

## REGIONAL STUDIES

CENTRAL ASIA AS SEEN  
FROM RUSSIA

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*Introduction*

This is a survey of what has been written in Russia about Central Asia, of the subject range and scope of problems that our Russian colleagues have discussed in their works, and of what they think about the region's future. For obvious reasons, the Russian public as a whole and political scientists and politicians as its part cannot remain indifferent to what is going in Central Asia. Until quite recently, Russia and Central Asia were parts of a single state; today they remain tied together by geographic and geopolitical proximity. For these reasons, the region is still part of Russia's information expanse.

The Russian Federation, which has scored quite a few foreign policy successes, is still facing old and persisting problems and is coping with the new challenges that crop up in the contemporary world. The integration initiatives formulat-

ed by Russia are hailed by some of its post-Soviet partners and rejected (or even undermined) by others.

Russia, which is seeking a stronger position in Central Asia, has to take into account the fact that China, an equal (or in certain respects stronger) economic and political rival, is also present in the region. In this context, the West, as seen from Moscow, looks like the geopolitical counterbalance needed to trim Beijing's great and soaring ambitions.

Afghanistan and China are two factors that Moscow cannot ignore when pursuing its otherwise independent Central Asian policy. It should be said that Kazakhstan has been and remains Russia's closest ally and strategic partner.

In the context of Russia's relations with Central Asia, the interests of the sides are not al-

ways identical, however there are no contradictions between them on the most important issues, including geopolitics and strategic security.

The positions and opinions of our Russian colleagues are highly important as factors directly affecting the Kremlin's Central Asian policy.

## Russian Authors about the Region in the Late Putin Period

During Vladimir Putin's second presidential term, relations between Moscow and the West went from bad to worse; the Russian leaders blamed the fairly impertinent policy of the United States and its allies in Central Asia and across the post-Soviet expanse, for that matter.

The political scientific and partly Orientalist community responded with political scientific and geopolitical assessments of the West's strategies. Andrey Kazantsev's *Bolshaia igra s neizvestnymi pravilami: mirovaia politika i Tsentralnaia Azia* (The Big Game with Unknown Rules: World Politics and Central Asia) is one of the pertinent examples.<sup>1</sup> The author, who works at the Center for Euro-Atlantic Security, MGIMO, Foreign Ministry of Russia, has formulated many well-substantiated geopolitical arguments.

He proceeds from identifying Central Asia's place on a global scale and tries to resolve the following dilemma: is Central Asia a "temporary and short-term casus" or is it an important constant of world politics.

The author asks another question: will this international region fall apart or will it be "torn apart" to be joined to other regions (the APR, the Middle East, South Asia, etc.)? This question is prompted by the region's diversity and the highly fluid nature of all the elements of its identity (geography, culture, economy, and security), as well as the steady supply of all sorts of reformatting projects supported by the West (the Greater Middle East, Greater Central Asia, etc.).

The author surmises that the Central Asian states do not, in fact, follow the commonly accepted political standards, values, and principles, to say nothing of any sort of coercion mechanism, which means that their regional identity remains highly vague. This means that the regional situation can be described as indefinite, unstable, and unpredictable.

Andrey Kazantsev has enumerated the main Western political-geographic projects related to Central Asia:

- (1) Strengthening the National Statehoods of the Central Asian Countries;
- (2) The "Turkic World;"
- (3) The Region's Internal Integration;
- (4) The Silk Road and "Alternative Integration" Across the Post-Soviet Expanse;
- (5) The Greater Middle East Project;
- (6) The Greater Central Asia Project;
- (7) Spreading and Increasing Euro-Atlantic Influence in the East.

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<sup>1</sup> See: A.A. Kazantsev, *Bolshaia igra s neizvestnymi pravilami: mirovaia politika i Tsentralnaia Azia*, Nasledie Evrazii, Moscow, 2008.

The author has concluded: the “kaleidoscopic” projects of Central Asian reorganization and their consecutive failures speak of the Western coalition’s extreme inconsistency and the low efficiency of its efforts in the region.

Andrey Kazantsev writes that the external forces are locked in a struggle over the region’s identity in an attempt to tie it to one of the Eurasian geopolitical components (the post-Soviet expanse, the Islamic world, Europe, or the APR), the energy transportation routes and related policies being an outcrop of this struggle.

In the absence of internal stabilizing resources, the Central Asian countries have found themselves in a total crisis; torn apart by external rivals they cannot develop their region.

All the regional players are puzzled by the “responsibility”/“free hands” dilemma. The relations between the external players are far from perfect: those that invest in regional stability are inevitably worried that others who saved their money will outsmart them. In other words, all the cooperating players, especially from different regional-civilizational “coalitions,” combine cooperation with competition when trying to monopolize *the most promising investment spheres*.

The author has pointed out that the system of regional interaction taking shape in Central Asia is fairly complicated because the external players use different types of resources that are unevenly distributed among them: Russia and the United States, for example, have gradually become geopolitical rivals because they both relied mainly on military-political instruments.

The author has arrived at the following key conclusions:

- (1) The geopolitical vagueness, which is gradually growing as we move across the post-Soviet expanse from west to east, is rooted in the past.
- (2) The neo-patrimonial political system that has taken shape in some of the Central Asian countries may embezzle and waste considerable means supplied by external sponsors for development projects.
- (3) Some of the Central Asian countries, while easily agreeing to host integration projects, shun real responsibility; this means that their involvement in international structures or their withdrawal from them says nothing about the policy of the external players.

This book can be described as a collection of recommendations addressed to the Russian political establishment on how to proceed in the region. It should be said that Andrey Kazantsev is unduly critical of Russia’s role in post-Soviet Central Asian history and obviously downplays Moscow’s role. He is either ignorant of the variety of instruments and methods that post-Soviet Russia had and has at its disposal to retain its considerable influence in the post-Soviet expanse or deliberately passes over this information in silence.

The collective monograph *Gody, kotorye izmenili Tsentralnuiu Aziiu* (The Years That Changed Central Asia) published in 2009 and edited by Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), Vitaly Naumkin<sup>2</sup> is another important work of the late-Putin period. It continues the monograph (The Fifteen Years That Changed Central Asia) published four years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Both deal with similar problems and both are similarly structured.

The authors identified five groups of major problems.

The first group consists of the problems created by the current transformations in Central Asia. The authors asked and answered several questions, such as Have the transformations ended or are they still going on? If they have ended, what state models have appeared?, to conclude that the political transformations in the Central Asian countries are geared toward consolidating national states.

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<sup>2</sup> See: *Gody, kotorye izmenili Tsentralnuiu Aziiu*, TsSPI-IV RAS, Moscow, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See: *Piatnadtsat let, kotorye izmenili Tsentralnuiu Aziiu (1991-2006)*, TsSPI, Moscow, 2006.

The second group deals with the ideology and instruments individual experts or even research schools use to study the region. As could be expected, this chapter brims with criticism of Western ideologists; the authors point out that Western approaches are, at best, abstract and, at worst, ill-intentioned. The West strives to detach Central Asia from Russia which, in turn, regards the region as an extension of sorts of its own territory rather than a geopolitical abstraction.

This chapter contains recommendations related to the role of the external players: Russia should concentrate on fighting poverty; encourage the Russian language; learn to take local specifics and political culture into account; never resort to double standards; prevent NGOs and all sorts of funds from developing into a source of money for the local opposition; warn the ruling regimes against policies in which the elites will not be able to compete; and avoid formal assessments that have nothing in common with regional reality.

The authors pointed out that the transformations have placed the local countries in different groups: Kazakhstan is moving toward the status of a regional power, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have found themselves in an abyss of poverty.

At the same time, the authors conclude that despite the blunders and errors, none of the local states has joined the ranks of “failed states” (even if the developments in Kyrgyzstan refute this conclusion as being too hasty). As distinct from the post-Soviet Caucasian states, the Central Asian republics demonstrated more stability. Some of the problems proved to be stubborn: so far it is unclear whether these states remain secular or are becoming Muslim. The worsening social and economic conditions and Western pressure are playing into the hands of the local Islamists.

The Central Asian regimes have one common problem inherited from the past: *political and economic power remain closely intertwined.*

The authors admit that the West coped with the self-imposed task of uprooting all elements of socialism and the vestiges of the Soviet system, but the results proved ambiguous. While the West wanted to prevent restoration of the Soviet system and socialism (and the “Soviet empire”) in any form (something which big corporations and the local regimes also wanted), the results proved to be precisely what the architects of the transformations were carefully avoiding.

Europe and Central Asia are close partners; to be more exact, Europe is the closest Western partner of Central Asia. The Central Asian states are OSCE members, but this is not the only reason why the two regions, separated by long distances, do not regard each other as the periphery.

The fourth chapter looks at the problem of radical Islam. It is not a novelty: the local regimes inherited it from the last years of Soviet power and have already arrived at one of three ways of dealing with Islamists:

- (1) Total suppression of all Islamists (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan);
- (2) Suppression of radical groups and a cautious dialog with the rest (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan);
- (3) Cooperation with Islamists who are represented in all the power structures (Tajikistan).

Chapter Five sorts out the external factors of the political transformations and Central Asian security; Russia, China, the U.S., and the European Union are presented as the key players; Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Japan are not discussed.

The authors do not beat about the bush: Russia is the main player in the region; its relations with Central Asia cannot be described as interstate because the historical, cultural, social-economic, civilizational, and geographic ties between the former metropolitan country and the region are still strong; the human (humanitarian) factor is still of colossal importance.

Russia is pursuing three main goals in the region:

- (1) Regional stability;
- (2) Reliance on the region's geopolitical potential to upgrade its international status;
- (3) International recognition of Russia's role in the region.

The sides prefer to downplay the factor of Russian-American rivalry, however it is too obvious to be safely ignored. America wants to squeeze Russia out of the region (and from the post-Soviet expanse, for that matter). This creates a paradox: Russia is guided by pragmatic considerations, while Washington is driven by ideological motives (at least during George W. Bush's presidency).

Russia's advantages in the region are the result of its regional policy, which the local regimes find understandable and predictable; unlike the U.S. and the EU, Moscow never moralizes, never applies double standards, and never flirts with anti-government forces.

Russia looks at the Islamist alternative as an unacceptable strategic prospect, therefore, it harshly responds to its manifestations backed by certain forces in Pakistan and Arab countries.

The authors write that China is proceeding cautiously in its relations with the regional states. Beijing has borrowed the "soft power" concept from Washington and profits from it. America, in turn, tries to undermine Chinese policy by insisting on the "Chinese threat" theory, which is fairly popular in Russia and Central Asian countries. The authors predict that China is unlikely to remain an outside observer if radical changes in the region infringe on its interests.

The role and possibilities of the European Union in Central Asia are assessed much higher than America's; relations between the EU and the local states are not burdened by old ambitions. While the United States indulges in the export of democracy, Europe looks at the region as a cultural entity that should develop independently. On the whole, the EU policy in Central Asia is described as "cautious restraint." According to European experts, write the authors, the EU's greater role in the region would have promoted stability and democratic values and would have counterbalanced excessive American, Russian, and Chinese involvement.

On the whole, the authors describe Western policies in Central Asia as "democratic messianism," which presupposes that there should be no alternatives and envisages only those variants from which the West and the loyal local elites would prosper. This has already been tested in Latin America, which plunged the masses into poverty and allowed the elites to indulge in shameless enrichment.

This suggests the following: first, political liberalization should not outstrip economic; second, property has not been transformed: the state has replaced civil society, which split along the "rights-privileges" line; third, democracy in the region has degenerated into a set of democratic institutions.

The main conclusion: the historical example of post-Soviet Central Asia has refuted the generally accepted politological models of transit, which presupposes movement from authoritarianism to consolidated democracy of liberal type. Instead, political regimes of a new type have emerged; in the future, each of the local states will have to "stumble across" its own model of transformations.

In her *Stanovlenie gosudarstv Tsentralnoy Azii: politicheskie protsessy*<sup>4</sup> (Emergence of the Central Asian States: Political Processes), Prof. Irina Zviagelskaia (Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS) has concentrated, as the title of her monograph suggests, on the political history of the Central Asian countries. As a lecturer at Moscow State University with many years of teaching experience behind her, she naturally intended her book as a textbook for the steadily growing number of young people interested in the region.

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<sup>4</sup> See: I. Zviagelskaia, *Stanovlenie gosudarstv Tsentralnoy Azii: politicheskie protsessy*, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 2009.

Her book is not a political scientific or analytical effort in the true sense of the word. The first three chapters plunge the reader into the history of Russian conquests; colonization of Turkestan and the development of Central Asia and Kazakhstan as Soviet republics.

Prof. Zviagelskaia reveals the historical paradigm of Central Asia's movement toward Russia; she concentrates on the problems of nation-building, political culture, the Islamic factor, ethnic and trade migrations, external impacts, potential and real threats, and conflicts during the post-Soviet period.

Put in a nutshell, her conclusions are the following: the region's future development trends are unclear and, most likely, different for different countries; Russia does not want to, and cannot, isolate the region from the rest of the world, although its cultural and historical ties with the local peoples should be preserved: "We cannot allow the natural and absolutely indispensable ties to become disrupted when the Soviet generation leaves the stage." This is very true.

China and its steadily mounting influence in Central Asia are too obvious to be neglected. It is not neglected by our Russian colleagues. I have in mind the monograph of S. Zhukov and O. Reznikova (Institute of World Economy and International Relations, RAS) called *Tsentralnaia Azia i Kitay: ekonomicheskoe vzaimodeystvie v usloviakh globalizatsii*<sup>5</sup> (Central Asia and China: Economic Cooperation in the Globalization Era).

The authors are convinced that the global context is the only relevant analytical framework within which the content of relations between China and Central Asia and their trends can be adequately assessed. China, which is moving fast toward a world Great Power status, is one of the most active participants in the current changes in the Central Asian economic expanse. The People's Republic of China relies on its market and non-market competitive advantages and the global and regional mechanisms of cooperation mainly within the WTO and, more and more actively, the SCO to become involved, to a great and increasing extent, in readjusting the vector of economic transformations in Central Asia to promote its national priorities.

The Central Asian economies, very much like the Eurasian economies, are facing a fundamental challenge: none can compete with China in the non-raw material branches, which negatively affects the economic future and economic structures of China's regional and continental neighbors.

The authors conclude that the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region is rapidly moving to the center of economic activities in Greater Central Asia. Today, the consistently developing macro-region includes Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, neighboring regions of the Russian Federation and, to some extent, Tajikistan. It seems that in the future they might be joined by Turkmenistan and, to a certain extent, Uzbekistan. The XUAR is gaining weight through direct (mutually complementary economic structures in Central Asia) and indirect (Central Asia reaches China through the XUAR) factors.

The XUAR's great and growing importance as an economic hub of Greater Central Asia is represented by trade, investments, and construction of trans-border road and transportation infrastructure, all of this made possible because the region serves as a bridge between Central Asia and China's developed center and south and the preferential treatment the region receives from Beijing, which does not grudge economic resources to transform the XUAR.

The Russian authors have pointed out that economic cooperation with Central Asia is a byproduct designed, together with other measures, to whip up the development of the country's western regions and that China is mainly interested in Kazakhstan because of its fuel transit potential. The au-

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<sup>5</sup> See: S.V. Zhukov, O.B. Reznikova, *Tsentralnaia Azia i Kitay: ekonomicheskoe vzaimodeystvie v usloviakh globalizatsii*, IMEMO RAS, Moscow, 2009.

thors are convinced that Kazakhstan deliberately invited China to discuss the regional gas projects to force Russia to reconsider some of its gas-related conditions.

The book offers the following conclusions.

- First, in the next ten years, economic cooperation between China and Central Asia will advance at a fast pace, which fully corresponds to the global trend: China is becoming a powerful economic hub of the world.
- Second, as the flow of goods, services, investments, and technologies along the China-Central Asia line increases, cooperation and the profits from it will become more and more asymmetric because of the very different sizes of their economies.
- Third, for objective reasons, China's economic interests in Central Asia are concentrated in Kazakhstan, the region's leader.
- Fourth, China, very much like all the other global economic power centers, is mostly interested in the region's natural riches, particularly in the oil of Kazakhstan and natural gas of Turkmenistan.
- Fifth, China agreed to set up the SCO as a political instrument of its economic interests in Central Asia among other things; furthermore, the mechanisms of multisided democracy and rhetoric allow Beijing to apply "soft power" in the region.
- Sixth, China's domestic demand for raw materials is steadily growing, which will transform Central Asia into a raw material appendage not only of the European, but also of the Chinese economy.

The authors conclude by saying that adaptation to China's economic might is the main challenge for the region and that the mounting economic cooperation between China and Central Asia directly affects Russia's interests. They recommend that Russia's political leadership take into account the experience of economic cooperation between China and Central Asia when formulating Russia's long-term national development goals.

## Central Asia and Russia

The monograph *Rossia v Tsentralnoy Azii* (Russia in Central Asia) is an excellent example of cooperation between Russian and Kazakhstan political scientists. Written by Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences Gennady Chufrin, who is well-known in the academic community, it was published by the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies (KISI).<sup>6</sup> The author, who for many years headed the Central Asian study programs at IMEMO, was involved in interaction within the SCO, and supervised cooperation between IMEMO and its Central Asian partners, has edited two collective monographs. In 2008, a monograph appeared dealing with Russia's policies in the region *Novye tendentsii vo vneshney politike Rossii v Tsentralnoy Azii i na Kavkaze* (New Trends in Russia's Policies in Central Asia and the Caucasus)<sup>7</sup> to be followed by other collective

<sup>6</sup> See: G.I. Chufrin, *Rossia v Tsentralnoy Azii*, KISI, Almaty, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> See: *Novye tendentsii vo vneshney politike Rossii v Tsentralnoy Azii i na Kavkaze*, ed. by G.I. Chufrin, IMEMO, Moscow, 2008.

effort entitled *Sostoianie i perspektivy vzaimodeystviia Rossii so stranami Tsentralnoy Azii i Zakavkazia*<sup>8</sup> (The State and Prospects of Russia's Interaction with the Countries of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus).

The latest monograph by Gennady Chufrin, which develops the subjects discussed in the previous one, consists of three parts.

- The first provides a detailed analysis of the non-traditional security threats and struggle against them, as well as the disagreements and contradictions among the local countries regarded as one of the potential threats.

America's regional policy is discussed in detail in one of the chapters in the context of Washington's foreign policy strategy and its specific military-political goals in the region viewed as a new frontier.

Another chapter looks at the CSTO and Russian-U.S. relations in the sphere of regional security.

The last chapter of the monograph's first part deals with the impact of the Afghan or, to be more exact, AfPak factor on regional security. It should be said that the author agrees with the critics of American policy in the region and their results.

- The second part deals with the region's economies; trade and economic cooperation and other aspects of interaction between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian republics (migration, financial cooperation, transport and communications, and joint use of hydropower resources).

One of the chapters in the second part deals with relations between Russia and Kazakhstan. His detailed discussion brought the author to the conclusion that Russian-Kazakhstan cooperation is the backbone of regional integration and economic ties in the eastern part of the CIS.

- The third part looks at the history, development, and current state of the SCO; the author concentrated on the evolution of its organizational structure, forms and methods of responding to security threats, economic cooperation within it, and the prospects for its further expansion. Gennady Chufrin believes that the organization hardly needs wider membership and, therefore, new members, and the status of SCO partner could attract not only Afghanistan, but also the U.S. and Japan.

The author's conclusions suggest that recently cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian countries abounded in serious economic and political contradictions which called for difficult and painstaking negotiations.

The author sees four main reasons for what is going on in the region. Among them, he notes the objective difficulties in political and socioeconomic development, as well as the negative impact of international events of a regional and global nature. He also points to the inconsistent assessments by the Central Asian leaders of the scale and aims of their countries' cooperation with Russia, which they regard as hardly useful and effective.

The competitive potential of third countries rapidly coming to the fore in Central Asia, where relations with the West and the East are enthusiastically promoted, can be described as another factor responsible for the problems in cooperation between Russia and the local states.

The author concludes by saying that Russia should pursue a maximally pragmatic policy in the region.

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<sup>8</sup> See: *Sostoianie i perspektivy vzaimodeystviia Rossii so stranami Tsentralnoy Azii i Zakavkazia*, ed. by G.I. Chufrin, IMEMO, Moscow, 2009.

Political relations are geared toward regional and Russia's security ensured by the CSTO and the SCO, Moscow's two main instruments in this sphere.

In the sphere of economic relations, Russia should maintain a maximally favorable climate, otherwise it will lose the last shreds of its influence in the region. The author is convinced that Russia can and should pose not only as a good economic partner, but also as an efficient guarantor of the local states' economic independence.

The bold and far-sighted conclusions of the Russian academic refute the clichés, myths, and sentiments prevalent in the West and among certain groups of Central Asian elites convinced that Russia is seeking control over the region to restore its colonial imperial rule.

It should be said that Central Asian studies are not the prerogative of the Moscow academic community. Konstantin Meshcheriakov's *Vneshniaia politika Rossii v Tsentralnoy Azii v 1991-2009 gody: osobennosti i problemy*<sup>9</sup> (Foreign Policy of Russia in Central Asia in 1991-2009: Specifics and Problems) appeared in St. Petersburg. (A. Bissenbaev's *Ne vmeste. Rossia i strany Tsentralnoy Azii*<sup>10</sup> [Not Together. Russia and the Central Asian Countries] was also published in St. Petersburg; written in an essayist style it does not belong to the body of Russian historiographic works discussed here.)

Saratov is another Russian city where an interest in Central Asian studies is fairly great. A collective monograph appeared in 2011 dealing with the region's water and energy resources titled *Vodno-energeticheskie resursy Tsentralnoy Azii: osnovnye problemy i perspektivy*<sup>11</sup> (Central Asian Water and Energy Resources: Problems and Prospects).

Moscow academics dominate the field: A. Bogaturov, A. Dundich, and E. Troitskiy made a highly interesting contribution to Central Asian studies with their *Tsentralnaia Azia: "otlozhenny neytralitet" i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v 2000-kh godakh. Ocherki tekushchey politiki* (Central Asia: "Postponed Neutrality" and International Relations in the 2000s. Essays of Current Policies); the same can be said about Dina Malysheva's *Tsentralnoaziatskiy uzel mirovoy politiki* (Central Asian Knot of World Politics).<sup>12</sup> The authors point out that Russia's interests are closely connected with Central Asia's geopolitical role.

A collective monograph *Rossia-Kazakhstan-Evrosoiuz: realii i perspektivy vzaimodeystviia na Evro-Aziatskom prostranstve* (Russia-Kazakhstan-European Union: Realities and Prospects of Cooperation in Eurasia) published by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is a good example of international cooperation among the academic communities.<sup>13</sup>

Relations between Russia and Central Asia figure prominently in the works of A. Klimenko, D. Popov, and N. Serebriakova dealing with the SCO as a regional security factor.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See: K. Meshcheriakov, *Vneshniaia politika Rossii v Tsentralnoy Azii v 1991-2009 gody: osobennosti i problemy*, St. Petersburg, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> See: A. Bissenbaev, *Ne vmeste. Rossia i strany Tsentralnoy Azii*, Piter Publishers, St. Petersburg, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> See: *Vodno-energeticheskie resursy Tsentralnoy Azii: osnovnye problemy i perspektivy*, SGU, Saratov, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> See: A. Bogaturov, A. Dundich, E. Troitskiy, *Tsentralnaia Azia: "otlozhenny neytralitet" i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v 2000-kh godakh. Ocherki tekushchey politiki*. Issue 4, NOFMO, Moscow, 2010; D. Malysheva, *Tsentralnoaziatskiy uzel mirovoy politiki*, IMEMO RAS, Moscow, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> See: *Rossia-Kazakhstan-Evrosoiuz: realii i perspektivy vzaimodeystviia na Evro-Aziatskom prostranstve*, FRL, Moscow, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See: A.F. Klimenko, *Strategiia razvitiia Shankhaiskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva: problemy oborony i bezopasnosti*, IDV RAS, Moscow, 2010; *Shankhaiskaia organizatsia sotrudnichestva: k novym rubezham razvitiia*, Compiled by A.F. Klimenko, IDV RAS, Moscow, 2008; D.S. Popov, "O probleme rasshireniia Shankhaiskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva. Analiticheskiy obzor," *RISI*, No. 4 (27), 2010; N.V. Serebriakova, *Shanhaiskaia organizatsia sotrudnichestva: mnogostoronniiy kompromiss v Tsentralnoy Azii*, InfoRos, Moscow, 2011.

## The Era of Dmitry Medvedev: “Resetting” and Its Political Scientific Echoes

Dmitry Medvedev’s advent to power (even if formal) favorably affected the relations between Russia and the West; their resetting was very much in line with what Barack Obama also wanted. Do the foreign policy changes affect in any noticeable way the stereotypes and set ideas of the Russian academics?

In 2011, a collective monograph *Politicheskiy protsess v Tsentralnoy Azii* (Political Process in Central Asia), the third in a series dealing with Central Asian topics, was published as part of the joint project of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Germany) and the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. The international collective of authors analyzed the political processes unfolding in the region, the social and economic specifics of the regional states, and the fundamental changes that affected all spheres of life.

The authors of the introductory article (Arne C. Seifert and Irina Zviagelskaia) pointed to the sustainable authoritarian rule in the Central Asian states and a very specific type of clan-bureaucratic capitalism serving a small population group. The region demonstrates a very complicated intertwining of tradition and modernity, as well as the strong and mounting impact of religion on social life. The authors believe that the current political developments reproduce not a Western model (or a set of its elements) based on the separation of personal and public relations, but a model in which power, authority, and influence largely depend on the individual’s social status. This explains why political struggle is concentrated on problems of influence rather than on alternative political courses.

The authors have detected a certain similarity between Central Asian reality and the social revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa; they point out that there is a fairly widely accepted opinion that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt spearheaded at the authoritarian regimes serve as a model for at least some of the Central Asian countries with similar headaches: the growing number of educated youth with no adequate employment at home; painful urbanization accompanied by no less painful social repercussions of the developing market (frequently not market) economy; widespread corruption; poverty, etc.

The Central Asian problems differ from those of the Middle East: tension is fuelled by basic social and economic problems, although outbursts are ignited by the elites locked in rivalry over power and resources. This leads to mobilization on the regional or local basis (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan).

Sergey Abashin’s chapter in the reviewed monograph “Tsentralnaia Azia: kak my ee vidim” (Central Asia: How We See It) is of a conceptual nature. The author asks: do these countries constitute a single whole and what are their common descriptions? It should be said in all justice that much of what the author says here was said earlier in his *Natsionalizm v Tsentralnoy Azii* (Nationalism in Central Asia), which appeared in 2007.<sup>15</sup>

The author pointed out that the two versions of the region’s possible configuration presented as alternative interpretations of the region’s past, culture, and political interests—Central Eurasia and Greater Central Asia—were put on the table with the clear purpose of getting rid of the vestiges of the region’s Soviet past.

Meanwhile, the Soviet heritage is gradually disappearing; new geopolitical structures that represent certain old and much more solid relations based on culture, language, and religion have moved

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<sup>15</sup> See: S.N. Abashin, *Natsionalizm v Tsentralnoy Azii: v poiskakh identichnosti*, Aleteyya, St. Petersburg, 2007.

to the fore. This means, argue those who favor new names, that Central Asia, together with other countries, should become part of a region that from that time on should be regarded as a historical geopolitical entity. The expert community has gradually grown attached to the idea, which is demonstrated by the names for all sorts of events, communities, and departments.

Dr. Abashin argues that the new idea about the region and its new names (in fact the difference between Central Asia and Greater Central Asia is purely stylistic) constitutes a problem because of the vague borders of this new cultural-geographic construct. Indeed, there is a more or less definite consensus that it should include five Central Asian states and Afghanistan, the rest depends on the whims of each specific author. The lists of candidates include Mongolia, Xinjiang, Eastern Iran, Northwestern Pakistan, Western Siberia, the Southern Urals, Volga Area, the Southern Caucasus, and the Crimea.

The author then turns to the “meaningful features” (social and economic characteristics and statistics) of each of the Central Asian republics to conclude that the local societies are stuck between “urbanized/rural” and “industrial/agrarian” categories with a prominent and prevailing rural/agrarian element. It should be said that in Central Asia, the lifestyle in many towns is more rural than urbanized.

This brings Sergey Abashin to certain conclusions related to the modernization/demodernization problem; he refers to the supporters of the classical modernization concept who believe that social and economic development inevitably leads to secularization.

It is absolutely clear, however, that the processes underway in the Central Asian societies are not that simple: a large share of people have completely lost their interest in religion; the majority of those who regard themselves as Muslims have in mind certain cultural values rather than faith per se.

Those who regard themselves as faithful follow the minimal set of religious injunctions maximally adjusted to the demands of the mobile information society of our days.

There are people who claim to be active believers (their ranks swelled after the Soviet Union’s downfall) and call on the rest to strictly follow the numerous religious rules. It should be said that this is not a backward movement toward archaic spiritual practices, but a newly comprehended religiosity that stresses personal faith and personal responsibility.

Each of the categories, irrespective of their share in each of the Central Asian countries, represents a specific version of “inclusion” in the contemporary world. The local society is not a keeper of ancient traditions, but a dynamically changing community that has acquired new layers and creates new, hybrid forms of cultural identity.

The author concludes with a discussion of the “world-system,” which pigeonholes the countries into “central” and “periphery,” and adds the “semi-periphery” category to them to describe a certain transition state. This classification relies on the fact that there are more diverse forms of predominance: redistribution of financial means, flows of people, commodities, technologies, cultural values, fashions, etc. On this scale, the Central Asian countries occupy a subordinate and dependent position compared to Russia (which is a semi-periphery state itself), China, the U.S., and Europe. At best, Central Asia has supplied the developed countries with raw materials and workforce in exchange for greater dependence on loans, investments, and political benevolence. In other words, the outmoded term “third world,” abandoned when the Soviet bloc collapsed, can be used to describe the “periphery” and the lower status.

Dr. Abashin points out that there is no single (nor can there be) opinion about the region. Diverse descriptions reveal a multitude of views and opinions about the region. The ideas about Central Asia greatly depend on the point from which an expert observes the region, the interests, real or imaginary, which are defended, and the mechanisms and methodologies applied.

The Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, pays particular attention to Central Asia's domestic policy.<sup>16</sup> In 2011, the Center for Strategic Assessments and Forecasting in Russia issued a report in which it pointed to possible connections between the events in the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> The authors had to admit that Russia, one of the key regional players, has failed to restore its former influence in Central Asia.

In one of the chapters of *Vneshnepoliticheskiy protsess v stranakh Vostoka*, Irina Zviagelskaia (Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS) looks at the foreign policy process in the Central Asian states as part of the region's general rebirth and development that has been unfolding in recent decades and the role of external players in the region.<sup>18</sup> The author points to the closed nature of foreign policy decision-making as one of the specific features of the region's political regimes. She also mentions other similar features of the region's political culture, which combined modern and traditional elements: social hierarchy, solidarity groups, etc., and the multiple impact of what is going on outside the region on what is going on inside it and the foreign policy of its states.

The author deems it necessary to stress the following important fact: what the West, very much aware of the importance of energy sources, is doing in the Arab East (removal of elderly leaders, external reorientation, structural economic changes, etc.) should be expected after a while in Central Asia; the region and its neighbors should be prepared. Indeed, some of the Central Asian leaders have been at the helm as long as displaced Mubarak, Ben Ali, Saleh and Kaddafi, their regimes (authoritarianism that pretends to be democracy) being very similar to those in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

In other words, the Central Asian leaders and their regimes have grown old and become worn-out during the 20-odd post-Soviet years: back in 1991, they bred limited enthusiasm; in stormy 2011, they could rely on fear of repression, fear of change, apathy, and post-Soviet conformism.

Irina Zviagelskaia concludes by saying that a peaceful and organized transfer from these regimes to democracy is too complicated to be smooth; what is more, there has been no successful precedence anywhere in the world.

*Aziatskie energeticheskie stsenarii* (Asian Energy Scenarios), which is part of a series published by the Institute of World Economy and International Relations,<sup>19</sup> looks at the energy problems and the region's role in the world export of energy resources. The authors have pointed out that Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan used their vast oil, gas, and uranium deposits to find a niche in the international division of labor as energy exporters. Many of them, however, failed to modernize their energy and transportation sector, which demands excessive energy-intensity of production and consumption. Very soon this will diminish their export advantages.

*Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v Tsentralnoy Azii* (International Relations in Central Asia), another fundamental work of Russian academics edited by A. Bogaturov, deserves special mention.<sup>20</sup> This is the first attempt in Russia to present an integrated version of the history of the sub-system of international relations in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period. The authors supply an overview of the pre-history of international relations in the region and their evolution in the last two decades. The period between 1991 and 2008 received special attention because this was when international relations in Central Asia acquired new logic, new stimuli, and a new trajectory.

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<sup>16</sup> See: *Razvitiie politicheskoy situatsii v gosudarstvakh Tsentralnoy Azii v kontekste transformatsii*, IV RAS, Moscow, 2010; *Politicheskii protsess v Tsentralnoy Azii: rezultaty, problemy, perspektivy*, IV RAS/TsSPI, Moscow, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Tsentralnaia Azia v geopoliticheskikh protsessakh, ee nastoiashchee i budushchee*, TsSOP, Moscow, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> See: *Vneshnepoliticheskiy protsess v stranakh Vostoka*, ed. by Prof. D.V. Streltsov, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> See: *Aziatskie energeticheskie stsenarii*, ed. by S.V. Zhukov, Magistr, Moscow, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> See: *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v Tsentralnoy Azii: sobytia i dokumenty*, Teaching aid, ed. by A.D. Bogaturov, Moscow, 2011.

*Rossia v Sredney Azii. Zavoevania i preobrazovania* (Russia in Central Asia. Conquests and Changes) by Evgeny Glushchenko,<sup>21</sup> which appeared earlier and dealt with more or less similar subjects, should also be mentioned here.

The monograph edited by A. Bogaturov pays much attention to the social, political, and economic processes underway in the post-Soviet Central Asian countries. The authors concentrate on the interaction between the regional states and the external world, which underwent great changes when the Soviet Union disappeared and new Russia emerged on the international political scene. The book analyzes in detail the relations with the world and regional actors (Russia, the United States, China, Turkey, the EU), as well as with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. The authors have said enough about the role these countries are playing in the very complicated and consequential geopolitical games and the prospects for their involvement in international regional cooperation in the 21st century.

The American formula Greater Central Asia (analogous to the Greater Middle East) received the full scope of attention. It presupposed that Greater Central Asia will cover not only Afghanistan, but also Pakistan, Bangladesh, and probably India. It should be said that these formulas are quite useful for analytical purposes.

This particular formula draws attention to a specific vector of American strategic interests; the authors absolutely correctly point out that the regional countries' foreign policy and the activities of their common organizations and consultative structures are very important for overcoming or neutralizing extra-regional threats and for more or less successfully addressing many of their domestic and interstate tasks.

The authors conclude that today those Central Asian republics that are still clinging to their "multivectoral" policies (President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov is especially fond of this) have acquired another argument in favor of closer relations with Russia.

The authors point out that in recent years the number of reasons to pursue full-scale and varied cooperation with Russia has been increasing. The stumbling blocks on this road (discussed in detail above) proved to be higher than many of the supporters of reintegration believed, one of them being the diminished international role and weight of Yeltsin's Russia and the imperfect decision-making mechanisms.

In Central Asia, "anti-imperialist" sentiments and the desire to find new foreign partners played an equally negative role. Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's new ties with China, Uzbekistan's with Turkey and the United States, Turkmenistan's with Turkey and Iran, and Tajikistan's with Afghanistan and Iran proved to be fairly strong. In these conditions, relations with Russia survived, but no longer as a priority; in some countries (Uzbekistan), they were pushed to the backburner. The circumstances gradually changed; under Putin, Russia regained its strength and influence, including, among other areas, in the center of Asia.

The authors stress that Central Asia is very important for Russia in the context of economic and military security; the sub-system of international relations taking shape in this geopolitically highly important region will determine, in many respects, the image of the developing multipolar world.

## Conclusion

The numerous and varied Russian studies of Central Asia suggest the following conclusions about Russia's security interests and concerns in the region:

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<sup>21</sup> See: E.A. Glushchenko, *Rossia v Sredney Azii. Zavoevania i preobrazovania*, Tsentrpoligraf, Moscow, 2010.

- (1) military-strategic stability and recognition of Moscow's "special rights" to the region as a zone of Russia's national interests;
- (2) military-political and military-technical cooperation on a bilateral basis;
- (3) unwelcome influence or interference of third countries in the region;
- (4) regional stability (relations among the Central Asian states);
- (5) stability in each of the Central Asian republics;
- (6) dependence of regional stability on the Afghan developments.

The authors practically never admit (but not infrequently imply) that Russia does not have enough money, information resources, etc. to compete with the West's active policies; Russia does not have what is called soft power (its model is not culturally or otherwise attractive). This does not prevent Russian strategists and economists from developing far-reaching integration projects.

Kazakhstan is Russia's key strategic partner in the region, but Moscow does not always take its interests into account. This is confirmed by the methods by which the Customs Union was established, the events in Kyrgyzstan, Russia's relations with Uzbekistan, problems with jointly invested projects in other Central Asian republics, etc.

Today, China's consistently growing influence in Central Asia presents the main challenge for Russia, which has long been concerned about the West's influence.

The scope of studies of Russia's interests and policies in Central Asia is not exhausted by the publications reviewed above; the same can be said about the region's other problems. A. Bogaturov, Iu. Morozov, A. Malashenko, M. Braterskiy, A. Grozin, D. Malysheva, A. Tsyganok, N. Fedulova, and many other authors write consistently and extensively on subjects related to Central Asia.

This far from exhaustive overview demonstrates that the Russian academic and political scientific communities have not lost an interest in Central Asia: in fact, today it is even greater than ever. This breeds hope that relations between the states and peoples, who are not alien to each other, will continue to develop. This is the main idea of most Russian authors.