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Research Report

Political protest in Central Asia: Potentials and dynamics

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Political Protest in Central Asia

Potentials and Dynamics

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Political Protest in Central Asia Potentials and Dynamics

The mass protests of 2011 that rippled out from Tunisia across North Africa and the Middle East to topple dictators in Tunis, Cairo and Tripoli also caused waves in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have much in common with the states of the “Arab Spring”: Here, too, authoritarian rule, grave social problems, corruption and self-enriching elites have created a situation of great frustration in a younger generation with rising expectations.

However, a comparative analysis of the relevant demographic, socio-economic and political conditions reveals great differences between the specific conflict constellations in the five republics on the southern periphery of the former Soviet Union. Consequently, the conditions under which political protest might develop also differ, as do its possible manifestations and dynamics. The potential for protest is especially large in Kyrgyzstan, where public articulation of anger and resentment has become the new established norm of political action following the violent removal of Presidents Askar Akayev (2005) and Kurmanbek Bakiev (2010).

In Tajikistan mass protests are currently less likely, although limited local confrontations with the regime could easily set in motion a spiral of violence. The situation is similar in Uzbekistan, where the government seeks to suppress potential public expressions of dissatisfaction through extremely tight political control. The Uzbek regime is particularly willing to apply heavy force and would respond very quickly with violent means, especially if protests could be linked to Islamist actors.

The space for protest is small in Turkmenistan too, where the state exerts heavy political repression and the population lacks access to independent information and the technical tools for networking and coordination. This makes it virtually impossible to channel criticism of the regime into collective protest.

In Kazakhstan, on the other hand, new media are widespread. But thanks to the country’s economic success the tendency to protest is not particularly marked. Potential for protest is located above all at the margins of society, where social problems are concentrated. Protracted industrial action in the oil

industry in West Kazakhstan in 2011 showed that dissatisfaction can very quickly flip into open protest, acquire political demands and spread to other parts of the country. It is quite possible that the combination of repression and placation will at some point lose its power to guarantee stability here.

The extent and dynamics of future protest in Central Asia will also increasingly depend on the extent to which suitable channels of information and mobilisation are available. New electronic communication tools are spreading rapidly, with online social networks growing in popularity. As the possibilities for individual articulation grow protest becomes increasingly unpredictable, the configuration of actors becomes more complex, and the relationship between politics and society altogether more open.

To date, however, the possibilities for political protest in the region remain limited, it must be said. The prospect of facing similar developments to the Arab Spring has electrified the ruling elites of Central Asia. The shockwave of the “colour revolutions” that toppled authoritarian leaders in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) had already motivated Central Asian regimes to tighten state censorship and other internal political controls and renew their security alliances with Russia. The same pattern of response can be observed in the context of the Arab Spring. Central Asian rulers have also been very quick to recognise the possibilities for mass mobilisation opened up by the new social media, and are increasingly using these for their own ideological purposes. It is becoming apparent that this process is deepening the alienation between state and society in the countries of Central Asia, while their rulers distance themselves ever further from the West.

That will not, however, be able to put social change in the region permanently on hold. As the case studies show, all the countries of Central Asia are entering the digital age, albeit at different speeds: while the rate of new internet connections in Turkmenistan is still very low, growing parts of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh populations are going online at an accelerating pace. This emerging infrastructure enables the formation of easily mobilisable ad hoc “provisional communities” that can potentially dynamise political protest.

Germany and Europe are inadequately prepared for the emerging transformation in Central Asia. On the one hand they are committed to turning the Central Asian states into open societies, while on the other European policy is primarily focused on expectations of stability: supporting the status quo through eco-

nomic and security cooperation up to and including the transfer of technologies used by state repression apparatuses to block social change and assist regimes in monopolising public space. But the revolts in the Arab world highlight the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes.

To that extent it is time to rethink German and European Central Asia policy and reassess priorities. The review of the EU’s Central Asia Strategy scheduled for 2012 offers an opportunity for long overdue adjustments. Here it would be advisable to focus less on the classical forms of cooperation in the field of security and more on promoting new modes of conflict processing between state and society. This presupposes that Germany and Europe expand the spectrum of their dialogue partners in Central Asia and pay greater attention to the sphere of civil society. Central Asian leaders must be pressed to permit their civil societies to integrate into the global experience. But entering the digital age also presupposes that actors acquire the new knowledge needed to cope intellectually with the growing complexity and sophistication associated with the availability of new media. European Central Asia policy should support this by giving greater weight to education cooperation and responding more vigorously to the partly catastrophic state of local education systems.

Introduction: The Arab Spring as Point of Reference

The wave of protests that began in 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt and spread across much of North Africa and the Middle East took even expert observers by surprise. Of course the Arab world has always been known as a region of conflict, but its authoritarian regimes were regarded as fundamentally stable and flexible enough to absorb social dissent. The complaints raised by the protesters had been known and tolerated for years by the populations of the affected states, without this ever giving rise to mass uprisings. While the problems were (and are) socio-economic in nature, it was the dashing of political expectations of reform that drove Arab masses onto the streets.¹ The experience of never-ending political stagnation and glaring inequities in the distribution of wealth in society produced a rapid de-legitimisation of these regimes and ultimately led to mass protests.

One reason for the unexpected eruption, rapid spread and enduring intensity of these protests is to be found in the speed with which the new electronic communication media of internet and mobile phone, and digital social networks building on them have disseminated in the Arab world. This process has radically changed the communication structures in society. In combination with older media such as satellite television and radio, information channels have multiplied and the pace of information transfer has accelerated in the extreme. A broader networking of communication participants has also become possible. The plurality of public discourse has increased and its repercussions on social action become less predictable. To that extent the Arab Spring is not only an expression of pent-up social dissatisfaction but also a symptom of the new fundamental openness in the

relationship between politics and society in the digital age.

The events in North Africa and the Middle East were watched attentively in the post-Soviet states, especially so in Central Asia. Like the countries of the Arab Spring, the five states of Central Asia are overwhelmingly exporters of resources and labour.² There are other similarities too, including a markedly unequal distribution of society's wealth in a context, in some cases, of high rates of economic growth. The values for "social inequality" calculated by the Human Development Index (HDI) for the five Central Asian republics range between 0.48 and 0.59, similar to those for the countries of the Arab Spring.³ While relative deprivation is high in these countries, absolute deprivation does not reach the levels of, for example, Sub-Saharan Africa with its extreme divide between a very few very rich and the impoverished masses, and they pose the experience of inequality as a problem affecting the whole of society.

In Central Asia too, the young generation suffers a lack of opportunities for advancement, while representing a steadily growing proportion of the population. About 30 percent of the Central Asian population (which is growing at an average annual rate of 1.8 percent) is younger than fifteen,⁴ and

¹ On the Arab Spring see Muriel Asseburg, *Der Arabische Frühling: Herausforderungen und Chancen für die deutsche und europäische Politik*, SWP-Studie 17/2011 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2011), 9f.; Muriel Asseburg, ed., *Protest, Revolt and Regime Change in the Arab World*, SWP Research Paper 2012/RP06 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2012); Jack A. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies", *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011): 8–17; Volker Perthes, *Der Aufstand: Die arabische Revolution und ihre Folgen* (Munich, 2011).

² Wojciech Ostrowski, "Rentierism, Dependency and Sovereignty in Central Asia", in *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*, ed. Sally N. Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 282–303.

³ The *Inequality-adjusted HDI* measures inequality in the fields of income, education and life expectancy on a scale from 0 (absolute inequality) to (perfect equality); Douglas A. Hicks, "The Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index: A Constructive Proposal", *World Development* 25, no. 8 (1997): 1283–98. With the exception of Kazakhstan, the Central Asian republics fall in the range between *Medium Human Development* (0.480) and *High Human Development* (0.590), as do most of the countries of the Arab Spring; United Nations Development Programme, *International Human Development Indicators, Inequality Adjusted HDI* (2011), <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/73206.html>. For country-specific details see the next chapter, pp. 10ff.

⁴ Country database of Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung, accessible via <http://www.weltbevoelkerung.de/oberes-menue/>

according to rough estimates youth unemployment exceeds 20 percent (except in Kazakhstan) and is thus only slightly less than in the countries of the Arab revolutions (23.4 percent).⁵ Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, especially, exhibit high poverty rates and desolate, chronically underfunded education systems.⁶ Schools and universities in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are primarily instrumentalised for ideological indoctrination, and grave deficits also exist in Kazakhstan's education system.⁷

Parallels between the five republics of Central Asia and the states of the Arab Spring are found not only with respect to socio-structural factors but also in their political systems. As in the Arab world, political reforms in Central Asian states have failed to bring about a democratic transformation. Instead, authoritarian structures inherited from the Soviet era have consolidated almost everywhere. Opposition groups demanding political participation in the aftermath of independence from the Soviet Union were successively coopted and marginalised in the course of the 1990s (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan) or eliminated by repression (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan). Corruption and nepotism are entrenched in the social order, as highlighted for example by the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), in which the five Central Asian republics have languished in the bottom third for years. The same is also reflected in the widely respected annual Freedom in the World ranking published by the US-based NGO Freedom House, which rates the five Central Asian states as "consolidated authoritarian regimes",⁸ and classifies them (with the exception of Kyrgyzstan) as "not free"; Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan indeed rank among the nine countries classified as the "worst of

the worst" for their especially dismal records on political rights and civil liberties.⁹

At the same time, as in the Arab world, the expansion of electronic media has transformed communication behaviour. Mobile phones, the internet and social platforms like Facebook and Twitter and regional counterparts such as *Vkontakte* have grown in popularity and the number of internet users has quadrupled since 2005 to reach levels approaching those of the Arab world.¹⁰ The situation regarding dissemination of mobile phones is similar.¹¹ The significance of the media for mass mobilisations was shown recently during the "Kyrgyz Spring" in April 2010, which led to the toppling of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Images of the events captured on mobile phones were disseminated through social networks, uploaded onto video platforms and were soon even appearing in television news reports. This made the uprising in Kyrgyzstan the first such event in Central Asia that could be followed *live*.¹² Already in the "colour revolutions" in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) the use of mass media was decisive in circumventing state-controlled reporting and mobilising demonstrators.¹³

Despite these parallels, the differences between the states of Central Asia and the countries of the Arab Spring are considerable. If we are to assess the likelihood of social unrest and transformation in Central Asia, we must now turn in greater detail to the specific potential for political protest in each Central Asian state and identify the factors that favour or hinder the expression of dissent.

publikationen-downloads/zu-unseren-themen/laenderdatenbank.html.

⁵ The figures for individual countries on which this estimate is based are cited in the country studies.

⁶ See the chapters on Kyrgyzstan (pp. 10ff.) and Tajikistan (pp. 13ff.).

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*, Asia Report 201 (Bishkek and Brussels, 3 February 2011), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/201-central-asia-decay-and-decline.aspx>. See also the next chapter, pp. 10ff.

⁸ Christopher Walker, *Nations in Transit 2011: The Authoritarian Dead End: The Arab Spring's Implications for the Former Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2011), http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/NIT-2011-Essay.pdf.

⁹ Out of forty-seven designated as "not free"; Arch Puddington, *Freedom in the World 2011: The Authoritarian Challenge to Democracy* (Freedom House, Washington, D.C., n.d.), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2011/essay-freedom-world-2011-authoritarian-challenge-democracy>.

¹⁰ *Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000–2010* (Geneva: ITU), http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/IndividualsUsingInternet_00-10.xls.

¹¹ *Mobile Cellular Subscriptions, 2001–2010* (Geneva: ITU), <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/MobileCellularSubscriptions00-10.xls>.

¹² Neil Melvin and Tolkun Umaraliev, *New Social Media and Conflict in Kyrgyzstan*, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security 2011/1 (Solna: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, August 2011), <http://books.sipri.org/files/insight/SIPRIInsight1101.pdf>.

¹³ One example out of many: David Lane, "'Coloured Revolution' as a Political Phenomenon", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25, no. 2–3 (2009): 113–35.

Conflict, Protest, Revolt: Defining the Terms^a

Conflict, in the context under discussion here, designates a situation in which the unequal distribution of opportunities for social participation in the different functional spheres of society is experienced and registered as asymmetry. The textbook economic case is the exclusion of particular groups from the spheres of production and consumption. While members of the elite accumulate riches, large parts of the population live in poverty and social deprivation. One extreme form of asymmetry in politics is the pairing of rule by repression and the associated experience of powerlessness. In the case of religion, opportunities for participation are distributed extremely unequally where one dogma monopolises a particular creed and prevents the emergence of autonomous spaces for alternative practices.

Conflicts may be latent or acute, in the latter case assuming the form of protest or revolt. *Latency* occurs where asymmetries in society are perceived but not treated as a problem. Here it is decisive whether inequality in one functional sphere of society can be balanced out elsewhere: whether, for example, economic decline finds a safety valve in increasing emigration, or political repression is compensated by economic progress – or whether, conversely, the means required to articulate the experience of asymmetry and address inequality in public are lacking.

Where asymmetry is articulated and many voices aggregate as one, conflict assumes the form of *protest*. Where conflict becomes revolt the risk arises of violent confrontation with the objective of bringing about change. This raises the question under which conditions does the way asymmetries in a society are experienced mean that their solution can only be sought in violence.

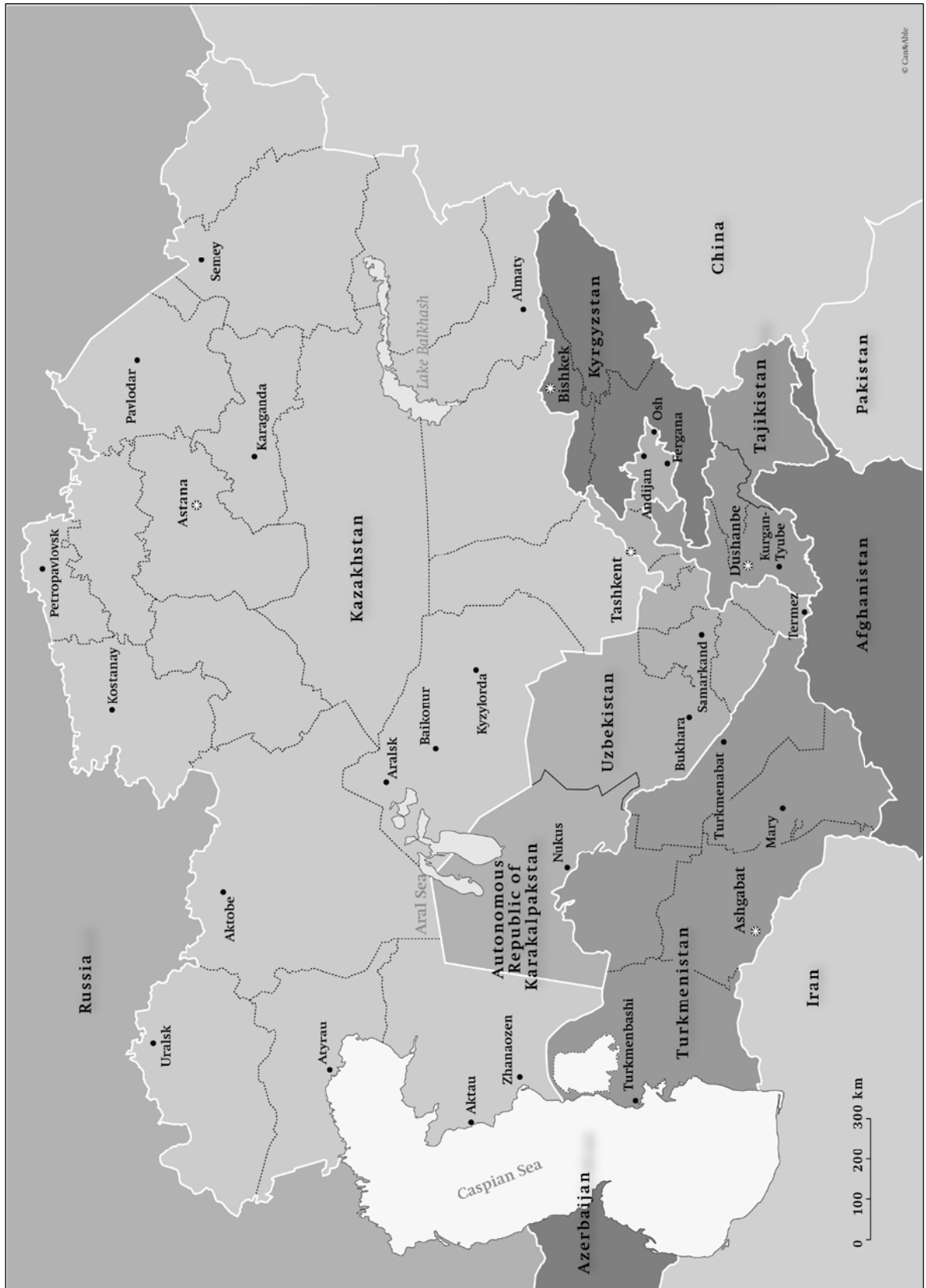
Protest requires the possibility to articulate a contradiction, and thus presupposes the existence of concomitant means and spaces: Whether the voices of many can be joined to a single voice depends, amongst other factors, on whether the experience

of injustices can be shared, for example through reciprocal observation in a public space or through networking in an informal group. Further, the articulation and impact of protest depend on the level of sophistication of the public sphere, access to mass media and the possibility to channel loose networking into organisation-building.

A protest is decidedly political if it is associated with demands on political decision-makers to reduce social inequalities. A *revolt*, on the other hand, is rooted in the experience that conditions of inequality cannot be changed by peaceful means. A revolt aims to overturn the existing power relations and depose their representatives, and is thus initially an act of liberation and destruction. Launching a revolt requires access to means of mobilisation and instruments of violence. A revolt is based on organised force; as it progresses leadership becomes established and spaces for autonomous decisions are marked out. A revolt can culminate in *revolution* based on loss of authority of the old order and mark a new beginning, but it can also be suppressed and defeated, or degenerate into civil war. The events in North Africa convey an impression of the different trajectories that a revolt may take. The spectrum ranges from rebellion and revolution (Egypt and Tunisia) through repression and defeat (Bahrain and Syria) to civil war (Libya). As these examples show, one central characteristic is that a revolt forces a response to a conflict. Unlike in the case of protest, simply ignoring a revolt is not an option for the challenged power.

^a After Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford, 1959); Ralf Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict: An Essay on the Politics of Liberty* (New York, 1987); Jörn Lamla, “Die Konflikttheorie als Gesellschaftstheorie”, in *Sozialwissenschaftliche Konflikttheorien: Eine Einführung*, ed. Thorsten Bonacker (Wiesbaden, 2005), 207–29; Julia Eckert, “Einleitung: Gewalt, Meidung und Verfahren: Zur Konflikttheorie Georg Elwerts”, in *Anthropologie der Konflikte: Georg Elwerts konflikttheoretische Thesen in der Diskussion*, ed. Julia Eckert (Bielefeld, 2004), 7–25; Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492–1992* (Oxford, 1993); Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963).

Map
Central Asia



Between Stagnation and Reform Pressure: Protest Potential in Central Asia

The following case studies begin by identifying those asymmetries in the distribution of opportunities of social participation that have the potential to provoke protests, escalate into revolt or even lead to revolution. Secondly, the dynamising potential of the new media is analysed, along with state measures designed to control or prevent their use. On that basis an assessment of the probability of protest in each country is undertaken.

Kyrgyzstan

In the two decades since achieving statehood Kyrgyzstan has already been the scene of two president-toppling revolts. In spring 2005 a movement inspired by the “colour revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine forced the resignation of President Askar Akayev in the “Tulip Revolution”, in which patronage networks and traditional institutions played a decisive mobilising role. Led by representatives of opposition groups and NGOs, the movement protested against election fraud, corruption and social grievances. On 24 March its supporters stormed the presidential palace and Akayev fled into exile.¹⁴ His successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev, suffered a similar fate five years later. But unlike the “Tulip Revolution” of 2005, the uprising that brought down the Kyrgyz leader in April 2010 was a spontaneous and unorganised eruption of anger over Bakiev’s failed economic policies, repression of political opponents and brazen nepotism.¹⁵ Unlike 2005, the dynamic of the second Kyrgyz revolution in 2010 was decisively shaped by the new media. As well as functioning as mobilising tool, they also allowed the storming of the presidential palace to

be watched in real time, and thus made a large part of the population eye-witnesses to the events.¹⁶

Today, nearly two years on, the challenges Kyrgyzstan faces are just as great. The social and economic situation of this overwhelmingly agricultural country remains desolate:¹⁷ Per capita GDP is about \$2,200,¹⁸ youth unemployment officially about 10 percent;¹⁹ although the real figure is likely to be a great deal higher. Although the shortage of work is partly mitigated by (seasonal) labour migration to Russia and Kazakhstan, about half of the population has to survive on less than two dollars a day (2010: almost 52 percent);²⁰ the inflation rate in 2010 was close to 8 percent, rising to 19 percent in 2011.²¹ The country has yet to recover from the economic collapse caused by the unrest of 2010 and the outlook is anything but rosy.²² With few natural resources but a business environment of legal and political insecurity, Kyrgyzstan is unattractive to investors. Although Kyrgyzstan, which has been a member of the World Trade Organisation since 1998, succeeded in establishing itself as a regional hub for goods from China, this transit trade has declined since the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan came into force in July 2011. Nor will Kyrgyzstan’s foreseeable accession to the customs union do much to improve matters:

¹⁶ Melvin and Umaraliev, *New Social Media and Conflict in Kyrgyzstan* (see note 12).

¹⁷ For detail: Schmitz and Trevisani, *Neuanfang im Schatten der Krise* (see note 15), 18ff. and passim.

¹⁸ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (Washington, D.C., September 2011). Unless otherwise indicated, all data cited here and in the following relates to 2010.

¹⁹ Ministerstvo Truda, Zanjatosti i Migracii Kyrgyzskoj Respubliki, *Bezrobotica sredi Molodeži: Analiz Tekušeje Situacii*, 15 July 2011, <http://www.mz.kg/news/view/id/340>.

²⁰ Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Kyrgyzstan Country Report*, 1, <http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/bti/laendergutachten/laendergutachten/gus-und-mongolei/kyrgyzstan>.

²¹ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (September 2011) (see note 18).

²² Germany Trade & Invest, *Wirtschaftsentwicklung Kirgisistan 2010/2011*, http://www.gtai.de/ext/Export-Einzelsicht/DE/Content/_SharedDocs/Links-Einzeldokumente-Datenbanken/fachdokument,templateId=renderPrint/MKT201106168024.pdf.

¹⁴ Azamat Temirkulov, “Kyrgyz ‘Revolutions’ in 2005 and 2010: Comparative Analysis of Mass Mobilization”, *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 5 (2010): 589–600 (592ff.).

¹⁵ Andrea Schmitz and Tommaso Trevisani, *Neuanfang im Schatten der Krise: Kirgisistan nach dem Regimewechsel*, SWP-Studie 16/2011 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2011), 7.

compensation payments to third countries will place an additional burden on the state budget, while membership will impact negatively on the competitiveness of its domestic economy, with the threat of cheap goods from Russia flooding in.²³ Kyrgyzstan will in all likelihood remain dependent on foreign aid and remittances from labour migrants.

In such a situation the prospects of raising the standard of living of the Kyrgyz people through new jobs and higher wages or improving the precarious supply of staple foods and energy are truly dire. The picture of a chronically failing state is completed by the persistent underfunding of the education and health sectors, which are central for human development, and the perception that corruption permeates all areas of society.²⁴ It therefore comes as no surprise to hear that the Kyrgyz regard politics above all as a vehicle for self-enrichment, as recent surveys demonstrate.²⁵

Nor is the new Kyrgyz government under Omurbek Babanov likely to succeed in increasing the population's confidence, especially where politicians are still operating on unfamiliar terrain after the regime change of 2010 and the establishment of a parliamentary system. Political decisions are correspondingly error-prone, while at the same time the public demands rapid improvements.

The experience of two revolutions within the space of a few years and the new intensity of public scrutiny have transformed the relationship between politics and society in Kyrgyzstan.²⁶ Since the change of regime, with ratification of a new constitution, parliamentary elections in October 2010, the subsequent swearing in of a new government, and presidential elections in October 2011 with Almazbek Atambaev

elected president, demonstrations and other forms of public protest have become a common mode of political expression. The potential for massive violence involves was highlighted by the pogroms of June 2010 against the Uzbek minority in the south of the country. The ethnic clashes, whose background and causes remain unexplained to this day,²⁷ have become a kind of collective trauma that overshadows the political transition in Kyrgyzstan and creates new conflict potential. For the riots themselves and the way they are ignored by the Kyrgyz majority shake the idea of peaceful coexistence of Kyrgyz and Uzbek to the core and deeply challenge the tolerant and multi-ethnic selfimage that Kyrgyz society has cultivated since independence.²⁸

Kyrgyzstan thus finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it must be assumed that the country will remain the scene of protests on a scale of intensity that may include outbreaks of violence. The liberalisation of the public sphere, as manifested in an internet access ratio of almost 40 percent, mobile phone dissemination of 100 percent, the establishment of independent radio and television stations and the publication of independent newspapers, allows protest to be articulated openly.²⁹ In virtual space this change is promoted by social media like *Odnoklassniki* and Facebook and video platforms like YouTube and *Namba.kg*, which are among the most popular websites in the country.³⁰

On the other hand revolt is rather unlikely. The fall of President Bakiev in April 2010 put formal political power in the hands of parliament, so unlike the other Central Asian states Kyrgyz society no longer has a clear single address for political protest. Is the centre of power the president, the prime minister, parliament or public opinion? At the same time the failures of political leaders are exposed to public criticism

²³ Bakyt Baimatov, "Kyrgyzstan Faces Bleak Prospects in the Customs Union", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst* 13, no. 13 (6 July 2011): 9–11, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5591>.

²⁴ Ranked 164 (out of 183 countries) in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, Kyrgyzstan is among the states rated as "highly corrupt"; <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/>.

²⁵ Dina Tokbaeva, "Uncertain Mood in Kyrgyz Election Campaign", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia* 660 (24 October 2010).

²⁶ For a fundamental treatment: Alexander Wolters, "The Loss of Difference: The Conditions of Modern Politics in Kyrgyzstan", in *Presidents, Oligarchs and Bureaucrats: Forms of Rule in the Post-Soviet Space*, ed. Susan Stewart, Margarete Klein, Andrea Schmitz and Hans-Henning Schröder (Farnham, 2012), 223–40.

²⁷ Schmitz and Trevisani, *Neuanfang im Schatten der Krise* (see note 15), *passim*.

²⁸ On the societal and security implications of collective trauma see Kate Schick, "Acting Out and Working Through: Trauma and (In)Security", *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 4 (October 2011): 1837–55.

²⁹ On mobile phones: *Mobile Cellular Subscriptions, 2001–2010* (see note 11); on internet access: Internet World Stats, *Internet Users in Asia*, 31 March 2011, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>; see also Alexander Wolters, "The Changing Media Landscape in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia", in *global*, 29 March 2011, <http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/ideas/article/changing-media-landscape-kyrgyzstan-and-central-asia>.

³⁰ Alexa, *Top Sites in Kirgistan*, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/KG> (accessed 10 December 2011).

directly and unfiltered. Precisely that offers the jumping-off point for protest, which can now also be articulated and aggregated more easily and quickly than ever. The risk in this constellation lies in the possibility of rapid disappointment and resignation of large parts of society, which could ultimately explode in spontaneous violence.

Tajikistan

Conditions are different in Tajikistan, to the extent that the experience of civil war (1992–1997) and the fragility of state institutions means that protest always contains the potential to trigger a military response and an ensuing spiral of violence.³¹ As in Kyrgyzstan, opportunities for participation are very unequally distributed; but here the asymmetry affects the practice of religion as well as economic and political life. However, the new media are expanding rapidly in Tajikistan too, creating new possibilities to air complaints concerning inequality.

With per capita GDP of just \$1,900, largely agricultural Tajikistan is the region's poorest country.³² About 60 percent of the population works in the cotton sector, which contributes about one fifth of GDP but is characterised by semi-feudal and monopolistic structures and pays low wages that often barely cover subsistence needs.³³ Half the population lives on less than two dollars per day.³⁴

The second most important export (after cotton) is aluminium. The aluminium industry is under direct state control and especially opaque, but yields enormous revenues – of which only a fraction appears in the official GDP figures with the rest flowing into

private bank accounts abroad.³⁵ Corruption and lack of transparency also characterise the energy sector. Tajikistan is rich in water and could in theory export hydro-electric power. In fact inadequate infrastructure and ongoing mismanagement leave it unable even to cover its own domestic peak demand.³⁶

Tajikistan's foreign debt totalled more than \$2 billion in 2011,³⁷ and the country depends on foreign aid to provide basic services to its population and alleviate chronic food shortages.³⁸ But the most important role is played by remittances from labour migrants, which amount to more than \$2 billion annually. In 2010 remittances contributed about 35 percent of GDP.³⁹ Like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan lacks employment opportunities for large parts of the population; this deficit is likely to worsen in future under the pressure of growing numbers of Chinese immigrants working legally or illegally in Tajikistan.⁴⁰ Although unemployment is officially only 2.2 percent,⁴¹ the real proportion of unemployed or underemployed is estimated to be up to 40 percent of the working age population. The 15- to 29-year-olds, who make up more than half of the unemployed, are worst affected, followed by the 30- to 49-year-olds.⁴² Not

³⁵ "IMF Attacks Tajikistan Aluminium Co – Orders International Audit", 11 September 2008, <http://www.mineweb.com/mineweb/view/mineweb/en/page36?oid=62257&sn=Detail> (original report: <http://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/2008/tjk/061008.pdf>).

³⁶ Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Tajikistan Country Report* (see note 33), 2; Tajikistan occupies position 152 (of 183) in the CPI: Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2011* (see note 24).

³⁷ "Tajikistan's External Debt Reaches US\$2.075 bln", *Asia-Plus*, 25 July 2011, <http://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan-s-external-debt-reaches-us2075-blm>.

³⁸ World Food Program, *Tajikistan Food Security Monitoring System*, Bulletin 10, August 2011, <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp239939.pdf>; United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Development Assistance Framework for Tajikistan, 2010–2015* (Dushanbe, 2009), http://www.unpei.org/PDF/UNDAF_2010-2015_Tajikistan_Eng.pdf.

³⁹ After the crisis year of 2009, remittances to Tajikistan rose again in 2010; World Bank, *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011* (Washington, D.C., 2011), 14, 238, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/Factbook2011-Ebook.pdf>.

⁴⁰ "Tajikistan to Monitor Illegal Chinese Immigration", *RFE/RL*, 10 November 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/tajiks_monitor_illegal_chinese_immigrants/24386951.html.

⁴¹ Data relates to 2009: The World Factbook, *Tajikistan* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ti.html>. No data is available for 2010.

⁴² UNDP Tajikistan, *National Human Development Report 2008–2009: Employment in the Context of Human Development*

³¹ Civil war: Shirin Akiner, *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001); Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes, "The Tajik Civil War: Causes and Dynamics", *Conciliation Resources*, March 2001, <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/tajikistan/causes-dynamics.php>. Institutional fragility: International Crisis Group, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, Asia Report 162 (Dushanbe and Brussels, 12 February 2009), http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/162_tajikistan_on_the_road_to_failure.pdf.

³² International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (September 2011) (see note 18).

³³ Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Tajikistan Country Report*, 12, http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/fileadmin/pdf/Gutachten_BTI2010/CIS/Tajikistan.pdf.

³⁴ Namely, almost 51 percent: *ibid.*, 2.

included in these figures are about 800,000 (or according to some estimates more than one million) Tajik labour migrants who work seasonally abroad and whose number amounts to one seventh of the country's population. In the years 2007 to 2009 96 percent of Tajik labour migrants were working in Russia, where the high oil price stimulated the economy and fuelled demand for cheap labour especially in the construction industry and other low-wage sectors.⁴³

Tajikistan's dependency on labour migration to Russia represents a great risk for the migrants themselves, who enjoy no legal security in Russia and may be expelled at any time,⁴⁴ and for the regime of President Emomali Rahmon, which enjoys very little support among the population anyway and could come under enormous pressure if host countries chose to repatriate migrants. A mass return would in all probability transform latent social conflicts into open social protest, which the Tajik regime would probably put down with the same harshness it has repeatedly demonstrated since the end of the civil war (1997) in suppressing unwanted developments and eliminating political rivals.

Indeed, past experience of violence is probably the foremost reason why widespread dissatisfaction in Tajikistan has to date rarely been articulated in protests. Firstly, even a decade after the civil war that conflict still frames the political space. Ethno-demographic division into Tajiks and Pamirs and fragmentation into camps closely tied to the regions of Kulyab, Rasht and Gorno-Badakhshan have left scars in society that have lost little of their potential to be instrumentalised for protests. Secondly, as a consequence of the civil war access to arms cannot be fully controlled, despite international demobilisation efforts. This obviously increases the risk of violence appearing as a

means of protest. Thirdly, the state-directed discourse about Islamism opens the door to the use of violence for combating political resistance.

The conflict between the central government and supporters of former civil war commanders in the Rasht region, who follow a conservative Islamic tradition and refuse to recognise the secular regime in Dushanbe, demonstrates how these three factors interact. Since the end of the civil war Rasht has been a refuge for opponents of today's President Rahmon. Although former commanders were given government posts after the peace agreement of 1997 and at least formally integrated in the central state, this failed to resolve the antagonism between President Rahmon and his former adversaries, who enjoy much greater authority than the central government in home territories.⁴⁵ Rahmon has repeatedly resorted to repressive measures to repel the claims of his rivals. Since 2000 many of the previously co-opted warlords have been persecuted, dispossessed, imprisoned and even killed.⁴⁶ The roots of armed clashes between government forces and local militias in Rasht in autumn 2010 and spring 2011 are also to be found in this festering conflict between local and national elites.⁴⁷

Although the local resistance groups in Rasht call themselves "fighters for the cause of Islam" (mujahedeen), there is no convincing evidence that recent armed attacks were inspired by an Islamist agenda, still less of any connection with Islamist terrorism originating from Afghanistan.⁴⁸ However, the Islamist terrorism discourse has come to offer a welcome scapegoat narrative for the governments of Central Asia, allowing failures of the state to be conveniently swept under the carpet and justifying more or less any political move.⁴⁹ As well as blaming international

(Dushanbe, 2010), 82, 86, <http://europeandcis.undp.org/home/show/227D5C68-F203-1EE9-BD56764B2CB21E91>.

⁴³ Alexander M. Danzer and Oleksiy Ivaschenko, *Migration Patterns in a Remittances Dependant Economy: Evidence from Tajikistan during the Global Financial Crisis* (n.p., n.d.), http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/336003-1250632365376/Tajikistan_AD_OI_.pdf; on the significance of high oil prices for remittances from Russia see: Sanket Mohapatra, Dilip Ratha and Ani Silwal, *Outlook for Remittance Flows 2012-14*, Migration and Development Brief 17 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1 December 2011), <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/TOPICS/Resources/214970-1288877981391/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief17.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Russia: Reported Roundup of Tajik Migrants", 15 November 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/15/russia-reported-roundup-tajik-migrants>.

⁴⁵ Sophie Roche, "Conflict in Tajikistan – Not Really about Radical Islam", *Open Democracy*, 19 October 2010, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/56466>.

⁴⁶ Most recently in November 2011: "Last Fugitive from Tajik Jailbreak Caught", *RFE/RL*, 14 November 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/last_tajik_jailbreak_fugitive_captured/24390473.html.

⁴⁷ John Heathershaw and Sophie Roche, "Tajikistan's Marginalised Youth", *Open Democracy*, 20 October 2010, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/56478>; for a chronology of the events see: International Crisis Group, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, Asia Report 205, 24 March 2011.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ For example in connection with violence against Uzbeks in the Kyrgyz city of Osch in summer 2010; Schmitz and Trevisani, *Neuanfang im Schatten der Krise* (see note 15).

terrorism for the violence in Rasht,⁵⁰ the regime in Dushanbe has also initiated a series of measures to tighten monitoring of Islamic worship and education. The Islamic Renaissance Party, which holds two seats in parliament and has always sought a balance between conservative Islamic currents and secular forces, has found itself facing increasing state repression since the events of autumn 2010.⁵¹ But given the lack of affordable education in the provinces and the desolate state of the Tajik education system,⁵² demand for Islamic education is growing, not least as a consequence of the economic and political marginalisation of particular regions. In this context there is a great risk that the government's campaign will cause the opposite of what it sets out to achieve, and actually drive people into the arms of more radical Islamist groups.⁵³

The government's tactic of containing protest through prohibition and repression may promise short-term success, but provides no guarantee that restiveness among parts of the population can be kept in check in the long term. As in Kyrgyzstan, one possible trigger for protests would be waves of labour migrants returning to Tajikistan, either because of falling demand in the Russian labour market or because of political tensions between Tajikistan and Russia. A further rise in basic commodity prices would also represent a conceivable trigger for protest.

Simply the fact of the spread of mobile phones and internet access will lead in the medium term to criticism of the regime becoming more strongly networked. Tajikistan's liberalised telecommunications market ensures rapid introduction and distribution of the latest technologies. Currently the country is expanding its optical cable network, with plans to

connect to the Chinese and Kyrgyz networks. With four mobile phone operators competing for market share, network coverage already exceeds 90 percent and the GSM norm is increasingly supplemented by more modern technical standards such as UMTS.⁵⁴ By 2010 more than 85 percent of the Tajik population already owned a mobile phone and the number of internet users was estimated to have passed the 20 percent mark.⁵⁵ Protests are capable of spreading quickly under such circumstances. The potential was underlined in April 2011 when a small group of Facebook users arranged a flashmob in Dushanbe to protest about the unreliability of the electricity supply.⁵⁶

However, as already mentioned, it must be assumed that the government would pursue a course of harsh repression of any growing protests, rather than negotiation. Evidence of this was seen recently in February 2011, when two hundred heavily equipped riot police were deployed to contain a small group of demonstrators protesting about the demolition of their homes.⁵⁷ But the regime's rigid stance inevitably increases the probability of violent clashes.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan merits special attention for two reasons. For one thing, numerous macroeconomic factors, as well as the political conditions within the country, demonstrate parallels with countries in North Africa affected by revolt and revolution. For another, Uzbekistan's size and geographical position make it crucially important for the security architecture of the whole region. A violent conflict, revolt or revolution in Uzbekistan would have immediate effects on neighbouring states, with which Uzbekistan is closely bound by minorities, enclaves, disputed borders,

⁵⁰ The intended audience here is not only the Tajik population but without doubt also international. The emotive conjunction of "Islamism/security/Afghanistan" plays on Tajikistan's role in supplying NATO forces in Afghanistan and is designed to ward off criticism of the regime's repressive policies.

⁵¹ John Heathershaw and Sophie Roche, "A Recipe for Radicalisation: The Campaign against Islam in Tajikistan", *Open Democracy*, 17 January 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/57613>; Alexander Sodiqov, "Tajik Authorities Impose Heavier Restrictions on Islamic Education", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 6 July 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5590>.

⁵² International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline* (see note 7).

⁵³ Heathershaw and Roche, "Tajikistan's Marginalised Youth" (see note 47).

⁵⁴ *Tajikistan Electronic Readiness Assessment*, Dushanbe: Public Fund 'Internet' Tajikistan, 2010, http://www.cipi.tj/files/eReadines-full_En.pdf.

⁵⁵ On mobile phones: *Mobile Cellular Subscriptions, 2001-2010* (see note 11); on internet penetration: "V Tadžikistane 1,8 mln internet pol'sovatelej", *Toptj.com*, 14 November 2010, <http://www.toptj.com/News/2010/11/14/EE1AED13-4419-4563-814E-75E6CB9F5524>.

⁵⁶ "Flashmob in Dushanbe", *Tethys*, 12 April 2011, <http://www.tethys.caoss.org/index.php/2011/04/12/flashmob-in-dushanbe>.

⁵⁷ "Egyptian Growling in Tajikistan", *New Eurasia*, 24 February 2011, <http://www.neweurasia.net/politics-and-society/egyptian-growling-in-tajikistan/>.

migrants and trade relations, especially in the Fergana Valley.

In 2010 almost 30 percent of Uzbekistan's more than 28 million inhabitants were younger than fifteen.⁵⁸ Although the country possesses great mineral reserves and can point to an impressive growth rate of more than 8 percent, per capita GDP is only about \$3,000.⁵⁹ The most important sector of the economy is agriculture, above all cotton which contributes about 11 percent of GDP. After natural gas and gold (of which Uzbekistan possesses the world's fourth-largest reserves), cotton is the third most important export.⁶⁰

The country's wealth is extremely unevenly distributed. While export revenues are rising,⁶¹ the benefits are enjoyed above all by a largely closed elite whose loyalty to the regime of President Islam Karimov is cemented by their integration in the state patronage network and the associated opportunities for self-enrichment.⁶² At the other end of the spectrum a large proportion of the Uzbek population lives on or below the poverty line. It is probable that more than 70 percent of the population live on less than two dollars a day.⁶³ According to figures from the U.S. Department of State about 8 percent of the working age population is unemployed and at least a further quarter underemployed. The real figures are probably a great deal higher.⁶⁴ More than 60 percent of the population live in the countryside, largely pursuing a subsistence existence. This group is especially affected by underemployment and poverty,⁶⁵ as well as by rising fuel prices and frequent power cuts.⁶⁶ The situation is

worsened by an inflation rate of more than 9 percent.⁶⁷

With prices rising and food shortages worsening, a further increase in social inequalities is on the cards sooner or later. Although state agricultural policy aims for self-sufficiency, Uzbekistan still relies on importing basic foodstuffs and is therefore susceptible to price shocks. It requires about four million tonnes of wheat annually to feed its population, but domestic production is too low to accumulate adequate reserves. Worse still, Uzbekistan (unlike for example Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan) seems unable to offset drastic price increases through permanent subsidies, nor can wage and pension increases keep up with a steadily rising cost of living.⁶⁸ At the same time the population is set to increase to more than 33 million by 2025. This is all the more dramatic considering that the consequences of climate change and associated growing water shortages will hit Uzbekistan's irrigation-intensive agriculture especially hard.⁶⁹ A continuing rise in prices for staple foodstuffs, as well as food shortages and growing unemployment appear inevitable.⁷⁰

This lack of prospects has led to enormous labour emigration. It is estimated that between two and five million Uzbeks – or between 10 and 25 percent of the working age population – are working in neighbouring countries,⁷¹ above all in Russia and Kazakhstan.⁷² The domestic economy, which remains underdevel-

58 U.S. Census Bureau, *International Data Base: Uzbekistan*, <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/country.php>; see also International Organization for Migration, <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/uzbekistan>.

59 International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (September 2011) (see note 18).

60 U.S. Department of State, *Background Note: Uzbekistan*, 20 June 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2924.htm>.

61 Germany Trade & Invest, *Wirtschaftsdaten kompakt: Usbekistan* (May 2011), http://www.gtai.de/GTAI/Content/DE/Trade/Fachdaten/PUB/2009/05/pub200905148080_159890.pdf.

62 Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Uzbekistan Country Report*, 18f., http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/fileadmin/pdf/Gutachten_BTI2010/CIS/Uzbekistan.pdf.

63 *Ibid.*, 2.

64 *Ibid.*, 15.

65 U.S. Department of State, *Background Note: Uzbekistan*, 20 June 2011 (see note 60).

66 Erkin Akhmadov, "Risk of Social Unrest in Uzbekistan Due to Gas Shortages", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 16 November 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5669>.

67 International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (September 2011) (see note 18).

68 Roman Muzalevsky, "Food Security Problems in Central Asia Challenge Local Regimes", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 8, no. 51 (15 March 2011): [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37650&cHash=e9a4fcfe227d393bef18b74675de0bfe](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37650&cHash=e9a4fcfe227d393bef18b74675de0bfe); "No Stabilization of Price Hike Seen in Uzbek Markets – Kazakh TV", *BBC Monitoring Global Newsline – Central Asia Political*, 20 August 2011.

69 Andrea Schmitz, "Amudarja und Syrdarja: Konfrontation statt Kooperation", in Stormy-Annika Mildner, ed., *Konflikt-risiko Rohstoffe? Herausforderungen und Chancen im Umgang mit knappen Ressourcen*, SWP-Studie 5/2011 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2011), 34–43.

70 "Uzbekistan Facing Food Shortages and Unemployment, Say Researchers", *Uznews.net*, 23 November 11, http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?nid=18441.

71 There is no reliable data on migration or on the real dimensions of unemployment.

72 Shohida Sarvarova and Kamilla Abdullaeva, "Uzbek Government in Denial on Migration", *Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Reporting Central Asia* 629 (24 September 2010), <http://iwpr.net/report-news/uzbek-government-denial-migration>.

oped and largely based on the export of gold and cotton, offers little by way of career opportunities for the many Uzbeks seeking work. With large numbers of youth leaving school and university every year it is doubtful whether recent measures designed to encourage private-sector entrepreneurship will be able to make a dent in growing youth unemployment.⁷³ Widespread corruption permeating all spheres of society, with Uzbekistan ranking among the world's most corrupt countries at 177th place out of 183 in the CPI,⁷⁴ and a dearth of legal security also impede economic initiative.

Another source of latent conflict is the state's monopolisation of religion, which leaves no room for alternative interpretations of Islam. A repressive line on religion places any teachings that deviate from the state doctrine under the blanket suspicion of "Islamic radicalism" and could potentially turn fundamentalist religious ideologies into a lightning rod for social frustration, even if such currents currently appear to play virtually no role in everyday religious practice. As the uprising in Andijan in May 2005 showed,⁷⁵ the confluence of religious convictions with worsening socio-economic conditions can mobilise social protest.⁷⁶

This complex of protest-promoting factors appears in a context of enormous growth in the importance and popularity of the internet in Uzbekistan, with *monthly* growth rates of 2 to 3 percent. Moreover, more than 75 percent of Uzbeks now own mobile phones.⁷⁷ However the Uzbek regime has succeeded in systematically undermining the capacity for self-organisation within society by integrating NGOs into state structures and generating an atmosphere of passivity and

fear.⁷⁸ The same also applies to virtual space: equating online media with print for legal purposes and applying repressive censorship rules to the virtual world keeps a tight rein on internet activity. Website owners can be held liable for the "objectivity" of their content, with the plainly intentional consequence of fostering heavy self-censorship.⁷⁹ Furthermore, all internet providers must route their access to international networks via the state-run UzbekTelecom, which filters data traffic centrally. This means that numerous sites, such as critical information portals like *uznews.net* and *ferghana.ru*, or the websites of the BBC and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) are inaccessible to users in Uzbekistan.⁸⁰ The resulting shielded virtual world for Uzbek users is commonly referred to as the UzNet or the "Uzbek internet".

Under the impression of the Arab Spring Uzbekistan has tightened its controls still further. President Karimov, who believes "foreign powers" were behind the revolts in North Africa,⁸¹ ordered all Uzbek mobile phone and internet providers to report "suspicious" text messages and e-mails to the state authorities and to suspend services on demand.⁸² Numerous websites like Facebook, Twitter or the blog hosting service *Live Journal* have been blocked temporarily and access to the internet is generally made difficult, for example through slow data transmission rates.⁸³ Finally, in August 2011 the government set up its own online social network named *Muloqot* ("dialogue") as an alter-

73 Shakar Saadi, "Uzbekistan Tries to Solve Youth Unemployment", *Central Asia Online*, 14 September 2010, http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/business/2010/09/14/feature-02.

74 Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2011* (see note 24).

75 Human Rights Watch, "'Bullets Were Falling Like Rain': The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005", June 2005, HRW Reports, vol. 17, no. 5(D), <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0605.pdf>.

76 On the role of political Islam in the Andijan events see: Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir*, Central Asian Studies Series (London and New York, 2010).

77 Reporters Without Borders, *Internet Enemies – Uzbekistan* (2011), <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-uzbekistan,39765.html>; on mobile phones: *Mobile Cellular Subscriptions, 2001–2010* (see note 11).

78 Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Uzbekistan Country Report* (see note 62), 10, 17.

79 International Partnership for Human Rights et al., *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet and Other New Media*, briefing paper (November 2011), 14, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/wp-content/uploads/ENG-internet-briefing-paper-Nov-2011.pdf>.

80 Reporters Without Borders, *Enemies of the Internet: Countries under Surveillance* (2010), 34, http://en.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/Internet_enemies.pdf.

81 "Uzbek President Says 'Foreign Powers' behind Arab Uprisings", *RFE/RL*, 11 May 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbek_president_says_foreign_powers_behind_arab_uprisings/24097499.html.

82 "Three Blind Mice in Central Asia", *NewEurasia*, 20 March 2011, <http://www.neweurasia.net/politics-and-society/three-blind-mice-in-central-asia/>.

83 Stephen Blank, "Russia and Central Asia Fight the Arab Revolutions", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 13, no. 13 (6 July 2011): 13, 6–8, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/110706analyst.pdf>; "Dozens of Websites in Uzbekistan Suffer Access Problems", *RFE/RL*, 12 August 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/dozens_of_websites_in_uzbekistan_experience_access_problems/24295316.html.

native to the popular networks of *Odnoklassniki* and Facebook. To register with *Muloqot* the user must supply a mobile phone number, which in Uzbekistan requires an official identity document. Comprehensive state control of the users of this new medium is thus guaranteed.⁸⁴ Critics fear that the launch of *Muloqot* could be the first step on the way to a general Facebook ban in the country.⁸⁵

Regardless of these new censorship measures, the growth of electronic communication media continues apace, expanding the possibilities for intensifying social networking within society – and the chances of coordinating possible criticism. In view of the social and economic inequalities and not least the history of sporadic Islamist resistance,⁸⁶ protest potential in Uzbekistan must be estimated to be high. However, President Karimov's strongly centralised and authoritarian regime wields impressive repressive capabilities. The May 2005 massacre in Andijan confirmed that the regime will not shy from clamping down with military force on public expressions of collective will. Wherever determined political protest raises its head, escalation up to and including extreme state violence must be reckoned with (at levels surpassing the repressive but decentralised police operations seen for example in Egypt).

In view of the socio-economic and cultural bifurcation of the country, resistance to the regime is more likely to arise in the isolated Fergana Valley than in the capital Tashkent. The possibility of localisation of protest in this complex border region means that it remains difficult to assess the risk of developments moving towards intensified repression and the danger of violence spilling over into neighbouring states.

Altogether the combination of economic instability, grave socio-economic problems and political and religious repression contains great potential for conflict, which the demographic trend suggests will grow rather than recede. If the regime fails to rectify socio-economic asymmetries by adapting its policies, protests – probably remaining local – must be expected at least in the medium term. The still unresolved question of who will succeed President Karimov and power

struggles within the elite could also be used to channel frustration into organised protest.⁸⁷ But the clear threat of state repression and violence, at the latest since the traumatic experiences of Andijan, makes revolt or revolution in Uzbekistan an unlikely prospect for the foreseeable future.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's self-isolation, with rigid control of information, presents difficulties for systematic analysis and assessment of possible protest scenarios. Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow possesses practically unlimited powers; his country has the world's fourth largest natural gas reserves, which generate 90 percent of the state's export revenues and ensure consistently high economic growth rates.⁸⁸ These economic advantages are also reflected in per capita GDP, which is estimated to be as high as \$6,800.⁸⁹

There is, however, an enormous income gap between a small state elite and the bulk of the population. About half of all Turkmen live on less than two dollars a day,⁹⁰ and about half of the population is rural, mostly in the subsistence economy. Agricultural production – cotton and to a lesser extent wheat and rice – is subject to strict state controls and offers few incentives for improving efficiency. The agricultural sector consequently contributes only 11 percent to GDP,⁹¹ whereas much more is generated in the service sector that, like all other branches of the economy, is subject to state control. Trade, commerce, telecommunications, transport and banking generate nearly half of GDP and employ 38 percent of the workforce,

⁸⁷ Alisher Ilkhamov, "Islam Karimov – Der ewige Präsident? Perspektiven eines Führungswechsels in Usbekistan", *Zentralasien-Analysen* 37 (28 January 2011): 2–5.

⁸⁸ The International Monetary Fund expects real annual GDP growth of almost 10 percent in 2011: International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (September 2011) (see note 18). Macro-economic and other data are generally estimates because official information is incomplete and regarded as unreliable; see for example Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report Turkmenistan* (October 2011), passim.

⁸⁹ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (September 2011) (see note 18).

⁹⁰ Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Turkmenistan Country Report*, <http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/149.0.html?L=1>.

⁹¹ UNDP Turkmenistan, *Concept Note Rural Development in Turkmenistan for 2010–2015*, 29 January 2010, http://www.undptkm.org/files/vacancy/040610_CN_en.pdf.

⁸⁴ *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet and Other New Media* (see note 79), 14f.

⁸⁵ "Uzbekistan Launches Its Own Facebook, Except It's Not for Everyone", *RFE/RL*, 26 August 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbekistan_launches_its_own_facebook_except_its_not_for_everyone/24308909.html.

⁸⁶ Vitalii Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Lanham, 2005).

which is thus directly integrated into the state patronage system.⁹²

Despite modest liberalisation initiatives, the private sector makes up only about 2 percent of the economy, the lowest figure in the region.⁹³ This is reflected in the unemployment figures: according to estimates by the U.S. State Department about 60 to 70 percent of Turkmenistan's population are unemployed or underemployed.⁹⁴ Of these the 15- to 24-year-olds, who according to the U.S. Census Bureau make up more than one fifth of the population, are especially affected.⁹⁵ But the lack of possibilities to earn a living is compensated by state subsidisation of energy, fuel and basic necessities (such as bread, salt and water) and by price controls.⁹⁶

It is plain that the emerging young generation is being cheated of its chances. Several factors contribute to this impression: high youth unemployment, a health system ruined under the previous President Saparmurat Niyazov and an ideologically motivated truncation of education opportunities manifesting itself in outdated curricula and inadequate access to independent information.⁹⁷ Further sources of latent conflict are the great gulf between the capital Ashgabat and the rural provinces and the preferential granting of government posts to members of the Ahal Teke tribe.⁹⁸

However, the Soviet era has left deep marks in the ethno-social structure. One important Soviet legacy in Central Asia is the way Soviet economic planning and administrative hierarchies pushed aside premodern tribal loyalties and other traditional modes of social differentiation, and gave rise to expectations that the state would provide public services. This supplied fertile ground for propaganda engendering a "Turk-

men" national identity and allowed Niyasov's cult of personality (which his successor maintains in new guise) to take root and flourish.⁹⁹

The regime's control is omnipresent. Abuse of power and corruption are everyday experiences for the Turkmen population,¹⁰⁰ as is the systematic abuse of civil and human rights.¹⁰¹ The decisive actor in the regime's repressive security apparatus is the secret police, whose power is contained by regular rotation of cadres and a system of interministerial checks and balances.¹⁰² The omnipresence of the secret police provides blanket surveillance of public space, with the effect of restricting the impact of new communication technologies. Data traffic in *Turkmenmet*, the virtual space in Turkmenistan, runs through a central hub run by the monopoly TurkmenTelecom, which censors access to the worldwide web. Exorbitant prices for private internet access restrict use to a negligible minority.¹⁰³ Public internet cafés offer no alternative because visitors have to show their identity documents, and all activities are recorded anyway. As a result of these controls the proportion of the population with access to the internet is estimated to be a very modest 1.6 percent.¹⁰⁴ In the mobile phone market the government in December 2010 suspended the licence of the Russian-based market leader MTS, which held about 80 percent market share, and made the state-controlled Turkmen *Altyn Azyr* the sole provider.¹⁰⁵

As the Arab Spring unfolded, the regime in Ashgabat ordered the return of all Turkmen students studying abroad and subsequently banned all laptops from

92 Economy Watch, *Turkmenistan Economy*, 30 June 2010, http://www.economywatch.com/world_economy/turkmenistan.

93 UNDP Turkmenistan, *Concept Note Rural Development in Turkmenistan for 2010–2015*.

94 U.S. Department of State, *Background Note: Turkmenistan*, 31 October 2010, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35884.htm>.

95 U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base, <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/country.php>, and UNICEF, *Country Profile Education in Turkmenistan*, <http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Turkmenistan.pdf>.

96 Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Turkmenistan Country Report* (see note 90), 14; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report Turkmenistan* (see note 88), 20.

97 International Crisis Group, *Central Asia. Decay and Decline* (see note 7).

98 Slavomír Horák, "Changes in the Political Elite in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2010): 27–46.

99 Jan Šír, "Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan", *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 25 (2008): 203–20; "Another Personality Cult Blossoms in Turkmenistan", *EurasiaNet*, 20 December 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62605>.

100 Turkmenistan occupies place 177 (of 183) in the CPI; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2011* (see note 24). Because censorship is omnipresent, such information is otherwise only available in anecdotal form from individual sources.

101 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2011: Turkmenistan*, <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2011/turkmenistan>.

102 Most recently: "Prezident Turkmenii naznačil novogo ministra nacional'noj bezopasnosti", *IA Regnum*, 30 March 2011, <http://www.regnum.su/news/1389096.html>.

103 A 64 kb/s ADSL flatrate costs €159/month; 2048 kb/s costs €5,189/month (as of February 2012); see tariffs on provider's website: <http://www.online.tm/content/тарифы>.

104 *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet* (see note 79), 11–13.

105 *Ibid.*, 11f.

student residences using the pretext that students had been caught visiting pornographic websites.¹⁰⁶ The inability of such a strategy of isolation to prevent trouble was demonstrated by the aftermath of the munitions depot explosion in Abadan.¹⁰⁷ Video footage recorded by residents found its way out of the town, allowing the Chronicles of Turkmenistan website run by the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights to run a series of reports on the events. But the regime responded quickly. In July 2011 the website was targeted by cyberattacks probably originating from the Turkmen secret police; the site was disabled and had to be rebuilt in a new format.¹⁰⁸

Given the extreme curtailment of public space in Turkmenistan, the possibilities for attempting to articulate and mobilise protest, or even for perceiving protest as a global phenomenon, are extremely restricted. Anyway, the experience of exhaustion with the existing regime does not apply to Turkmenistan. President Berdimuhamedow has been head of state for only five years, having demolished his predecessor's cult of personality and replaced it with his own self-staging as a moderate reformer. The hate figure of a despot ruling for decades, which fired the protests in the countries of the Arab Spring, is absent.

In this context mass protest or revolt are highly unlikely. Under the given conditions dissent can be articulated at most locally, in the form of protests against the worst excesses of economic mismanagement and abuse of power. In this case the regime would seek to combine improvements in satisfaction of material needs with intensified repression.

Kazakhstan

Political protest is an established form of public articulation of disagreement in Kazakhstan. While similar to Kyrgyzstan in this respect, protest in Kazakhstan has always remained episodic and local. One reason for this is the sheer expanse of the country, where huge distances and marked regional dif-

¹⁰⁶ "Turkmenistan Cracks Down on Youth as Revolutions Continue Abroad", *neweurasia.net*, 18 March 2011, <http://www.neweurasia.net/media-and-internet/turkmenistan-cracks-down-on-youth-as-revolutions-continue-abroad/>.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, "Turkmenistan: Human Rights Activists Say Death Toll Climbing from Explosion", *EurasiaNet*, 13 July 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63870>.

¹⁰⁸ *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet* (see note 79), 11f.

ferences make it practically impossible to network protest. Another is that the state has to date succeeded in politically balancing existing asymmetries in social participation in such a way as to ensure conflicts remain largely latent.

The decisive factor is the country's economic success, with a combination of economic liberalisation, modernisation and state planning making it possible to use the revenues generated by the country's oil wealth to incrementally raise the standard of living of large parts of the population.¹⁰⁹ With per capita GDP about \$12,000,¹¹⁰ and continuing growth thanks to rising prices for its main exports of oil and metals and massive state subsidisation of the manufacturing sector,¹¹¹ large parts of the population have experienced the recent years as a personal success story. Growing spending on education and freedom to travel abroad promise the younger generation, especially, at least partly realistic prospects of advancement within the present system.¹¹² Nor does youth unemployment, officially just 3.4 percent,¹¹³ offer much occasion for criticism of the powers that be; quite the contrary, with the presidential elections of April 2011 demonstrating the broad popular support enjoyed by the regime of President Nursultan Nazarbayev.¹¹⁴

The self-enrichment of the political elite, first and foremost the president's family, appears not to detract from this fundamental mood of approval. This is due not least to the dexterity with which international criticism of Nazarbayev's style of leadership is pre-

¹⁰⁹ Andrea Schmitz, *Kasachstan: neue Führungsmacht im post-sowjetischen Raum?* SWP-Studie 7/2009 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2009), 7f., 11f.

¹¹⁰ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (September 2011) (see note 18).

¹¹¹ Germany Trade & Invest, *Wirtschaftstrends Kasachstan Jahreswechsel 2010/11* (March 2011), 1, https://www.gtai.de/ext/anlagen/PubAnlage_8835.pdf?show=true.

¹¹² Education represented 17.6 percent of the 2011 budget, a 17.7 percent increase over 2010; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Profile Kazakhstan*, December 2011, 14.

¹¹³ Data for 2009: "Rate of Youth Unemployment Decreased 3 Times during Four Years", *Kazinform*, 3 February 2010, <http://kazinform.kz/eng/article/2234688>. The overall unemployment rate that year was 6.6 percent; Agenstvo Respubliki Kazachstana po Statistike, *Regiony Kazachstana v 2009 godu: Statističeskij Sbornik* (Astana, 2010), 398; accessible via http://www.stat.kz/publishing/Pages/sborniki_2010.aspx.

¹¹⁴ Ellen Barry, "Nazarbayev Wins Landslide Victory in Kazakhstan", *Herald Tribune*, 5 April 2011, <http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20110405/ZNYT03/104053001>.

sented domestically as “constructive dialogue”.¹¹⁵ While corruption riddles all spheres of political and economic life,¹¹⁶ it attracts just as little public protest as the obvious instrumentalisation of parliament and elections by the executive.¹¹⁷ The national success narrative interprets these and other signs of consolidating authoritarian rule as mere “teething troubles” that will soon be rectified.

Nor does the impressive dissemination of internet and mobile phone – by 2010 35 percent of the population had internet access and there were 120 mobile phones per 100 inhabitants – appear to lead to increased criticism of the prevailing power relations.¹¹⁸ The Nazarbayev regime guards this state of affairs by expanding its control activities. State-run Kazakhtelecom dominates the market for internet and mobile phone and regularly facilitates the blocking of websites publishing regime-critical comments, like *respublika-kaz.info* or *kplus-tv.net*. Other providers are required to install SORM-2 devices (from the Russian surveillance system) to allow the Kazakh secret police to monitor times of internet use, IP addresses and information on data traffic. To further tighten its control of virtual space, Kazakhstan decreed in September 2010 that all domain owners in the top-level domain .kz must route their traffic through servers physically located in the country. It is believed that this measure aims, firstly, to promote Kazakh providers and secondly, to create a new means of control through physical access to hardware.¹¹⁹

Like its neighbours, Kazakhstan responded to the events of the Arab Spring in Tunis and Cairo by tightening internet censorship. Several online outlets were blocked, including RFE/RL, the BBC’s Russian-

language website and local Kazakh opposition media. By early February 2011 parliament was already discussing new rules for internet surveillance.¹²⁰ The Security Council, which has already had 125 websites banned for “extremist content”, has been seeking since November 2011 to block access to another 168 websites. The blocking of the blog hosting service *Live Journal* made it clear that the move was ultimately aimed at making it even more difficult to express criticism within the country.¹²¹

However it must be doubted whether this approach can succeed in the long run, as there is certainly protest potential in Kazakhstan. Although per capita income and average wages are growing steadily, the gap between different groups in society is considerable, with a small handful of top earners standing out from the low-earning masses. About 10 percent of the population has to manage with less than the national living wage, which in 2010 was defined as about \$92/month or only slightly above that.¹²² Protest potential arises less out of this asymmetry as such than from the marked regional income inequalities. In the oil-rich west of the country average income is nearly three times as high as in the agricultural south, but the western periphery also exhibits especially high poverty rates. Thus almost one quarter (22.6 percent) of the population of the Mangystau region (capital Aktau) live below the poverty line.¹²³ The impact is particularly harsh here given that prices of everyday necessities are higher in this part of Kazakhstan because there is little possibility for agriculture and infrastructure remains extremely underdeveloped despite the oil boom.¹²⁴

115 Andrea Schmitz and Esther Somfalvy, *Unintended Consequences: Western Soft Power as a Source of Legitimacy for Central Asian Autocrats*, SWP Comments 7/2011 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2011).

116 Germany Trade & Invest, *Wirtschaftstrends Kasachstan Jahreswechsel 2010/11* (see note 111), 7. The CPI also classifies Kazakhstan as highly corrupt (ranked 120th of 183); Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2011* (see note 24).

117 Most recently the dissolution of the single-party parliament to make way for early parliamentary elections; Georgiy Voloshin, “President Nazarbayev Dissolves Parliament’s Lower Chamber”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 16 November 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5668>.

118 *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet* (see note 79), 7ff.; on mobile phones see *Mobile Cellular Subscriptions, 2001–2010* (see note 11).

119 *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet* (see note 79), 7ff.

120 “Ahead of Elections, Kazakhstan Blocks Websites”, RFE/RL, 2 March 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/ahead_of_elections_kazakhstan_blocks_websites/2325983.html; Almaz Rysaliev, “Tough Times for Kazak Media Freedom”, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia* 664 (9 December 2011), <http://iwpr.net/report-news/tough-times-kazak-media-freedom>.

121 *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet* (see note 79), 8.

122 Germany Trade & Invest, *Wirtschaftstrends Kasachstan Jahreswechsel 2010/11* (see note 111), 9; see also Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2010, *Kazakhstan Country Report*, 2, http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/fileadmin/pdf/Gutachten_BTI2010/CIS/Kazakhstan.pdf, according to which more than 17 percent of the population live on less than two dollars a day.

123 Aгенство Республики Казахстан по Статистике, *Regiony Kazachstana v 2009 godu* (see note 113), 131.

124 United Nations Environment Programme et al., *Environment and Security: Transforming Risks into Cooperation: The Case of*

This imbalance in the distribution of wealth has been intensified by the transformation brought about by the arrival of numerous labour migrants,¹²⁵ and by the settlement of returnees from the Kazakh diaspora (known officially as *oralman*), whose repatriation has been encouraged since the 1990s to compensate the declining population growth caused by falling birth rates and the emigration of ethnic Russians and Germans.¹²⁶ The integration of returnees in West Kazakhstan (above all from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) has turned out to be exceptionally problematic. Most of them speak no Russian and only poor Kazakh, so many fail to find work. As a consequence they are perceived by the locals as a burden imposed on them by a state that is doing too little for development in the region.¹²⁷ This has contributed to growing anger among the established population of West Kazakhstan already displeased to see oil revenues flowing out of the region rather than raising the local standard of living and foreign skilled workers employed in the oil industry being paid considerably more than the locals.

The only partial participation of a growing proportion of the population of West Kazakhstan in the country's economic success led in May 2011, almost unnoticed by the public at home and abroad, to industrial action in the oil industry of Mangystau.¹²⁸ In terms of the number of participants (figures up to 12,000 have been reported) and the length of the strikes, they represented a novelty in the post-

the Eastern Caspian Region (2008), esp. 34ff., http://www.grida.no/files/publications/envsec/envsec-caspian2-eng_scr.pdf.

125 There are hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from neighbouring republics working in Kazakhstan; in 2009 more than one million were registered, mostly from Russia and Uzbekistan; Žusupov Ajman, "Nužny li gastarbajtery Kazachstanu?" *Kvorum.kz*, 21 October 2010, <http://kvorum.kz/archive/1897/>.

126 About one million Kazakhs have returned from abroad since the early 1990s. Many of them, especially Kazakhs from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, were settled in the thinly populated Mangystau region; UNDP Kazakhstan, *Status of Oralman in Kazakhstan* (Almaty, 2006), 14, http://www.undp.kz/library_of_publications/files/6838-29587.pdf.

127 *Ibid.*, 15f.; Gulmira Kamziyeva, "Astana Develops New Oralman Repatriation Programme", *Central Asia Online*, 2 November 2011, http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2011/11/02/feature-01.

128 The strikes only hit the headlines in early July 2011, when the British musician Sting cancelled a birthday performance for President Nazarbayev in the Kazakh capital Astana after Amnesty International informed him about the strikes and their background; "Sting Cancels Kazakhstan Concert over 'Rights Abuses'", *BBC News*, 4 July 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-14011860>.

independence history of Kazakhstan. The stoppages began in early May 2011 at a production facility run jointly by the Kazakh state-owned KazMunaiGaz and the Chinese CNPC, and spread over the course of the month to a Kazakh-Italian joint venture and a KazMunaiGaz subsidiary. The strikers' demands were for equal pay with the staff of other production companies and generally better paid foreign workers, improved working conditions and the recognition of independent trade unions.¹²⁹

The management of the affected companies rejected demands for higher wages with the argument that pay was already high compared with the national average,¹³⁰ and responded with mass dismissals and other punitive measures. They also took legal action against the activists, and the district court ruled the strikes illegal. Representatives of the independent trade unions and other activists were arrested, and some sentenced long prison terms. Particular outrage was provoked by the prosecution of trade union lawyer Natalya Sokolova on charges of "inciting social discord", at the instigation of company management. The court admitted neither witnesses nor potentially exonerating evidence, yet sentenced her to six years in prison followed by three years professional disqualification.¹³¹

Neither these measures, nor the intimidation of activists,¹³² nor attempts to prevent the protests from spreading by shutting down the regional mobile phone network succeeded in ending the strikes.¹³³ Instead, the employers' intransigence and the open bias of the organs of the state led growing numbers

129 Almaz Rysaliev, "Kazakhstan's Unhappy Oil Workers", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia* 652 (24 June 2011), <http://iwpr.net/report-news/kazakstans-unhappy-oil-workers>.

130 *Ibid.*; see also "Deadlock in Kazakhstan as Oil Workers Strike", *BBC News*, 25 October 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15426533>.

131 Human Rights Watch, "Kazakhstan: Appeals Hearing Should Vindicate Labor Rights", 14 September 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/14/kazakhstan-appeals-hearing-should-vindicate-labor-rights>.

132 Andrei Grishin, "Reprisals Merely Anger Protesting Kazak Oil Workers", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia* 656 (28 August 2011), <http://iwpr.net/report-news/reprisals-merely-anger-protesting-kazak-oil-workers>.

133 Farkhad Sharip, "Kazakh Authorities Ignore Political Implications of Strikes in Karazhanbas Oilfields", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 8, no. 149 (3 August 2011), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=38273](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=38273).

to join the strike over the course of summer 2011 and the labour dispute assumed an increasingly political character. As well as including an explicitly political item in their list of demands, by calling for Sokolova's release, more than one thousand striking oil workers resigned their membership of President Nazarbayev's governing Nur Otan party and joined an opposition alliance.¹³⁴ There were also protests and expressions of solidarity in other parts of the country.¹³⁵ These remained isolated, not least because of the absence or bias of reporting in the state-controlled media which dismissed the strikers' wage demands as exaggerated, pointing to the lower level of average pay.¹³⁶ At the same time local officials did everything they could to prevent information about events in Mangystau from trickling out unfiltered. Their actions were guided by worry that the sceptical indifference of the Kazakh public towards the demands of the striking oil workers could flip over into sympathy.¹³⁷

Although the strikes gradually ebbed away after five months, a hard core of about one thousand for whom the struggle had become a matter of honour held out and refused to accept their dismissal. A stalemate arose, with oil workers insisting on the legitimacy of their demands and appealing to the government for support,¹³⁸ while politicians in the capital

Astana appeared to be playing a waiting game. But the ongoing stoppages led to a noticeable decline in oil production and by October 2011 production was 7 per cent below the previous year's level. The financial loss for KazMunaiGaz and the state investment fund is estimated to be several hundred million dollars.¹³⁹

While it appeared at first that the political leadership would prefer to absorb economic losses rather than risk the use of force, in the end an escalation did occur. Clashes between security forces and striking workers broke out on 16 December 2011 in Zhanaozen during celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of independence. Although the exact course of events remains unclear because the town was immediately sealed off, it can be regarded as fact that the police fired on demonstrators with live ammunition, caused numerous casualties; unofficial accounts speak of several dozen dead and several hundred injured.¹⁴⁰

The violently suppressed protests of the oil workers in West Kazakhstan expose the limits of the Kazakh "social contract" that forms the basis of political stability: the state promises to allow its citizens to share in the country's economic success provided they are prepared to refrain from demands for political participation.¹⁴¹ The striking oil workers broke that implicit agreement by calling upon politicians to renegotiate questions of distribution. The refusal of the polity to recognise the legitimacy of this wish, nor to negotiate with the strikers, is symptomatic for the arrogance of a complacent elite,¹⁴² and represents an exemplary case of political failure in an authoritarian state. For the conflict parties would probably have been able to find a compromise if the state had been content to play the role of a neutral mediator in the

134 "Deadlock in Kazakhstan as Oil Workers Strike" (see note 130); "Striking Kazakh Oil Workers Quit Ruling Party", *RFE/RL*, 11 August 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/striking_kazakh_oil_workers_quit_ruling_party/24294248.html.

135 "Kazakh Workers' Protests Widen", *Asia News.it*, 2 July 2011, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Kazakh-workers%E2%80%99-protests-widen-21988.html>; Rysaliev, "Kazakhstan's Unhappy Oil Workers" (see note 129); "Activists in Almaty Express Solidarity with Striking Oil Workers", *RFE/RL*, 9 September 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/activists_in_almaty_express_solidarity_with_striking_workers/24323533.html.

136 Rysaliev, "Kazakhstan's Unhappy Oil Workers" (see note 129); Saule Mukhametrakhimova, "Patience Wearing Thin in Kazakhstan", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia* 657 (23 September 2011) <http://iwpr.net/report-news/patience-wearing-thin-kazakhstan>.

137 "Television Crew Assaulted after Covering Labour Strike", *IFEX*, 27 October 2011, http://www.ifex.org/kazakhstan/2011/10/27/bisen_amilov_assaulted/; "Kazakh Rapper Forced to Cancel Concert for Striking Workers", *RFE/RL*, 31 August 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakh_rapper_forced_to_cancel_concert/24314142.html; Mukhametrakhimova, "Patience Wearing Thin" (see note 136).

138 They even tried to contact Prime Minister Karim Masimov, who is an active social networker, via Twitter; Artur Nigmatov, "Tired, Angry, But Determined, Striking Kazakh

Oil Workers Say Fight Will Go On", *RFE/RL*, 14 September 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/striking_kazakh_oil_workers_say_fight_will_go_on/24328725.html; "Kazakh Strikers Demand Apology from President's Son-In-Law", *RFE/RL*, 30 September 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakh_striking_oil_workers_demand_apology_from_president_nazarbaev_son_in_law/24345404.html.

139 "Kazakhstan: Labor Dispute Dragging Energy Production Down", *EurasiaNet*, 13 October 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64310>.

140 "Situation Remains Tense in Western Kazakhstan after Deadly Clashes", *RFE/RL*, 19 December 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan_manghystau_oil_workers_unrest/24425501.html.

141 Schmitz, *Kasachstan: neue Führungsmacht im postsowjetischen Raum?* (see note 109).

142 For one example: "Kazakh Strikers Demand Apology from President's Son-In-Law" (see note 138).

labour dispute, rather than unambiguously taking the side of the employers.

As well as evidencing the failure of state crisis management, the confrontation between striking oil workers and security forces and the violent escalation in Zhanaozen also debunks the Kazakh success narrative that declares authoritarian leadership and economic prosperity to be the preconditions for political stability. Although the unrest in the west is not of itself proof of an increasing mood of protest in Kazakh society, it does demonstrate a growing estrangement of particular social groups from the state. Surveys in Kazakhstan also show that growing dissatisfaction with the state's social policies is indeed associated with growing popular willingness to protest.¹⁴³

Kazakhstan's geographical and socio-economic fragmentation means that mass protests are nonetheless unlikely, at least as long as they do not flare up in the cities where the resources needed to organise them effectively are concentrated. The last-minute decision to bring parliamentary elections originally planned for August 2012 forward to January could be an indication of heightened crisis-sensitivity in the Kazakh leadership. The elections were supposed to open the way for a second party to enter the lower chamber of the Kazakh parliament in a move plainly designed to forestall a crisis of image and legitimacy.¹⁴⁴

143 "Survey Shows Rise in Public Frustration, Protest Mood in Kazakhstan", *BBC Monitoring Global Newsline – Central Asia Political*, 26 August 2011; Mukhametrakhimova, "Patience Wearing Thin" (see note 136).

144 Voloshin, "President Nazarbayev Dissolves Parliament's Lower Chamber" (see note 117); see the OSCE's provisional report on the parliamentary elections of 15 January 2012, accessible via <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/86985>.

Summary and Conclusions

The case studies show that with the exception of Turkmenistan there is marked protest potential in the Central Asian republics, but that this is more likely to lead to protest actions in some republics than in others. In Kyrgyzstan the threshold for action is especially low, but it remains to be seen to what extent the new diversity of political decision-making centres prevents further revolt or whether functional deficits of politics rooted in a worsening backlog of reforms leads frustrated masses to air their dissatisfaction in further excesses of violence. In Tajikistan too, popular embitterment about the failure of the state to tackle social and economic problems could, in the context of a repressive policy on religion, lead to violence.

While protests could also turn violent in Uzbekistan, the Uzbek regime possesses much stronger tools of coercion than its Tajik counterpart. In view of the country's socio-demographic development, limited local protests cannot be excluded but would in all probability (as in the past) be violently suppressed by the state. In Turkmenistan, by contrast, significant protests are unlikely because there is virtually no free public sphere and the state's repressive apparatus is omnipresent. In Kazakhstan, where protest potential is situated above all at the periphery of society, willingness to protest could grow. The state appears neither disposed nor able to constructively address the fragmentation of society, but possesses a broad spectrum of repressive means with which it is likely to suppress protest if the need arises.

All five Central Asian states are characterised by a strong likelihood of protests turning violent. The authoritarian systems in the region are plainly incapable of producing collectively binding decisions by the path of negotiation. They seek to compensate this weakness by a marked determination to use repression, as seen most recently in the oil workers' strikes in West Kazakhstan. The experience of such state violence lowers the willingness for political protest in Central Asia and makes the expansion of local protests highly unlikely. Moreover, geographical, social and cultural fragmentation within and between the individual states of the region hinders the emergence of a Central Asian "wave of protest" on the model of the Arab Spring.

More broadly Central Asia, unlike the Arab world, lacks narratives that engender a frontier-transcending sense of community and can be anchored in a shared culture, religion and language. Instead the post-Soviet nation-building process has brought forth a dominating sense of difference and cultivated exclusive narratives concerning each nation and its specific traditions. A Central Asian community claiming a shared history has therefore been unable to emerge and there is no common frame within which a "Central Asian spring" could develop a joint quest for freedom.

The often rapid dissemination of new media changes little about the prognosis. A provisional impression was conveyed by the initial reactions of the region's online communities to the Arab Spring, which found a cynical echo in Kyrgyz forums, while some Uzbek commentators expressed hopes for similar events in their own country.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the introduction of new technologies and the liberalisation of markets has, at least in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, led to an exponential expansion of the space of communicative accessibility. Although internet access by landline remains limited and broadband is still in its infancy,¹⁴⁶ all five (even isolated Turkmenistan) have achieved mobile network coverage of at least 60 percent of the population and the numbers are rising rapidly.¹⁴⁷ Encouraged by low prices, usage of mobile internet especially is expanding.¹⁴⁸ Ever more people can de facto access online

145 See for example the discussion on *Diesel Forum*, 16 November 2011, <http://diesel.elcat.kg/lofiversion/index.php?t10239770.html>, and the comments below the article "Cygan uže prodal šubu, a Uzbekistan 'perechodit na ugol'", *ferghana.news*, 28 October 2011, <http://www.ferghananews.com/comments.php?id=7152>.

146 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Broadband for Central Asia and the Road Ahead: Economic Development through Improved Regional Broadband Networks*, ESCAP Technical Paper, Information and Communications Technology and Disaster Risk Reduction Division, 2009, http://www.unescap.org/idd/working%20papers/IDD_TP_09_05_of_WP_7_2_909.pdf.

147 Even in 2005 the figures were all around 10 percent, with the exception of Kazakhstan; *Mobile Cellular Subscriptions, 2001–2010* (see note 11).

148 Internet World Stats, *Asia Internet Usage and Population*, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>.

services through their mobile phone. Thus the infrastructure preconditions exist for “provisional communities” to emerge within the individual states.¹⁴⁹ This dynamising potential is multiplied by role models and examples, of which the Arab Spring doubtless offered the Central Asian public an initial taste.

The Central Asian reception of the demonstrations over massive election fraud that flared up in Russia after the parliamentary elections in December 2011 also play a decisive role in possible protest dynamics in the region. Russian activists have started using social media like Twitter, Facebook and their Russian counterpart *Vkontakte* to organise and coordinate protests in a way that is completely new for their country.¹⁵⁰ It cannot be excluded that this Russian example will over time encourage the emergence of a new political consciousness in the Central Asian states too. It is at least conceivable that the Russian language will permit a new young generation to carry the Russian experience across national borders and harness it to rebel against political stagnation and demand reforms.

The current regimes in Central Asia are ambivalent about the rapid expansion of information and communication technologies. While aware that tapping modern technologies is imperative for maintaining economic growth, they increasingly worry about losing control over information and communication flows. All five states are experimenting with new forms of oversight and control ranging from repressive laws through the application of new filtering technologies and sophisticated manipulation of content to technical monitoring of servers and hubs.¹⁵¹ These concerted initiatives to control the internet are embedded in the frame of regional cooperation. The informal summit of the region’s Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in August 2011 in the Kazakh capital Astana was without doubt a response to the events in North Africa and the Middle

East. The central topic addressed by the meeting was how to prevent the Arab Spring from spreading to the post-Soviet space, with a focus on the role of the internet and social media. In his opening address Kazakh President Nazarbayev denounced the freedom of information on the internet as a threat to regional security and stability and called for effective countermeasures.¹⁵² The preventive strategy for controlling virtual space and combating “cyberterrorism” on which the heads of state gathered in Astana agreed as a new CSTO priority, will likely lead to a tightening of internet censorship and manipulation of social networks.¹⁵³

It is, however, highly unlikely that these efforts will succeed for long in preventing a quantitatively and qualitatively new public sphere emerging in the states of Central Asia and directing its attention more flexibly and demanding solutions in real time. For the political leaders in Central Asia this represents a challenge to which, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, they have hitherto known no other way to respond than with more manipulation and repression. The underlying calculation may function to the extent that it can keep conflict in the societies latent for the moment, but in the longer run it obstructs necessary transformation processes.

In this whole process Europe and other Western states have thus far played a very ambivalent role, which needs to be reconsidered in view of the impending societal transformation in the region. In one respect the West’s cooperation with these regimes is oriented on supporting the transformation of the former Soviet republics into open societies through the transfer of ideas and technologies. But at the same time the West’s engagement in this part of the world has, at the latest since NATO began its intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, been dominated above all by economic, stability and security considerations. This choice of priorities has done a great deal to create a situation where the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia are increasingly able to monopolise unchallenged the public space in the societies they rule.¹⁵⁴

149 “Provisional community” refers to a new type of easily mobilisable protest formation that arises and dissolves spontaneously, and manages without formal organisational structures; see Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, “Arabisches Erwachen: Die Wiederaneignung des eigenen Schicksals und eine sich öffnende Welt”, *Lettre* 92 (spring 2011), 23–27.

150 Moritz Gathman, “Raus aus den Blogs, raus auf die Straße”, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 17 December 2011, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/medien/raus-aus-den-blogs-raus-auf-die-strasse/5968978.html>.

151 *Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet* (see note 79).

152 Tai Adelaja, “Brotherhood in Resistance”, *Russia Profile*, 15 August 2011.

153 Roger McDermott, “CSTO Moves into the Information Age”, *RFE/RL*, 4 September 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/commentary_csto_moves_into_information_age/24317363.html.

154 Andrea Schmitz, *Beyond Afghanistan: The New ISAF Strategy: Implications for Central Asia*, SWP Comment 2010/C10 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2010).

The upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East have demonstrated how unstable the political systems created by authoritarian regimes are in times of crisis. This analysis notes similar system and acceptance deficits in the Central Asian states. Three conclusions emerge for German and European policy in the region.

(1) As the media and communication landscape changes, the public sphere becomes more diverse and decentralised – even in the Central Asian states. This makes it ever more risky for European actors to rely on the existing repressive regimes of the region when pursuing their interests. The West must be prepared to be asked more directly and critically about its motives by an increasing number of increasingly diverse actors. While pursuing their interests European actors should therefore ensure they preserve their credibility with the civil societies of the region, for in the long term friendly dealings with Central Asian autocrats run the risk of estranging the West from potential future leaders. Contact and dialogue initiatives will become discredited if they are perceived by the local public merely as nothing but cosmetic window dressing for hard interest-driven Western policy. Future expansion of information and communication technologies will further expand the possibilities for the Central Asian public to observe such discrepancies in the policies of foreign partners.¹⁵⁵

(2) In the interests of a peaceful and orderly transformation in the region the West should encourage its Central Asian partners not clamp down on the new emerging public spaces. Public reactions to events like the shutdown of the mobile phone network in Egypt or the closure of local television stations in Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 underline the potential consequences when expectations are awakened and then abruptly dashed. In Egypt protests escalated, while in Kyrgyzstan the resulting information vacuum was filled by rumour-mongering and led to panic.¹⁵⁶ The West would do well to encourage the expansion and utilisation of the new information technologies in Central Asia, insist on free access to information and to communication technologies and exert political pressure if required.

(3) Finally, the West should rid itself of the illusion that social transformation processes can be controlled if one only identifies the supposedly “right” political forces. One thing that characterised the revolts in the Arab world was the lack of prominent “figureheads”. Instead, freely networked movements were seen to play a central role in protest dynamics in the digitalised world. The crucial point is therefore the presence of a critical mass of well-educated young people capable of shaping an institutional new beginning in times of rapid change, and whom the West can address politically. With respect to the states of Central Asia and their wrecked education systems,¹⁵⁷ that means appealing to the European Union and especially to Germany, which is present on the ground with a large number of education and culture institutes, to invest more in measures to construct capacities for good education in the region. The EU’s Central Asia Strategy contains ambitious targets, but five years after their formulation they still have not been fulfilled.¹⁵⁸

155 Andrea Schmitz and Alexander Wolters, “Revolutionen in Zentralasien?” *Zentralasien-Analysen* 43–44, (29 July 2011): 2–5 (5), <http://www.laender-analysen.de/zentralasien/pdf/ZentralasienAnalysen43-44.pdf>.

156 Wolters, “The Changing Media Landscape in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia” (see note 29).

157 International Crisis Group, *Central Asia. Decay and Decline* (see note 7).

158 Peter Jones, *The EU-Central Asia Education Initiative*, EU-Central Asia Monitoring, Working Paper 09 (February 2010), http://www.eucentralasia.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Working_Papers/WP9-EN.pdf.

Abbreviations

CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communications
HDI	Human Development Index
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
RFE	Radio Free Europe
RL	Radio Liberty
SORM	System for Operative Investigative Activities (Sistema Operativno-Rozysknykh Meropriyatii)
UMTS	Universal Mobile Telecommunications System
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund