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The Stability of Uzbekistan and Central Asia after the Death of Islam Karimov

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The first-ever change of leader of Uzbekistan is a test for its authoritarian political system built by Islam Karimov. His death in September could lead to destabilisation of the country and in the region against a background of conflict between regional clans, ethnic tension and Uzbek jihadists. Although in these circumstances Russia will find it easier to rebuild its influence in Uzbekistan, the EU and NATO should engage in dialogue with the new Uzbek leader on issues ranging from combating terrorism to deeper economic reforms and liberalisation of the country's political system.

Succession of Power. The change in leadership after the death of Uzbekistan's long-time president, Islam Karimov, on 2 September 2016, is the first since the country gained independence in 1991. It will also be the most important test of its authoritarian political system. The Uzbek leader did not designate an official successor. He maintained a state of competition in the government between the Samarkand clan represented by Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the Tashkent clan of Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov (these so-called "clans" group officials from one region and form informal political factions in the government of Uzbekistan). Mirziyoyev, who has been acting president from 8 September, seems most likely to gain the full presidency. An election must be announced within three months, that is, by December this year. Although it will not be truly free and democratic, the election will enable the authorities of Uzbekistan to maintain the fiction of wide social legitimacy. The key arbiter in the struggle for leadership is Gen. Rustam Inoyatov, who for more than 20 years has been head of the National Security Service and previously supported Mirziyoyev's career. For now, it seems that there has been a compromise between these politicians to ensure the continuity of the authoritarian system.

Stability of Uzbekistan. Karimov's death is also a test of the economic and social stability of Uzbekistan. The current economic model is based mainly on the export of raw materials (including gas, gold and cotton), which benefits the oligarchic elite of the country. Unlike Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan in its first decade after independence did not attract foreign investment in its gas sector despite interest from China, South Korea and Japan. Most of the production of natural gas satisfies the internal needs of the country and a relatively slight surplus goes to Russia, Kazakhstan and China, as well as the often insolvent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan also collects fees on the transit of gas from Turkmenistan to China. Beyond gas, Uzbek cotton production methods have not changed since Soviet times. The authorities often order officials and students to the fields when it is time to collect it. Meanwhile, decreasing money transfers from Uzbeks working in Russia—as a result of the economic crisis in the latter country—have meant a significant deterioration of the financial situation of the society. These transfers were in recent years one of the main sources of income of Uzbek families and amount to as much as 10% of GDP. The country's current economic model combined with the economic crisis in the region could lead to an increase in anti-government sentiment. The new leader of Uzbekistan will have to take on deeper systemic reforms. If these are limited to cosmetic changes, in the long run an increase in public protest and destabilisation of the country cannot be ruled out.

Uzbekistan and Russia. Karimov tried to diversify his foreign policy in order to create a greater margin of freedom from Russian influence. This action was enhanced by the emigration of Russians and a personnel policy in the special services and administration. Although Karimov was a difficult partner for Russia, the U.S. and China, this approach gained Uzbekistan greater autonomy in security matters than the neighbouring and much richer Kazakhstan. Examples of this include Uzbekistan's reluctance to integrate with the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO),

recognition of the growing role of China in the region and accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This approach was carried out in parallel with pragmatic bilateral military cooperation with both Russia and the U.S.

The new Uzbek president may try to deepen cooperation with Russia. Attracted by Russian promises of access for Uzbeks to the labour market of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Uzbekistan may start discussions on integration with the Russia-built organisation. Also, the personal interests of Uzbek elites that have business ties with Russia may motivate them to push for rapprochement with Russia and the EEU. The first step in this may be the plans to build a common market between the EEU and Uzbekistan without the latter's full membership of the former. Mirziyoyev, who has family ties with a Russian billionaire of Uzbek origin, Alisher Usmanov (affiliated with Gazprom and the Kremlin), is perceived as the most pro-Russian politician. Inoyatov also would likely try to maintain or improve the relationship between the leaders of Uzbekistan and Russia.

Uzbekistan and Central Asia. Since the disintegration of the USSR, relations between Uzbekistan and other countries in region have been tense, and with Kazakhstan, rivalrous. Given that these countries are relatively new and the need to build a national identity, Uzbek minorities in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (14% of each population) might be a destabilising factor. Uzbekistan together with Russia intervened in the Tajikistan civil war (1992–1996), and later encouraged divisions in the country. Other reasons for regional tensions include issues with the delimitation of borders, the supply and transit of electricity, and access to drinking water. They are manifested in repeated skirmishes between the border services of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek authorities many times have halted supplies of gas and electricity to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Some were in retaliation for their plans to build dams and power plants, which might decrease the amount of water flowing to Uzbekistan. These conflicts hamper—if not rule out altogether—the prospects for regional integration in Central Asia. Nevertheless, the influence of Uzbekistan among the Uzbek minority in Afghanistan (9% of the population) are a reason for the U.S., Russia and other Asian neighbours to seek cooperation with Karimov's successor. Uzbekistan had made its air bases available for coalition operations in Afghanistan but ended it in 2005 after American criticism of the use of force to quell riots in Andijan. However, it seems that it had only a temporary impact on intelligence cooperation between the U.S. and Uzbekistan.

Facing Regional and Global Jihad. The last three decades have seen a rebirth of Islam in Central Asia and the emergence of fundamentalism there. The radicalisation of the Uzbek opposition was caused by the Karimov regime's repression and the civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The creation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has bases with the Afghan Taliban, and its pledge of loyalty to Al-Qaeda threatened Karimov and other regimes in the region. Its safe haven in Afghanistan allowed IMU to stage raids into Kyrgyzstan (1999-2000) and recruit new members in Central Asia and China (among the Uighurs). In this period IMU took control over Afghan drug-trafficking via Central Asia to Russia and Europe. The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan resulted in high losses of the leaders of IMU and the majority of its members had to flee to hide in Pakistan. Some of them turned to fighting ISAF troops in Afghanistan and become elite forces even among the experienced Taliban insurgents. But some of the IMU leaders were interested in a more ambitious agenda and further cooperation with Al-Qaeda cells in the Caucasus and Middle East. The differences in strategy led to a split in the IMU and the emergence of the Islamic Jihad Union. This latter group became more known for planning spectacular terrorist attacks in Germany (2007–2008). The future of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia might be influenced by trends in global jihad, currently shaped by the weakness of Al-Qaeda, divisions among the Taliban and the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS/IS). In 2015, IMU leaders declared they had broken from Al-Qaeda and were joining the new "Caliphate province" in Afghanistan. In the last two years, at least 500 Uzbeks and IMU members have moved to Syria and Iraq, where they are highly respected among jihadists. However, the presence of Uzbeks in the ranks of ISIL or Al-Qaeda affiliates should be seen in the right context and proportion. On the one hand, they might still be the biggest "contingent" of Central Asians (estimated at 2,000 in total) in Syria and Iraq but, on the other hand, they are only a fraction of the radical group of foreign fighters from the Middle East, Russia or Europe, and only a drop in the bucket compared to Uzbekistan's population.

Conclusions. The change of power in Uzbekistan will not turn the political regime to a democratic direction. It is not certain that Karimov's successor will be able to maintain an equally strong position in the country or region, and an increase in Russian influence is highly likely. The economic crisis in the whole post-Soviet area and worsening of living conditions in Uzbekistan might result in more sympathisers of radical Islam, perceived by part of society as an alternative to the current regime. It also should be taken into account that terrorist organisations will try to recruit more Uzbeks, organise cells where they go, and stage terrorist attacks on Europe, too. By criticising Tashkent for its poor human rights record, the U.S. and EU are less attractive as partners for Uzbekistan compared with Russia and China. Even so, the U.S., the EU and its Member States should try to deepen cooperation with the new Uzbek president, not only on issues concerning Afghanistan and combating terrorism but also economic cooperation with the EU, especially if the new president will decide to renew negotiations about membership of the World Trade Organisation (abandoned in the previous decade). The ruling elite in Tashkent—if seeing benefits in stronger relations with the U.S. and EU—might be much more willing to seek limited liberalisation of the economic and political system in Uzbekistan.