

Re-Electing a Dictator? Electoral Logics in Central Asia

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Abstract

This fourth paper in the **Policy Papers on Eastern Europe and Central Asia** series provides an analysis of the recent elections in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, directly addressing the implications of the results for the succession question facing incumbents in both countries. It reflects on power struggles inside of the countries and contemplates potential future political scenarios based on current trends. The paper gives a number of recommendations for the EU regarding its function in the resolution of possible succession crises, according it a role as a promoter of dialogue in this highly delicate negotiation process.

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Re-electing a dictator? Electoral logics in Central Asia

Vanessa Boas

1. Introduction

Spring 2015 has been an exciting time for Central Asia: presidential elections were held in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. However, unlike European elections where turnout is low and the outcome uncertain, there was little doubt whom the masses would flock to vote for. In fact, the recent elections in Central Asia were landslide victories for the incumbents. Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov won 90.39% of the votes, whereas in Kazakhstan, 97.7% of the ballots went to the incumbent Nursultan Nazarbayev.¹ While these results are striking, what is all the more unusual for European standards was the fact that 91% of the populace voted in Uzbekistan² and 95.22% of eligible Kazakhstanis cast their vote.³

Victory was to be expected as political plurality is not readily accepted in these lands, and the ruling elites do all within their means to dominate the political landscape. Opposition candidates thus did not feature prominently in the pre-election process and neither president left much room for speculation regarding the vote outcome. The contrary applies to the long-term political future of these countries which are headed by aging leaders. Little is known about who will take over the rule from the incumbents once they step down or pass away. As potential candidates have fallen from grace, analysts fear looming succession

crises. In countries where political life is under close control, such uncertainty holds the possibility of triggering societal instability and conflict.

This paper will begin with a brief outline of the political system of both countries in order to shed light on the legacy of each president. Subsequently, it will address the succession question and outline potential scenarios based on the outcome of the elections. It will show that the prospects of democratic leaders taking over remain very bleak. Finally, this paper will add a reflection on the impact on EU-Central Asian relations and provide policy recommendations.

2. Politics in Uzbekistan

Karimov became the Communist party's First Secretary in 1989 and was elected president of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic on March 24, 1990. Since the country's independence in 1991, Karimov has won three presidential elections and managed to stay in office by organising referenda in 1995 and 2002. No presidential or parliamentary elections to date have been judged free or fair by the ODIHR. This partly stems from the fact that opposition candidates are prevented from running and voters are coerced into voting for Karimov.

Although Uzbekistan experienced a period of relative openness, a purported assassination attempt on the president's life (1999) as well as the Andijan massacre (2005) fuelled great repression. Nowadays, Uzbekistan ranks as one of the most closed and repressive regimes on earth, having eliminated almost all civil society and political opposition. Citizens enjoy no basic rights such as freedom of speech or assembly, and religious minorities are frequently harassed.

1 Paolo Sorbello and Daniyar Kosnazarov (2015): "No Surprises in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan", *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2015. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/no-surprises-in-uzbekistan-and-kazakhstan/>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

2 BNews (2015): "Uzbekistan's election sees turnout at 91%", March 30, 2015. Available at: <http://bnews.kz/en/news/post/259886/>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

3 Russia Today (2015): "Kazakhstan strongman leader re-elected with 97.7% amid record voter turnout", April 27, 2015. Available at: <http://rt.com/news/253157-kazakhstan-president-election-turnout/>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

Moreover, the country is famous for forcing children to pick cotton in order to meet Uzbekistan's cotton export commitments.

Typically, Uzbeks are kept in check by the security services, which pervade all layers of social life.⁴ At the same time, the state is highly centralised and has total control over its citizens. The consequence of this concentration of power is that the state can wipe out all opposition and absorb any businesses it desires.⁵ Foreign investors are equally affected by this as they are subjected to the withdrawal of licences and the arbitrary application of taxes. This renders the investment climate in the country very hostile.

While Uzbekistan appears politically stable from the outside, and perestroika elites have been deferential, there are some weaknesses in the state structure once one digs deeper. The most salient threat to the reign of the incumbent is Islamic civil society, which has far greater legitimacy among the population than the ruling elite. Nevertheless, the ruling family has succeeded in amassing wealth without provoking a revolution, which is likely to stem from the fact that the elite base in Uzbekistan is robust. It remains unclear if the elite will continue to be as cohesive once the current strongman leaves the political scene.

3. Politics in Kazakhstan

Nazarbayev was appointed Kazakh Communist Party's First Secretary in 1989, and later became the President of Kazakhstan on April 24, 1990. He was subsequently re-elected in December 1991, in 1995, 1999, 2005 and

2011.⁶ The latter election was made possible through a legal amendment which allowed him to ignore the usual presidential term limit. In fact, in 2010 he was made "leader of the nation" by parliament, a status which he will hold for life and will grant him special political powers after he steps down.⁷

It can thus be stated that power has firmly been held in the hands of one person since independence. While being a genuinely popular leader who has allowed for economic development and peace, Nazarbayev has not shied away from silencing the opposition. The incumbent has often played by unfair rules, seeking to gain the upper hand over all dissenting parties. Tactics such as the calling of snap presidential elections and making opponents fail the Kazakh language test are only some of the milder methods espoused in order to ensure complete control. In more serious cases, opposition figures are locked away under the pretext of tax fraud or die under mysterious circumstances. It is thus not surprising that Kazakhstan's social and political landscape is characterised by political apathy despite high voter turnout.

The Nur Otan Party has dominated the government since its creation in 2006 and is also the principal force in parliament, sharing seats with two other parties which are also pro-government. The Kazakh ruling elite has access to substantial resources to fund social projects and redistribute some of the country's immense wealth. In consequence, specialised schools were opened for especially talented children, and scholarships are provided to allow Kazakhs to study abroad. This contributes to the incumbent's popularity and explains popular support for the status quo. At the same time, a careful balancing act between the country's three clans is still in force: the Great Horde (Uly Zhuz), the Middle Horde (Orta Zhuz) and the Small

4 Dmitry Gorenburg (2014): "External Support For Central Asian Military And Security Forces", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Working Paper, page 2. Available at: <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/afghanistan/central-asia-security/publications/SIPRI-OSFno1WP.pdf>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

5 Jos Boonstra and Marlène Laruelle (2014): "Unchartered Waters: Presidential Successions In Kazakhstan And Uzbekistan", EUCAM Policy Brief 33, page 2. Available at: http://fride.org/download/EUCAM_PB_33_UZ_KZ_president_successions.pdf. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

6 Ibid.

7 Bloomberg (2014): "Nazarbayev Weighs New Run to Extend Longest Ex-Soviet Tenure", February 12, 2015. Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-02-11/nazarbayev-considers-fifth-term-to-extend-longest-ex-soviet-rule>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

Horde (Kishi Zhuz).⁸ The objective is to ensure that all three have equal access to the country's wealth and no group is favoured in order to ensure stability and elite cohesion. Social and political harmony thus hinges on a tacit contract between elites and citizens which supposes a partial redistribution of wealth in exchange for peace.

4. Succession in Central Asia

Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan recently pushed their citizens to the polls in the context of presidential elections. Onlookers curiously observed developments surrounding the elections given that this was considered a possible moment for the appearance of a successor. The leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have long passed the 70 year mark, and there is increasing debate about the future of their countries. Both steered the independence of their states and have not budged from their position of pre-eminence since then. Nonetheless, neither Karimov nor Nazarbayev have been clear about who their chosen successor will be. As prominent figures close to the ruling elite have grown unpopular, the succession question remains unanswered. This is also fuelling uncertainty among investors as they are reticent to commit funds to endeavours when instability could be looming. Indeed, conflict is a real possibility in both countries given that income distribution has been unequal and political repression has been great.

In the Central Asian power contest, the stakes are high as those who win gain a lot and losers risk losing everything. The absence of a successor also raises tensions within the regimes as factions begin competing for power. Central Asia finds itself at a very fragile moment in time which it may overcome

smoothly, provided a “mediator” is put in power. In fact, it is this mediator role which allowed for both Karimov and Nazarbayev to climb to power during Communist times. However, as the current regimes are based around the personality of one leader and there are no strong institutions to uphold them, breakdown may occur.

The incumbents undoubtedly face a dilemma: identifying a successor would assuage the fears of citizens and investors who are currently bracing themselves for turmoil. On the other hand, it also raises the risk that competing factions defect as they do not feel fairly compensated. Moreover, once a successor is announced, he may be rejected by the public or worse still, try and outmanoeuvre the incumbent in order to access power sooner. This could prove very dangerous for the safety of the ruling family and jeopardise its wellbeing. As neither president has stayed in power through honest means and both have had their reputation soiled through allegations of corruption, a loss of power could have serious consequences.

5. Elections and Succession in Uzbekistan

President Karimov won 90.39% of the vote on March 29th combined with a turnout of 91.08%.⁹ This will ensure that the president stays in power for another 5 years despite the fact that it is his fourth term in office – a clear violation of the Uzbek constitution which only allows two consecutive terms.¹⁰ However, these elections can be seen as a formality only that chiefly serves the purpose of upholding the status quo and playing down rumours about the president's ill-health.

8 Kristin Fjaestad and Indra Øverland (2012): “Energy Elites In Central Asia”, RussCasp Working Paper, pager 6. Available at: http://www.fni.no/russcasp/Energy_Elites_in_Central_Asia.pdf. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

9 Joanna Lillis (2015): “Uzbekistan's Dictator Grabs Fourth Term in Opposition-Free Poll”, Eurasianet.org. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72781>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

10 Bloomberg (2015): “Uzbek President Defies Constitutional Limit to Win New Term”, March 30, 2015. Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-30/uzbek-president-wins-new-term-in-defiance-of-constitution-limit>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

In these elections Karimov faced three opponents: Akmal Saidov won 3.08 percent of the vote, followed by Khatamzhon Ketmonov with 2.92 percent, while Narimon Umarov trailed last with 2.05 percent. All three are largely unknown, and even though they were given some time on television to advertise their programmes, they openly supported the president. It is thus fair to say that the president faced no opposition during these elections and they were solely a farce. Unsurprisingly, observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) condemned the fact that the constitution was ignored, that competition was absent and that proxy voting was practiced.¹¹

While the President managed to extend his power through these elections, he has not addressed the issue of his successor. Karimov does not have any legitimate sons to succeed him, which renders the succession issue very thorny. For a long time, onlookers speculated that his daughter Gulnara Karimova would take over the reins. In fact, for most of her career she held very important positions such as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Cultural and Humanitarian Affairs, representative to the United Nations' offices in Geneva and Ambassador to Spain, which presaged a great political future. She was also deeply involved in charity work and supported Uzbekistan's youth, which is supposed to have earned her considerable popularity with this group.

At the same time, there is no doubt that she has a lot of enemies. Throughout her career, Karimova built up a large business empire at the expense of her opponents. In fact, her wealth was estimated at around 570 million USD in 2010.¹² Gulnara Karimova was well known for her antics, hosting fashion shows

and running her own NGO which received EU funding until she was placed under house arrest in 2014. Since then, very little information has surfaced in the press about the president's daughter, despite her attempts to communicate with the outside world.

Her son appeared in a BBC programme in November 2014, appealing to his grandfather for the release of his mother and sister.¹³ While there is a lack of available information on the cause of this dispute, the president's grandson is adamant that this stems from a misunderstanding and that his daughter would never betray him. At the same time, while Gulnara never openly criticised her father, she became an increasing embarrassment to her family due to her outbursts on twitter. This may explain why Karimova seems to have disappeared – even if she is the president's daughter, criticism is not tolerated. On the other hand, it could also indicate that the president is increasingly out of touch with developments in his country. While little is known about the origins of this estrangement, observers have noted that those closely linked to the president's daughter and her former business empire are increasingly being persecuted.

Thus, it remains unknown who may take over and whether this person will be a skilled politician. During his time in power, Karimov has attempted to balance regional interests and rotated officials to prevent one single group from dominating.¹⁴ The cotton industry has provided most of the resources for rents and will undoubtedly be a source of competition in the post-Karimov era. As Uzbekistan stops benefiting from the Northern Distribution Network¹⁵ following the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, competition may become even fiercer.¹⁶

11 OSCE/ODIHR (2015): "Uzbekistan, Presidential Election, 29 March 2015: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions", Tashkent: OSCE/ODIHR. Available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/uzbekistan/148186?download=true>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

12 Courtney Weaver and Neil Buckley (2013): "Uzbekistan: The Leading Lady", Financial Times. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e73db090-85b7-11e2-9ee3-00144feabdc0.html>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

13 BBC (2014): "Happier days in the Karimov family album", 18 November 2014. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-30100542>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

14 Kristin Fjaestad and Indra Øverland (2012): "Energy Elites In Central Asia", page 9.

15 Uzbekistan lies on the route of goods flowing from Europe to Afghanistan as part of the NATO war effort.

16 Jos Boonstra and Marlène Laruelle (2014): "Unchartered Waters", page 3.

Given this imminent change in geopolitical context, there is reason to believe that Karimov's successor may try to attract funds by liberalising the market and opening it to foreign investors. This will change the balance of power in the country and may trigger violent conflict. For Uzbekistan to exit from the succession process peacefully, an intra-elite agreement will be necessary in which dominant factions are allocated a part of Uzbekistan's shrinking fortunes. The president's daughter is likely to make substantial losses in this process as she will no longer enjoy her father's protection.

6. Elections and Succession in Kazakhstan

On February 25, 2015 Nazarbayev called a snap election for April 26, thereby surprising his opponents and preventing them from mounting a meaningful political campaign. Nazarbayev has used this tactic on numerous occasions – a snap presidential election was held in April 2011, instead of December 2012 for instance. This time he faced two opponents: Turgun Syzdykov, a former provincial official who represents the Communist Party and Abulgazy Kusainov who ran as an independent, having headed several ministerial posts and the Federation of Trade Unions.¹⁷ Both are largely unknown to the Kazakh public and do not represent a credible alternative.

These elections had originally been scheduled for 2016 but were moved forward in order to “ensure the continuity of the current policy”¹⁸. It is believed that the economic slowdown recorded this year

due to Western sanctions on Russia and dropping oil prices have made the president uneasy. Given that his legitimacy as a leader rests on being able to bring about economic growth and stability, waiting for 2016 appeared risky. However, by running again, Nazarbayev has missed a historical opportunity to introduce his successor to the general public and give them time to gain his trust.

Unsurprisingly, the elections were subject to critique as they largely represented a one-man show. According to the OSCE/ODIHR report, voters were forced to vote for Nazarbayev, and other irregularities were noted such as ballot stuffing which made the 97.7% outcome possible. Still, it is interesting to note that the incumbent outdid his previous performance in 2011 where he won 95.6% of the vote. While this may appear to be a coincidence, there is no doubt that such a turnout also serves the end of legitimising the rule of the president and proving to the world that Kazakhs support their leader.¹⁹

Kazakhstan may soon approach a succession crisis, as the incumbent turned 74 in 2014 and no viable candidate has been publicly identified. Nazarbayev has three daughters, Dariga, Dinara and Aliya, and no sons. Dariga was being groomed as a successor and headed the fake opposition party Asar, later becoming deputy chairperson of Nur Otan after these two parties merged. However, Dariga lost influence because of her choice in husband, the ill-famed Rakhat Aliyev. In fact, there are rumours that her father forced her to get a divorce.

A major obstacle to presidential succession plans in Kazakhstan was removed in February with the suicide of Rakhat Aliyev, as president Nazarbayev no longer needs to worry about where his daughter's loyalties lie. His former son-in-law was found hanged in his prison cell on 24 February 2015 after having purportedly

¹⁷ Kyiv Post (2015): “Nazarbayev wins 97.7 percent of vote in Kazakhstan presidential elections”, April 27, 2015. Available at: <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/russia-and-former-soviet-union/nazarbayev-wins-977-percent-of-vote-in-kazakhstan-presidential-elections-387209.html>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

¹⁸ Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2015): “2015 Presidential Elections in Kazakhstan”. Available at: <http://www.kazakhembus.com/content/2015-presidential-elections-kazakhstan>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

¹⁹ Marlene Laruelle (2015): “The Power of Soft Power in Kazakhstan”, Washington Post.com, May 1 2015. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/01/the-power-of-soft-power-in-kazakhstan/>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

taken his life several hours before his court case. He had been charged with murder and given a sentence in absentia of 40 years for the murder of two Kazakh businessmen and a TV host.²⁰ There is speculation however, that the Kazakh Security Service lies behind the death of Aliyev.

Dariga Nazarbayeva has since been deemed the main successor although there is also speculation that the mayor of Astana or the current Prime Minister could take over. It would be important to see which of these figures relishes most support among the elite. There are also numerous oligarchs which are currently tolerated by the president and part and parcel of the power structure. No doubt, a change in regime could trigger conflict between these traditional groups and new ones, wishing to have part of the nation's share.

While Nazarbayev has managed to keep Kazakhstan stable, it is a multi-ethnic state and houses numerous competing identities which could clash, resulting in a division by ethnic group, clan or regional grouping.²¹ This would not be surprising, as Kazakhstan has increasingly become a nation for Kazakhs with the large Russian minority being pushed out of strategic sectors. The worst case scenario would be that ethnic Russians would call on Russia to come to their rescue and provoke a possible annexation à la Crimea. Such an outcome would inevitably result in a loss of life and bloodshed.

7. A bleak future?

The recent elections in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have shown that Central Asian elections follow a very specific logic and serve a particular purpose. In the case of these elections, the underlying aim was to reaffirm the power of the president and allow for

the status quo to be upheld. Showcasing political pluralism and the existence of an opposition were not important in the electoral spectacle. High turnout rates are part and parcel of the process of proving legitimacy and allowing leaders to either implement painful reform or uphold a façade of normality. This explains why leaders continue to organise elections even if there is no real alternative.

There is reason to believe that Central Asia may be shaken by succession crises which could change the face of the regimes in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This stems from the fact that new forces could emerge during a possible power vacuum. While both states are consolidated authoritarian regimes, the prospects of transformation are greatest in Kazakhstan, as it has a larger Western-educated elite. In contrast, the level of oppression has been so great in Uzbekistan that the successor of Karimov is likely to come from the ruling elite and thus will attempt to uphold the status quo, although some economic liberalisation is foreseeable. Either way, it is a safe bet that the ultimate winner of the contest will not be democratic in the Western sense of the term.

8. What are the Implications for the EU?

While the EU does not tend to take an active stance in Central Asia, it did react to the elections in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, noting the lack of progress made. However, this fact is unlikely to affect the relationship in place at the moment. To date, the EU has succeeded in establishing blossoming trade relations with Kazakhstan and engaged in strategic security cooperation with Uzbekistan. The EU's relations with these two countries are thus largely driven by security and economic interests rather than normative concerns.

20 BBC (2015): "Kazakh pair in Austria trial after Aliyev jail death", 14 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32253434>. Last accessed: May 20, 2015.

21 Eric McGlinchey (2011). "Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics And Islam In Central Asia". Pittsburgh, Pa.: University Of Pittsburgh Press, page 164.

On an economic level, the succession issue poses a substantial risk. European investors are afraid of losing their assets due to a change in political power or a revolution. However, by clinging on to the status quo, stakeholders actually encourage succession crises in the long-term. As a representative of European interests, it is the EU's duty to address the succession issue in discussions and to push for greater transparency. There is no doubt that the current uncertainty undermines the deepening of EU-Central Asian economic and political relations, as there is no clarity on who future interlocutors may be.

While the EU does fund projects which are to promote respect for human rights and democracy, these have had a limited impact to date. In fact, in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, human rights dialogues have been more of a formality than anything else. This largely stems from the fact that neutral topics have been selected. Still, these occasions are an opportunity where the EU can address political concerns such as the lack of pluralism. It should thus increasingly seek to employ this forum as a means of dialogue with the elite.

9. Policy Recommendations

- Uphold the political dialogue with the ruling elite with the aim of addressing the succession question and the political future of the regimes in place. The EU human rights dialogues as well as high level political meetings are an excellent occasion to discuss the lack of pluralism in the country and electoral practices. The EU has some clout due to its economic strength and is also not considered a threat to the current regimes. It can utilise this advantage in order to push forward debate on the succession issue in the countries concerned.
- Closely monitor political developments on the ground through embassies and delegations in order to spot possible struggles for power and avoid missing windows of opportunity which could allow for more democratic systems to take root. The power vacuum, which may emerge after the death of either leader, could be an opportunity for dissenting voices to grow stronger and for a new regime to take shape.
- Continue to make funding available for the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights' and the Non-State Actor Local Authority's development programmes to help foster pluralism and enable civil society to gain strength. Projects supporting the independence of the media and the safety of human rights activists should also be granted special attention.
- Prioritise education as this triggers critical thought, thereby allowing young Uzbeks and Kazakhs to facilitate gradual change. This can be done by investing in national education systems and also through the provision of scholarships to study abroad. Kazakhs have the opportunity to receive scholarships from the government, whereas far fewer possibilities are available for Uzbeks. This is a gap the EU can address by making more ERASMUS MUNDUS scholarships available for Uzbeks in particular.

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