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## Why Central Asia is More Stable than Eastern Europe

### THE DOMESTIC IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICS

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In the early 1990s, scholars, journalists, and political observers predicted that the new Central Asian states would descend into chaos and break apart. More than 20 years later, Central Asia's states seem relatively stable, both at their political centers and outlying territories, including states like Tajikistan that were once embroiled in civil war. Eastern Europe, meanwhile, is littered with frozen and active conflicts and states whose rulers may very well envy the staying power of their Central Asian counterparts.

With the exception of revolution-friendly Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia seems more stable than Eastern Europe on a number of fronts: the longevity of leaders, lack of civil or separatist conflict, and overall lower incidence of social protest. This stability has much to do with how rulers coerce populations, co-opt potential rivals, and collect revenues that keep them in power. Central Asia's ruling elites have also proactively monitored unrest in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Iran, and more recently the Middle East, devising measures to nip similar challenges to their authority in the bud.

In this memo I explore another factor—the geopolitical dimension. Central Asian rulers, on balance, are more adept at neutralizing destabilizing geopolitical competition. Perhaps more importantly, they make crucial foreign policy decisions behind closed doors and then sell them to domestic publics as winning strategies. In contrast, Moldovan and Ukrainian rulers poorly mediated contradictory geopolitical pulls on their countries, deepened social divisions over their countries' directions, and intensified mobilization across opposing camps seeking victory for their favored national vision. The Ukraine conflict and the dynamics of the Euromaidan are only the more recent of such ruptures. More turmoil lies ahead.

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## The Domestic Burden of Foreign Policy

Foreign policy decisions matter domestically—even more so when these decisions decisively alter a state’s geopolitical and national space. In that regard, both Central Asia’s and Eastern Europe’s states face recurring strategic choices on whether they will pitch to the West, gravitate to Russia, or beat a more neutral, go-it-alone path. As Ayşe Zarakol has argued in *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, decisions about whether a country’s rightful place is in the West or East can trigger a highly emotional response in society. In other cases, the decisions affect the fortunes of economic elites. ADA University’s Anar Valiyev [notes](#) how Azerbaijani oligarchs prefer to keep their distance from the Eurasian Economic Union for fear of competition from their Russian counterparts; the European Union is a less burdensome partner.

Given the domestic repercussions of foreign policy, rulers in semi-democratic and semi-authoritarian states face a dual dilemma. They must pursue their desired foreign policy and prevent that policy from triggering a domestic backlash which threatens their longevity. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in Central Asia and Ukraine and Moldova in Eastern Europe show the very different outcomes rulers face domestically as they handle (and mishandle) foreign policy.

## What Kazakhstan and Tajikistan Have in Common

Over the course of two decades Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev has emerged as a consummate balancer of foreign policy, juggling countervailing pressures of Russia, China, and the United States while participating in Western and non-Western international organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In *Great Games, Local Rules*, Alexander Cooley underscores Nazarbayev’s skillful handling of diplomacy, which has enabled Kazakhstan “to present itself as the geopolitical crossroads of multiple identities and influences, invoking the often-quoted slogan that ‘happiness is multiple pipelines.’” But this balancing is, in part, possible because the country’s foreign policymaking mechanisms are made at the pinnacle of the executive, not unlike many of Kazakhstan’s more consequential government decisions. Decisions are then reinforced through the government’s well-funded patronage mechanisms ensuring that the country’s key business and political interests fall in line with foreign policy choices.

Kazakhstan has managed to sidestep domestic blowback from major foreign policy decisions, among them membership in the EEU and the sale of national land to China. While protests have taken place in Kazakhstan on a variety of domestic issues, popular blowback on the country’s foreign policy choices is limited to quiet grumbling. For example, the EEU has exposed Kazakhstani entrepreneurs to competition from Russian businesses, but as long as the country’s patronage mechanisms remain well funded, the

government can buy acquiescence. As KIMEP University's Nargis Kassenova [explains](#), "The public discussion was very short...it was very, very fast; done incredibly fast. We didn't even have time to have a proper discussion. It wasn't really encouraged. Now we have these multiple conferences on Eurasian integration. But it's post post-factum."

In Tajikistan, the government of Emomali Rahmon is trying to carry out a similar balancing act. But while Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy is all about shoring up stability and promoting the country's image as a geopolitical bridge, Tajikistan's motives are driven by economic necessity. Tajik authorities have long tried to court as much economic assistance as possible from any and all donor countries, while preventing the public from questioning the government's ability to protect national interests and security from neighboring Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

This is a delicate balancing act, even as Rahmon has consolidated his authority throughout the country. One key foreign policy issue is the country's prospective membership in the EEU. Rahmon's government has officially noted that it is exploring the costs and benefits and the country's readiness to join the EEU, but in reality the downsides of membership weigh heavily on the government. Membership in the EEU comes part and parcel with greater ties to Russia and less freedom of movement from Moscow's geopolitics. For example, it will be nearly impossible for Tajikistan as a member of the EEU to turn down hosting Russian troops on its border with Afghanistan.

As 72 percent of Tajiks [polled](#) in early 2015 support accession to the EEU (a number reflecting a slight drop in enthusiasm in the wake of the Ukraine conflict), the government faces a choice: it can ride the wave of public opinion, bring the country into the EEU, and reduce the country's ability to maneuver, or it can indefinitely postpone accession and risk public criticism. Many Tajiks believe that EEU membership will grant them unrestricted access to the Russian market, but fewer understand that a more likely result will be a flood of Russian goods and an increased Russian security imprint. No matter the decision on the EEU, the prospect of popular mobilization over foreign policy is remote given the state of political opposition and civil society in the country. Public expressions of dissatisfaction on Tajikistan's geopolitical direction are unlikely to amount to more than Kazakh-style grumbling.

### **An Almost Ukraine**

In Ukraine and Moldova, by contrast, foreign policy decisions on key geopolitical issues have fostered strong social mobilization as segments of society and the political opposition sought to neutralize these decisions. Although the recent turmoil in Ukraine

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<sup>2</sup> See the author's PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 137, [The International Community's Elusive Search for Common Ground in Central Asia](#), 2011, and Open Society Foundations Report, [Central Asia's Border Woes & the Impact of International Assistance](#), 2012.

is about much more than foreign policy, it is important to acknowledge that the Euromaidan movement and Eurosceptic/pro-Russian countercurrents all took part in a highly destructive, zero-sum mobilization for furthering each side's own visions about the country's rightful place in global politics. Given the attention to Ukraine, it is easy to forget that neighboring Moldova was nearly driven apart by similar domestic controversies over geopolitics and foreign policy.

Well before the Ukraine crisis, Moldova's government and opposition engaged in a very public and populist debate over the country's foreign policy directions and choice of membership in the European Union or the EEU. The debates became heated enough to eclipse the usual discussions of the country's blistering unemployment and the frozen conflict with secessionist Transnistria.

True to its name, Moldova's governing Alliance for European Integration (AEI) advocated a pro-European path and initialed the EU Association Agreement in Vilnius in November 2013, raising hackles among sizeable opposition parties and skeptical civic groups. In briefings with PONARS Eurasia members in Chisinau in December 2013, leaders of opposition parties raised the specter of a Russian gas and food embargo while AEI politicians blasted the opposition for selling their soul and the country to Russia. "They'll talk about cheap gas, we'll talk about the future," said Vlad Filat, a pro-European political party leader and former prime minister, about the anti-EU camp. Noting the 50-50 split in public opinion on whether to pursue EU versus EEU accession, Igor Dodon of the Socialist party stated, "Society is paralyzed. An even split on the issue is dangerous."

In this period, the international press paid lots of attention to Russian officials who threatened Moldovan government officials that they might lose Transnistria on the way to the EU. However, less attention was given to the comments and actions of EU enlargement commissioner Štefan Füle, who declared that there is only one way for Moldova, and to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who drank wine that had been embargoed by Russia during his Moldova visit. Most unhelpful were statements by Romania's president that Moldova is part of Romania.

High-level EU representatives rarely acknowledge their mistakes in assisting Moldova's bid for ever-closer association with Brussels. And yet, the frequent protests that took place outside the EU mission in Chisinau suggest that EU officials may have been too enamored with the Alliance for European Integration and hadn't put enough effort into engaging anti-EU sentiments.

But a non-partisan approach may not have made for less combustible politics and protest. After all, it is not the EU's job to sell itself to Moldova's public; rather, it is the job of the government to engage the opposition and explain the benefits of EU integration against the opportunity costs. Moldova's pro-EU ruling coalition, however,

has done the job poorly. For several years, it has fostered a populist and dramatic public debate that is thick in rhetoric but thin on substantive issues. Indeed, Moldova's governing elites have put much more effort into selling the country to Brussels than in selling Brussels to Moldovans.

Support for the EU and EEU are subject to shifts, and by mid-2015, public support for the EU was down to 40 percent in Moldova. At a PONARS conference in Astana in June 2015, Nicu Popescu, senior analyst at EUISS, explained that he sees such shifts as "the public's reaction to a disappointing government," where opinion for or against the EU is a proxy for how well the ruling coalition is doing its job. Despite such swings by a portion of the public, the core pro-Western and pro-Russian integrationist camps remain highly divided. Cooler heads prevailed as the country watched a year of violence unfold in neighboring Ukraine. But self-restraint does not always last, and Moldova—an almost-Ukraine—may follow Ukraine's path still.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

In concluding, I leave the reader with three thoughts. First, an observant reader will note a mismatch between the title and the argument. I do not mean to imply that region or geography matters when it comes to how rulers balance the contradictions and countervailing pressures in geopolitics and foreign policy. Belarus, for example, is a notable bulwark of inertia in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, while Kyrgyzstan has had more than its fair share of political upheaval. Rather, my argument here is that we have not paid enough attention to how rulers, political elites, and domestic publics react to geopolitical pressures and foreign policy choices that decisively and divisively affect a country's future. It so happens that Central Asia's rulers have managed to insulate their foreign policy decisions from domestic turmoil in a way that has eluded their counterparts in Eastern Europe.

Second, this memo does not advocate iron-fisted rule nor does it recommend that rulers isolate their foreign policy from broader input and public debate. No ruler is fully immune from domestic blowback against his or her foreign policy decisions and that includes "consummate balancers" like Nazarbayev. Kazakhstan's strategy of balancing Western, Russian, and Chinese interests and integration projects is possible in part because, as Central Asia expert Marlene Laruelle [points out](#), those projects have yet to mature. When they do, the unresolved contradictions in the country's balancing act will be painfully obvious and harder to maintain.

Third and last, international policymakers and sponsors of integration projects—be they Western or Eastern—have to be mindful of their own actions. EU and EEU officials and diplomats have become skilled at making recriminations about how each side has played destructive geopolitical games. They are much less skilled, however, in recognizing when their advocacy and pressure on target states will backfire. In recent

years, the EU pushed for closer association with states like Ukraine and Moldova despite major national cleavages in both countries. In furthering the association process, the EU may have inadvertently fueled an unproductive, zero-sum public debate in Moldova and undermined its goal of fostering more democratic and transparent politics in the country. Moldova today has a divided society, a dysfunctional party system, a depressed economy, and dismal prospects to join the EU as a full member. It does, however, have a junta of diplomats who remain very capable at playing up the country's rightful place in the EU to Brussels.

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