



BULLETIN

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The Kremlin's Strategy in Central Asia after the Ukraine Crisis

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Russia seeks political reintegration of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan show a loyalist attitude, trying not to irritate the Kremlin. However, they agree only on economic integration, excluding the construction of supranational political structures. Other countries in the region are even less interested in closer ties with Russia. The aggressive tactics of the Kremlin towards Ukraine could therefore be repeated in Central Asia. The EU, in order to prevent destabilisation of the region, should deepen dialogue with local governments in the area of security.

The Reaction of the Central Asian States towards the Crisis in Ukraine. Officially, the governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have shown support for Russian actions in Ukraine. The Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in accordance with the Kremlin's narrative, described the new government in Kyiv as neo-fascist. This position, loyal to Moscow, has been met with approval by Kazakhstani Russians, although opposition groups among ethnic Kazakhs were critical. However, it is more important for the government in Astana to maintain good relations with Moscow, which remains Kazakhstan's main partner in the framework of the Customs Union (CU), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), planned for 2015.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan has shown support for the Russian annexation of Crimea, a move that can be understood as a result of Kyrgyzstan's growing economic dependence on Russia, especially in the sectors of mining and energy (including gas supplies from Russia, and financing of the construction of hydroelectric power plants). Kyrgyzstan seeks membership of the Russia-led Customs Union and the planned Eurasian Economic Union. However, the authorities in Bishkek did not support the Kremlin regarding the legitimacy of Viktor Yanukovich's leadership. The Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry stressed that the president, who had lost the support of the nation and fled abroad, could no longer be considered the legitimate leader of Ukraine.

Other countries in the region, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, adopted a "wait and see" strategy towards the Ukraine crisis. The Uzbek Foreign Ministry was vague in its call for the use of force to be avoided, and for the principle of territorial integrity to be respected. The population of these republics has no access to media that is not pro-government and these outlets were silent on the Ukraine crisis, which was probably a result of the region's authoritarian leaders' fear that the civic rebellion in Kyiv could be "contagious."

The Central Asian republics have reason for concern about the effects of economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the European Union on Russia. Not only the economy of Kazakhstan, which, together with Belarus and Russia is a member of the Customs Union, but also other countries in the region have strong connections with the Russian economy. Money from compatriots working in Russia is a key source of income for the residents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Thus, Russia's economic isolation may lead in the long run to a lower income for migrants, thus hitting the economies of Central Asia.

"Controlled Destabilisation" as a Tool of Influence. The annexation of Crimea and Russian support for separatism in the east of Ukraine, justified by the demographic dominance of ethnic Russians in these territories, could set a precedent for similar Russian actions in Central Asia. The risk of such a scenario applies especially to Kazakhstan, where 23% of the population are Russian, constituting the majority of the population in the northern regions.

Further simplifications of procedures for granting Russian citizenship to people born in the former USSR, or who are descendants of the citizens of this country, and who know the Russian language, have raised concerns in Central Asia. Russia could use such population groups as a pretext for military intervention, as in the case of the invasion of Georgia in 2008, explained by Kremlin as “the need to protect citizens of the Russian Federation.”

The Kremlin’s use of ethnic conflicts in the region as instruments of influence cannot be excluded. They can be used to destabilise the Central Asian states in the event of resistance to Russia’s post-Soviet reintegration policy. The problem of potential separatism concerns not only northern Kazakhstan, but also Uzbekistan (the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan), and Tajikistan (Gorno-Badakhshan).

Unlike Gorno-Badakhshan, which sought to strengthen its autonomy during the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992, Karakalpakstan has never shown any separatist tendencies. Indeed, the notion of Karakalpak separatism has so far appeared only on Russian internet sites. However, if the Kremlin were to “create” a Karakalpak separatist movement, it could be used as a tool against the government of the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, which distances itself from Moscow. Authorities in Tashkent have been gradually retreating from cooperation in Russian-led organisations integrating countries of the former Soviet Union. In 2008, Uzbekistan left the Eurasian Economic Community, and in 2012 it suspended its membership of the Organisation of the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO).

The existence of Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will be an instrument of political pressure on the governments of these countries. The precedent of Crimea, where the Russian Black Sea Fleet’s base played a key role in the annexation of the peninsula, can also be used in Central Asia. However, the governments in Bishkek and Dushanbe will not be able to close such bases, due to economic dependence on Russia and the fact that bases are a source of income.

The Chinese Challenge in the Great Game for Central Asia. The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan reduces the role of the West as a player in the region. However, China is becoming an increasingly serious challenge for Russia. China is the main economic partner for the Central Asian countries, and the main importer of Kazakh and Turkmen energy resources. China is also an increasingly important investor and source of loans to countries in the region. The government in Beijing is seeking, among other things, the expansion of roads and railways, which will allow the export of Chinese goods not only to Central Asia but also further, to Europe. The importance of China as a political ally in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, uniting it with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is also rising.

Russia, using its influence from the Soviet era (political interpersonal contacts, common knowledge of the Russian language), while ignoring the issues of human rights violations in the region, has so far been a more attractive partner for Central Asian countries than the European Union and the United States. Cooperation with China, like Russia, (as opposed to relations with the EU and the U.S.), does not oblige local governments to democratise the political system. The Chinese economic component of the offer is, however, becoming more and more attractive for countries in the region, ahead of Russian proposals. China, unlike Russia, is not pushing them to deepen political integration.

In the context of the growing presence of China in the region, and the weakness of political and economic arguments from the Kremlin, it is possible that Moscow will seek to use violent methods in its policy towards Central Asia. One cannot rule out a “Ukrainian” scenario in the Central Asia, a “controlled destabilisation” inspired by Russia. Moreover, even the very existence of the risk that the Kremlin may support anti-government forces in the countries of the region will remain a factor “disciplining” the local ruling elites.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The potential threat from Russia for the Central Asian republics, in the form of “Ukraine-style” destabilisation, led to gestures of loyalty on the part of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These countries will, however, pay only lip service to political integration with Russia within the framework of the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union. In reality, they will continue trying to maintain their political independence from the Kremlin.

The European Union should activate dialogue with the governments of the republics of Central Asia in the field of security. The aim should be to develop a common position regarding Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Undermining the international order in the former Soviet Union, these actions are also a potential threat to the region. Another area of possible cooperation between the EU and Central Asian republics may be European support for modernisation of border services, the prevention of illegal migration, drug trafficking, and combating terrorist organisations.

In addition to diplomatic means, channels of communication (such as EU-funded media) should be expanded to create a counterweight to Kremlin propaganda. The Russian media remains the main source of information for the societies of Central Asian republics, who are still mostly Russian-speaking. One should bear in mind, that the target of the Russian propaganda attacks is not only the government in Kyiv, but also the allegedly “aggressive” policy of the European Union.

EU policy in the region should be long-term. Although authoritarian systems prevail in most Central Asian countries, new elites are being formed at the same time. Therefore, grants and stipends should be developed for students from the region. Their studies in EU countries will be the best way to build a positive image of the Europe in Central Asia, and to promote the idea of the rule of law and democracy among the future political elite. Although these objectives are distant, they should not be abandoned.