

AMERICA AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Political opposition in all Central Asian countries is still weak: the dissident parties and groups are not strong enough to cope with the state, their opponent, which is omnipotent.¹ Late in the 1990s the United States realized that rather than

addressing specifically European or Asian tasks, in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan it has to create a certain Eurasian model of its attitude toward their political systems. The threat of international terrorism and Islamic extremism is too real to allow Washington to treat the democratic groups in Central Asia in the same balanced way similar groups in Central and Eastern Europe are treated. Still, the White House is fully aware of the importance of the current situation in Central Asia for continued stability and order the world over.

¹ Talking about the Central Asian republics Brzezinski has pointed out that “the newly independent energy-exporting states are still in the early stages of political consolidation. Their systems are fragile, their political processes arbitrary and their statehood vulnerable” (Zb. Brzezinski, “Hegemonic Quick-sand,” *The National Interest*, Winter 2003/04, p. 14 [http://www.kas.de/upload/dokumente/brzezinski.pdf]).

Sources

The sources of the United States current and highly unusual attitude toward political opposition in the Central Asian republics should probably be sought in the special approaches of former U.S. President Carter and his closest circle to this opposition. As soon as the Soviet Union signed the Helsinki Final Act, America, under pressure from the humanitarian basket and human dimension priorities, had to alter its previous, “Ford,” tactics. The Democratic Administration referred to the human rights issues much more often than its predecessors. The stake on deeply personal motives stalled the Soviet propaganda machine. The dissident movement, or even its shoots (in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and elsewhere), developed from pro-American into “pro-world.”

It seems that the only failure shared by two successive administrations—Jimmy Carter’s Democratic and Ronald Reagan’s Republican—was their inability to differentiate between the various political opposition groups in the Soviet Union (and in Central Asia). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the White

House regarded their common feature—anticommunism and anti-Sovietism—as the main trait unrelated, for example, to secular and religious factors. “Dissident,” “opposition member,” and “prisoner of conscience” were indistinguishable synonyms. While Marxism was shortsighted enough to classify its theoretical opponents according to their attitude to God, the American leaders could have been more farsighted when Leninism was undergoing its total crisis.²

The way two subsequent administrations (of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton) treated the opponents of the post-Soviet Central Asian regimes largely depended on the fluctuations of President Yeltsin’s policies and the degree to which the Russian democratic forces contributed to decision-making in the Russian Federation. The important (now partially lost) pro-American triad still existed, “the White House-Russia’s democratic forces-Central Asian political opposition,” which made it easier to realize democratic goals. In the 1990s, constructive opposition groups in post-Soviet republics coordinated their actions to a certain extent, the center of which was removed beyond the offices of the Russian special services.

The turn that occurred late in 2001 in the relations between the local regimes and the United States opened a new stage for the Central Asian opposition: it finally found its real place in the political systems of its own states. The choice was a hard one: the opposition had to identify its attitude toward the stronger pro-American bias and certain shifts in the policies pursued by the U.S. Administration regarding religious extremism. Being aware of the dilemma that might prove too complex for the fairly weak local opposition, the White House deemed it necessary to insist on continuity of its Central Asian policies.³

Attitude to Different Groups

Today, as before, the leaders of Central Asian political opposition form a loose conglomerate of academics (A. Pulatov, N. Masanov, and others), journalists (D. Atovulloev, A. Usmanov, and others), diplomats (B. Shikhmuradov, B. Malikov, and others), officials (A. Kazhegeldin, F. Kulov, and others), writers (M. Salikh, O. Suleymenov, and others), etc. Their intellectual potential notwithstanding, in the latter half of the 1990s, the White House placed its stakes on those who had been in politics and especially on those who had stood at the helm. This happened because in the late 1980s and early 1990s, post-Soviet opposition compromised itself (in Azerbaijan, Georgia, etc.).

This should not be taken to mean that Washington has changed its attitude toward the local opposition as a system of different, not only political, elements.⁴ The administrations of father and son Bush and Clinton placed their stakes on the young institutions of civil society, which had been opposing bureaucracy from the very beginning. Indeed, the conception of the “third sector” in its American interpretation (parties, NGOs, initiative groups, religious organizations, clubs, branches of international organizations, etc.) has broadened the opposition’s potential fields of involvement. Western donors created rivalry inside the opposition camp and caused mergers between individual organizations.

As distinct from Moscow, Washington is treating the region as a single whole: it openly stimulates joint actions of civil society institutions (forums, seminars, etc.), and supports opposition in exile. (It should

² I have excluded from this article the attitude of the American leaders to Central Asian spiritual opposition, the Hizb ut-Tahrir Party, the Wahhabis, etc. in particular.

³ Within days after 11 September, 2001 National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice provided a clear answer: “We are not going to stop talking about the things that matter to us—human rights and religious freedom and so forth. We’re going to continue to press those issues” (*Country Reports on Human Rights Practices—2003*, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 25 February, 2004 [www.state.gov/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/]).

⁴ Significantly, in 2004 in many of its documents the U.S. State Department used the blanket term of “activists” and “non-governmental organizations” to describe all opposition groups.

be added that the seemingly monolithic Turkestan opposition in the West has, to a certain extent, helped the United States realize its national interests.) The White House proceeds from the idea that the democratic states embracing the market economy will inevitably be involved in globalization and internationalization of their public life.

The United States treats political opposition in the densely populated areas of the Ferghana Valley historically predisposed to social conflicts as a special issue. Statistics confirm that opposition sentiments are rapidly developing and that the American sociopolitical centers are focusing greater attention on these areas. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development supports most projects, especially in the media.⁵ The growing number of applications for grants testifies that the realized projects were effective.

Long-Term Goals

American interest in Central Asian political opposition consists of three components. First, the discovered and potential oil and gas fields make the region's democratic stability all-important. Second, the threateningly large weapon reserves and drug routes forced the United States to identify the most efficient elites in Astana, Tashkent, Ashgabad, Bishkek, and Dushanbe. Third, the disintegration processes, which make the opposition in all five countries political players in their own right.

The most prominent opposition figures, in turn, accuse the White House of having no reasonable and long-term policies. Former Kazakhstan Prime Minister Kazhegeldin has pointed out that no regional security is possible without stability, while "the only stability an authoritarian regime can offer is stable stagnation."⁶ This is hardly true: authoritarian regimes are generated by undeveloped markets, while stability cannot be achieved outside developed commodity-money relations.

The very fact that the ruling Central Asian elite has armed itself with the "managed democracy" conception, and want to achieve modernization *à la* Putin, says that it is hardly prepared to coexist with the political opposition.⁷ The "managed democracy" conception became even more important for certain leaders in certain countries after Eduard Shevardnadze was removed from his post.⁸ The statements issued by the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in late 2003 and early 2004 about the odious nature of certain international organizations confirm that they refused to follow in the footsteps of Washington alone. This deprived the opposition of a large number of financial sources.

Democracy and the market inevitably lead to social differentiation and to opposition between social groups. Producers come to the fore as the most promising class; it has, however, to cope with communist-minded bureaucrats. Is the American administration aware of this? Its policies of the past decades say that the understanding is not complete. Preached by Western political scientists, the concept of "managed conflicts," which is realized in Central Asia, localizes the hotbeds of resistance and slows down the emergence of a healthy opposition in the region.

⁵ The relative trip to Namangan Assistant Secretary Michael G. Kozak made in November 2004 to meet the leaders of non-registered opposition groups of Uzbekistan confirmed that Washington is resolved to support political opposition in the region.

⁶ *Balans mezhdu voennoy moshch'iu i podderzhkoy prav cheloveka v Tsentral'noy Azii. Diskussia na radio "Svoboda" (U.S.A.)*, 2 July, 2002 [www.svoboda.org].

⁷ On 27 April, 2004, speaking at the conference of the U.S. Kazakhstan Business Association in Washington the then Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage correctly pointed out: "I want to emphasize that the road to a viable, independent state with long-term prosperity and political stability does not run through 'managed democracy'." ("Kazakhstan Can Be a Positive Role Model," R. Armitage Says. *Remarks at U.S.-Kazakhstan Business Association Conference*, 27 April, 2004 [usinfo.state.gov].)

⁸ Here I want to quote an outstanding Uzbek and Tajik philosopher Abdurrauf Fitrat (1886-1938) killed by the Stalin regime. Back in 1917 he said that democracy needed no management—it itself should manage society.

Achievements

Implementation of the documents “Charter on Strategic Partnership between the U.S. and the RK,” “Declaration of Strategic Partnership between the U.S. and the RU,” “Joint Statement on Relations between the U.S. and the RT,” and others helped democratize the political processes in Central Asia. Among other things, they contain provisions about helping the local states move toward democracy. As a result, civil society institutions, including those not loyal to the official regimes, acquired wide support, the opportunity for legal appeal, guarantees of their security, as well as financial support, etc.

According to different sources, in the past four years the United States followed a more differentiated strategy on the human rights issue, which cannot be said of other issues enumerated above. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the George W. Bush administration is resolved to help develop the independent media; in Tajikistan, it concentrates on stemming trafficking in human beings; in Kazakhstan, on fighting corruption, in Uzbekistan, on intensive discussions about democratization at all levels of power, as well as active cooperation with Uzbek human rights activists.⁹ In other words, the White House has identified its preferences regarding certain political opposition groups, depending on the democratic development level.

Washington’s efforts achieved a certain amount of success in promoting the power/opposition dialog. In Kazakhstan, for example, the political opposition took part in the parliamentary elections; in Kyrgyzstan, rallies in support of imprisoned opposition members were allowed; in Tajikistan, several groups presented alternative amendments to the election laws; Turkmenistan adopted a new law on the “third sector,” in Uzbekistan, political opposition and human rights activists regularly gathered for round table discussions. (The U.S. Department of State monitors how human rights are observed in these countries.)

The George W. Bush Administration is continuing what was started by its predecessors: it uses the tactics of financing specific programs to allow them to achieve independence in the future with an emphasis on teaching the principles, forms, and methods of democracy to the broad masses. This is done in the form of training seminars in various parts of the local states. Well-known international institutions, such as the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, the Open Society Institute, and others, have an important role to play in these processes. They rarely duplicate their efforts.

Democrats and Republicans

The Democratic rule in the United States in the 1990s determined the line of conduct of George W. Bush and his administration, especially where support of opposition parties and movements was concerned. The time lost on the inevitable delimitation of “what was mine” and “what was yours” between the Democrats and Republicans and between America and Russia deprived the administration of the opportunity to formally readjust the democratic forces in Central Asia. This did not weaken the Clinton Administration’s position in the region. The lack of finesse and relative one-sidedness of Russia’s diplomacy in the region forced the United States to reveal and prevent anti-American sentiments.¹⁰

⁹ See excerpts from a report “Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2003-2004 Report. Richard L. Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State, Remarks at the Rollout of Report,” Washington, D.C., 17 May, 2004 [www.state.gov/s/d/rm/32521.htm].

¹⁰ On 18 April, 2000, the *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* wrote about the visit of U.S. State Secretary Madeleine Albright and noted that the local opposition had had to meet one of the top U.S. officials “late at night and without journalists.” The newspaper concluded that judging by the subjects discussed “America was more interested in possible variants of its relations with Russia, that has just acquired a new president (Putin.—*B.E.*), than in the problems of opposition.”

In 2000-2004, the White House described its efforts to promote parliamentary political parties, human rights structures, and the independent media as “unprecedented.”¹¹ I believe that the period between October 2001 and December 2003 was the most successful in this respect: political opposition formulated new conceptions and created new platforms that took into account the achievements and failures of democratic movements in Central and Eastern Europe.¹² The unfolding worldwide counter-terrorist struggle created certain elements of democratic unity in the face of contemporary threats and challenges.

The involvement of the region’s countries in the operation in Iraq was the touchstone of loyalty of the U.S. Administration to the local regimes and its attitude to the political opposition. Uzbekistan was the first to approve America’s intention, while Kazakhstan was the only country in the region to send its troops to Iraq. Western governments, meanwhile, used the situation to try to reconcile power and the opposition and to achieve the latter’s broader involvement in parliamentary elections.

Many of the Central Asian opposition groups understand that the U.S. Administration’s position is a difficult one, therefore, it has become normal to seek the support of American legislators. Democratic and Republican congressmen and senators often agree on Central Asian issues. For example, the joint resolution of the U.S. Congress (No. 3 of 14 January, 2003) drafted by Democrat of Connecticut Joseph Lieberman and Republican of Arizona John McCain called on the region’s governments to liberate all imprisoned opposition members and demanded that all political emigrants should be allowed to return home.¹³

Prospects

The events in Serbia, Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine urged Washington to more actively support political opposition, on the one hand, while Moscow found itself excluded from the “power-opposition” problem range, on the other. American support became more selective; today the White House relies on “practical-minded dissidents.” It seems that Moscow lost a lot of influence among the Central Asian opposition groups when Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces (two democratic groups) failed to retain their seats in the State Duma. They made it possible to maintain a productive and civilized dialog across the post-Soviet expanse and to prevent radical steps.

Two most prominent issues the United States supports—transparent elections and a more democratic media—are shaping the legal field of action for the region’s democratic forces. In 2002-2004, they took an active part in amending the election laws, and in making TV, radio, the press, and the Internet more democratic. Washington is actively using the OSCE and international NGOs to improve the election laws and allow dissidents take part in parliamentary and local elections.

The very fact that the active phases of democratic processes (the “roses,” “palm,” and “orange” revolutions) coincided with presidential and parliamentary elections (which manifests the purely Western type of political thinking) deprives the opposition groups across the post-Soviet territory of the opportunity for effective consolidation. At the same time, the leaders of such revolutions are too hastily selected (this also happened before, in the late 1980s-early 1990s). In Turkestan (with the exception of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan), it would be better to elect an economist rather than a lawyer as leader. European experience cannot be fully applied in Central Asia; the local mentality should be taken into account.

¹¹ In 2003 fiscal year the United States contributed \$13.9 million to democratic developments in Kazakhstan, \$7.5 million in Tajikistan, etc.

¹² The program of action formulated by two groups (Birlik and Erk, headed by T. Yoldosh) acting in Uzbekistan is a relevant example. Its economic part demanded that poverty be liquidated, the problem of illegal labor migration addressed and local producers protected, etc. Their claim to part of the Caspian oil, however, can be described as highly debatable.

¹³ Introduction of bills and joint resolutions—(Senate—January 14,—2003) [thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?r108:24:/temp/~r108BpwrDX].

The Internet attracts the Washington Administration's particular attention: it can provide objective information about the situation around the world and in one's own country and it can unite the region's democratic forces. The United States is supporting a huge number of web sites in Central Asia, thus giving it an unlimited opportunity to plant democratic ideas in people's minds. But the worldwide net has its weaknesses too: the democratic forces have not yet invented any legitimate and effective counter-censorship measures; they cannot prevent persecution of journalists, stop blockage of their web sites, etc. The region needs a single information space.

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It is interesting to note that in 2007, a number of fairly important political events will take place, one of the most significant being the presidential elections in Kazakhstan. In Georgia, the new authorities will take their first important steps, the Ukrainian political system will be transformed, while in Russia the liberals may come back to power. This will change once more the relations between the United States and the Central Asian political opposition; prompt and unconventional steps might be needed. We shall probably watch interesting events in the camp of the ruling elite; some of them are already taking place before our eyes in Kazakhstan. Washington will have to reassess its attitude to the opposition groups once more.
