

CENTRAL ASIA: THE BUMPY ROAD TOWARDS POLITICAL MATURITY

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ABSTRACT

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the new Central Asian independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan replaced the Soviet republics of Central (Sredniaia) Asia and Kazakhstan. By the time they gained independence, these countries had already developed specific mechanisms of governance: The Communist Party and state structures had relied, to a great extent, on certain regional clan principles of decision-making inherited from their distant past. The new states immediately declared that they would strive to build Western-style political systems. They elected their presidents and parliaments, set up judicial systems, yet the political elites proved unable to realize the democratic standards of the West they supported in words. Over the course of three decades, heads of state, who dominated and still remain the dominant figures in their countries and are responsible for domestic and foreign policies have replaced each other without any real competition. None of the regional states can boast of competitive presidential elections. On the other hand, even though their political development may have external similarities, there are still numerous differences rooted in their very different past,

cultures and mentalities. The regional clan division, swept under the carpet during the Soviet period, was revived as an important and highly influential feature. Kazakhstan was divided into zhuzes; Kyrgyzstan is in the midst of an ongoing regional confrontation between the South and the North; in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan regional clans have gradually gained a lot of political weight. This means that the leaders of all Central Asian countries had no choice but to take into account the interests of groups and clans and the ties between different tribes, which inevitably affected the principles of governance and choice of officials.

The personal characteristics of leaders who came to power after the Soviet Union had left the stage and their interpretations of the ongoing processes played a huge role in regional developments, the relationships between the regional states, the regional balance of power and the political situation.

Today, all the above-mentioned countries with the exception of Tajikistan, have elected new presidents either amid domestic political turmoil or through a power transit within the same group.

This means that in all Central Asian countries presidential elections are not seen as an instrument of change of power but,

rather, as an instrument of remaining in power. The complicated economic situation, the non-regional actors that put pressure on the local political elites and, recently, the

COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified the social and economic problems, did nothing positive for the political and economic stability in Central Asia.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, politics, political process, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.*

Introduction

In the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union was still functioning, political processes in the republics of Central (Sredniaia) Asia and Kazakhstan (the formula used until 1993) gained momentum: nationalist movements became highly visible, which meant that the local elites wanted greater independence. They still perceived their republics as parts of the unified state, albeit with wider powers and less control by the center.

Amid the political chaos in the Soviet Union, the local leaders had no choice but to adjust and manipulate in order to remain in power. The local Communist Parties, bureaucracies and leaders of nationalist movements closed ranks in a tactical alliance and used it as an instrument of pressure on the Center without hesitation. The loud deliberations about democracy, economic and political changes suppressed the sounds of the vehement clan struggle for two main prizes—power and the property of the republic.

As soon as the Center reduced its control over the republics, the local leaders tried to redistribute their powers within the frameworks of the Soviet system. The Central Asian republics set up the ~~post of president to consolidate their positions in the relationships with the Center and within the republics.~~ In 1990-1991, the Supreme Soviets of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan elected their presidents. In Turkmenistan, the president was elected by popular vote in October 1990. In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov scored his expected victory in late 1991 after a feigned political struggle that ended in early 1992.

In Tajikistan, the president and the opposition relied on the use of force in their struggle for power partly because the rapid population growth led to serious economic problems and water and land shortages.

In November 1991, elected president Rakhmon Nabiev succumbed to the opposition. It won the battle that it had been leading up to for several years, driven by its highly efficient propaganda and supported by some of the Eastern countries and Western political forces.¹ The president resigned in September 1992; his duties were transferred to the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Akbarsho Iskandarov. Economic problems were mounting against the background of unfolding political struggle and continued warfare. In November 1992, Emomali Rakhmonov (later Rakhmon) was elected Chairman of the Supreme Soviet with the duties of the head of state. He seemed like an interim figure, a temporal head of state, yet his skillful maneuvering and the Constitution of 1994 extended his authority as head of state and consolidated his power.

On the whole, the history of newly built national states was unfolding amid an uncompromising struggle between their presidents and the opposition. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the opposition

¹ See: A.I. Kuzmin, "Prichiny i uroki grazhdanskoy voyny," in: *Postsovetskaiia Tsentralnaia Azia. Poteri i obreteniia, Vostochnaia literatura RAN, Moscow, 1998, pp. 215-294.*

was pushed away from the political arena. By that time, the economic situation, which required fast and efficient measures and traditional state governance, left no other options. The division into clans (tribes), which had outlived the Soviet Union, survived in the new political context. At this stage the major changes caused by the Soviet Union disintegration coexisted with the Soviet past.²

The Central Asian countries had no choice but to introduce the post of a president, the key and dominant figure in the power system. In all Central Asian countries, he defined external and internal policies and was responsible for dealing with the most complex social and economic problems.

Moving towards Political Stability

Political stability Central Asian-style did not presuppose efficiency of the state machine and alternation of power. Eradication of opposition was the main and ultimate aim. It is hardly surprising, since the scarcity of resources inherited from the Soviet Union and the desire of the clan (group) in power to control the most precious resources forced the leader in power to keep the opposition within certain limits and reduce its influence to naught. Islam Karimov (president of Uzbekistan in 1991-2016) spared no effort to neutralize the powerful regional and national clans.³ In 1992, the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan amended the law on the deputy status according to which any deputy could be deprived of his status for anti-Constitutional activities and social and political destabilization.

The Constitution of Turkmenistan established the presidential republic, in which the president headed the state and the executive branch. In 1992, when the Constitution was elaborated and reforms planned, Saparmurad Niyazov, president of Turkmenistan in 1991-2006, pointed out that the country should not exactly copy the state systems of other countries: the history and traditions of the Turkmen and their experience have formed a much more solid foundation.⁴

Each of the Central Asian states, therefore, had its own specifics, which determined, to an extent, their political future. Kazakhstan, for example, rejected the total democratization taken up by Kyrgyzstan, seen as the most democratic of all Central Asian republics. On the other hand, Kazakhstan avoided the authoritarian trends apparent in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where from 1992 onwards, the president had developed into a dominant figure, while the powers of the parliament and the judicial system were largely limited. However, in Kazakhstan the institution of presidency played the key role in the republic's political development.

The above demonstrates that all Central Asian countries have their specifics. Kyrgyzstan was promoting the "democratic" principles based on the separation of powers and the non-government sector. Tajikistan was immersed in a civil war. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the presidents were persistently elbowing out the opposition parties from the political arena,⁵ while limiting the power and influence of the parliament and the judicial system. Kazakhstan was moving towards

² See: Kh. Adeeb, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2021, p. 442.

³ See: *Tsentralnaia Azia: 1991-2009 gg.*, monograph, ed. by B.K. Sultanov, KISI at the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 2010, p. 199.

⁴ See: K.P. Dudarev, "Postkommunisticheskiy avtoritarny rezhim," in: *Postsovetskaia Tsentralnaia Azia. Poteri i obretenia*, p. 167.

⁵ See: E.T. Seylekhonov, *Politicheskaia Sistema Respubliki Kazakhstan: opyt razvitiia i perspektivy*, KISI at the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 2009, p. 62.

its ultimate aim stage by stage. In April 1995, the President extended his term through a referendum⁶; a new Constitution gave more powers and, therefore, more political influence to the head of state.⁷

New leaders could act independently. There was no longer a Union center and no control on the part of the Communist Party. From that time on, the leaders of the new independent states could rely on the principles of governance inherited from their distant past: regional, tribal and clan ties were revived to play the main role in the domestic policies of the Central Asian countries.⁸

At the same time, they tried to comply with the demands formulated by Western countries: parliamentary and presidential elections, a multiparty system and separation of powers were introduced to demonstrate their adherence to the Western principles of political development. As could be expected, very soon it became clear that the local states were not ready to build their political systems after Western patterns⁹ that contradicted Asian traditions.¹⁰ Despite this obvious inconsistency, the ruling regimes used the democratic procedure and elections as one of the forms of political mobilization.¹¹

Kyrgyzstan, which created an illusion of democratic development, is one of the most adequate examples in this respect. Indeed, the number of political parties and NGOs was consistently increasing in the country that was branded an “island of democracy” in Central Asia. Under the Constitution of 1993, Kyrgyzstan became a parliamentary republic that relied on the separation of powers. At the same time, behind the baffling scenery, the president deprived the Supreme Soviet of all or nearly all powers, has consistently consolidated his power and did not support the idea of power rotation. The parliament allowed President Askar Akaev to take part in the presidential elections of 2000, a sure sign that authoritarian trends had cropped up amid democratic rhetoric and an illusory multiparty system.

Occupied with expanding his powers, the president of Kyrgyzstan was unable to offer any reasonably efficient methods of dealing with interregional contradictions. In a country divided into clans, regional groups and tribes, parliamentary governance format tested the country’s sustainability. This was amply confirmed by two coups d’état in independent Kyrgyzstan. The Constitution adopted in 2010, after yet another coup, limited the powers of the president and established a semi-presidential system, in which the head of state shared power with the prime minister.¹² As a result, the country acquired a malfunctioning parliamentary-presidential form of governance that pushed the state further along the road of regress.¹³ This meant that the Central Asian countries were not ready to establish Western-style political systems.¹⁴

⁶ See: R.N. Zhanguzhin, *Kazakhstan postsovetskiy*, Institute of Economics and International Relations, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kiev, 2002, p. 129.

⁷ See: M. Karsakov, “Osobennosti transformatsii politicheskoy sistemy Kazakhstana v kontse 80kh-serediny 90kh godov,” *Tsentralnaia Azia*, No. 14, 1998, pp. 34-56.

⁸ See: A.D. Bogaturov, A.S. Dundich, V.G. Korgun, et al., *Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia v Tsentralnoy Azii: sobytiia i dokumenty*, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 2011, p. 19.

⁹ See: S.S. Zhiltsov, “Political Processes in Central Asia: Peculiarities, Problems, Prospects,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2016, pp. 21-29.

¹⁰ See: D.B. Malysheva, “Paradoksy natsionalnoy idei i problemy stanovleniya gosudarstvennosti v postsovetskom prostranstve,” *MEiMO*, No. 11, 1998, pp. 151-155.

¹¹ See: A. Kurtov, *Demokratia vyborov v Kazakhstane: avtoritarnaia transformatsia*, ASTI-IZDAT, Moscow, 2001, p. 331.

¹² See: UNDP Chief lauds Kyrgyzstan’s Democratic Transition and MDG Progress, 17 May, 2011, available at [<https://reliefweb.int/report/kyrgyzstan/undp-chief-lauds-kyrgyzstan%E2%80%99s-democratic-transition-and-mdg-progress>], 23 August, 2021.

¹³ See: D.A. Aleksandrov, I.V. Ippolitov, S.D. Popov, “Miagkaia sila kak instrument amerikanskoy politiki v Tsentralnoy Azii,” in: *Tsentralnaia Azia: Problemy i perspektivy (vzgliad iz Rossii i Kitaita)*, RISI, Moscow, 2013, p. 28.

¹⁴ See: S.S. Zhiltsov, op. cit.

Transition

The Central Asian presidents rushed to expand their powers by amending the Constitutions of their respective countries; the changes were made in the provisions concerning the territorial and state order. Over a fairly long period, the president remained the key figure in the system of power in all Central Asian countries.

The fact that all presidents did everything possible to remain in power is one of the clearest confirmations that the Central Asian states were not sufficiently developed to follow the recommendations of the West. In all of the regional countries presidents either extended their terms in office or changed the laws to be able to run for presidency again and again. During the transition period, when the region's countries were coping with internal and external challenges, the fact that the presidents remained in power since 1990 in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and since the mid-1990s in Tajikistan played a positive role. On the other hand, while the legal mechanisms were losing their efficiency, the archaic forms of mobilization and political activity were gaining significance.¹⁵

The First President of Kazakhstan put great efforts into strengthening the executive power vertical in order to overcome the contradictory influence of the regional elites, concentrate power in the hands of the president and stabilize the social and economic situation. However, consolidation of presidential power caused certain problems in the political sphere; and depriving the parliament of its independence did nothing good to the country's development.

In 2016-2017, Kazakhstan started looking for adequate power transfer mechanisms and found them in the form of a higher status of the Security Council in the power system. The Draft Law on the Security Council in the Republic of Kazakhstan presupposed that it would be chaired by Nursultan Nazarbayev for life. The Law on the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted in 2018 changed it from a deliberative into a constitutional body with wide powers and life chairmanship of the Leader of the Nation.¹⁶

This mechanism of redistribution of power within the executive branch prevented political aggravation and fostered the continuity of external and internal policies. On 19 March, 2019, Nazarbayev resigned from the post of head of state, which was transferred to Kassym-Jomart Tokaev, head of the Senate. On 9 June, 2019, he won the off-year presidential elections. It was not the final act of transit of power but, rather, a step towards a political system where Nazarbayev retained his political influence in Kazakhstan.¹⁷ As the Leader of the Nation and chairman for life, ex-president Nazarbayev partially balanced out the power of the president.¹⁸ Today, the Security Council is de facto "the second center of power in Kazakhstan with considerably expanded powers. It is no longer a consultative and deliberative body of the past. Today, it is a constitutional structure that coordinates unified state policy in national security and defenses, internal stability, protection of the Constitutional order and the national interests on the international arena."¹⁹ On the other hand, the off-term elections created prerequisites for political rivalry between the power centers with practically equal powers. The tipped balance of power between the parliament, the president and the government may cause conflicts between them.

The changed role of the Security Council of Kazakhstan can be defined as a constitutional reform that paved the road to other constitutional changes.

¹⁵ See: *Tsentralnaia Azia segodnia: vyzovy i ugrozy*, ed. by K.L. Syroezhkin, KISI, Almaty, 2011, p. 21

¹⁶ See: S.S. Zhiltsov, I. Zonn, "Political Development of Kazakhstan: Results and Prospects," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 20, Issue 4, 2019, pp. 62-69.

¹⁷ See: S.S. Zhiltsov, "Tsentralnaia Azia: osobennosti politicheskogo razvitiia," *Vestnik Diplomaticeskoy akademii MID Rossii. Rossia i mir*, No. 1, 2020, pp. 143-160.

¹⁸ See: G. Abishev, "Nyneshniy sostav kazakhstanskogo parlamenta ustarel—mesto dolzhny zaniat odnomandatniki, 14 July, 2019, available at [<https://ia-centr.ru/experts/gaziz-abishev/nyneshniy-sostav-kazakhstanskogo-parlamenta-ustarel-ikh-mesto-dolzhny-zanyat-odnomandatniki/>], 16 August, 2021.

¹⁹ E. Ionova, "Kazakhstan v period tranzita vlasti," *Rossia i novye gosudarstva Evrazii*, No. 1, 2020, pp. 82-97

Kyrgyzstan has demonstrated that personal agreements and newly invented mechanisms of power transfer are highly unreliable. In 2017, Almazbek Atambaev, the then president of Kyrgyzstan, who represented the country's North, was looking for a suitable candidate as head of state to realize the "strong prime minister-weak president" alliance. In 2017, Atambaev lost, while Sooronbay Jeenbekov, who represented the country's South, won the presidential elections in a fierce struggle.

However, his term in power was short. On 4 October, 2020, the opposition parties started talking about large-scale violations during the parliamentary elections, when voters were bribed and threatened. After mass riots, the Election Commission annulled the election results.²⁰ The events that followed the annulment brought Sadyr Japarov, a former deputy with a prison term under his belt, to power. Political activism of the opposition liberated him from prison and he was nominated as the main candidate for the post of prime minister. Having won the preterm election, he became prime minister and president ad interim. The former president resigned. On 10 January, 2021, Japarov was elected president by a 79% majority.²¹

As the president, Japarov started promoting the idea of a Constitutional referendum, seeking to restore the presidential form of governance in a republic that was not ready for a parliamentary format. In April 2021, Kyrgyzstan carried out a referendum, where the new variant of the Constitution was adopted: the head of state consolidated his positions, while the parliament lost many of its instruments of control. Kyrgyzstan became a presidential republic once again; the parliament lost its right to form and control the executive branch.²² The new Constitution restored the right of the president to run for another term. The document that violated human rights and weakened the system of checks and balances was severely criticized by the Human Rights Watch, among others.²³

The Constitutional ups and downs which, in fact, deprived the country of a sustainable Fundamental Law, negatively affected its development: amendments are introduced by different political forces seeking certain advantages here and now; they have pushed aside any considerations related to the efficiency of state structures and settling interregional contradictions.

Authoritarian Trends: What Keeps Them Alive?

The West never hesitates to accuse Central Asian countries of authoritarianism and absence of democracy. In fact, Western critics either do not understand the current situation in the region and know nothing about its past, or are trying to put pressure on the Central Asian leaders. Indeed, in practically all countries the local elites that emerged in all Soviet republics in conformity with the local traditions and history, rather than branches of power, are locked in an uncompromising power struggle.²⁴ In Central Asia clans are rooted in the past and cultural traditions, while the division into tribes (clans) and territorial division play a key role in the political life of each of the local states. In fact, candidates were often appointed to high political or economic posts according to territorial di-

²⁰ See: Kyrgyzstan Election: Sunday's Results Annulled After Mass Protests, 6 October, 2020, available at [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54432030>], 10 October, 2021.

²¹ See: "Iz tiurny v presydeny za tri mesiatsa," 11 January, 2021, available at [<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/01/2021/5ffc07c39a7947703c6e0150>], 27 September, 2021.

²² See: "Freedom House. Nations in Transit 2020: Kyrgyzstan," available at [<https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/nations-transit/2020>], 24 September, 2021

²³ See: "Kyrgyzstan: Withdraw Problematic Draft Constitution," Human Rights Watch, 5 March, 2021, available at [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/kyrgyzstan-withdraw-problematic-draft-constitution>], 24 September, 2021

²⁴ See: R.Yu. Khadyrov, "Osobennosti politicheskoy sistemy Tadjikistana," *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva*, No. 2, 2016, pp. 104-111.

vision.²⁵ People from the same region or the same ethnic group, clan or region staked on “their own”: this is one of the main sources and accelerators of authoritarianism in the Central Asian countries. The Western standards, with the president, elections and a developing party system, had nothing to do with the traditional Asian societies.²⁶ The ideals, principles and standards of developed societies and actual national doctrines were replaced with distorted copies and illusory democracy; the national projects expected to develop the state languages, history and culture became mere decorations.²⁷ In fact, democratic institutions and procedures had nothing in common with the mentality and history of the Central Asian countries.²⁸ No wonder that political struggle had moved backstage, away from the public sphere to the space of clandestine agreements. Governments were dissolved, and preterm parliamentary elections were organized to consolidate the president’s positions. Competition was limited to regional elites that sought political power for the sake of control over economy. On the whole, the region failed to establish consistent rules of supreme power continuity.²⁹

Historical and cultural legacy of the local countries is the key factor behind their political systems. The Soviet Union’s disintegration left behind an ideological vacuum to be filled with mythologized history, historical heroes, etc.³⁰ Having rejected the communist ideology, leaders of all regional countries armed themselves with the idea of building up national states that required fully justified and legitimized efforts from the new political elites. History was used to link their statehoods to a more distant past and exaggerate their greatness.³¹

Redistribution of power in favor of the president has become one of the characteristics of the local states and their political systems. The Constitutions adopted in all countries in the early 1990s endowed the presidents with the broadest powers. In fact, the parliament was dominated by the president, who became the key figure. This was done to ensure the realization of a concerted state policy and suppress political rivalry among the branches of power. Subdued parliaments allowed the Central Asian countries to adopt new Constitutions under which the presidents acquired maximally wide powers and dramatically limited the consequence of the other branches of power.³²

In fact, this was done very much in line with the local traditions and historical development specifics of local societies. In all countries people perceived the head of state as the leader of the nation with unlimited powers; the volume of the powers extended to the executive branch differed from country to country. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the parliaments are formally independent, while in the other Central Asian countries the powers of the presidents are unlimited.

In the absence of legally regulated mechanisms of interaction between the branches of power and domination of informal agreements concluded in the interests of certain clans to the detriment of

²⁵ See: R.Yu. Khadyrov, “Rol klanov vo vnutrenney politike Tadjikistana,” in: *Aktualnye problemy razvitiya post-sovetskogo prostranstva: materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii (Moskva, 2 April, 2015)*, МГОУ, Moscow, 2015, p. 124.

²⁶ See: E. Luzanova, “Mezhdunarodny seminar ‘Politicheskoe razvitiye Tsentralnoy Azii i Tsentralnoy Evropoy: skhodstvo, razlichia, puti sotrudnichestva,’” *Tsentralnaia Azia*, No. 10, 1997.

²⁷ See: V. Tuleshov, “K voprosu o formirovaniy i razvitiy identichnosti v Kazakhstane i Tsentralnoy Azii,” in: *Tsentralnaia Azia-25: mysli o proshlom, proektsiia budushchego*, ed. by M. Laruelle, A. Kurmanova, The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University, Washington, 2017, pp. 36-38.

²⁸ See: Kh.Kh. Khurramov, “Vzaimootnosheniya oppozitsii i vlastey v Tadjikistane: istoriya i sovremennost,” *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva*, No. 2, 2016, pp. 112-116.

²⁹ See: *Izovy bezopasnosti v Tsentralnoy Azii*, ed. by A.A. Dynkin, V.G. Baranovskiy, IMEMO, Moscow, 2013, 150 pp.

³⁰ See: M.A. Neymark, “Kultura kak resurs natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossii,” in: *Sovremenny mir i geopolitika*, Kanon+, Moscow, 2015, pp. 158-175.

³¹ See: R. Agaev, “TsAR: problemy evoliutsii politicheskikh system,” in: *Tsentralnaia Azia: geopolitika i ekonomika regiona*, Krasnaia Zvezda, Moscow, 2010, p. 15.

³² See: D.E. Furman, “Evoliutsia politicheskikh sistem stran SNG,” in: *Sredizemnomorye-Chernomorye-Kaspiy: mezhdru Bolshoy Evropoy i Bolshim Blizhnim Vostokom*, ed. by N.P. Shmelev, V.A. Guseynov, A.D. Yazkova, Granitsa, Moscow, 2006, p. 136.

others, the political systems cannot cope with either internal or external challenges. The power structures are not self-sufficient; they are forums of sorts in which sub-state groups compete among themselves for greater security and for control over the state.³³

Conclusion

During the thirty years of independence, the Central Asian countries have achieved certain successes in their political development. All of them obey the principles of the separation of power; international observers are invariably present at elections. At the same time, the power system is, in fact, authoritarian. It is dominated by the head of state who relies on family, kinship and clan ties. The parliament, which is elected by popular vote, does not play an important role. Kyrgyzstan is the only exception, with the parliament coming to the fore under certain circumstances. On the whole, however, the legislative organ of power is pushed aside in all Central Asian states, while constitutional amendments are superficial.

The political future of the Central Asian countries is closely connected with their economic potential. Having escaped the control of the Soviet Union's authority, they were confronted by strong pressure on the part of non-regional actors, all them wishing to adjust their external and internal policies. This makes it much harder to apply democratic procedures similar to those used in the West. The local elites are locked in an uncompromising struggle for very limited economic resources. Traditions, political culture and local mentality are, likewise, very important. Hence, the regional countries' political development will be determined not only by the internal political factors. Economic problems and non-regional states will not disappear, and will continue playing their roles.

Today, political future of the Central Asian states remains under the strong pressure of economic problems and the pandemic. This has already invigorated the rivalry for the very limited resources, intensified the regional countries' inability to cope with the most acute problems, deteriorating social conditions and increased unemployment.³⁴ The above has strongly affected the approaches to the problems of social, political and economic stability practiced by the local elites. In 2020-2021, external debts increased; disagreements over the use of water and electric power resources have not disappeared despite the mechanism of interaction between the local countries, namely, the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Presidents. Climate change adds its share of problems; internal migration is growing, incomes are shrinking, and social problems are deteriorating. These trends exacerbated the political situation, and stirred up negative feelings among the population, which may lead to increased political tension.

Very much like today, the presidents of all regional countries will be looking for a balance between individual groups and clans; they will try to curtail the positions of certain elites to prevent any threats to those in power. Informal agreements, instead of formal mechanisms of power, will dominate in the relationships between the political elites of the Central Asian countries. Parliamentary and presidential elections will be used to legitimize power and demonstrate their devotion to democratic procedures to the West.

³³ See: *Tsenralnaia azia i Kaspiyskiy region: riski, vyzovy, ugrozy: kollektivnaia monografia*, ed. by B.K. Sultanov, KISI, Almaty, 2012, p. 79.

³⁴ See: S.S. Zhiltsov, "Koronavirus udaril po stranam postsovetского prostranstva," *Problemy postsovetского prostranstva*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2020, pp. 8-17, available at [<https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2020-7-1-8-17>].