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Unintended Consequences

Western Soft Power as a Source of Legitimacy for Central Asian Autocrats

Andrea Schmitz / Esther Somfalvy

The policy of the EU and its member states vis-à-vis Central Asia's authoritarian states is focused first and foremost on stability. At the same time, it is hoped that the region's political elites will allow themselves to be swayed by "constructive engagement" and "dialogue" to abide by human rights standards and to pursue democratic reforms. In accordance with this policy, the Central Asian states are incorporated into international cooperation projects, which focus on shared interests and blur the variance in different values. Just how unsuccessful this approach is has been demonstrated by Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship. Kazakhstan's leadership has primarily used the office to consolidate its domestic power rather than promoting acceptance of the "human dimension" of security in the post-Soviet space and leading by good example. If it wishes to avoid such outcomes in the future, the West must develop a more acute awareness of the behavioural logic driving its partners.

Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship came to an end with mixed results. On the one hand, representatives of the member states once again announced their commitment to the organisation's principles during the summit in Astana. On the other hand, ethnic upheaval in Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2010 demonstrated that it is precisely in the case of conflict that the OSCE lacks the capacity to act. Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship was also unable to reconcile the differing interests that have crippled the organisation for years (cf. *SWP Comment 3/2010*). It will therefore go down in history as a footnote rather than as a turning point in the organisation's history, as had been ex-

pected by proponents of Kazakhstan's candidacy.

From the perspective of the Central Asian states themselves, there is admittedly a different perception. While independent observers offer a rather sceptical assessment of the chairmanship, reporting in Kazakhstan has been euphoric. It stylises the chairmanship and the glamorous final chord it struck in Astana as epochal occurrences, which demonstrated to the world the growing international importance of the resource-rich country and the foreign policy prowess of its president. Measured by the response within Kazakhstan, the OSCE chairmanship was unquestionably a suc-

cess, the value of which cannot be overestimated for the regime.

Domestic Policy Calculations

From the very beginning, Kazakhstan's campaign for the OSCE chairmanship was motivated by domestic policy. The candidacy was launched in early 2003 as part of an image campaign, which aimed to distract attention from a corruption scandal involving President Nursultan Nazarbayev. At the same time, it was supposed to eliminate the attacks from an opposition movement within Kazakhstan. This movement had formed a year earlier and its criticisms of the regime were increasingly being heard abroad as well as within the country. The fact that Kazakhstan was now presenting itself as an aspiring democracy resonated positively in the West. It was seen as confirmation of the conventional development paradigm according to which the states in the post-Soviet space would undergo political transformation through their integration into the global economy, thereby approaching the model set by Western democracies.

This conviction persisted tenaciously even though the reforms announced by Kazakhstan throughout the course of its candidacy failed to materialise. On the contrary, as the steppe republic gained importance as an economic and strategic military partner of the West, this was accompanied by an increasing streamlining of the political landscape. The parliamentary elections held in August 2007 provided striking evidence of this: seven political parties competed, but only Nur Otan, the president's party, succeeded in entering parliament. Nevertheless, in the same year the OSCE Ministerial Council in Madrid expressed its support for transferring the chairmanship to Kazakhstan in 2010. Bowing to pressure from the USA, Marat Tazhin, who was at that time Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister, had previously issued a public statement committing to the OSCE's human rights dimension and to the work

of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which is responsible for monitoring elections within the OSCE.

Ersatz Concepts

Despite the verbal commitment to democratic standards, however, there continued to be no further consequences. In January 2010, Kazakhstan took over chairmanship of the OSCE although the agreed upon reforms in the areas of human rights and freedoms had not actually been implemented. Instead, the political strategists in President Nazarbayev's administration developed effective methods for fending off western democracy requirements or ensuring that they led nowhere. A strategy that proved particularly effective was to refer to the country's unique cultural features and a path to democratic development that was supposedly specific to Kazakhstan and which the West needed to respect.

This line of argumentation is particularly effective, because it can easily be linked to the call for ethnic and religious tolerance as well as intercultural dialogue which figure prominently in the political discourse. Such concepts constitute core elements of the nation building process in Kazakhstan and are particularly viable in an ideological sense – connecting to the “friendship among peoples” ideology cultivated by the Soviet nationality policies as well as to the relativism and multiculturalism, which are at the core of western liberalism.

In the reasoned expectation that it would be impossible within the community of OSCE states to simply disregard the plea for tolerance and harmony among peoples, Kazakhstan's leaders purposefully introduced these topics into the chairmanship – presenting this as evidence of its commitment to the “human dimension”. In June 2010, Nazarbayev even lobbied for the establishment of a “Centre on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination” within the OSCE

and the naming of a “High Commissioner on Inter-Ethnic and Interreligious Tolerance”.

Panegyric

Within the OSCE itself, the response to Kazakhstan’s chairmanship was exceedingly positive, as was seen in the active participation during the final summit in Astana. It was therefore only logical that Kazakhstan’s media interpreted the meeting as the culmination of the president’s successful policies. While western journalists offered a critical assessment of the summit as it didn’t generate any concrete results, the reception within Kazakhstan was consistently enthusiastic. Picking up on the tone set by the president, the mass media celebrated the OSCE meeting as a historic event reflecting international recognition of Kazakhstan’s development. In the process, the summit was inflated to take on the proportions of a turning point in the entire Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The “Spirit of Helsinki” had become a “Spirit of Astana”. The path taken by Kazakhstan since its national independence had therefore been proven right. The praise that the summit’s organisers received from their guests was passed on from the regime to its people. By presenting the success on the international stage as an achievement of all Kazakhs, the regime appealed at the same time to the symbolic unity of the people.

Within Kazakhstan, the echoing of this major event also clearly indicated a control strategy characteristic of authoritarian systems. With the help of state run media, foreign policy initiatives can be exploited for domestic gains. The lack of democratic legitimacy is compensated for by only allowing interpretations that fulfil the desired goal. A statement by Kazakhstan’s Ambassador at Large Madina Dzharbusynova during the OSCE chairmanship clearly exemplifies this discourse strategy. Responding to the question of whether Kazakhstan was intending to address its

deficits, Dzharbusynova answered that there were no negative assessments of Kazakhstan’s chairmanship and therefore there was no need to improve on any deficits.

Personality Cult

The extent to which the OSCE office and the associated increase in international attention were used to consolidate claims to power can be seen in a series of measures implemented around the time of the chairmanship. Thus, a tightening on media rights occurred in the summer of 2009. In the following year, Kazakhstan’s parliament awarded Nazarbayev with the title “Leader of the Nation”, a title which had been specifically created for him. The title granted the state’s leader as well as his family immunity from possible prosecution after leaving office. While the president expressed his rejection of this proposal, he abstained from issuing a formal veto, which led to the rule coming into effect anyway.

At the same time, Nazarbayev – and this is perhaps the most remarkable side effect of the chairmanship – became the object of a growing personality cult. An example of this was apparent during the speech given by Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev at the opening of the Astana Summit on 1 December 2010. He emphasised that this date marked the 20th anniversary of Nazarbayev’s election as president. In this way, he presented the OSCE chairmanship as the culmination of Kazakhstan’s development since winning its sovereignty in 1990 – a success story which could be directly attributed to the president. In the presentation of Kazakhstan’s media, which followed the official script, the visits of high-ranking state guests appeared to be an homage, as it were, to Nazarbayev.

The increasing personalisation of Kazakhstani politics is viewed by international organisations and Western actors, including the German government, as standing in contradiction to the modernisation rhetoric of the state’s development pro-

gramme. If one follows the logic of the discourse within Kazakhstan, however, this personalisation makes complete sense, because linking modernisation with the personality cult makes it possible to attribute Kazakhstan's rise to the president's wise leadership. Democratic legitimacy is thereby rendered superfluous. In this respect, the personality cult and modernisation rhetoric aren't contradictory concepts, but rather complementary and mutually reinforcing.

For the time being, the zenith of Nazarbayev veneration came in December 2010 in the form of a motion launched by a "citizen's initiative", which would use a referendum to extend the term of the president, who has already been serving for two decades, by an additional ten years. Coming punctually at the end of the chairmanship, these plans were met with international protest, which even the OSCE joined. In Kazakhstan, however, the criticism was dismissed as being merely rhetoric. The presence of heads of state at the summit was presented as clear evidence of approval of Nazarbayev and his policies.

The fact that the president turned away from the referendum at the last moment and instead recommended early elections (which have now been scheduled for April) did nothing to stop the adulation afforded him. On the contrary, his reputation as the "guardian of Kazakhstan's democracy" was only reinforced by this decision.

Consequences

The case of Kazakhstan underlines how limited the possibilities are for democratic states to have a normative impact on authoritarian partners. The declaratory agreements of such states with western policy approaches in no way means that they also want to implement these concepts. Instead of following the calls for democratisation, they integrate the relevant vocabulary – loaded with locally-specific semantics – into their own political agendas. At the same time, dialogue offers

from the West are interpreted by the rulers as consent and are used to consolidate their own rule.

In this manner, Western engagement contributes to stabilising authoritarian balances of power rather than paving the way for a policy shift. This works to counteract their own efforts at democratisation. Under these conditions, the concurrent criticism of authoritarian political styles remains ineffectual. This holds true not only in the case of Kazakhstan, but also in a similar fashion for EU policy vis-à-vis Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Even though European Commission President Barroso may have admonished Uzbekistan's President Karimov in regard to democratic deficits when receiving him in Brussels in February 2011, Karimov nevertheless pointed to the invitation as a sign of gratitude for his cooperation with the West, as was shown in Uzbekistan's media response to the visit.

For Europe's Central Asia policy, such differences in perceptions result in serious consequences. If one wishes to avoid dialogue offers being misused by partners solely as domestic power resources, then there must be a greater awareness of divergences in operating logic. While these differences are obscured by the adoption of western terminology into authoritarian contexts, political action continues to be determined by these differences. Thus, the politics of double standards emerges, which benefits from the symbolic acknowledgements of efforts by authoritarian rulers that are granted all too readily by Europeans. Therefore the EU states – and Germany carries particular responsibility in this case from its position in the vanguard of Europe's Central Asia policy – need to develop a more acute sensibility for the symbolic level of their interactions. To avoid political gestures weakening Western normative pretensions, symbolic capital must be seen as a resource and its allocation must be linked to measurable progress in clearly defined areas.

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