

Responses From Central Asian States to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Written by Beate Eschment

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BEATE ESCHMENT, MAR 31 2022

Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine presents the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan with a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea. On the one hand, all five countries are closely tied to the Russian Federation in economic and security terms, and their autocratic style of rule has more in common with the Russian political system than with Ukrainian democracy. On the other hand, Putin's invasion of a former Soviet republic has fuelled fears about the violation of their own territorial integrity and sovereignty. Solidarity with Ukraine or protest against the invasion would be the logical response here. Moreover, it is already foreseeable that the war and above all the Western sanctions against the Russian Federation will have dramatic economic consequences for Central Asia, which only the West can mitigate, so it should not take a gamble on its support.

It is quite obvious that Moscow is exerting pressure behind the scenes to get Central Asian leaders to come out in favour of the war. Just how much the Kremlin cares about this (and how little it respects these leaders) can be seen in the fact that the Russian president's press service has, following Putin's telephone conversations with his Central Asian counterparts, repeatedly misrepresented them as supporters of his war. In the case of Uzbekistan, this happened on two occasions, first shortly after the invasion, and again on 21 March 2022, after Uzbekistan had explicitly declared its neutrality.

So far, however, no Central Asian state has sided with Putin. Aside from their voting behaviour in the resolutions on Ukraine at the UN General Assembly on 2 and 24 March 2022 (Tajikistan abstained in both cases, Turkmenistan did not participate), there have been no public statements on the war by Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The leaderships of the other three states have emphasised their neutrality and the need for a political solution to the conflict. In view of the above-mentioned dependencies, it would be wrong to interpret this attitude as tending towards Russia or as cowardly; on closer examination, it appears to be a thoroughly courageous decision taken with these countries' own interests in mind.

The case of Kazakhstan seems particularly astonishing, given its own delicate geopolitical situation, which is not unlike that of Ukraine. It is the only Central Asian state that shares a border with the Russian Federation and still has a large Russian population (approx. 3.5 million), mainly concentrated near the border with Russia in the north of the country. Statements by the Kazakh president testify to the fears associated with this state of affairs. Nevertheless, and contrary to the assumptions of many observers that Kazakhstan would become even more dependent on Moscow after the deployment of Russian-dominated CSTO troops to restore internal order in January 2022, the leadership adopted a cautious but self-confident position vis-à-vis the Kremlin early on. Even before the war began, it declared that recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics was not on the agenda.

Kazakhstan also abstained from voting on the resolutions at the UN General Assembly in March. Official statements emphasising the country's neutrality have been matched by actions: the president of Kazakhstan is not only in contact with high-ranking Russian officials, but is the only Central Asian head of state to have sought telephone contact with his Ukrainian counterpart Zelensky at an early stage. It remains to be seen whether the weather-related month-long outage of the CPC pipeline announced by the Russian side on 23 March is Russia's first punitive measure in response to this neutral stance.

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Uzbekistan, the most populous and militarily strongest state in Central Asia, took considerably longer to take a public stance, apart from distancing itself from the Kremlin's false assertions of the Uzbek leader's support for the war. The Uzbek permanent representative did not vote on the first resolution at the UN General Assembly in early March. And it was not until mid-March that the Uzbek foreign minister spoke out, demanding an end to the military actions and violence, and explicitly calling for the recognition of the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine and the non-recognition of the People's Republics. In accordance with the country's own national interests, he also said that Uzbekistan would continue to cooperate with both the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Uzbekistan abstained from the UN vote on 24 March.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest states in the CIS and is particularly dependent on Russia both economically (mainly because of migrant workers) and militarily (not least because of the Russian military base on its territory). This made it particularly hard for the country to position itself with regard to the war. The Kyrgyz president, who still has little experience in foreign policy, initially stated that the recognition of the People's Republic was necessary to protect the Russians and was the right of every independent state. And he did not explicitly distance himself from the claim on the Russian president's website that he had signalled support for Russia in a telephone conversation with Putin. In the UN General Assembly, however, Kyrgyzstan abstained from voting on the first resolution, and on 9 March the president made an explicit declaration of neutrality, combined with the apologetic but rather disingenuous statement that as a small country it could have no influence on ending the war and was therefore obliged to remain neutral.

It is safe to assume that these declarations of neutrality are not music to the ears of the Russian president. They appear hard-won and far from pro-Russian, given the multiple dependencies of the Central Asian states on all-powerful Russia. Western politicians would do well to recognise this, not only politically, but also in decisions on financial support, which will certainly be necessary in the near future because of the disastrous economic consequences of the war in Central Asia as well. This is particularly true in the case of Kazakhstan, which, motivated by concerns about its economy, invited Western companies to the country on 28 March, much to the Kremlin's chagrin.

About the author:

Beate Eschment is an expert on Central Asia and has been a researcher at ZOiS since 2016. She gained her PhD in Russian history at the University of Hannover in 1992. Since then, her research has focused on contemporary developments in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. She has worked at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Ebenhausen, the Central Asia Seminar at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Institute for Oriental Studies at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, and the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen. From 2008 to 2019, she was the editor of the Zentralasien-Analysen. She has taught at various German and Central Asian universities, including the German-Kazakh University and the Al-Farabi University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and the Bishkek Humanities University in Kyrgyzstan. She is currently also a lecturer at the Central Asia Seminar at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.