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The crisis in Ukraine and its influence Central Asia's political stability

The main purpose of this article is to point the challenges, threats and risks, both internal and external in nature, that affect the stability of current political regimes in the region. Events in Ukraine remain a relevant topic for all five Central Asian countries. The defragmentation of Ukraine could become a negative precedent for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, as there are unresolved border disputes between these three countries. To study these questions authors have used transitological theories to analyze the internal policies of Central Asian countries. The theory of globalization, regionalization and interdependence helps in understanding the ongoing processes in Ukraine that could have an effect on the stability of political regimes in Central Asia.

Key words: Central Asia, Ukraine, crisis, stability, destabilization.

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Украина дағдарысы және оның Орталық Азияның саяси тұрақтылығына әсері

Мақаланың басты мақсаты – аймақтың қазіргі саяси режимдерінің тұрақтылығына әсер ететін ішкі және сыртқы қауіптер мен қатерлерді анықтау. Украинадағы жағдай Орталық Азияның барлық бес мемлекеті үшін өзекті мәселе болып табылады. Украинаның бөлінуі Өзбекстан, Тәжікстан мен Қырғызстанға жағымсыз жағдай алып келуі мүмкін, себебі бұл мемлекеттердің араларындағы шешілмеген шекаралық мәселелер әлі бар. Украинадағы мәселелердің шарықтауы «Украиналық Майдан Орталық Азияда қайталанбайды ма?» деген сұрақты тудырып отыр. Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің ішкі саясатын сараптауда транзитологиялық теорияларды қолдану бұл мәселені зерттеуде маңызы зор. Жаһандану, аймақтану және өзара тәуелділік теориялары Орталық Азиядағы саяси режимдердің тұрақтылығына әсер ете алатын Украинадағы қазіргі жағдайларды түсінуге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Украина, дағдарыс, тұрақтылық, дестабилизация.

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Украинский кризис и его влияние на политическую стабильность Центральной Азии

Основная цель статьи состоит в том, чтобы обозначить угрозы и риски, внутренние и внешние, которые влияют на стабильность в текущих политических режимах в регионе. События на Украине остаются актуальной темой для всех пяти центральноазиатских стран. Разделение Украины на отдельные части может стать негативным прецедентом для Узбекистана, Таджикистана и Кыргызстана из-за нерешенных пограничных вопросов между этими тремя государствами. Для исследования этого вопроса авторы использовали транзитологические теории для анализа внутренних политик стран Центральной Азии. Теории глобализации, регионализации и взаимозависимости помогают понять текущие события на Украине, которые могут влиять на стабильность политических режимов в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Украина, кризис, стабильность, дестабилизация.

**THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE
AND ITS INFLUENCE
CENTRAL ASIA'S
POLITICAL STABILITY****Introduction**

Today, Central Asian states face a broad range of challenges and threats. The current state of the world has demonstrated the external risks that exist for all of Central Asia, where the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine is just one of such factors. Events in Ukraine remain a relevant topic for all five Central Asian countries. Regional elites have acknowledged the risks to stability in their political regimes. Public announcements made in Central Asian republics about the Ukrainian crisis were careful in nature due to concerns about internal stability, a desire to keep good relations with global players and to preserve a place for diplomatic actions, as well as the ambiguity of how the situation in Ukraine would play out and in which direction. While the threat to political stability posed by the Ukrainian crisis varies in each Central Asian state, each regime is concerned about the potential danger of Maidan happening at home.

To study these questions authors have used transitological theories to analyze the internal policies of Central Asian countries. Utilizing the theories of democratization and political realism one can examine the interrelation of internal and external processes occurring in the regions' governments.

Kazakhstan

The situation analysis, demonstrated by reaction to events in Kiev, shows that conservatism is the dominant force in Kazakhstani society.

While the Afghanistan question is more relevant for Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the Ukrainian factor for Kazakhstan and its proximity to Russia is of real concern. On the one hand, Astana was one of the initiators (and remains an active participant) in the processes of Eurasian integration, but on the other hand Astana would like to preserve the multi-vector character of its foreign policy. In terms of the first point, Russia is not attempting to pressure its partner to change its international positions due to the growing confrontation with the West. Additionally, there are no factors that threaten Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. The US and EU

are interested in maintaining their positions in the republic by way of constructive relations, despite Kazakhstan's participation in the Eurasian integration process alongside Russia. As for China, its policies on Kazakhstan in no way depend on the «conflict of interests» between Russia and the West.

In the Republic it is mostly members of the opposition and civil society who express fears about the events in Ukraine. Kazakh national-patriots are concerned about a Crimean scenario playing out in the northern regions of the country. Regardless, anti-Russian sentiment is not widespread in Kazakhstan, even though polls show that the public negatively views the civil war in Ukraine due to Russia annexing Crimea. The importance of strong power, a strong state, and billions of foreign investment in the Kazakhstan economy help to ensure that external forces are unable to incite discontent.

Despite Russian experts assessment that Kazakhstan is the Central Asian country whose political regime is the least at risk compared to other countries in the region, Astana has taken precautionary measures by increasing criminal liability for separatism and participation by Kazakh citizens in armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine [7].

Russian experts name the following as internal risks: infighting among elites, battle to gain control over legal and illegal cash operations, rise of social unrest and a high unemployment rate (self-employed persons) – all of which provide fertile ground for extremism.

Kazakh experts also include clashes between various groups, manifestations of terrorism and extremism and the rise of social protests (labor, youth, migrant, etc.) as other potential risks.

Thus, despite the growth of external factors and potential risks around Kazakhstan's growth, its political system remains stable. This stability is dependent on several internal factors including intra-elite relations and especially concerning the transformation of presidential power.

Uzbekistan

In assessing the Ukrainian crisis, the Uzbek authorities expressed their conviction of the impossibility regarding, «a threat of force, or its implementation, against the territorial integrity or independence of any state,» without mentioning the referendum in Crimea.

Negotiations between Tashkent and Moscow concerning possible collaboration on security questions (where the overall trend relates to the

developing situation in Afghanistan) bear witness to the lack of wariness there is towards Russia and the need to deepen co-operation between the two countries.

Uzbekistan's economic policy is in large part connected to the Eurasian Economic union since its foreign exports are mostly oriented on trading partners across the former Soviet Union as well as neighbors throughout the region.

On March 27th, 2014 Uzbekistan abstained from a vote on the status of Crimea during a meeting of the UN's General Assembly which signaled its disapproval of Russia's actions. But then, during a meeting of the leaders of the member states of SCO (Shanghai Co-operation Organization) in Dushanbe, President Karimov expressed support for the Minsk accords which aimed to resolve the conflict.

The possibility of a destabilizing scenario, such as Maidan, is low in Uzbekistan. Despite the Andijan events in 2005, which illustrated the authorities' harsh reaction to social unrest, there is practically no anti-Russian sentiment due to the export of labor resources to Russia and the non-existence of a nationalist opposition.

Tajikistan

The experience of Civil War forced Tajik authorities to pay attention to the changing moods of protest in society. While the majority of Crimea did vote to be reunified with Russia, Dushanbe did not make an official statement on the situation in Ukraine.

Upon analyzing the confrontations happening on Maidan, the President of Tajikistan referred to the civil war in his own country as an, «armed conflict which produced very serious socio-economic and humanitarian consequences for the country» [8].

The government is beginning to increase pressure on the opposition. The Ministry of Justice has added new amendments to the Law on Public Associations, which requires that public associations register and receive approval for all grants and aid from foreign sources by the Registry of Humanitarian Aid [9]. The Tajik parliament itself adopted amendments to the law on «Meetings, Rallies, Demonstrations and Marches,» that prohibit foreigners and stateless persons from participating in protests [10].

The measures taken by the government were met with discontent by the liberal part of the population. The head of the National Association of Independent Media, Nuriddin Karshibayev, believes that in the wake of revolutionary Euromaidan, pressure on opposition leaders was increased. On social media

comparisons between the events in Ukraine and the beginning of civil war in Tajikistan in 1992 began to appear. Several opposition leaders, for example, Rakhmatillo Zoyirov, the leader of the Social-Democratic party, made a pilgrimage to Maydan in Kiev and wanted to hold a press-conference in Dushanbe about his trip upon his return.

The government has started cracking down on access to information that is anti-Russian in nature. It is important to keep in mind that Russia's military presence in Tajikistan consists of the 201st base where more than 7500 soldiers are stationed. Tajikistan is also one of the countries most dependent on remittances from labor workers. According to statistics, around four billion dollars come into the country by way of remittances which is equivalent to 52% of Tajikistan's GDP. The labor market of Tajik migrants, in effect, guarantees stable relations with Russia. Tajikistan, like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, are not interested in the deterioration of relations with Russia, since the return of millions of disappointed and angry labor migrants would bring about social protests. Consequently, Moscow's most effective leverage over Dushanbe would be the massive deportation of labor migrants back to their homeland.

With the aforementioned in mind, it is clear that anti-Russian or pro-Ukrainian sentiments are neither widespread among the general population, nor among bureaucrats or pro-government journalists. President Rakhmon has been in power for more than twenty years, consistently receiving unwavering support from Moscow which, in essence, brought him to power.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan maintains an isolationist foreign policy and total control over its domestic policies. Turkmenistan's neutrality assures Russia and the West that Ashgabat will not take any measures that might irritate Moscow or cause concern for Washington and Brussels. At the same time, relations with Kiev are promising, first of all, due to a plan to supply Ukraine with Turkmen gas. This is being considered as a likely substitute for Russian gas which would provide Ashgabat with a handsome profit. Nevertheless, the authorities of Turkmenistan understand that it is not possible to expect a 100% guarantee of safety in relations with Putin's administration. The presence of a Russian diaspora making up 4% of the population, and more than 100,000 with Russian passports is an additional factor that forces the Turkmen authorities to consider

how a Crimean and/or Donetsk-Lughansk scenario would play out.

However, certain factors, for example, its geographical location and population (5.2 million), lack of political opposition, minimal influence by the mass media, including western media, on domestic processes in the country, and a lack of influential ethnic groups decrease risks for the country's political regime. Apart from this, the political atmosphere in Turkmenistan makes it extremely difficult for NGO's to operate.

Nevertheless, the situation in Turkmenistan is also somewhat unstable. There is a risk that the Turkmen president will not be able to manage all the various domestic and foreign challenges, particularly since the country has few allies in the international arena.

According to data from the media, mass arrests, which took place in March 2014, were connected to the activity of religiously-oriented terrorist organizations (The Taliban, ISIS, etc.) as well as protests by city dwellers who expressed discontent over price increases on foodstuffs. It is also important to keep in mind the access to mass media, albeit meager, that is available to the country's residents.

Kyrgyzstan

At first, comments regarding the events in Ukraine from Bishkek were relatively restrained despite the rather sharp critique of Viktor Yanukovich, «The president is no longer legitimate, when he has completely lost the trust of his own people.» This reserved manner can be attributed to the experience gained by the political elite as a result of two political revolutions. Addressing his people, the President of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbyek Atambayev, noted the great responsibility that Ukrainian politicians (holding themselves responsible for the future of their country) have during this complicated time, adding on top of this, that they must take into account the interests of all the Ukrainian people, and avoid escalating tensions of the internal political situation, in particular in terms of inter-ethnic relations.

The events in Ukraine have effectively split society down the middle into pro-Russian and pro-Western sides, while the authority's political opponents, inspired by the victory at Maidan in Ukraine, have made attempts to strengthen their efforts.

Above all, the Ukrainian crisis has also had an effect on the opposition in Kyrgyzstan, which has already organized several events, including the presentation of a new organization, «The National

Opposition Movement.» There is plenty of criticism from their ranks, even hints of a possible repeat of the Ukrainian scenario. Prominent members of Kyrgyzstan's scientific community have called for the government to increase control over the political situation in the country which they conveyed to the country's leadership in an open letter. In their opinion, some members of the new opposition movement are rocking the boat, following in the footsteps of Ukraine.

It is clear that the potential for protest is highest in Kyrgyzstan where criticism of President Atambayev's regime is the focus. Kyrgyzstan has long fostered a strong opposition culture that is capable of destabilizing the political situation inside the country as well as in the region. Non-governmental organizations play a particular role in undermining Kyrgyz statehood. For a population of 5.7 million, there are more than 11,500 registered NGO's. Most of them has a socio-political orientation of the activity [11]. A combination of strong opposition forces and weak state power explains why Ukrainian Maidan has caused enthusiasm in the opposition, oriented to the West. The oppositions' pro-Western orientation is contributing to the development of anti-Russian sentiment in the country which could provoke the Russian-speaking population to seek recourse from Russia.

But, in the opinion of many political analysts, there are no preconditions for a repeat of Ukrainian Maidan in Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, current Kyrgyz opposition suffers from a lack of constructiveness—they criticize the regime, citing various problems, but do not offer their own solutions.

Apart from the threat of political instability, the Ukrainian crisis also has had an impact on the economic ties of countries in Central Asia with key trading partners. Research performed by Minchenko Holding, a communications holding company, has been recording the effects of economic risks for foreign investors in Central Asia. Among the reasons for these risks is the on-going sanction war between Russia and the West, caused mainly by the Ukrainian crisis, and a growth in Islamic extremism [12]. The authors of the report also cite the authoritarian nature of regimes and the «behind closed doors» nature of politics as key risks in Central Asia. Experts add that the political environment's instability is often more of an impediment for successful foreign investments than the authoritarian regime's lack of transparency.

The main issue for Central Asian countries in developing trade and economic relations with Ukraine is related to domestic, as well as economic policies:

– The side effects of sanctions and counter-sanctions have had a negative impact on the macro-economic prospects of the region due to close ties between Central Asia (specifically Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and Russia. Growing political risks threaten not only the attractiveness of foreign investment in the region (with risks increasing for foreign investors in 2014-2015), but also the possibility of regional instability.

– Regional economies are closely intertwined with one another. The Russian ruble's fall affected local currencies in Central Asia, which poses a serious threat to post-Soviet countries' economies that are dependent on remittances from its citizens working in Russia. The Turkmen manat has dropped and the Kazakh tenge is expected to fall further. These downward trends, caused by the ruble's devaluation, could eventually lead to a political crisis.

– According to the World Bank, remittances form 31.5%, 42%, and 12.5% of Kyrgyzstan's, Tajikistan's and Uzbekistan's economies respectively. If 2 million Uzbek labor migrants were to return home from Russia, there would be a sharp decline in population purchasing power, which could foment discontent with the current regime.

The most effective response to growing risks in the region remains conducting multi-vector foreign policy, where Kazakhstan's is seen as the most effective. Despite this assessment, it will be difficult to maintain a balanced position amidst the growing confrontation between Russia and the West, while Astana remains concerned about a recurrence of a Crimean scenario in the North and East of Kazakhstan.

Central Asian regimes, especially in countries with significant ethnic minorities, are carefully observing the process that would lead to federalization in Ukraine, making sure to be pragmatic in understanding their own interests.

Conclusion

Applying the theories of globalization, regionalization, democratization and transitology, the authors have come to the following conclusions:

– While the events in Ukraine remain a relevant topic for all five Central Asian countries, overall, maidanization does not present an overt threat to these countries, though there is a slight risk for Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser degree, Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan this is posed by the so-called opposition, and in Kazakhstan by the national-patriots, both of which, in varying degrees, support Maidan.

– In the circumstances of the modern world order, boundaries between domestic and foreign policy are gradually being erased, where, as a result, the latter ends up governing the former. The Ukrainian crisis has demonstrated that while threats, in and of themselves, are not dangerous, weak external shocks have the potential to adversely affect the stability of political regimes in Central Asia.

– In terms of the globalization of democratic processes and the widening and variety of concepts and understandings of democracy, non-liberal democracies are born, such as hybrid regimes, imitation democracies and so on. At the beginning of the 21st century, the phenomenon of «Color revolutions» was added to the arsenal of democratic concepts. This was a milder and more cost-effective strategy in comparison with economic sanctions, humanitarian interventions and military action. The crisis in Ukraine demonstrated the need for political systems to be modernized, as well as public life to be democratized. While Central Asian states tend to focus on security issues, they choose to ignore or pay minimum attention to the problems of democratization. States with a deficit of democratic

structures, lack of political freedoms, and human rights violations are not capable of countering religious extremism, managing social tension or combating international terrorism.

– In terms of a change in policies in the light of events in Ukraine, Central Asian states have once again shown that relations with Russia, in multiple instances, are significantly more important than any remaining events in the world.

– New threats and challenges that could destabilize the political situation in Central Asian countries require new methods and tools to promote the interests of the state. The geo-economic paradigm raises the question of what instruments and mechanisms need to be created in order to meet new challenges, prevent threats and manage risks. Today, more so than ever, nation-states must take into consideration regional and global processes.

The Ukrainian crisis has shown the importance of integration, consolidation, and strengthening of the regional geo-political and geo-economic space, which would provide an effective strategy for the sustainable development of the region.

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