



ENC ANALYSIS



Understanding Russia's Central Asia Policy ¹

December 2023

Author

Dr. Aijan Sharshenova

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About the author



Dr Aijan Sharshenova is an ENC Academic Council member and executive director at Crossroads Central Asia as well as a research fellow at the Foreign Policy Centre in London. She holds a PhD in Politics awarded at the University of Leeds and two Master's degrees in International Studies and EU Studies. Aijan has recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, where she researched Russian public diplomacy in Central Asia. In addition to her academic career, Aijan has worked in the international development area, including the UN system in the Middle East.

Introduction

Having counted the Central Asian republics as an integral part of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) for over 70 years, Russia has largely taken its bilateral and multilateral relationships with Central Asia for granted in the post-Soviet period. As Russia's loyal allies, Central Asian states were expected to stay within the orbit of Russian political influence and show support for Russia's regional and global initiatives. For most of the three decades of the post-Soviet period, Russia's policy towards Central Asia revolved around regional security, post-Soviet border management, and issues related to labour migration from Central Asia to Russia. However, Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 has shifted the dynamics of regional and international politics for all foreign policy actors in the region. Russia has increasingly become a pariah in international politics, and Russia's list of friendly countries has shrunk to a small number of states scattered around the world, some of which are in Central Asia. This paper explores Russia's policy towards Central Asia through an analysis of Russia- Central Asia relations, a mapping of Russian potential and actual foreign policy actors, and an overview of the factors which guide Russia's policy towards Central Asia. The focus of this paper is on the current period (as of 2023), but some of its timeline covers the period before the war in Ukraine to better explain the peculiarities of Russian politics in general and foreign policy in particular. The term "Central Asia" is used to refer to the five Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Russia-Central Asia Relations: A Backgrounder

Russia's bilateral relations with the independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan de jure started in 1992 when formal diplomatic relations with all five Central Asian republics were established. All parties found themselves in the same boat at the same time as they navigated formal and informal international politics in their capacity as newly established sovereign nations in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. Russia, as the USSR's successor, took over most of the USSR's assets and liabilities. These assets included the well-established network of diplomatic missions, a seat at the United Nations Security Council, all of the Soviet nuclear weapon assets, the USSR's advanced space programme, the Soviet soft power capacity,[1] and an expansive network of political, economic, and intelligence networks around the world. Central Asia, on the other hand, faced the overwhelming task of building these virtually from scratch. Russia's policy towards Central Asia in the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union largely followed a path dependence pattern. The Central Asian republics were perceived and treated as Russia's "near abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezh'ie*), a natural sphere of Russia's influence which, by the unfortunate accident of the Soviet Union's collapse, just happened to be politically separate from Russia. Due to this, Russia's relations with these countries were set somewhere in between the conventional domestic and conventional foreign politics domains: not quite a part of Russia anymore, but also hardly independent states warranting differential treatment. This situation seemed to accommodate all parties involved, but this has since changed due to a range of domestic and external factors. Multilateral relations between Russia and Central Asia were probably more dynamic as Russia sought to create and consolidate several regional institutional frameworks to regulate regional politics and to (re)establish itself as an important foreign policy actor.

Russia and Central Asia have become members of the following regional and global organisations in different constellations (see the membership dynamics in Table 1): the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia’s contemporary foreign policy is specified in the key document of its legal and normative framework in this area, the Foreign Policy Concept. Russia’s most recent Foreign Policy Concept[2] was adopted on 31 March 31 2023. In Section V of the Concept, Central Asia is mentioned as one of the key directions of Russia’s regional foreign policy. More specifically, the Concept highlights the importance of regional integration processes and multilateral cooperation with Central Asian partners. In contrast, the previous 2016 Foreign Policy Concept mentioned Central Asia only fleetingly, in the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Table 1: Participation of the Central Asian states in regional multilateral organisations

	CIS	CSTO	SCO	EAEU
Kazakhstan	Member	Member	Member	Member
Kyrgyzstan	Member	Member	Member	Member
Tajikistan	Member	Member	Member	n/a
Turkmenistan	Member	n/a	n/a	n/a
Uzbekistan	Member	Quit in 2012	Member	Member

In the next sections, I engage more with Russian foreign policy at the level of actors (actual and potential) and factors which might shape and inform Russian foreign policy in general and its policy towards Central Asia in particular. While every effort was made to identify and analyse the key actors and factors, one must take into consideration the general tendency of non- transparency and the black box-like nature of informal Russian politics. A lot of key foreign-policy decision making in Russia takes place behind the closed curtains with little reliable and verifiable reporting.

Mapping Actors in Russia’s Central Asia Policy

Russia as a mysterious and unique foreign policy actor, whose intentions, interests, and behaviours are impossible to understand. As Oliker brilliantly put it: “Few countries have been subject to mythmaking on such an industrial scale”[3]. In fact, Russia is a regular state whose intentions, interests, and behaviours might not always fit into Western liberal frameworks, but nevertheless are understandable [4] for the most part. The second pitfall is assuming that Russian President Putin holds all the knowledge and makes all the decisions about what that happens in this enormous country. In this section, the analysis of perceptions of Russia’s relations with Central Asia goes from the bottom level, with the general public, to the very top, with President Putin. Again, while it is difficult to make any assertive statements about Russian politics, one can still identify various levels of fairly reliable information that might shed some light on how Central Asia is perceived and approached as a foreign policy partner by Russia. Russia’s public has a generally positive perception of the Central Asian nations, but these perceptions have changed slightly in the aftermath of the start of the war in Ukraine. A recent domestic poll by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (also known by its Russian abbreviation VCIOM) reported that, in September 2022, the Russian public identified China (55%), Belarus (49%), and India (22%) as the friendliest countries towards Russia [5]. Kazakhstan found itself in fifth place. However, in 2019 Kazakhstan was considered the third friendliest country to Russia. Other Central Asian countries received only a small number of mentions (see the dynamics of VCIOM polls in Table 2).

Table 2: *With which countries does Russia have the strongest, the friendliest relationships at the moment? (open-ended question, no more than 5 answers, % of total respondents): WCIOM 2014, 2018, 2019, 2022 data as reported on WCIOM’s website.*

	2014	2018	2019	2022
Kazakhstan	20	15	21	13
Kyrgyzstan	1	1	4	3
Tajikistan	1	1	2	2
Turkmenistan	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Uzbekistan	1	2	4	5

What is curious to note is that, in 2019 and 2022, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan received more mentions, i.e., they are more frequently perceived as foreign policy

actors that are friendly to Russia. Kazakhstan's friendliness seems to be declining in the eyes of the Russian public as the country pursues a more independent and assertive foreign policy. Turkmenistan is hardly ever mentioned, potentially because the country declared its formal neutrality in international politics in the early 1990s and tends to stay away from any public manifestations of its foreign policy preferences and aspirations.

The Russian expert community as exemplified by state-owned or state-affiliated think tanks seems to have developed a slightly different trend. To what extent these think tanks are able to shape foreign policy decision-making in Russia is difficult to measure. However, given that their key arguments are intertwined with the official narratives and foreign policy reasoning of the Russian government, it is worth having a peak into the key themes that prevail in this domain. The Council for Foreign and Defence Policy is a Russian government-affiliated foreign policy think tank. Registered as a public foundation in 1992, the Council (better known as its Russian abbreviation SVOP) created the Valdai Discussion Club, a think tank and discussion forum that is often used as a platform by the country's leadership (including President Putin) to voice their views, opinions, and vision of global politics. This Club features Central Asia regularly in its publications, but tends to treat the region as a part of Russia's family, not as independent foreign policy actors. Kazakhstan's foreign policy ambitions, specifically its interpretation and instrumentalization of Eurasianism as a geopolitical concept is considered "Lev Gumilyov's fiction about the "Great Steppe" [6]. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are rarely considered to be active foreign policy actors on their own. Russian experts note that neither country has the funds to pursue an active foreign policy and are generally guided by the need to provide for their large and young populations. Within Russia's academia, the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences [7] (also known as IMEMO) has a division, the Centre for Post-Soviet Studies, which houses a Central Asia section which consists of six experts. The journal "Russia in Global Affairs" regularly publishes analytical and opinion pieces by key Russian foreign policy actors such as the long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov (e.g., Lavrov's 2016 article). The Central Asian region does not feature much in these academic publications, but the tone in which the region is discussed is frequently less condescending and more neutral. At the level of the Russian government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is primarily responsible for Russia's relations with other countries. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the so-called Third Department of CIS Affairs (in total, there are four CIS Departments) is in charge of the country's relations with the five Central Asian republics. The

Department Head, Alexander Sternik, occasionally speaks publicly. Most recently, Sternik commented on the strategic geopolitical and economic actions of the EU and in Central Asia [8]. Finally, the most important person in any analysis of Russian politics is likely the President, Vladimir Putin. Given the nature of the highly centralised and non-democratic state, President Putin, who has been in charge of the country for over 20 years, regularly finds himself under the spotlight of global attention. “The supreme decisionmaker” (Oliker et al, p. 7) is often seen as the only centre of power and the decision-making hub. While this might not necessarily be true as some reference “Putin’s narrow circle” (whoever that might include) as being a collective powerhouse, President Putin certainly is an important policy actor. It is notable that President Putin has rarely focused on Central Asia in his key foreign policy speeches. His seminal foreign policy speeches never mention the region. The 2007 Munich speech [9] and the 2014 Crimean speech have no mentions of the region whatsoever. The Crimean speech does, however, highlight that Russia respects the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. The 2014 Valdai speech only touches upon Central Asia in relation to the threat of Islamic extremism. [10] In 2022-2023, in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical situation has changed drastically for Putin. In February 2022, [11] Putin issued two addresses, both focussing on Ukraine and Russia’s perceived geopolitical threats from the collective West.

Both speeches aim to reinforce the notion that Russia respects the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. Thus, the speech of 24 February states: “We have been treating all new post-Soviet states with respect and will continue to act this way.” However, given that both speeches preceded a full-scale military invasion of a former Soviet republic, the Ukraine, these reassurances have been taken with a pinch of salt in Central Asia and the wider post-Soviet space. It is also interesting to note that, before 2022, President Putin authorised and sent a top civil servant, Dmitry Kozak, Deputy Chief of Staff of the President’s Administration, for any important discussions in Central Asian capitals. Kozak seemed to have been a member of Putin’s inner circle as an old and loyal ally from his Saint Petersburg years. Since the start of Russia’s war in Ukraine, Dmitry Kozak seems to have disappeared from Russia’s public information space. Some media outlets [12] have reported on disagreements between Kozak and Putin. Thus far it has not been clear whether there is to be a new Kremlin handler for Central Asia in the absence of Kozak.

Russia's Policy towards Central Asia: From Soviet Patterns to a New International Environment

Up until recently, Russia's policy towards Central Asia was rather "a consequence of the Soviet heritage" than an organised and deliberate effort to engage with the region[13]. The Russian public held only a limited interest in the region, mostly dictated by the presence of Central Asian labour migrants in the country. Russian expert society likewise had a rather limited interest, and largely focused on regional security, post-Soviet border management, and issues related to labour migration[14]. At the top leadership level, Central Asia has not been seen as a priority region in Russia. Multilateral alliances with Central Asian states mostly serve the purpose of supporting the global foreign policy positions of Russia. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed the international environment for Russia drastically and shifted Central Asia higher in the list of foreign policy priorities. Unfortunately, for Central Asian states, this shift in public and government perceptions of the region is hardly due to any benign reasons or reasons that stem from Central Asia's increased importance in general. Russia's list of friendly countries seems to be diminishing with an alarming speed, and Central Asian governments are seen as comparatively fairly friendly as they pursue a challenging game of multi-vector foreign policy in a complicated international environment. To what extent this sudden increase of interest in Central Asia is sustainable in Russia is a difficult question as the international environment and Russia's position in it changes continuously.

Acknowledgements

The paper was presented at workshop "Central Asia's international relations: unpacking actors and factors" on 28 April 2023. The workshop and the publication were supported by postdoctoral fellowship of Dr Shairbek Dzhuraev (OSCE Academy) from Volkswagen Foundation.

Notes

[1] The further one goes geographically away from the former Soviet region, the more likely one is to consider all of the achievements (and failures) of the Soviet Union as “Russian.” In this way, Russia has intentionally or unintentionally appropriated anything significant that was ever achieved or created by joint effort in the USSR.

[2] The full text of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2023 and its translation to English are available on the website of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs at https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/1860586/.

[3] Oliker, O., Crane, K., Schwartz, L.H. and Yusupov, C. (2009) Russian foreign policy: Sources and implications, RAND Corporation, p. 3., available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg768af>

[4] Understandable does not necessarily mean rational.

[5] Russian Public Opinion Research Centre 2022, “Friends and ill-wishers amidst the special operation”, VCIOM Analytical review, available at <https://wciom.com/press-release/friends-and-ill-wishers-amidst-the-special-operation>, last accessed on April 16, 2023. While the reliability and validity of Russian public opinion polls might be questioned since VCIOM is a state-controlled pollster, such data provides some insight and indication of what the Russian public might think. In the absence of other alternatives, this is potentially the only available way to get some understanding of public opinions in Russia.

[6] Sushentsov, A. and Silaev, N. (2022) “Coming-of-age stories: Foreign policy as formative experience for new Eurasian states”, Valdai Discussion Club Report, p. 18. available at <https://valdaiclub.com/files/37782/>

[7] The IMEMO’s structure is available at <https://www.imemo.ru/en/about/structure/post-soviet-studies/central-asia>. Last accessed on April 24, 2023.

[8] Lenta.ru 2023, “V Rossii obvinili ES v zhelanii podobrat’sya k resursam Tsentralnoi Azii” (The EU got blamed in Russia for their wish to approach Central Asian resources), Lenta.ru information portal, February 10th, 2023, available at https://lenta.ru/news/2023/02/10/asia_europe/, last accessed on May 7th, 2023.

[9] English translations of all these speeches are available on the Kremlin’s website. The Munich speech is available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034> and the Crimean speech is available at <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>. Last accessed on May 7th, 2023.

[10] See full transcript of the 2014 Valdai speech at the Kremlin website at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860> last accessed on May 7, 2023.

[11] Putin’s speech of 21 February speech is available at <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67828>; his 24 February speech is available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>; last accessed on May 7, 2023.

[12] See, for example, this BBC report in Russian <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-61420400> and this Reuters feature <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-kremlin-deal-exclusive-idAFKBN2QF0CH>.

[13] Wilson, J. L. (2021) “Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening tensions in the relationship”, *Acta Via Serica*, 6(1), p.68.

[14] See, for instance, Borodachev, T. and Chizhova, D. (2022) “Central Asia and the Ukraine crisis”, Valdai Discussion Club Report, available at <https://valdaiclub.com/files/40115/>.