engagement with Russia is another question altogether. Kyrgyzstan somewhat differs as it has failed to consolidate its regime, so the state has very low political plurality. However, its foreign policy is undermined by a strong dependence on Russia. To sum up, diplomatic communications at the highest level present the main form of interstate communication with the states of Central Asia.

Besides holding on to power, Central Asian leaders have to deal with regional problems. It is in the interest of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to finish the demarcation and delimitation of the state borders and provide mine-clearing operations where needed. Enclaves, ethnic heterogeneity, and concerns relating to the Russian language as an instrument of soft power in the region add more tension. The Aral Sea crisis affects negatively the environment of the region and has little chance to be managed due to the mostly declarative rhetoric and potentially challenging initiatives, such as

2 G. Golosov, *The Five Shades of Grey: Party Systems and Authoritarian Institutions in post-Soviet Central Asian States*, "Central Asian Survey", 2018, pp. 1-18.

3 A. Gussarova, *Kazakhstan Moves to Expand, Strengthen National Security Council*, "The James Town Foundation", 13 February 2018 [<https://jamestown.org/program/kazakhstan-moves-expand-strengthen-national-security-council/> access: 15 February 2019].

the extraction of hydrocarbons from the Uzbek side and the construction of artificial lakes in Turkmenistan.

Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province borders with Afghanistan and is practically beyond the central government's control. The extremist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan found shelter in Tajikistan, and that creates more tension among the states. Threats from the Afghan side, including the spread of radical Islam, illegal arms and drug traffic, Taliban and ISIS activity make Central Asia dependent on external help and this complicates the development of infrastructure projects. However, security issues and concerns regarding Afghanistan can serve a cornerstone for further regional integration.

Support of Central Asian initiatives regarding the issues listed above at the international level may serve as an additional tool for cooperation, especially given that presidents of the states of the region strive to gain symbolic legitimacy at the domestic level by highlighting how successful they are in the global arena. Although solutions to most of the challenges require improvements in the quality of governance and local actions, the transnational character of the problems coincides with Ukraine's interests and values in terms of such global issues as terrorism or climate change. Given the fact that the regional identity of Central Asia as a geographical and political unit appears to be more prominent, e.g., while cooperating in the UN<sup>4</sup>, a partnership between Central Asia

and other states beyond the traditional global actors gets favourable conditions. However, this optimism may be followed by, but does not automatically imply, the diminishing influence of great powers, which are the main drivers of regional formats of cooperation.

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**trade between Ukraine and the Central Asian states has recently become complicated due to restrictions imposed by the Russian Federation**

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The Central Asian states have weak economies, exhausted by bad governance. Being landlocked creates their dependence on global actors, mainly Russia, in the transit of goods and energy. As logistics and energy projects are mostly developed with foreign sources, the Central Asian states have massive issues with debt. Kazakhstan's diversified debt structure<sup>5</sup> does not pose a serious problem, but Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are in the risk zone due to the debt to China within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>6</sup>. China's practice to "forgive" debts for resources not only undermines sovereignty, but may create further problems. Turkmenistan presents an excellent example: It experiences problems with cash and has to grant China gas for free in exchange for pipeline construction. Tajikistan is the most remittance-dependent country and is seriously affected by sanctions against Russia<sup>7</sup>. Kazakhstan aims

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4 Resolution Adopted by the UN General Assembly on 22 June 2018, A/RES/72/283, *Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation to Ensure Peace, Stability and Sustainable Development in the Central Asian Region*, United Nations, 2018 [[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/72/283](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/72/283) access: 11 March 2019].

5 *External Debt*, National Bank of Kazakhstan [<https://nationalbank.kz/?docid=202&switch=english> access: 15 February 2019].


6 J. Hurley et al., *Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective*, Center for Global Development Policy Paper 121, March 2018 [[www.cgdev.org/publication/examining-debtimplications-belt-and-road-initiative-a-policy-perspective](http://www.cgdev.org/publication/examining-debtimplications-belt-and-road-initiative-a-policy-perspective) access: 15 February 2019].

7 U. Mukhtorova, *Central Asia and NATO against a Backdrop of Changing Geopolitical Realities*, NATO Defense College Fellowship Monograph, January 2018, [<http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1132> access: 15 February 2019].

to stay as a regional leader and tries to develop its economy, implementing new projects and initiatives in innovations, green economy, renewable energy, financial sector. Cooperation with Kazakhstan on these issues may be a subject for further analysis.

The main narrative proposed by the region is to be a bridge between Europe and Asia. This aspiration coincides with perceptions of global actors, which seek to use the region as an instrument of further expansion. Being puzzled in terms of stakeholders, interests, and thematic directions, the question of the agenda regarding Central Asia and the image of a bridge can be better considered in three interconnected dimensions: logistics and infrastructure, energy, and security.

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***Russia aims to keep its leading role in the energy sector and cannot let any project out of its patronage***

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Further, I will try to explain the interests of Central Asian states and global actors in the respective areas and describe the projects that are on the agenda. India, Turkey, and Iran play their cards in the region. Their influence, as well as the role of respective regional organizations or smaller formats such as the US-led “C5+1”, which implies annual foreign ministers’ meetings of the Central Asian countries and the US, should not be underestimated as well. However, I focus on such global actors as China, Russia, the EU, and NATO. First, their presence in the region is determinative; secondly, Ukraine has these actors as significant others and,

due to the relatively weak capacity to play a big part by itself, should find its place in their competition or cooperation over the region.

### **At the Heart of Trade Roads**

While the EU seems to be the only global actor concerned about democratic development in the region and is likely to keep this agenda in the future, it also considers Central Asia in terms of the Asia – Europe connectivity. In the latest Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM)<sup>8</sup>, emphasis was given to the road transport and rail connection in terms of the East – West link from the EU to China and Central Asia. The EU is certainly concerned by China’s rise and its Belt and Road Initiative. The Connectivity Strategy was even called an alternative to the BRI project. For the time being, the EU is preparing a new strategy towards Central Asia, with the previous one in place from 2007–2013. We are still waiting to see how much attention will be given to democratic values, and how seriously the EU takes cooperation with the region in infrastructure, energy, and security issues.

Sea connection between Europe and Asia is provided by Turkmen and Kazakh seaports at the Caspian. Project “Eurasia”, highly advocated by the Kazakh president Nazarbayev, should connect the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea through the territory of the Russian Federation and then via the Kerch Strait<sup>9</sup>. The project seems to be alive only in public speeches and attracts no serious interest of stakeholders, including Russia and, supposedly, China, so far. What is really probable and what is advocated at the EU level is a connection with the

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8 *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank. Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy*, 19 September 2018 [[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/50708/connecting-europe-and-asia-building-blocks-eu-strategy\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/50708/connecting-europe-and-asia-building-blocks-eu-strategy_en) access: 15 February 2019].

9 *Kazakhstan Wishes Access to the Sea*, “Tenge Monitor”, 03 August 2018 [<http://economics.kazgazeta.kz/?p=24389> access: 15 February 2019].



Black and the Mediterranean Sea via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus to the Romanian port of Constanta, which may become a transshipment point of goods from/to Turkmenistan. Both Constanta and Turkmenbashi are located on the Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) trade route and have importance in terms of China's BRI.

Ukraine, with its Odessa port and a joint border with Romania, should take a proactive position and become involved in the project. Maintaining good relations with Romania and Georgia is thus a priority for Ukraine in these projects.

Landlocked Uzbekistan aims at getting access to the Caspian Sea (via the Navoiy-Turkmenbashi rail link through Turkmenistan) and further to Europe as well as to the Persian Gulf via the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman railway. Its interest in financing the expansion of the Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat line (currently operating up to Hairatan) in Afghanistan is due to further plans to get access up to China and India.

China is highly interested in improving connections with bordering Central Asian states, including the Angren-Pop railway tunnel and the project of a railway connection Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China. The Central Asian states see benefits from China's interest in the region in terms of the BRI, as it would help to develop infrastructure and diversify trade roads.

## **All That Energy**

Russia aims to keep its leading role in the energy sector and cannot let any project out of its patronage. The most ambitious idea is to create a single gas market in the frame of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and to launch it within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) before 2025. The expected creation of this market served as a formal reason for Kazakhstan to deny gas

export to Ukraine in 2015. It is unlikely that the market would start operating in time, and Russia tries to involve Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the EEU. In Uzbekistan, Russia is to build the first nuclear power plant in Central Asia. Ukraine has experience with nuclear energy, which can be shared with Uzbekistan, whose experts are already visiting Ukrainian nuclear stations.

Kazakhstan is still dependent on oil transit through Russian territory. In Kyrgyzstan, Russia was also involved in hydropower projects, but due to economic difficulties the project has been frozen and the dispute sent to the ICJ. Tajikistan denied Russian aspirations to take part in the construction of hydropower plants (HPPs) due to the unfavourable terms of the contract proposed by Russia and objections from the Uzbek side. Construction of HPPs will remain a factor of tension and further fuel conflicts between the states of the region. The case is that the construction of HPPs by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the upper reach of common rivers is negatively seen by downstream Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as a cause of the lack of water for their agricultural needs.

For that reason, potential political escalations with the following outcomes for the interstate relations should be considered before planning the participation of Ukrainian companies in the building of HPPs. The challenge for Ukraine is to decide whether the unclear business interests or a partnership with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and the regional unity are of higher importance.

In terms of relations with Turkmenistan, Russia tries to win time with empty promises to keep the Central Asian state in its fairway. Turkmenistan is in a very unpleasant situation now as it has China as the only importer of its gas, which undermines Turkmenistan's energy security. Other traditional buyers of Turkmen gas, Russia and Iran, have long-term disputes with

Turkmenistan and are unlikely to restore gas imports in the nearest future. The fuel to the fire is added by the fact that Turkmenistan suffers from an economic crisis. Last summer, Russia promised to restore gas supply from Turkmenistan starting from 2019; however, no feasible results have been seen yet. It is doubtful that Russia has any economic interest in Turkmen gas and is ready to buy it just to prevent further growth of China's influence in the region in general and in Turkmenistan in particular.

Turkmen gas is unlikely to be considered seriously at the EU level. The TCP project (Trans-Caspian pipeline), which is to deliver gas from Turkmenistan through the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, is in the list of Projects of Common Interest of the EU. As a part of the Southern Gas Corridor, it would be accessible to several EU states and able to diversify import of Turkey and Bulgaria, which strive to be gas hubs. However, scheduled for June 2019, the project would unlikely be finished. Azerbaijan aims to deliver gas by itself and may hope for some leverage on Russia regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia and Iran have no interest in the TCP despite some talks on including Iran in the project. The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, finally signed last summer after years of fruitless negotiations, only gave some frameworks for the demarcation of boundaries and construction of pipelines, so current disputes between Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Iran are yet to be resolved; business interests are not very clear<sup>10</sup>. However, one should not hurry to take the TCP off the agenda with regards to the continual interest showed by different states, mainly Georgia and Germany. Without further advocating for the TCP, Turkmenistan risks falling under Russian influence completely. In terms of the estimated costs, gas supply

through the Central Asia pipeline (runs from Turkmenistan to Russia) and via Ukraine's GTS to Europe seems to be most profitable for Turkmenistan. It is for further policy evaluation of how to reactivate this option with benefits for both Turkmenistan's and Ukraine's interests.

The TAPI project (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India), which will enable the supply of Turkmen gas to India, is of vital interest for Turkmenistan. One should take into account that, as Turkmenistan does not cope with the completion of its part of TAPI, Russian involvement in the project becomes more possible. Afghanistan may hope that Russia will boost the project. Ukraine should consider possible involvement of other parties in TAPI and CASA-1000 when cooperating on these issues.

It was already mentioned that the states of the region are in danger in terms of border security and spread of terrorism, namely regarding the situation in Afghanistan. Such vulnerability is also used by global actors in geopolitical games and creation of political narratives.

### **Cooperation and Competition in Security Issues**

Security concerns of global actors in the region are concentrated around but not restricted to the Afghan issue. NATO has become a prominent security partner in Central Asia with regards to its presence in Afghanistan and the Partnership for Peace programme. Its activity has been limited in recent years and focused mostly on military training and education of the military. Kazakhstan has been the most active partner of NATO with the main focus on peacekeeping. Earlier open to cooperation,

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10 S. Pirani, *Let's Not Exaggerate: Southern Gas Corridor Prospects to 2030*, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies Paper: NG 13, July 2018 [<https://www.oxfordenergy.org/publications/lets-not-exaggerate-southern-gas-corridor-prospects-2030/>; access: 15 February 2019].

Kyrgyzstan has entered “the new era of being a Russian client” after it closed the only NATO base in the region in Manas because of the Russian pressure<sup>11</sup>. Neutral Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan cooperate with NATO in security issues and, when there was a need, they provided territories and air space for NATO transfer to or from Afghanistan<sup>12</sup>. However, the Russian role is growing and opposing to NATO involvement.

Recently declared, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is promised to be gradual and in coordination with NATO. Given the fact that a threat from the highly decentralized Taliban and ISIS remains, and Central Asia has no capacity to respond to all the challenges by itself, it is doubtful that the West would stop cooperating on the issue with the region. Whether it would trigger the rise of the activity of Russia or China, or a more prominent involvement of India, we are yet to see.

Russia has military bases in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, which are all members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and uses security concerns of terrorism, both real and imagined, presenting itself as “a security guarantee” and “the only reliable protector” to eliminate terrorist influence. Russian troops, in particular, helped in joint Afghan border control with Central Asian states. The latter, being the most passive NATO partner, has a Russian

military base with the Russian military managing its space station “Okno”. Besides, Russia supplies Central Asian states, mainly Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with cheap but usually obsolete weapons<sup>13</sup>. However, the perspective for Ukraine or the EU countries to sell arms to, say, Turkmenistan should not be perceived optimistically due to the EU agreement to reject licenses to countries that are known for domestic repressions<sup>14</sup>.

China definitely “goes West”, strengthening its military presence together with the development of infrastructure projects in the region. With this strategy, China accumulates political influence towards global leadership, facing no serious opposition from Russia, which can only maintain the rhetoric of the coincidence of interests and good partnership. China uses both bi- and multilateral mechanisms to catalyse military cooperation, e.g., the Quadrilateral Cooperation Coordination Mechanism among China, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, which should operate under the Shanghai Cooperation. China also has started to strengthen its military presence in terms of border control due to the allegedly growing threat from the Afghan side<sup>15</sup>. Anti-Chinese sentiments in the region may slow down China’s expansion, but not pose a serious opposition. We are to see whether there would be a new balance of China and Russia in the region, and what place would be left for the West.

11 S. Ott, *Russia Tightens Control over Kyrgyzstan*, “The Guardian”, 18 September 2014 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/18/russia-tightens-control-over-kyrgyzstan> access: 15 February 2019].

12 U. Mukhtorova, *Central Asia and NATO against a Backdrop of Changing Geopolitical Realities*, NATO Defense College Fellowship Monograph, January 2018 [<http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1132> access: 15 February 2019].

13 U. Mukhtorova, *Central Asia and NATO against a Backdrop of Changing Geopolitical Realities*, NATO Defense College Fellowship Monograph, January 2018 [<http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1132> access: 15 February 2019].

14 *Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP*, “Europa.eu”, 08 December 2008 [<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32008E0944&from=EN> access: 15 February 2019].

15 G. Shih, *In Central Asia’s Forbidding High Lands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops*, “Washington Post”, 18 February 2019, [[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html) access: 19 February 2019].

## Conclusions

Central Asia is keeping its geopolitical significance as an energy and trade bridge between Europe and Asia, and global actors would like to have more control over that bridge. The complexity of relations with the region is also due to the unreliability of its states and changing conditions in the carrying out of joint projects, weakness of their economies, with dependence on external forces and debt spiral, and political regimes.

Under such conditions of increasing competitiveness, and given the physical distance, it is a challenge for Ukraine to participate in this geopolitical game. There is good news: The most suitable policy for Ukraine is to cooperate with global actors in bridging Central Asia. A clear understanding of the configuration of political forces may equip Ukraine with the necessary strategic view on how to reach foreign policy goals with limited resources.

Joint projects with the EU and the South Caucasus states, in particular, in terms of the increase of transport capacity to connect Central Asia and Europe, as well as China's initiatives in the frame of the BRI must be taken into account. It is clear that Georgia and Romania should be given more attention. In

terms of security, the partnership with NATO in the region continues to be a priority, with the focus on cooperation regarding the Afghan issue, despite all the current uncertainty. One must also not forget about the less visible but certainly important issues that are not covered in this paper but need additional attention: hybrid threats, including cyber security, alleged protection of minorities' rights, rethinking of the Soviet past, and others. These common challenges may present a subject for interagency cooperation, and cultural diplomacy may be helpful as well.

It is a tough and crucial task for Ukraine to maintain permanently good political relations with the Central Asian states and provide active diplomatic work on the ground, as well as to be ready to cooperate more actively if the foreign policy environment becomes more favourable.

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