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**Die aktuelle politische und  
wirtschaftliche Situation in  
Usbekistan**

Perspektiven aus Wissenschaft  
und Praxis

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**Die aktuelle politische und wirtschaftliche  
Situation in Usbekistan**

Perspektiven aus Wissenschaft und Praxis

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### Editorial

After the 8th issue on the current political and economic situation in Rwanda, the 14th issue of the *Journal of Political Science Applied*, once again, devotes itself to one particular country: Uzbekistan. The landlocked Central Asian country has long been associated with the authoritarian regime of long-time President Islom Karimov. Since his death and the assumption of office by Shavkat Mirziyoyev in December 2016, there have been signs of political, societal and economic liberalization. In addition to efforts to strengthen the role of parliament and the rule of law, a comprehensive program aims at fundamental reforms in the educational and agricultural sectors, amongst others. Being the most populous country in the region, Uzbekistan's reform course might have an effect on neighboring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The country is also bordering Afghanistan, which, after the Taliban's return to power, seems to be developing in the opposite direction. Against this background, we invited submissions that take a closer look at the political and socio-economic developments in Uzbekistan since its independence, and especially under its current president. Authors were asked to explore the reform process that has been initiated, what changes could actually be brought about, and what challenges exist.

The first two chapters focus on the political reform process. In their chapter on *The Political System of Uzbekistan*, Rustam Burnashev and Irina Chernykh argue that current reforms are insufficient and unsustainable, leaving the core of the country's super-presidential system untouched. In her chapter on *Uzbekistan's International Human Rights Commitment*, Anja Mihr comes to a similar assessment: Despite some modest reforms, Uzbekistan's human rights record did not improve considerably under the new president. The next two chapters provide a practitioner's view that is somewhat more optimistic. In her chapter on *Higher Education in Uzbekistan*, Nazokat Kasymova takes stock of the government's ambitious higher education reforms, and in his chapter on *Energy Infrastructure Development in Uzbekistan*, Martin Giersch demonstrates the country's great potential as an energy supplier. The last two chapters examine Uzbekistan's place in the (wider) region: While Ilya Levine, in his chapter on *Central Asia's New Centre*, considers Uzbekistan's active role in Central Asia, Sebastian Mayer concludes the issue with a chapter on *Uzbekistan's Pro-Active Afghanistan Policy*.

We wish all readers an exciting and insightful read!

Jakob Lempp, Angela Meyer, Jan Niklas Rolf

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## The Political System of Uzbekistan

Rustam Burnashev & Irina Chernykh

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The change of political leadership in Uzbekistan at the turn of 2016/2017 led to a number of transformations. Interim results allow us to speak of a trend towards liberalization of socio-economic life in Uzbekistan. The country's foreign relations, especially in the regional Central Asian context, have also undergone significant changes: Uzbekistan began to actively address problems with its neighbors and, simultaneously, develop bilateral ties. While not denying the importance of these transformations, it is worth questioning to what extent they affect the core of Uzbekistan's political system, which was created during the rule of former President Islam Karimov. The article argues that despite the ongoing transformations, the main structural features of Uzbekistan's political and social life have not undergone fundamental changes. Uzbekistan remains a weak state with a weak society that adheres to the model of "state capitalism". This renders the ongoing transformations unsustainable.

### Political system

According to the first article of the Constitution of Uzbekistan, "Uzbekistan is a sovereign democratic, legal, social and secular state with a republican form of government" (Republic of Uzbekistan 2023). The head of state is the president, elected for no more than two consecutive terms. Despite this, the first president

of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, ran and won four presidential campaigns (1991, 2000, 2007 and 2015). Additionally, his powers were extended twice in referendums (1995 and 2002). Karimov was able to subjugate not only the executive but also the judicial and legislative branches of government, creating a super-presidential authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan.

After Karimov's death, the second president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, initiated reforms aimed at liberalizing the social and economic life of the country, which can be described as a "quiet revolution from above". However, these reforms are not sustainable, as they have not led to fundamental institutional changes in the political system established under Karimov. For example, after the adoption of the new version of the Constitution in 2023, it was announced that due to changes in the Constitution, Mirziyoyev's previous terms of presidency were not counted and he could seek the presidency for the next two electoral cycles (from 2023 to 2030 and from 2030 to 2037).

As in any super-presidential political system, the principle of separation of powers in Uzbekistan exists only on paper. Power is concentrated in the hands of the president and subordinate administrative institutions, primarily the presidential administration. The bureaucracy continues to play a key role in making and implementing political decisions in the country. The constitutional powers of the president of Uzbekistan give him the right to issue binding decrees, dissolve parliament, and appoint and dismiss ministers and governors.

The supreme assembly ("Oliy Majlis"), which exercises legislative power, is the supreme representative body of the state. After 2011, Uzbekistan has taken some measures to strengthen the role and importance of the Oliy Majlis, in particular by amending the Constitution to give it greater powers over the executive branch. For example, the Oliy Majlis could instate the prime minister's candidacy. The amendments introduced in the new version of the Constitution in 2023, however, have signif-

icantly limited the powers of the Oliy Majlis. Thus, it no longer nominates the prime minister, but only “examines and approves” his or her candidacy.

The country’s party system includes five registered parties (the People’s Democratic Party, the “Adolat” Social Democratic Party, the “Milliy Tiklanish” Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the Ecological Party). While all five are represented in the Oliy Majlis, they have little influence on the country’s politics outside of parliamentary activity. Although presidential candidates are nominated exclusively by political parties (starting with the 2007 election campaign, Karimov was nominated by the Liberal Democratic Party, and Mirziyoyev was nominated by the same party in the 2017, 2021 and 2023 elections), the president of Uzbekistan is obliged to suspend or terminate party membership during his term of office. Thus, the president and the administrative institutions under his control are independent of party structures. In this regard, it would not be quite correct to call the party that nominated the president of Uzbekistan for the elections a “presidential party” and even less so a “ruling party”.

Next to registered parties, there are also unregistered opposition parties in Uzbekistan: People’s Movement “Birlik”, Democratic Party “Erk”, and the People’s Democratic Party “Birdamlik”. “Birlik” and “Erk” tried to officially register after Karimov’s death and the start of Mirziyoyev’s reforms, but were denied. In addition to these parties, there are several political opposition movements abroad among Uzbek emigrants, such as the People’s Movement of Uzbekistan. It is currently impossible to assess the influence of these parties and movements and the degree of their support among the population because, on the one hand, they do not participate in the electoral process and, on the other hand, there are no sociological studies in Uzbekistan aimed at determining the degree of popular support for certain political forces and ideologies. The situation is further complicated by the low level of freedom of speech in Uzbekistan.

The executive branch of government is the Cabinet of Ministers, whose members are appointed by the president after approval by the legislative chamber of the Oliy Majlis.<sup>1</sup> The candidacy of the prime minister for consideration and approval by the legislative chamber is submitted by the president after consultations with all political party factions.<sup>2</sup> Local bodies of executive power (“khokimiyats”) are headed by mayors (“khokims”). The khokims of the provinces and Tashkent City are appointed and dismissed by the president. The khokims of the provinces and the city of Tashkent, in turn, appoint subordinate khokims. Thus, a rigid vertical chain of executive power is being established in Uzbekistan.

The judiciary in Uzbekistan is proclaimed by the Constitution to be independent of the legislative and executive branches, political parties, and other associations, and has a Constitutional Court. In practice, though, it is dependent on the president and his or her administration.

From a formal-legal point of view, Uzbekistan has a presidential system. Although the president has ceased to head the executive branch since 2011, from 2023 he has the power to appoint the prime minister (head of the executive branch). The prime minister, although approved by the parliament, is not accountable to the legislature. The legislative and judicial branches of government retain their subordinate position, and media independence and freedom also remain limited. According to Freedom House, at the end of 2022, Uzbekistan “remains an authoritarian state with few

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the adoption of the new version of the Constitution, the composition of the Cabinet of Ministers was approved by the president on the proposal of the prime minister after consideration by the legislative chamber of the Oliy Majlis.

<sup>2</sup> Prior to the adoption of the new version of the Constitution, the candidate for the post of prime minister was proposed by the political party that won the largest number of seats in the elections to the legislative chamber of the Oliy Majlis, or by several political parties that won the same number of seats. After considering the candidacy, the president submitted it to the chambers of the Oliy Majlis for approval.

signs of democratization” in terms of both political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2023). According to the Democracy Index, Uzbekistan continues to be classified as an authoritarian regime in 2022, ranking 149<sup>th</sup> out of 167 with a score of 2.12 (1.95 in 2016) (The Economist 2022).

### **Socio-political situation**

Uzbekistan is characterized by a weak civil society, which is generally unable to form a real opposition to the state apparatus and contribute to the formation of a collective identity. In terms of the typology of political cultures developed by Almond and Verba (1963), the political culture of Uzbekistan during Karimov’s rule could be classified as a “parochial type” characterized by a rather indifferent attitude of the population to the political system. Most Uzbeks focused exclusively on the life of the local community (“mahalla”), which was actively supported at the state level. With the beginning of Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s reforms, the political activity of the Uzbekistlon began to increase, and the political culture approached the “subjective” type. Citizens are more interested in the activities of the authorities but do not have enough power to influence them, remaining in the position of observers and commentators.

Nevertheless, there are a large number of non-profit non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Uzbekistan, most of which, however, deal only with local political (e.g. rights violations by local authorities) or social (e.g. discrimination against women or the difficulties of persons with disabilities) problems also perceived by the authorities. Many of these formally non-governmental organizations are government-initiated and largely dependent on the government. Truly independent NGOs have difficulties in carrying out their activities. Especially since the mid-2000s (after the Andijan events) there has been a widespread perception among the Uzbek political elite that NGOs are instruments of foreign influence. Despite the ongoing reforms and serious easing of restrictions made about such NGOs, it is too early to speak of radical change.

Trade union activity in Uzbekistan is at a rather low level because the mechanisms of interaction between the authorities, trade unions and business have not been worked out. Trade unions exist, but they are part of a state-controlled confederation of trade unions and therefore remain under the control of the state.

Paradoxically, despite its super-presidential system of government, Uzbekistan is not only a state with a weak society, but also a weak state.

Uzbekistan’s weakness as a state and society is also confirmed by the Fragile States Index, according to which Uzbekistan, despite improving its position from 2016 to 2023 by 16.7 points, received a score of 66.8 in 2023 and is considered a “warning state” (Found for Peace 2023). One of the main characteristics of Uzbekistan as a weak state and society is its franchised nature: each social group (especially ethnic, religious, kinship, and territorial influence groups)<sup>3</sup> functions as its center of power, which means that the government tends to be just one of many competing social groups. In this regard, one of the key components of President Mirziyoyev’s policy is to ensure consensus among the most important groups of interest and influence on the future development of the country. Mirziyoyev’s government is thus entangled in an “insecurity dilemma”, where any attempt by the government to improve its security or even to establish better governance provokes a negative reaction from the influential social groups whose interests are affected by such changes (Job 1992). Many reforms, such as restructuring large state-owned enterprises and the banking sector, creating a level playing field

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<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, two types of interest or influence groups are distinguished in Uzbekistan. First, these are kinship and territorial clans (Samarkand, Samarkand-Bukhara, Jizzak, Tashkent, Fergana, Khorezm or Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya), the role of which has significantly diminished over the years of independence. Secondly, it is worth mentioning functional groups linked to a particular sphere of power by ties such as joint education, work or service (especially within existing power structures).



between public and private enterprises, land reform, and the development of public institutions accountable to citizens, can carry political risks. One mechanism for Mirziyoyev to overcome the “insecurity dilemma” is to rely on the Uzbek population and ensure its loyalty by expanding the boundaries of what is allowed, which is perceived by internal and external observers as a liberalization of the country’s socio-economic life.

## Conclusion

Structurally, Uzbekistan is a weak state with a weak society. Uzbekistan has a developed political system, which is formally based on the principle of separation of powers. However, the most important decisions in the country are made at the level of the president and his administration, so that *de facto* Uzbekistan has an authoritarian political system. The political culture of Uzbekistan can be characterized as “subjective”: the population shows great interest in the activities of the authorities, but has no opportunity to influence them and remains in the role of an observer. Moreover, informal interest groups have a significant influence on political decision-making. Before Mirziyoyev’s reforms, Uzbekistan had a “state-capitalist” economic system based on strict state control over all sectors of the economy and extensive use of protectionist measures to implement the import substitution model. Currently, the emphasis is on liberalization of the economy and a more export-oriented development model, but the state’s dominant role in the economy remains.

Even medium-term forecasts for Uzbekistan are hardly possible at present, as the country is in a state of transformation. The unsustainability of the ongoing transformations is determined by the fact that ensuring regime stability in conditions of weakness of the state and society may take precedence over liberalization and democratization.

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## **Uzbekistan's International Human Rights Commitment**

Anja Mihr

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### **Background**

Despite many institutional and economic reforms in Uzbekistan since 2017, Uzbekistan's human rights record has mostly stayed the same. The fact that not only political rights and fundamental freedoms, such as the right to peaceful assembly, access to information, and freedom of expression, remain restricted, but also fundamental economic and social rights has caused severe instability and unrest among the people across the Central Asian region. In 2017, President Mirziyoyev called upon the young diaspora to return to Uzbekistan to establish business and internationalize education and social life (Frauve et al, 2021).

External pressure by Russia, China, UAE, and Turkey, let alone the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has done its part, and let the Uzbek government shrink the civic space. Anti-democratic and anti-western trends have gathered pace, most evidently seen by increased discrimination of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and sexual minorities, shrinking civic space, and violating women's and girls' rights (Mihr, 2023).

Out of the five Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan has been elected to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for the first time in 2022. It has ratified most of the nine important international human rights treaties, the so-called "International Bill of Rights". It has also participated voluntarily in the UN HRC Universal Period Review (UPR) screening process since 2006. The government in Tashkent promised to undertake legal and political

reforms to meet international standards in the context of political, economic, and cultural rights, as well as the rights of women, children, people with disabilities, and migrant workers. In the same vein, Uzbekistan has, over the past three decades, intensively collaborated with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Office of Democratic Institution Building and Human Rights (ODIHR) as well as the regional Shanghai Cooperation for Security (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This can be seen as a concession towards international norms – albeit under the influx and pressure of non-democratic states such as China and Russia.

### **Human Rights in Uzbekistan**

In 2022, the Uzbek government violently crashed peaceful protests in Karakalpakstan, killing dozens of people and sentencing hundreds to prison, with many more disappearing during that time. This "unjustifiably lethal force" used by the police and military against its population is common in Uzbekistan. It has been condemned at the UN HRC several times over the past decades. Restrictions on the right to freedom of expression have always been in place. However, the government has promised to regulate "insulting" information and to punish "disrespect for society and the state" in alliance with global standards (Amnesty International 2023).

As with other Central Asian countries, the issues of counter-extremism and the fight against terrorism remain high on the agenda and are, therefore, often the cause or excuse for serious setbacks in human rights fulfillment (Pomfret 2019). This leads to repeated criticism from OHCHR, ODIHR, the EU, and civil society because reforms are hesitant, limited, or window dressing (HRW 2019).

Nevertheless, in 2018, in the run-up to the Asian Forum for Human Rights in Samarkand, the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and visits by UN Special Rapporteurs, the government released imprisoned journalists and other long-time political prisoners. The same was before the UN conference on Human

Rights Education in 2022. Subsequently, the country successfully applied for a seat on the UN HRC and claimed that seat in 2021.

On the positive side, visa restrictions have been lifted, making it easier for international NGOs or media representatives to travel to the country and conduct research. Yet the State Security Service (Uzbek Davlat Xavfsizlik Xizmati, DXX) has the last word still; arbitrary pre-trial detentions and disappearances are still frequent. There is little opportunity for detainees to appeal, including the annulment of unlawful convictions, and access to appropriate medical treatment in detention is often denied. Thousands of other suspects have been detained, including academics, opposition activists, film producers, clergy, soldiers, and journalists. Despite international and overall UN interventions, Uzbekistan has passed various cycles of the UPR (OHCHR, UPR 2018).

In light of its multi-vector diplomacy and application to the HRC, the government in Tashkent invited the UN Special Rapporteur in 2019 to review the independence of lawyers and the judiciary. After his visit, the Rapporteur urged the country to engage in more significant reforms. At the same time, the rapporteur pointed out that compared to the first report of 2016, when there had been six acquittals, the number has risen to more than 500 in a few years. This illustrated the greater independence of the courts (OHCHR 2019).

In addition, social media (and the fact that the government has ratified the UN Convention on Women's Rights (CEDAW)) has raised public awareness of violence against women, rape, and forced marriage. However, local authorities routinely refuse to report gender-based violence. Women's shelters, usually set up by international NGOs, are overcrowded, as there is no state duty of care. From the authorities' point of view, family violence is considered a family matter, illustrating a culture of "patriarchal impunity" (Amnesty International 2019).

The violence in families in rural areas, where about 70 percent of the population lives, is

exceptionally high, especially in the so-called *Mahallas*, which stand under patriarchal leadership and Muslim councils of elders. The *Mahalla* leaders are potentially crucial for the government in implementing – or violating – laws and human rights in that they are judges, municipal police, electoral commissioners, and social servants simultaneously (Gumpenberg 2002).

### Concluding comments

After Uzbekistan's 3<sup>rd</sup> UPR in 2018, the UN sent a list of recommendations to the President asking him and his government, among many other things, to strengthen the national human rights institution and civil society and to improve the human rights situation, including that of women, children, and persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the UN committee recommended closing the Soviet-style Jaslyk prison colony and facilitating full and unhindered access for monitoring by the International Committee of the Red Cross or Crescent. It also asked the government to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and to eradicate forced labor in the cotton harvest sector (UN Universal Period Review 2018).

Shortly after his visit in the same year, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief expressed concerns about the limits of religious freedom and the extreme monitoring of all religious practices in the name of the "fight against terrorism", which led to false accusations. This affects all aspects of the freedom rights in Uzbekistan and in response to the report, the Uzbek Parliament adopted a master plan for more freedom of belief in the country (OHCHR 2018c). Concrete measures, though, have remained short and the level of improvement, hence, has been marginal.

In preparation for the country's 4<sup>th</sup> UPR in December 2023, HRW reported that the Uzbek Security Service continues to imprison bloggers, in particular those with religious motives, whereas respect for speech and media freedoms has further declined (HRW, 2023). Journalists faced harassment and

prosecution, and it has become much easier for them to be sentenced to prison, if accused of insulting the president.

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## Higher Education in Uzbekistan

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In recent years, higher education in Uzbekistan has undergone significant transformations. A number of important changes have been made in the new version of the law “On Education” (LoU, 2020), which replaced older laws “On Education” and “On National Program of Personnel Training” that had come into force in 1997. Reforming higher education is aligned with the “Strategy of Actions on Five Priority Areas of Development of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021”, including the priority areas of state and public development, supremacy of law, economic development, social sector development as well as provision of security and implementation of mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy (PD, 2017). Based on the experience made with the implementation of this strategy, the “Strategy of New Uzbekistan Development for 2022-2026” seeks to continue the reform path (PD, 2022a). The new strategy’s fourth priority area – “Pursuing fair social policy, human capital development” – seeks to improve the quality of education, raise the capacity of teaching staff, and cover up to 50% of the youth with higher education (PD, 2022a).

In October 2019, a new “**Concept of Higher Education Development**” was adopted in Uzbekistan that clearly defines the main priorities of development in this sector for 2030, namely:

- internationalization and development of cooperation with higher education institutions, production enterprises and research institutions of other countries;
- improving the positions of the Republic’s higher education institutions in international rankings (such as Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings, Times Higher Education or Academic Ranking of World Universities);
- gradual transition of higher education institutions to the credit-based modular curriculum;
- introduction of advanced standards of higher education, in particular, gradual transition from curricula based on theoretical knowledge to an educational system aimed at the formation of practical skills based on best international practices;
- organizing training for highly-qualified human beings capable of finding a job in the labor market and making their contribution to the sustainable development of society and the economy;
- development of public and private partnership in higher education;
- gradual introduction of the “University 3.0” concept that seeks to commercialize the results of education, science, innovation and research in higher education institutions;
- establishing technoparks, foresight centers, technology transfer centers, start-ups and accelerators in higher education institutions by attracting foreign investments, scaling-up paid services and other off-budget assets (PD, 2020).

Although the concept includes more than 70 target indicators with detailed plans of how to reach these targets, there are several priority items among them.

In order to effectively organize the activities of the government, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Education was reorganized into the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovations in December 2022 (PD, 2022b). Given the increased focus on **internationalization** in modern concepts of HE development, the Ministry seeks to facilitate the mobility of skills across countries. Learning and teaching abroad is acknowledged to be one of the factors that improves individual opportunities for employment, and academic mobility is seen as an effective tool of public diplomacy, international development and dialogue between cultures and the National Erasmus+ Office (NEO) noted that «relevance and importance of developing international cooperation has greatly increased» during last years. (NEO, 2020). Here, the Erasmus+ program plays an important role, involving a total of 65 universities from all regions of the country. Under this program, cooperation is not only established with European universities, but also with higher education institutions of CIS countries (including those of Central Asia) and other regions of the world. Erasmus+ provides comprehensive support for joint projects on advanced teaching technologies, educational platforms, access to educational resources of European universities, implementation of the “University 3.0” concept. The document emphasized a support from European partners and the NEO along with growing trust and intensifying cooperations within the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action (2020).

International cooperation proved to be particularly important in times of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which higher education systems in Central Asia and the European Union, despite their cultural peculiarities and different structural and institutional characteristics, faced similar challenges. One of the core components of the concept is to **ensure continuity of education**. E methods to solve this task varied from distance learning, to online platforms, to video and TV broadcasting. In some education institutions, distance learning switched to an online learning format. This shift was a result of the experience in online teaching gained by higher education institu-

tions, the acquisition of different digital tools and their effective implementation, strengthening the capacity of teachers, students and specialists in the higher education system. For such conditions and formats of teaching and learning, **quality assurance** became an acute issue. An analysis of the quality assurance of higher education in the EU during the pandemic and after allows us to draw conclusions on past changes. The following factors were identified as critical: online teaching; international coordination and cooperation; management and leadership in higher education institutions; education assessment and monitoring; coordination of management and administration of university. In sum, higher education institutions in Uzbekistan tended to maintain general standards and mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on students by making various corrective measures including demonstration videos, virtual labs, software, etc. Although this required time, efforts and substantial investments, in effect, an accelerated **digitalization** of Uzbekistan’s higher education system took place and, thus, next to the many challenges of the pandemic, one could also identify positive aspects (PD, 2019).

Over the last years, national higher education institutions have further gained experience in the acquisition of instruments required for **online education**. This includes provision of the relevant technological infrastructure, purchase of licenses, expansion of online libraries, adjustment of timetables, and ensuring access to education, teaching and relevant materials by establishing a support service for members of staff and students. The student performance assessment system was also changed to include different combinations of assessment methods as well as new methods to ensure data protection and academic integrity.

The development of a successful national policy in **science and innovations** remains to be a very complicated task. In order to make full use of the benefits of economic development based on science and innovation, a simultaneous progress in a number of different policy areas, including education, basic sciences and technological development, is required. It is

important to note that the “Concept of Higher Education Development” involves the strategic objectives of increasing productivity of research in higher education institutions, wide involvement of youth in research, and forming an innovative infrastructure of science. The following elements of state policy and the science and education management system can be identified as priority areas in Uzbekistan: motivation researchers, teaching staff and postgraduates for innovations and research; enhancing self-organization and self-administration of research groups; provision of research institutions and universities with modern scientific equipment; development of fundamental, applied and innovative research, strengthening of capacity of staff, and expansion of international cooperation in science.

**Internal quality control** is not flexible enough in all national higher education institutions to adapt to the changes while maintaining coherence and consistency of actions aimed at ensuring quality. Lack of institutional autonomy, which limits quick decision-making and action; lack of adequate institutional strategy; lack of quality culture in the national system (as a commitment to quality shared by all members of the academic community); poor sharing of experiences within the institution and between institutions to find solutions to problems encountered.

**Professional training of lecturers** of higher education institutions remains a priority of the state, which is important with a combination of learning and teaching methods and tools, improvement of online education pedagogics, optimization of used instruments, capacity building based on gained experience, acquaintance with such methods as mixed, hybrid, interdisciplinary, problem-oriented, competency-based and project-based learning and teaching, modelling and case studies. It is required to pay special attention to specialties based on laboratory, practical or applied methods of teaching, as well as those related to provision of clinical skills in medical institutions or internships. As a result, curricula need to be adjusted including practical modules for effective use.

The introduction of the **credit-module system** is taking place in all public higher education institutions of Uzbekistan. The system is based on the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) European model. It is a flexible process of organizing education, increasing the share of independent learning and allowing universities to constantly adjust the content of educational programs depending on the demands of the labor market. However, the implementation of such a system in the national higher education institutions has its challenges as it requires first of all a focus on students and an adjustment of the entire educational process to a student's study load rather than a lecturer's load, which in turn determines changes in organization of the entire system of higher education. Based on the new standards and qualification requirements, curricula in 625 bachelor degree and 634 master's degree specializations as well as more than 4700 educational programs have already been revised.

Recently, the number of higher education institutions has sharply increased, including private higher education institutions and branches of international universities. As per the data published by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovations, as of June 2023, in total there are 210 higher education institutions operating in Uzbekistan, including 36 universities, 48 institutes, 4 academies, 26 branches of Uzbekistan higher education institutions, 1 conservatory, 30 branches of international higher education institutions, and 65 non-governmental higher education institutions. The Ministry also indicates that coverage of youth with higher education in the country reached 38-39% (MHESI, 2023).

There is quite an active discussion among the higher education system specialists and the public regarding the conditions and tasks towards implementing the above-mentioned priorities. Particular attention is paid to the issues of responding to market needs at the national and international level, providing a system of specialized knowledge to create a competitive advantage in the successful employment of university graduates, quality assurance tools; strengthening financial auton-

omy of public higher education institutions (PD, 2020)

Under the new conditions, the structure of higher education is changing, and the demand is increasing for specialists who can neither apply their new knowledge in practice, nor understand the scale of innovative opportunities. They are expected to be able not only to competently solve current economic and production issues, but also to make right decisions that require certain *soft skills* and abilities. In the modern economy, it is more important to possess general skills, manifested in the ability to solve emerging problems in professional life, to speak foreign languages, and to be proficient in modern information technologies, than to have scattered knowledge. Hence the demand for such basic competencies as: ability to work in a team, ability to navigate the labor market, willingness to link one's career with continuing education, ability to change one's profile of activities depending on changes in the development strategy of an enterprise and technology, skills to work independently with information, and ability to make independent decisions. This approach turns the requirements for a profession into a kind of "competence packages", since the labor market does not assess knowledge itself, but the ability to perform certain functions.

The ambition of Uzbekistan to continue with transformation and its commitment to sustainable development makes it necessary to create a higher education system capable of adapting to these rapidly changing needs of the labor market. This, in turn, a need in development of higher education institutions and strengthening of competition which plays an incentive for higher education institutions to provide high-quality educational services and to implement modern forms and technologies of education. In turn, this increases competition between universities and forces them to improve the quality of educational services provided and introduce modern forms and technologies of education. Based on the needs of the economic sector, modernization of higher education system and progress in science will undoubtedly continue.

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## Energy Infrastructure Development in Uzbekistan

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With one of the fastest growing population and economy in Central Asia, Uzbekistan is facing significant challenges and opportunities. Regarding energy infrastructure development, it seems necessary to distinguish between Uzbekistan’s national interests and needs, on the one hand, and regional and international objectives, on the other hand, as well as to identify players and stakeholders, including declared and hidden intentions.

### Current situation

With 36 million inhabitants and an annual increase of 2%, Uzbekistan represents the most populous country in Central Asia. Uzbekistan also has one of the world’s most dynamic economies: Starting from a moderate level of about 93 billion USD (3,500 USD per capita) (IMF 2022), its GDP increased by 5.7% in 2022 (World Bank 2023).

Uzbekistan has considerable natural energy resources (natural gas: 2,240  $\text{bm}^3$  [billion cubic meters], oil and gas condensate: 178 mt [mega= $10^6$  tons], coal: 1,950 mt, uranium: 97 kt [kilo= $10^3$  tons]) (IEA 2021). To compare: In 2022, German suppliers produced about 4  $\text{bm}^3$  of natural gas and proven reserves amount to 36  $\text{bm}^3$  (BVEG 2023). Uzbekistan’s electricity production reached 69 billion kilowatt hours (kWh) in 2020. The total demand is expected to rise to 117 billion kWh by 2030 (Nuclearasia 2020). In comparison, Germany generated about 596 billion kWh in 2021 (World Nuclear Association 2023).

The main challenges for the energy infrastructure of Uzbekistan are connected to:

- Fast increasing demand according to growth in population and standards;
- Economic transformation and adaptation to new industry needs;
- Necessary replacement and improvement of obsolete power plants, transmission and distribution networks;
- Power exchange infrastructure within the Central Asian region.

To tackle these challenges, large investments are required, political stability has to be ensured, technological choices have to be taken, and regulatory frameworks have to be facilitated. National legislation allows for the involvement of private companies, including foreign partners, within the highly centralized energy sector. Nevertheless, business within the main strategic areas including energy infrastructure, natural resources and mining industries will remain in governmental orbit, also as it generates significant income from export to balance state expenses.

The following overview will concentrate on the electricity sector as one of the major challenges in terms of near and mid-term investment needs. In 2020, Uzbekistan had the following electricity generation mix: natural gas: 58.4 TWh (88%), hydro: 5.0 TWh (8%), coal: 2.6 TWh (4%), oil: 0.5 TWh (1%) with net import balance of 2.5 TWh from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (IEA 2021). In 2018, the country ratified the Paris Agreement and adopted a national commitment to reduce Greenhouse gas emissions per unit of GDP by 10% of the 2010 level by 2030.

### Fossil fuels

In 2019, more than 90% of the electricity production of Uzbekistan was based on fossil fuels, mainly natural gas. The state hydrocarbon monopoly JSC Uzbekneftegaz ranks 11<sup>th</sup> in the world in natural gas production. In November 2021, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) announced financing to stimulate private sector investment in form of a 100 million USD-loan to support the construction of the 1,500 MW<sub>e</sub> Sirdarya Combined Cycle Gas

Turbines (CCGT) power project. It is the first non-sovereign-backed financing (NSBF) in Uzbekistan of AIIB, aiming to increase the availability of high efficiency gas power generation capacity in the country. Uzbekistan's electricity supply gap was estimated to be nearly 10% of the total electricity demand in 2019. The AIIB identified the need to build up high dispatchable and efficient reserve capacity to balance the projected large share of intermittent renewable energy sources such as solar and wind. This mainly includes high-efficiency gas power stations, substituting outdated and less efficient plants to complement an increase in variable renewable energy sources.

From a short-term perspective, facilitating low-carbon transition toward carbon neutrality by 2050 can be accelerated by an efficiency increase in the fossil sector itself. The project is also in line with Uzbekistan's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which aims to decrease specific greenhouse gas emissions per unit of GDP by 10% until 2030 based on 2010 levels.

The Among Sirdarya CCGT project lenders are the AIIB, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the OPEC Fund for International Development and the Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft (DEGmbH); with some commercial lenders backed by Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (AIIB 2021).

In July 2023, the construction of new combined cycle gas power units (CCGP) with a total capacity of 1,065 MW has started at Talimarjan with Intecsa Ingeniera Industrial S.A (Spain) and Mitsubishi Corporation (Japan) as main contractors for a volume of about 770 million USD. Commissioning for the power plant is scheduled for 2025 to supply Samarkand and Bukhara regions and seven pumping stations on the Karshi main canal. The project will provide 8.5 TWh/a (Terra (=10<sup>12</sup>) watthours per year) saving 600 million m<sup>3</sup> natural gas by higher generation efficiency in replacing old production units (MINENERGY 2023).

## **Renewable energy sources (RES)**

Uzbekistan may produce about 8% of its electricity demand in 2030 from solar and 7% from wind, whereas 5% from hydro were representing the only contribution of renewable energy sources (RES) in 2019.

In April 2023, the AIIB announced its commitment to support Masdar's solar power projects with 83.6 million USD as part of a nearly 400 million USD debt financing to Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company PJSC (Masdar). The AIIB engagement assists for the construction of three solar photovoltaic (PV) power plants (greenfield) in the Samarkand, Djizzakh and Surkhandarya regions. The involvement of the AIIB is complemented by contributions of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the EBRD and the European Investment Bank (EIB) (AIIB 2023). The solar PV capacities will contribute with nearly 0.9 GW to the National Strategy for the Transition to a Green Economy of Uzbekistan, containing 7 GW of solar capacity by 2030 (AIIB 2023, IRENA 2023). AIIB and the Government of Uzbekistan signed a Joint Declaration to implement at least 11 projects between 2023 and 2026 in Uzbekistan with an overall value of 2.16 billion USD also regarding investment in energy and transport (AIIB 2023).

## **Nuclear energy**

Uzbekistan has the world's seventh largest natural uranium reserves. When being part of the former Soviet Union, the country operated different mines for the Soviet military-industrial complex. These have left legacy sites, some of them still to be managed to reduce their environmental and health impact. According to the 2022 OECD/NEA, IAEA Uranium Red Book (NEA+IAEA 2023), Uzbekistan has 49,200 tonnes uranium (tU) in reasonably assured recoverable resources and 49,220 tU inferred recoverable resources to 130 USD/kgU in sandstones and 32,900 tU in black shales. The current production of about 3,500 tU/a is only based on sandstone resources.

In 2017, Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation signed an intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on cooperation in the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, followed by site exploration and survey for a large scale nuclear power plant. In September 2018, an additional IGA was signed for the construction of two Generation 3+ VVER-1200 reactors by Rosatom. These will have a generation capacity of 2 x 1.200 MWe (about 21 TWh/a) and design live time of 60 years to be commissioned about 2028-2030, which will help saving annually 3-3.5 billion cubic meters of natural gas.

The Nuclear Energy Development Agency UzAtom was established in 2018 to coordinate site selection and evaluation, building up technological expertise, assisting in establishing the institutional and regulatory framework and financial arrangements required for a nuclear embarking country. The total investment for the two nuclear power plant (NPP) units will be about 13 billion USD, largely prefunded by the Russian Federation based on an intergovernmental agreement as practiced with several comparable projects (such as the Rooppur NPP in Bangladesh, the Astravets NPP in Belarus, Paks II in Hungary or El Dabaa in Egypt).

The Uzbekistan NPP, planned to be sited near lake Tuzlan, will be by far the largest investment project implemented in Uzbekistan and may supply about 18% of the country's electricity when operable in 2030. In 2019, the construction of an additional NPP with two units was announced without providing further details.

Russia's nuclear and radiation safety regulator Rostekhnadzor and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are following the IAEA milestone approach for nuclear embarking countries and assist the setup and review of the Uzbek nuclear legal and regulatory framework.

In January 2023, an IAEA team concluded the Site and External Events Design (SEED) review mission in Uzbekistan. Still no defined date for the construction start has been announced.

## **Cooperation with the EU**

In July 2022, the EU initiated the new "Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA)" with Uzbekistan, which also foresees "Enhanced cooperation in a number of other key policy areas, including in economic and financial cooperation, energy, transport, environment and climate change, [...]" (EEAS 2022).

Under the current programme period (2021-2027), the EU's priorities as regards energy lie on effective governance and digital transformation, as well as inclusive, digital and green growth, with only 76 million EUR reserved for bilateral cooperation with Uzbekistan in the timeframe of 2021-24. This, however, constitutes the largest multi-annual bilateral cooperation in Central Asia by the EU.

EU institutions are aware of the natural resources of Uzbekistan, however the options to diversify the European security of supply seem to be limited in the current geopolitical context. The Uzbek ties with the Russian Federation and China are close. The risk of US secondary sanctions that might be followed by the EU reduce the attractiveness of trade with the EU member states for Uzbekistan.

Beyond the energy political agenda of the EU in Uzbekistan, which seems to be bolstered only by limited financial resources, there are several companies and investors from EU/Euratom member states, both with public and private background, active in Uzbekistan. Their activities also include some that are co-financed by International Financial Institutions (IFI) that are actively involved in energy infrastructure development in Uzbekistan; at the same time they perform project-oriented cooperation with Russian, Chinese and other players.

## **Cooperation with the Russian Federation**

During Soviet times, energy infrastructure development focused on mining and industrialization. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union under the conditions of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),

the focus remains on hydrocarbon exploration, extraction, processing and export to China and the Russian Federation as well as uranium enrichment and nuclear fuel production for nuclear power reactors in the Russian Federation (mainly Angarsk).

The envisaged realisation of the two-unit Tuzlan nuclear power plant project together with Rosatom would lift up the cooperation on a substantial new investment and administration level (> 15% of GDP in 2022). In a similar vein, this project also sets out to enhance cooperation in the fields of technologies, education, establishing a legal framework and industry standards, waste management over a longer period of time. As for other Rosatom projects, there might be considerable involvement of foreign partners like Orano (France). Even if EU sanctions did not involve the nuclear sector, participation of foreign partners also depends on general trade policy of host countries. German companies seem to be almost excluded according to the restrictive German export practice in this regard as demonstrated by restrictions on German companies (e.g. Siemens) by the German government to fulfil trade obligations with EU member states such as France, Slovakia or Hungary, if Russian companies are involved and even without restrictions on community level.

### **Cooperation with China**

Uzbekistan and China are increasingly cooperating on different levels and under different formats including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This also affects energy projects accompanied by large traffic infrastructure investments with financial assistance by new instruments created through China, or with a significant participation of the AIIB (but also involving direct foreign investment and other partners including private partners and traditional IFIs. China is increasingly importing resources from Uzbekistan and exporting energy technologies, financial arrangements, services and maintenance.

### **International and multilateral framework**

In 2016, with the Presidency of Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan began to open up in line with a newfound preference to intensify economic cooperation and trade exchange. In this, however, it sought to avoid irreplaceable dependencies, while at the same time leveraging its relations to historic regional and international partners.

The approach seems to be based on pragmatic considerations also regarding energy technologies and resources. Announced and therefore possible US secondary sanctions, which are to be followed by the EU, create uncertainties and additional risks. These could lead also to a further decoupling from trade with EU countries, as China, the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan are dominating foreign trade, security policy and investment stability within the greater region by far. Germany and EU foreign policy for energy infrastructure development in Uzbekistan has to outline its strategy on how to contribute or impede regional dynamics together with or antagonistic to other stakeholders of the region. At the same time, the joint development of energy infrastructure with neighbouring countries is gaining momentum, and the Uzbek government puts significant effort on sustainable bilateral cooperation with most of its neighbouring countries, currently also to cover the electricity demand in exchange of resources.

Key elements for a fruitful energy infrastructure development with Uzbekistan seem to be an open and fair competition of technologies and packages in project development, financing and transfer of competent ownership.

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## Central Asia's New Centre

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After Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, passed away in September 2016, Western observers were pleasantly surprised by his successor's steps to reform the country's economy, politics, and foreign relations (Starr and Cornell 2018; The Economist 2019). Seven years later, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's government still has a long way to go and has even experienced backsliding in politically sensitive areas like press freedom (RSF 2023). However, there are also examples of substantial and continual progress. Uzbekistan's relations with its post-Soviet Central Asian neighbours (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) are one such bright spot. Whereas Karimov's policies reflected an emphasis on the threats that interdependence posed to the regime's sovereignty and security, Mirziyoyev's policies emphasise the opportunities. For example, the foreign policy goals of the Government of Uzbekistan (2023) include "facilitating the increase of the volume and expanding the geography of exports of domestic products" as well as "assisting attraction of foreign direct investments".

Per World Bank (2023) data, Uzbekistan's exports (in current USD) plateaued and declined between 2008-2016 from 12.17 billion to 10.62 billion, rose to 17 billion in 2019, suffered from Covid-related disruptions, and reached almost 22 billion in 2022. Foreign direct investment inflows also grew from (current USD) 1.66 billion in 2016 to 2.53 billion in 2022. Unlike his successor, Karimov often responded to the challenges of interdependence with unilateralism and isolationism. Fazendeiro (2017) characterised this as a foreign policy

of "defensive self-reliance" because of Karimov's expectations of equal treatment by greater powers, rejection of expansionism, querulousness, economic nationalism, and preference for bilateralism. By contrast, Mirziyoyev has more actively pursued the opportunities and managed the challenges of interdependence by encouraging more of it via diplomacy and cooperation. For example, he visited all the other Central Asian states during his first two years in power. His trip to Tajikistan in March 2018 was the first Uzbek presidential visit there in 18 years (Economist Intelligence Unit 2018). Uzbekistan's status as a double-landlocked state makes its regional relations especially important for its integration into the global economy. Mirziyoyev also continued to take part in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China and Russia. In December 2020, Uzbekistan became an observer state in Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, which also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, Uzbekistan remained outside of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, since Karimov's withdrawal from the alliance in 2012. According to the Government of Uzbekistan (2023), it "is adherent to the policy of non-alignment with military-political blocs, preventing the deployment of foreign military bases and facilities on its territory, as well as the participation of the country's military personnel in peacekeeping operations or military conflicts abroad."

As a natural leader of its region, Uzbekistan can be a major obstacle or driver of Central Asian cooperation and integration. This is because it is the region's most populous state (outnumbering Kazakhstan's 19.5 million population by almost 12 million) (CIA 2023), borders the other four Central Asian states as well as Afghanistan, has the region's most powerful military, and is home to sites of great cultural, historic and religious import. This leadership potential went largely unrealized under Karimov because of his rivalry with the region's economic powerhouse Kazakhstan and poor interpersonal relations with other lead-

ers, great power contests, and the other reasons noted above. Tashkent's reticence contributed to what Allison in 2008 characterised as Central Asia's "virtual regionalism". That is, shallow participation in macro-regional structures whose "cooperative projects usually lack substance" for the sake of "mutual reinforcement of the political status quo" (Allison 2008, 185-6). For example, the SCO, with its official stance against the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, acts as an autocratic united front against Western human rights criticism.

Under Mirziyoyev, the Government of Uzbekistan (2023) identified Central Asia as its main foreign policy priority and committed to "make every effort to strengthen regional trade and economic cooperation, develop regional transport and transit infrastructure, ensure fair and rational use of water resources of transboundary rivers in Central Asia and ecologic sustainability of the region, complete the process of the delimitation and demarcation of borders." According to the UN Comtrade Database (2023), between 2017 and 2022, Uzbek goods exports to Tajikistan rose from (current USD) 75 million to 392 million, to Kyrgyzstan from 168 million to 927 million and to Turkmenistan from 53 million to 132 million. Exports to Kazakhstan rose from 977 million in 2017 to 1.2 billion in 2018, fell for two years and then recovered to 1.25 billion in 2022. Tashkent also participates in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, which can help integrate Uzbekistan's economy with others through infrastructure projects. Mirziyoyev stated in May 2023 that the "priority project for the revival of the Great Silk Road is the Trans-Eurasian Highway, the important components of which will be the 'China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan' highway and railway" (Kun.uz 2023a). The USD 4.5 billion railway would be part of the southern China-Europe freight rail route, allowing traffic from China to Europe via Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey while avoiding the politically sensitive Russian route.

Even the difficult issues of borders and water have seen progress. Karimov made few attempts to resolve the border disputes that

Uzbekistan inherited from the Soviet period, letting them fester as sources of tension. For instance, a worrying build-up of Uzbek and Kyrgyz forces occurred during Karimov's final months in 2016 at a disputed section of their border (DW 2016). By contrast, in January 2023, Mirziyoyev and Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov resolved the dispute by finalizing a deal under which Uzbekistan recognized Kyrgyz sovereignty over a disputed mountain while Uzbekistan received control over Kyrgyzstan's Kempir-Abad water reservoir (Rickleton 2023a). The two leaders praised each other, drawing positive comparisons with Karimov's testy public exchanges with a previous Kyrgyz leader. "In the 31 years of the independent history of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, this is the first time there has been this level of mutual relations", Mirziyoyev said (quoted in Rickleton 2023). Similarly, in December 2022, Mirziyoyev and Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokaev concluded a treaty on allied relations and signed a demarcation agreement after nearly two decades of negotiations (Omirgazy 2022). In the meantime, Uzbekistan continues to pursue border delimitation and demarcation negotiations with Turkmenistan (Kun.uz 2023b) and Tajikistan (Kun.uz 2023c). One result is a 2018 agreement resolving a dispute over the Farkhad Dam by giving the dam to Uzbekistan and the land around it to Tajikistan (Putz 2018). As an arid, down-stream state with a large, water-intensive agricultural sector, Uzbekistan is sensitive to the water policies of its upstream neighbours. Karimov even hinted at the possible use of force to stop ambitious hydroelectric plans in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Nurshayeva 2012). Mirziyoyev abandoned his predecessor's opposition to Tajikistan's Rogun dam and agreed to purchase some of its power (Eurasianet 2022). This shift is encouraged by Uzbekistan's worsening electricity shortages (Imamova 2023). The same can be said about the January 2023 roadmap agreement between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to help build the Kambar-Ata-1 hydroelectric power station on the Naryn River in Kyrgyzstan (Rickleton 2023b).

Security is another difficult area that has seen more cooperation. Uzbekistan's rugged bor-

ders are vulnerable to militant incursions. In 2000, after the Tajikistan-based Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan conducted raids into southern Kyrgyzstan and southeastern Uzbekistan, the latter unilaterally mined portions of its border. Between several dozen and several hundred civilians were hurt as a result. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan handed over maps of the mines' locations and worked jointly with Tajikistan to clear them from their border (Pannier 2018). They also opened new border crossings, resumed train traffic (Eurasianet 2018), agreed to visa-free travel (RFE/RL 2018), and resumed flights for the first time in 24 years (Eurasianet 2016). The Taliban's victory in 2021 added further impetus to Central Asian cooperation. For instance, Tajik and Uzbek militaries held joint exercises on the Afghan border in August 2022 and agreed to train Tajik military personnel at Uzbek institutions (Putz 2022). In May 2023, Uzbek forces conducted joint exercises with their Kazakh counterparts (Kun.uz 2023d). The Taliban's Islamist ideology, its ongoing conflict with Islamic State, and the presence of thousands of foreign fighters, including remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, make Afghanistan the leading external security concern for secular Uzbekistan (Seldin 2022). However, in contrast with Karimov's anti-Taliban stance, Mirziyoyev has engaged Kabul, pursuing closer economic ties to incentivise more favourable policies (Kun.uz 2023e). For example, Uzbekistan operates a rail line which runs from the Afghan border town of Hairatan to Mazar-i-Sharif and accounts for around half of Afghanistan's imports (Lillis 2023). Uzbekistan also has an agreement to export electricity to Afghanistan (Kun.uz 2023f) and is part of the planned Trans-Afghan railway, which would connect Termiz – Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar (Latif 2023). In turn, the Taliban promised to not allow its territory to be used to attack its neighbours. However, Islamic State made two attempts to launch rocket attacks at Uzbek targets across the border in 2022 (Pannier 2023).

Overall, despite major challenges, like border clashes between Tajik and Kyrgyz forces in 2021 and 2022, Central Asia is experiencing a level of cooperation that was hardly imagina-

ble under Karimov. Mirziyoyev's more liberal view of interdependence is a key factor. This is not to claim that the Uzbek leader is a liberal. Uzbekistan's opening is conditioned by its neopatrimonial context. For example, despite their involvement in a major smuggling and corruption scandal in Kyrgyzstan, the Abdukadyr family was granted a large role in Uzbekistan's economy and growing foreign trade, "gaining control over a major bazaar, dominating trade routes, and partnering with the customs service" (RFE/RL et al. 2023). According to RFE/RL et al. (2023), the Abdukadyrs have ties to Mirziyoyev's relatives, making them members of the president's patronage network. Tashkent's regional engagement is also influenced by mounting energy (Imamova 2023) and water shortages (Temirov 2023), shared concerns about Afghanistan, and a desire to boost its bargaining power with extra-regional actors. Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine may also be encouraging the Central Asians to take more responsibility for their area by diverting Moscow's resources and raising questions about its capabilities as a security guarantor. While the trend is encouraging, reversal is a possibility.

First, any of the region's leaders could be removed unexpectedly by illness, elite conflict, or popular rebellion. Turkmenistan's first president died unexpectedly from a heart attack at the age of 66 in 2006. In Kazakhstan, in January 2022, popular economic discontent combined with intra-elite rivalries to produce a crisis that saw protests, riots and gun battles, and ended with elite purges. In Kyrgyzstan, three presidents have been ousted since 2005 by elite-backed protests and riots. Due to weak formal institutions, changes in leading personalities in Uzbekistan or among its neighbours could lead to dramatic changes in foreign relations. Second, worsening power and water crises could put so much pressure on Tashkent and its neighbours that they revert to the old patterns of coercive unilateralism and isolation. Third, the same can be stated about security threats, particularly from Afghanistan. Finally, Central Asia remains vulnerable to the influence of external "great powers", especially Russia and China, and their differing visions of Eurasian integration.



A new, reinvigorated phase of the “Great Game” competition over regional influence could pull apart a region that is only beginning to knit itself together.

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## **Uzbekistan's Pro-Active Afghanistan Policy**

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Uzbekistan is one of the three Central Asian countries that share a border with Afghanistan (together with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), although with 160-kilometers the shortest of the three. Its southernmost city of Termez lies alongside the Amur Darya river, which marks the entire border of the two countries. Afghan trade with Uzbekistan is most extensive compared to that with the other Central Asian states. The top goods are milling products and mineral fuels. In 2020, Uzbek exports to Afghanistan saw their peak so far, with a value of almost \$600 million. In 2022, after the Taliban had swept back into power in August 2021, exports still amounted to almost \$525 million (Uzbekistan Exports to Afghanistan, 2023). In early 2022, already under the current Taliban rule, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev raised bright expectations that by the end of 2023, the trade turnover would reach \$2 billion (Iztelevova, 2022).

Given its immediate physical exposure and ethnic Uzbeks residing in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan is also especially imperilled by overall volatility and transnational challenges (illicit trafficking, refugee flows, extremism, and terrorism) stemming from its war-torn southern neighbour, which have the potential to cross boundaries. After the termination of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2014, and of all NATO and most other international engagements in the country by mid-2021, a security vacuum arose. Although the present Taliban government has done a better job in handling the Afghan economy than many observers had originally anticipated, the country is currently tormented with

widespread poverty, hunger, and massive unemployment. These difficulties have arisen because the banking system is largely paralyzed and as most international donors have left the country, with an accompanying decline in humanitarian assistance. But economic problems have also been exacerbated given the Taliban's opium ban (Byrd, 2023).

Uzbekistan's Afghanistan policy since the mid-2010s is the most pro-active among the five Central Asian states. Within a general opening up of the country in 2016 after President Islam Karimov's death, his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev generally introduced a greater degree of openness in the country's foreign policy, particularly towards the Central Asian neighbours. For instance, in 2018 he successfully suggested the reopening of annual multilateral consultative meetings of the Central Asian presidents. Also with ambition for regional leadership as the largest Central Asian country in terms of its population, several initiatives have been made towards enhancing regional cooperation (Rakhimov, Khasanov and Umarov, 2020).

Mirziyoyev has likewise created a window of opportunity for consolidating joint stabilizing efforts towards Afghanistan. Although Islam Karimov had established a few initiatives on Afghanistan and provided significant logistics for the ISAF operation, including for German troops in Termez, overall, his actions towards Afghanistan remained idle. By contrast, his successor claimed that Afghanistan embodies an integral part of Central Asia, not least pointing to cultural and historical ties (Burnashev and Chernykh, 2020, p.70). Since 2016, Mirziyoyev and then Afghan president Ashraf Ghani cherished the vision of making Afghanistan a key transit corridor for surrounding states (Sharan and Watkins, 2021, p.2). During Mirziyoyev's tenure, Uzbekistan has considerably expanded reciprocal ties with Afghanistan and hosted several international conferences on the country or the wider region. For instance, in March 2018, an International Conference on Afghanistan was held in Tashkent. A key rationale of this pro-active Afghanistan policy is to ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan, provide humanitarian aid, and pre-

vent transnational threats from spilling over, to which Uzbekistan is particularly prone. One key concern in this regard is that Afghanistan might become a safe haven for Islamist groups hostile towards Tashkent (Uzbekistan Navigates Relations with Afghanistan, 2022). A few months after the Taliban seized power in August 2021, Uzbekistan – together with Kazakhstan – held joint military exercises near Termez, with 300 troops, 50 vehicles, artillery, fighter jets, helicopters, and drones, to prepare themselves against potential incursions (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan Hold Drills Near Afghan Border, 2021). The Taliban, in turn, made a pledge to not allow the Afghan territory to be used to plot attacks on neighbouring countries, including Uzbekistan (Pannier, 2021).

Tashkent served as a dialogue platform for solving intra-Afghan problems, but likewise fostered the implementation of bilateral and regional economic projects. The current government hence sees Afghanistan not only as a source of instability, but also of opportunities. Under Mirziyoyev, bilateral trade has significantly risen (Izteleuova, 2022). In 2018, a free economic zone near Termez was established; two years later the Termez International Trade Centre. Of the electricity that Afghanistan had to import in 2021 (73 per cent of its overall electricity), Uzbekistan supplied 57 per cent. In August 2020, the two countries signed a new 10-year contract for electricity supplies (Pannier, 2021). Infrastructure projects traversing the two countries include the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway corridor, a power transmission line, and several communication lines (Bilateral Relations Between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, 2023). One conference in Tashkent in July 2021, a few weeks before the Taliban seized power, was on “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities”. It highlighted Uzbekistan’s trade and economic interests. These and similar initiatives are tightly organized with the United Nations and other international actors. The Advancing Afghan Trade (AAT) project, which is partially financed by the European Union (EU) and supported by Uzbekistan, also seeks to foster greater integration and connectivity of Afghanistan with its neighbours (Centro de Comercio Internac-

ional, 2019). At the mentioned July 2021 conference in Tashkent, negotiations commenced on a railway running through Afghan soil, worth 5 billion USD, which would connect Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, with Central Asia and Europe (Izteleuova, 2022).

During the ISAF operation between 2001 and 2014, NATO’s Northern Distribution Network already utilized Uzbekistan as one important link to bring supplies from Europe into Afghanistan and vice versa. Several banks, schemes, and international organizations are involved in these connectivity projects, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) organization, and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Pannier, 2021). The projects can open access for landlocked Central Asian countries, which would simplify the delivery of goods. To a degree, all five Central Asian countries coordinate their policies concerning a transit route traversing Afghanistan (Linn, 2005). Uzbekistan as one of only two double landlocked countries in the world<sup>4</sup> places particularly great expectations in the accompanying enhanced connectivity, hoping that this will further boost its economy. It also receives transit fees for cargoes into Afghanistan from China, Kazakhstan and other countries. A transport corridor via South Asia now seems particularly vital given current sanctions against Russia and Belarus, which makes northern transport corridors less viable (Umarov, 2022).

After the Taliban came to power in August 2021, the five Central Asian states pursued different routes towards dealing with the new government. The Tajik government proved most hesitant as it refused and still refuses to talk to the Taliban. By contrast, Kazakhstan (not bordering Afghanistan) and Uzbekistan are pursuing a more pragmatic approach (Marat, 2022). Apparently, Tashkent had prepared for the possibility of the Taliban gaining control in Kabul (Pannier, 2023). For the sake of rescuing previous substantial political and

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<sup>4</sup> The other being Liechtenstein. Double landlocked countries are surrounded only by landlocked countries (which cannot access any ocean).

material investments, Shavkat Mirziyoyev follows a realistic and largely unconditional way of cooperation with the Taliban, whereby gross human rights abuses and the exclusion of ethnic Uzbek leaders from the government in Kabul – one initial demand from Tashkent – are generally downplayed or skipped (Intel-Brief, 2022).

Concerns are widespread in Uzbekistan with its significant ethnic populations in northern Afghanistan that the government in Kabul is not inclusive enough in terms of ethnic minorities (Imamova, 2021). A few months after the Taliban gained power, the two countries signed a declaration to enhance bilateral cooperation. In the document, the parties emphasized “the need to preserve trade, economic, transport, logistics and energy ties, as well as to provide comprehensive international humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan, with the UN playing a central role” (Izteleuova, 2022). In the aftermath of the increased poverty created after August 2021, the UN World Food Program has established a logistics hub in Termez. Uzbekistan now plays a key role in the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Tashkent emphasizes its key level of communication with the Taliban, enabling it to serve as an interlocutor to improve communication with international actors, such as the US, with which it still maintains close relations. It is not ready to formally recognize the Taliban government in Kabul before this is done internationally, however (IntelBrief, 2022). Uzbekistan has always linked its economic engagement in Afghanistan with the need for generally stabilizing this country. Ismatulla Irgashev, the Uzbek special envoy for Afghanistan, said in this regard: “Imagine what happens if we don't engage. (...) More conflict, another civil war, more blood, poverty, suffering, threats to the neighbors and the international community” (Imamova, 2022).

Yet Uzbekistan's pro-active Afghanistan policy is not without problems. How an economically strained Afghanistan can pay for its imports, share in projects, and debts, is far from obvious. After the Taliban seized power in August 2021, nearly \$10 billion assets of the Afghan

Central Bank had been frozen. It comes as no surprise that Mirziyoyev has called for unfreezing these assets to allow the government to be financially more flexible (Pannier, 2021). The future of Afghanistan and its government remain unpredictable. In January 2023, Uzbekistan halted electricity exports to Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan's state railway company temporarily suspended its railway traffic to Afghanistan. At the same time, Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry complained about the introduction of a ban on the study of women and girls in public and private higher educational institutions in Afghanistan and about demolished memorials of the Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi in Afghanistan (Pannier, 2023). Given Uzbekistan's huge pre-Taliban investments in Afghanistan, politically and economically, there is now a lot at stake for Tashkent. But so is for the other Central Asian states and countries from the wider region, and Europe, for which improved connectivity between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan would also provide a significantly enhanced trade network and new trade and investment opportunities.

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