

Known as the “Heartland”, “Pivot Area” or, in Russian, “Central’naja Azija”, they are a group of high-risk republics, not only for Putin’s Russia and not only because of the Islamic independence movement. These States are a theatre of competition between the Russians and the Americans and channel a flow of drugs to Europe and the U.S. And there is little scope for optimism, because unlike Ukraine...

Central Asia isn’t orange

POLITICS

by Giovanni Bensi

As far back as 1904, English geo-politician Sir Halford Mackinder had broadly defined Central Asia, i.e. the region extending from southwest of the Urals to Iran and the Indian Ocean, as the *Heartland* or *Pivot Area*, crucial for the control of the Euro-Asian continental bloc and hence, subsequently, the rest of the world. This region includes a group of five former Soviet republics – Uzbekistan (including the Karakalpak region), Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan –

that was defined *Srednjaja Azija* (Central Asia or “middle”) in the USSR and is now called *Central’naja Azija* (the same meaning) in Russian. However, despite the importance Mackinder attributed to this region, the succession of events following the collapse of the USSR took the West by surprise, as the West had become used, during the 80 years of Communist rule, to considering Central Asia as a sort of Russian “back-shop” without genuine and independent importance from Russia’s own role as the dominant element of the Soviet Union. Martha Brill Olcott, a first-rate American expert, confirmed this when she said: “Central Asia’s independence was unexpected for America. We did not expect eight different States to emerge in the Caspian

_Putin (right) during a CACO’S summit (Central Asian Cooperation Organization) in St. Petersburg last July, accompanied (from left) by Presidents of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan



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region” (besides the five Central Asian States, the reference here is to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia).

In the course of the current year, some Central Asian countries have witnessed dramatic events focused on the attempt to free themselves from the old elites inherited from the Soviet regime. In two countries, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, popular revolutions broke out. In the first case, the insurrection (*tjul'panovaja revoljucija*, or “tulip revolution”), partly linked to the economic conflict between the more advanced north and the more backward south, was motivated by fraud in parliamentary elections and ended with a change in the government: former President Askar Akayev was ousted and exiled to Moscow. Opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev emerged the victor in the presidential elections which followed, with 88% of the votes, and the post of new prime minister went to another Akayev adversary, Felix Kulov. In Uzbekistan, on the other hand, the revolution that began in Andijan in the Ferghana valley (which had already witnessed an anti-Russian revolt during the reign of Czar Nicholas II, in May 1898) was unsuccessful: this insurrection

was bloodily put down and President Islam Karimov remained in his post. Official estimates put the number of dead at 169 people; according to Nigara Khidoyatova, leader of the *Ozod Dehkonlar* (“Free Peasants”) opposition party, there were no fewer than 745 victims, 542 in Andijan and 203 in Pachtabad. In another Central Asian republic, Kazakhstan (the second-biggest, after Russia, of the former Soviet republics), presidential elections were held on 4 December 2005. There were few doubts that Nursultan Nazarbayev, a supporter of “Eurasianism” and collaboration with Russia, would be returned to power. The electoral process in Central Asian countries is rapidly becoming a serious international problem. As recently as early 2005 there was talk of an informal Moscow-Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan)-Astana (Kazakhstan) axis to counter the export of the so-called *cvetnye revoljucii* (“coloured revolutions”, after Ukraine’s Orange Revolution). Russia had already demonstrated its interest in a stable Kazakhstan during a meeting in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Nazarbayev, while the Russian Defence minister had warned in New York of a possible “sharp



_Above left: supporters of Kyrgyzstan President Felix Kulov; right: protesters in front of the Uzbek embassy call for the resignation of Uzbek President Islam Karimov

reaction" (*ostraja reakcija*) on Russia's part to "the export of revolutions to the CIS countries". The January accords on cooperation in cosmonautics (the former Soviet space launch base of Baikonur is located in Kazakhstan) and energy exploitation, including a 47% annual increase in trade (\$7 billion in 2004), make Kazakhstan Russia's key economic partner in the region. Nazarbayev managed to obtain open support from Russia at a fresh meeting with Putin in Kazan in Tatarstan in August 2005. Specifically, the two Presidents evaluated the possibility of increasing the value of trade between the two countries to \$20 billion. Nazarbayev also announced that he intends to sign 15 of the 93 documents on 1 March 2006, drawn up with a view to creating a "common economic area" (EEP: *Edinoe Ekonomiceskoe Prostranstvo*). Finally, the

significance of Kazakhstan's hydrocarbon fields, which have drawn the interest of Russia as well as the U.S., should be kept in mind. In 2001 a record 40 million tons of petrol were extracted in this country. In 2005 production is expected to rise to 60 million tons and to 100 million tons in 2010. The underwater fields of the Caspian Sea aside, petrol and gas reserves are estimated at 2.9 billion tons. The oilfields are concentrated in the northern part of the country around Tengiz Lake, where the new capital Astana has also been built (on the site of the old town of Akmolinsk, renamed Tselinograd when Nikita Khrushchev launched the failed *Tselinny Kray*, or Virgin Lands Territory agricultural project).

Although the Kazakh opposition had actively tried to establish contact with the Russians, Moscow's sympathies were clearly with Nazarbayev. During the electoral campaign propaganda minibuses circulated in the major towns of Kazakhstan with posters of Putin and Nazarbayev and the slogan "The Russians, the Kazakhs and the Slavs are with Nursultan and Russia is with us. Who are you with? Nazarbayev – Yes!" This initiative was taken by an organisation



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nominally defined as “non-governmental” and called the “Council for the Coordination of Slavic Organisations for the Candidacy of Nazarbayev as President”. The setting up of this group was approved not only by the administration of the Kazakh President but also by the Russian embassy and the Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Mefodij, head of the Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan, gave the “Slavs” his blessing for this “holy” pre-electoral work. It should not be forgotten that 53.4% of the republic’s nearly 15 million inhabitants are Turkish-speaking Kazakhs while the Slavic component comprises 30% Russians and 3.7% Ukrainians.

The situation in the formerly Soviet Central Asia can be tackled from various points of view: the geo-strategic and military viewpoint, that of Islamic extremism (the entire population of the region except that from some fringes, including the Iranian Tajiks, are Sunni Muslims), or that of narcotics trafficking, for which the region (espe-

cially if we consider the non-former Soviet area of Afghanistan) is a driving hub. Let’s start with the most troubling and dramatic of these, Islamic extremism. The two major organisations of this type in the region are the “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” (called *Islamskoe dviženie Uzbekistana*, IDU, in Russian and *O‘zbekistonning Islom Horakati*, O’IH in Uzbek) and the “Islamic Liberation Party”, known by its Arabic denomination *Hizb ut-Tahrir il-Islami*. IDU has local roots. While the precise circumstances of its origins are vague, we do know that it was founded by Jumaboi Khojaev, better known as Juma Namangani, and Tohir Yoldashev. Both men, natives of the town of Namangan in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana valley, took part in the 1992-97 civil war in Tajikistan, enlisting with the Islamic opposition. Namangani in particular was suspected of running a profitable narcotics smuggling operation from Afghanistan to Central Asia. IDU organised armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan and



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Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000 and started clashes with the troops of these countries to demand the liberation of Islamists imprisoned there, making no secret of their intention to overthrow the regime of Islam Karimov. In addition, IDU is held responsible for five car bombings in Tashkent in February 1999. In May 2003 the Kirghiz police foiled an IDU attempt to bomb the American embassy and a nearby hotel in the capital Bishkek. IDU has bases in eastern Tajikistan and had a base in Afghanistan under the Taliban, where it established links with al-Qaeda. In the summer of 2001 it fought alongside the Taliban and was still in Afghanistan when Anglo-American troops stormed the country after the 9/11 attacks

in the U.S. IDU suffered serious losses and Namangani himself is said to have been killed. Tohir Yoldashev, on the other hand, is believed to be alive. In March 2004 he was apparently wounded in the Pakistani "tribal areas" of Waziristan and is said to be attempting to re-organise IDU. In September 2004 he gave the BBC an interview in which he denied that he had been wounded and announced his intention to continue his "battle". The *Hizb ut-Tahrir* on the other hand is an "import product" into Central Asia. Founded in Jerusalem in 1953 by a Palestinian judge or *qadi*, Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, it spread mainly to a few Arab countries, starting with Jordan and Saudi Arabia, before expanding into Central Asia by as-yet unclear means between the last few years of the Soviet regime and the first few years after the collapse of the USSR.

While they have maintained their rhetoric in the fight against the "Great Satan" represented by "American imperialism" and Western (including Russian) imperialism in general, in recent times both IDU and the *Hizb* appear to be oriented towards a focus on local Central Asian problems, portraying themselves as defenders of the peasants and the poor (as during the Bishkek and Andijan revolts) and putting the idea of a "global *jihād*" second. In addition, there is no lack of attempts on the part of both organisations to start a dialogue with the ruling powers in the various republics. In reality, the new tactic has not altered the intended ends of overthrowing the region's secular regimes and instituting an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. The Islamic organisations are heavily involved in the drug trade, based on the widespread opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan (a plague that neither the government of Hamid Karzai nor the Americans have been able to eradicate), a vast network of dealers and a tried and tested system of contraband routes through Central Asia towards Russia and Europe. Russian experts estimate that the annual volume of hard drugs (i.e. heroin) crossing the region has increased to reach a current level of 430 tons. With Europe's consumption estimated at about 70 tons, it can be seen that at least 360 tons of the remaining drugs do not go out of CIS territory. A portion of these drugs passes through the extremely long (7,500 km) and practically unguarded border

between Kazakhstan and Russia. On 18 January 2005, during Nazarbayev's visit to Moscow, an agreement was signed to mark off the borders, but a genuine demarcation has so far not been made, especially because of Kazakh resistance.

The political and economic situation in Central Asia does not allow much scope for optimism. Many observers have tried to perceive the signs of a forthcoming "coloured revolution" in this region too on the lines of the "orange" one in Ukraine. However, these prognostics have not proved true (quite apart from the far from excellent proof offered in Ukraine itself by the leaders of that "revolution", Viktor Yushchenko and Julia Timoshenko). Events in Kyrgyzstan actually have very little to do with the "orange" spirit. In Uzbekistan the attempt to change the regime has failed, not least because of the involvement in the popular movements of groups such as IDU and the *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. Those countries that have followed the recommendations of the OSCE and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), such as Tajikistan, are experiencing serious difficulties. The economic success of Kazakhstan in 2004 (a 9.5% growth in annual GDP) is linked to the business cycle and high oil and gas prices more than anything else. What is more, Nazarbayev's regime has always been marked by endemic corruption, nepotism and violations of democracy. The so-called Kazakhgate scandal over bribes paid to Nazarbayev (into Swiss accounts) by American citizen James Giffen, a consultant employed by the Kazakh President, on behalf of American oil companies interested in exploiting oilfields in Kazakhstan, has not yet been resolved. The case has been dragging on since 1999, after it came to light primarily following allegations made by former prime minister and Nazarbayev's main opponent Akezhan Kazhegeldin. Giffen is on trial in New York, and in March 2005 discussions were postponed to January 2006. The "Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan" (*Demokraticeskij vybor Kazachstana*, DVK) opposition party led by the former Speaker of Parliament Zharmahan Tujakbaj was banned even before the December 2005 elections could take place. There is total stagnation in Turkmenistan, ruled by former Communist leader Saparmurat Niyazov, who has now

converted to Islam and is best known for having written a "philosophical" treatise titled *Ruhnama* ("Spiritual Book"), which the author himself has proclaimed to be "the most important work in the world after the Koran".

In any case the Central Asia region remains "on the burner", whether because of the internal situation of individual countries or because, as Russia's "back-shop", since the 9/11 terrorist attacks it has also become a theatre of strategic competition between Russia and the U.S. In recent times, however, there has been a cooling off on the part of the Americans, especially after the bloody events in Uzbekistan. In October 2005 the US Senate suspended the payment of \$23 million to Tashkent for use of the Chanabad military base after having defined the regime of Islam Karimov "dictatorial". That same month, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice crossed Uzbekistan off the itinerary of her visit to Central Asia in protest against the Andijan events. ■■■■■