

RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA: HOW RUSSIA IS STRENGTHENING ITS INFLUENCE TOOLS

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I. SITUATION ASSESSMENT

Central Asia is one of the regions that Russia considers as a sphere of its monopoly influence as well as political, military, economic and cultural dominance. This is determined by the following: belonging of the Central Asian countries to the so-called post-Soviet space, the influence over which Russia is trying to preserve and strengthen; decades of strong formal and informal ties with the political and economic elites of the region; significant economic interests of Russia in the Central Asian countries; the need to maintain the so-called buffer zone between Russia and Afghanistan in order to curb the penetration of extremism and terrorism; prevention of the deployment of the U.S. military facilities in the region.

In this regard, Russia has built an extensive system of leverage over the political and economic elites, economies, expert and academic communities, and society of the countries of the region. In our opinion, after February 24, 2022, Russia not only did not weaken its influence in Central Asia, but in many respects strengthened it, and dependence on Russia deepened. Our conclusions were confirmed by the results of closed-door discussions with experts from Central Asian countries, including those who are officially or unofficially affiliated with their governments.

The signs and extent of Russia's impact in Central Asia can be described by the following indicators:

1.1. Political dependence.

Despite Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, violations of international law and Russia's massive war crimes in Ukraine, the Central Asian countries remain members of political, military-political and economic organizations led by Russia, in particular the CIS (all Central Asian countries), the CSTO (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), and the EAEU (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan). At the same time, the leaderships of the Central Asian countries

not only did not suspend or reduce their activities within these organizations, but also participated in many events and actively developed ties within their framework.

The official political position of the Central Asian countries on the Russian-Ukrainian war remains formally neutral with all of them supporting a peaceful resolution of the conflict and calling for negotiations, but not mentioning the need to withdraw Russian troops from the territory of Ukraine and bring the Russian leadership and the Russian Armed Forces to justice for war crimes. This position should be viewed as contrary to the national interests of Kyiv and aimed at: a) disrupting the Ukrainian Armed Forces' counteroffensive and liberation of Ukrainian territories; b) freezing the conflict on Russia's terms; c) providing Russia with an operational pause to restore its combat capability in order to continue its military campaign against Ukraine; d) reducing Western military support for Ukraine and actually accepting Russia's claims to Ukrainian territories.

Therefore, in this context, indicative of the effectiveness of Russia's pressure are the statement by Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on the continuation and deepening of the strategic partnership with Russia¹ and the actual lack of communication between Ukraine and the Central Asian countries at the level of heads of state, with the exception of two phone calls between Volodymyr Zelenskyi and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in March and November 2022.

Other signs of the effectiveness of Russian leverage are: demand of Astana to dismiss Ukraine's Ambassador to Kazakhstan Petro Vrublevskiy in 2022 after his comments to local media on aspects of the Ukrainian-Russian war²; the de facto refusal to appoint a new Ambassador of Ukraine to Kazakhstan Serhii Haidai; the presence of all CA leaders at the May 9, 2022 parade in Moscow; attendance by CA leaders at international events organized by Russia, etc.

1.2. Economic and logistical dependence on Russia.

In 2022, Russia remained one of the main partners for the countries of the region with a steady upward trend in economic indicators. In particular, trade turnover with Kazakhstan in 2022 amounted to \$26 billion³ (up 6%, Russia is the first trading partner⁴); \$9.3 billion with

¹ President of Kazakhstan K.Tokayev: "We are strategic partners with Russia. We are members of the same organizations. Therefore, our goal is to remain in close contact with Russia to strengthen our mutual cooperation both bilaterally and in relevant international organizations", URL: <https://kz.kursiv.media/2023-06-20/dmnv-tokaev-naschet-vojnny/>.

² In August 2022, former Ukrainian Ambassador to Kazakhstan P. Vrublevskiy said in a commentary to Kazakh media that the Ukrainian side "is trying to kill as many Russians as possible: the more they kill now, the less the next generations of Ukrainians will have to kill." Astana protested and demanded that the ambassador be replaced. The diplomat left the country in October 2022 without explanation.

³ Kazakhstan took advantage of the geopolitical crisis and increased exports to countries where supply chains were interrupted (in Russian), URL: <https://ranking.kz/reviews/industries/kazakhstan-vospolzovalsya-geopoliticheskim-krizisom-i-narastil-eksport-v-strany-gde-prevails-tsepochki-postavok.html>

⁴ Note: When the EU is considered a single trading partner, it is the largest for Kazakhstan; when calculated by individual countries, Russia ranks first.

Uzbekistan (up 23%, Russia is the first trading partner⁵); \$3.2 billion with Kyrgyzstan⁶ (up 40.3%, Russia is the second partner after China); \$1.4 billion with Tajikistan⁷ (up 18.3%, Russia is the first partner); and \$1.6 billion with Turkmenistan⁸ (up 86%, Russia is the third partner).

Another instrument of influence is significant labor migration to Russia, which accounts for up to 30% of GDP in local economies. This is especially true for Kyrgyzstan (\$2.8 billion in 2022, 27% of GDP), Tajikistan (\$3.2 billion, 32% of GDP), and Uzbekistan (\$14.5 billion, 18% of GDP). The impact of remittances from labor migrants working in Russia leads to a significant influence of the Russian Federation on the economies of the countries of the region, which tends to grow in multiples. This creates a serious mechanism of pressure on the political leadership of Central Asia, and also allows to form a loyal to Russia population of the countries of the region, as their welfare directly depends on economic ties and friendly relations with Russia.

In addition, Moscow is trying to bolster its geopolitical presence by promoting the construction of nuclear power plants in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Should this project be implemented, it will create an additional instrument of influence in the energy sector.

Despite the fact that the EU is one of the key partners for Kazakhstan in particular, Russia remains a monopolist in delivering products to the European market. In particular, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium accounts for 80% of oil, which is the main export product from Kazakhstan to Europe. Other products from Kazakhstan are also supplied mainly through the territory of Russia, which allows Moscow to directly influence the economies and, accordingly, the political leadership of the countries of the region. An example of the effectiveness of logistics tools is Russia's blocking of Ukraine's trade with Central Asian countries, which resulted in a 20-30% annual decline in trade turnover in 2015-2020. Year 2022 was no exception, with trade volumes decreasing by one and a half to two times⁹, demonstrating the lack of serious prospects for Ukraine in Central Asia in the face of a

⁵ China is catching up with Russia in becoming the main supplier. How Uzbekistan's foreign trade has changed in 2022, URL: <https://invest.gov.uz/ru/mediacenter/news/china-is-catching-up-with-russia-in-becoming-the-main-supplier-how-uzbekistan-s-foreign-trade-has-changed-in-2022/>

⁶ Trade turnover between Kyrgyzstan and Russia in 2022 reached a historical record of \$3.2 billion (in Russian), URL: <https://www.isap.center/post/13322>

⁷ Trade turnover between Russia and Tajikistan in 2022 increased by 18.3% to \$1.4 billion (in Russian), URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/895740>

⁸ Strategic Partnership between Russia and Turkmenistan (in Russian), URL: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/06/12/strategicheskoye-partnorstvo-rossii-i-turkmenistana-odno-iz-vazhneyshikh-sostavlyayushchikh-mira-i-stabilnosti-v-tsentralnoy-azii/>

⁹ Ukraine's total trade turnover in 2022 amounted to \$805.9 million with Kazakhstan (compared to \$1.29 billion in 2021), with Uzbekistan - \$348.6 million (compared to \$703 million), with Turkmenistan - \$214.1 million (compared to \$144 million in 2021), with Kyrgyzstan - \$39.3 million (compared to \$54.7 million in 2021), with Tajikistan - \$12.1 million (compared to \$22 million in 2021). Source: State Statistics Service of Ukraine.

permanent conflict with Russia.

1.3. Military and political ties.

Russia remains the main military-political and military-technical partner for almost all CA countries. First, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of the CSTO, and in 2022, they participated in almost all CSTO events (summits and military exercises)¹⁰ along with improving their legal frameworks related to technical support and participation in CSTO peacekeeping operations. Second, the armed forces and security agencies of the countries in the region rely heavily on Soviet- and Russian-made weapons and military equipment, which allows Russia to use this dependence to ensure political loyalty to Moscow. Initiatives to purchase weapons from Western manufacturers, including Turkish-made UAVs, are sporadic and do not change the overall situation. Third, there are Russian military bases and facilities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as the Federal Security Service (FSB) unit in Osh (Kyrgyzstan). In addition to a common vision of threats, military planning, and military construction (for example, with regard to a joint air defense system), close interconnection between the military and law enforcement agencies and intelligence structures allows Russian special services to create a wide network of operatives in the uniformed agencies of the CA countries. Thus, they are better informed about what is happening in these states, and create an additional tool to influence governments. Fourth, defense companies in Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are closely involved in cooperation with Russian defense companies, including those under EU and U.S. sanctions. Currently, there is no information about the termination of cooperation between them.

According to discussions with Central Asian experts, the Russian military presence in the region, besides the declarative function of ensuring military security, has the task of supporting the ruling regimes in the event of mass protests that could lead to a change of government. In this regard, in general, the leadership of the Central Asian countries views Russian military presence as a factor of ensuring that they and their family members stay in power.

1.4. Information influence.

Despite the fact that Russia's foreign policy ambitions, ideology, and military actions against Ukraine are aimed at destroying national identity, which is also true for the Central Asian countries, it should be noted that none of the Central Asian countries has restricted the activities of Russian media and cultural organizations (in particular, the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Gorchakov Foundation) on its territory, which further cover the Russian

¹⁰ The only exception was Exercise Unbreakable Brotherhood 2012, in which Kyrgyzstan refused to participate, but the reason for the refusal was most likely the conflict with Tajikistan.

invasion of Ukraine from Moscow's perspective, thus forming a point of view in society that is favorable to Russia¹¹. Against this backdrop, perhaps the only event on the Central Asian platform was an online interview with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in September 2022, during which the Ukrainian official described the development of the situation in Ukraine, expressed readiness to develop economic cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, and outlined the threats posed by Russia to the statehood of the countries of the region. Interviews with the heads of Ukraine's diplomatic missions in Central Asia were rare (one or two in 2022), which shows that Ukraine failed to build up its information influence in the region. This may be the result of both the ineffective work of Ukrainian diplomatic missions in this area and the deliberate blocking by the governments of the region of opportunities for public statements by Ukrainian officials.

In addition, Russia is actively working to open university branches in Central Asian countries (in 2022, it was announced that seven new branches would be opened in addition to the existing 25¹²), and is increasing quotas for students to study in Russian educational institutions. Currently, Russia ranks first in terms of academic migration from the region¹³, with approximately 185,000 students from Central Asia studying in Russia, of which approximately 68,000 students are educated at the expense of the Russian budget. This allows Russia to step up its influence in the academic and expert community, and to form a relatively loyal attitude of young people to Russian policy.

The DEMOSCOPE sociological survey in Kazakhstan, conducted in May 2023, shows that although Russia failed to achieve unconditional support for its actions in Ukraine (21% of respondents support Ukraine, while 13% support Russia), it has secured a neutral public position (60%), which is also beneficial to Moscow. Moreover, Kazakh society in general does not perceive Russia as a threat, with the majority (62%) considering an attack on Kazakhstan unlikely¹⁴. At the same time, the fact that the larger part of the population holds a neutral stance appears to be an intermediate goal of Moscow: to form a society indifferent to Ukraine, which is neutral to Russia's war crimes and actually tolerates them. According to Kazakhstani sociologists, it is possible that the consequences of this "neutrality" are the official position of the governments of the region, which support the narrative of non-interference and the need to develop partnerships with Moscow. These conclusions were confirmed by information received from the head of one of the

¹¹ More information about the landscape of Russian information influence can be found in the study "Exploitation of Vulnerabilities: Peculiarities of Russian Propaganda in Central Asia" (in Ukrainian) / CACDS. - Kyiv, 2020. - 106 p.

¹² Branches of leading Russian universities will be opened in Central Asian countries (in Russian), URL: <https://poisknews.ru/edu/v-stranah-centralnoj-azii-otkroyut-filialy-vedushchih-rossijskih-vuzov/>

¹³ Read more: "Foreign Educational Trajectory of Kazakhstan: Between Stereotypes and Pragmatism: a Monograph" (in Russian) / Nasimova G.O., Kaplan S., Buzurtanova M.M. [et al.], 2021.

¹⁴ Poll: One third of Kazakhstani people have begun to have worse attitude towards Russia after the war started, DEMOSCOPE, URL: <https://demos.kz/opros-tret-kazahstancsev-stala-huzhe-otnositjsja-k-rossii-posle-nachala-vojny/>

leading Kazakh media outlets, who noted on condition of anonymity that “all issues related to Russian aggression against Ukraine in the Kazakh information space are deliberately silenced by the authorities, and the media are forced to follow the official position of the government.” Mentions of Ukraine, Russian war crimes, etc. are perceived as a manifestation of Russophobia, nationalism, and as questioning the strategic partnership with Russia and the official course of the authorities. Obviously, the situation is similar in other Central Asian countries.

1.5. Standing in international organizations.

The results of Central Asian countries' voting on Ukrainian resolutions in the UN remain unfavorable for Ukraine. Russia's full-scale war and war crimes have not changed the position of the countries of the region compared to previous years: they abstain (do not vote) or cast votes against Ukraine's resolutions in the UN General Assembly. During the voting on the UN GA resolution “Aggression against Ukraine” (March 2, 2022), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan abstained, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan did not vote. During the voting on the UN GA resolution “Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine” (March 24, 2022), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan abstained, Turkmenistan did not vote. On the UN General Assembly resolution “Suspension of the Russian Federation's membership in the Human Rights Council” (April 7, 2022), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan voted against, Turkmenistan did not vote. During the vote on the UN GA resolution “Furtherance of Remedy and Reparation for Aggression against Ukraine” (November 15, 2022), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan abstained, Turkmenistan did not vote. On the UN GA resolution “Situation of human rights in the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine” (December 16, 2022), Kazakhstan voted against, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan abstained, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan did not vote.

1.6. Assisting Russia in circumventing sanctions.

Despite the assurances of the Central Asian governments that they do not help Russia circumvent sanctions and do not facilitate so-called parallel imports¹⁵, the Central Asian countries are involved in many issues related to the import of products to Russia, including those used for the manufacture of weapons.

Sanctions are circumvented in the following ways: relocation of Russian business to the territory of the Central Asian countries; formation of new logistics and production chains; creation of intermediary firms for importing sanctioned equipment; re-export of scarce goods

¹⁵ President of Kazakhstan K.Tokayev: "We are firmly committed, first of all, to the WTO norms, and also follow all the rules that have been adopted in the international market. As for the so-called export of dual-use goods to Russia - this is absolutely untrue", URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/18068081>



and equipment to Russia through gray parallel import schemes; possible provision of military and technical products manufactured in the Central Asian countries to Russia (for example, by the Tynys enterprise of the national company Kazakhstan Engineering, the Kyrgyz enterprise Dastan)¹⁶. As a result, Kazakhstan has dramatically (up to a hundredfold) increased its exports to Russian companies (including those associated with the Russian security forces) of microelectronics products used for military purposes, and companies established in Kazakhstan have supplied hundreds of UAVs from China to Russia¹⁷. The situation is similar with Kyrgyz¹⁸ and Uzbek¹⁹ companies, a number of which have been sanctioned by the U.S. and EU for exporting electronics, communications equipment, and aviation equipment to Russian defense companies.

II. PROJECTIONS AND PROSPECTS

At present, one should admit that the success of Ukraine's efforts to change the foreign policy position of the Central Asian countries in a direction more favorable to Ukraine is unlikely. For decades, Russia has been able to form political elites loyal to it, create a huge dependence of the region's economies and businesses on trade and investment ties with Russia, and logistics through Russia and Moscow's military and political dominance in the region remain a powerful tool for Moscow. The reduction of Russian influence in the region can only occur in the event of a convincing military defeat of Russia in Ukraine, or in the event that political forces that view Russia as a threat to the national security of their countries come to power in the CA countries. In our opinion, the predictions of the growing role of China in the region and the displacement of Russia in this regard are greatly exaggerated. According to available data, China puts and will continue to put considerable emphasis on relations with Moscow. Hence, despite some competition in Central Asia, Beijing will not take steps that would jeopardize Russian interests in the region and spoil relations with Moscow, which are vital for joint counteraction to the West²⁰. Besides, China does not currently have such a cultural and mental influence in Central Asia, and China is often seen as a threat in the region, so despite the increase in Central Asia's trade with China, Russia's clout will remain dominant

¹⁶ For more information on Russia's schemes of circumventing sanctions through Central Asia, see Support for the "Sanctions Regime against Russia by Türkiye and the Countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia," URL: <https://analytics.intsecurity.org/en/sanctions-support-asia/>

¹⁷ Despite sanctions, Russia gets drones and microchips via Kazakhstan, URL: https://www.occrp.org/ru/investigations/kazakhstan-has-become-a-pathway-for-the-supply-of-russias-war-machine-heres-how-it-works?fbclid=IwAR3CiZ9WVanE4B018teKLitcGi4Y9syc_uzXJw3GMhzwwG9NA7MHuDcmcbA

¹⁸ Treasury Sanctions Impede Russian Access to Battlefield Supplies and Target Revenue Generators, U.S. Department of the Treasury, URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1636>

¹⁹ EU adopts 11th package of sanctions against Russia for its continued illegal war against Ukraine, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3429

²⁰ R. Pantucci, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore and Senior Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies (RUSI) in London, also agrees with this assessment. URL: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32416671.html?fbclid=IwAR3N3wNI1iU1GmwElmccFrXs6qvFzfeAjjcmJ84FQA-Yp9h3jGSoxRSNNw4>

in the medium term.

In this regard, relations of Ukraine with the Central Asian countries will be severely limited, both in the political and economic spheres. The Central Asian countries are not likely to recognize the annexation of Ukrainian territories or provide open military assistance to Russia, but Moscow will use the available tools in Central Asia to block opportunities for the development of Ukraine's cooperation in the region, and the Central Asian countries will participate in circumventing sanctions and thus fuel the Kremlin's economy and military machine.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In the wake of Russia's aggression, strong political, economic, transit, information and security dependence of the Central Asian countries on Russia (which tends to grow), the orientation of a large number of political elites towards Russia, and the lack of real intentions to build alternative oil routes through the Caspian Sea, it should be noted that the prospects for Ukraine's political and economic cooperation with the Central Asian countries are dim. This was evidenced in 2022 by the lack of a high-level political dialogue between our countries, insignificant economic indicators of cooperation, active efforts of the Central Asian countries to help Russia circumvent sanctions, etc.

Given the inability to change the situation in a more favorable direction for Ukraine, in the short and medium term, Kyiv's urgent task will be to improve and increase the effectiveness of the sanctions regime, which will reduce Russia's ability to bypass sanctions through Central Asia. In addition, it is essential to ensure that Central Asian countries do not provide their own military and dual-use products, in particular, defense companies that cooperate with the Russian defense industry.

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