

Kazakhstan and the “Russian World”

IS A NEW INTERVENTION ON THE HORIZON?

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Russia’s annexation of Crimea and subsequent support for separatists in eastern Ukraine gave rise to fears that this scenario could be repeated elsewhere. Especially worrisome is the fact that the intervention was justified by the alleged need to protect ethnic Russians, and Russian foreign policy in general has become increasingly focused on the idea of the “Russian world.” Since Russian minorities exist throughout the post-Soviet space, it is possible that they could be used for provocations against their host states. Although the Baltic countries and Moldova are named as the most vulnerable among Russia’s neighbors, similar concern has been expressed with regard to Kazakhstan.

There is a sizable Russian minority in Kazakhstan, numbering around 4.3 million people, or 23.7 percent of the total population (and up to nearly 27 percent if all groups that could qualify as Russia’s “compatriots” are counted). Of significance, the Slavic population is concentrated in the north and east of the country, along the border with Russia. There is a Slavic majority in most administrative districts of the North Kazakhstan, Kostanay, and Akmola regions, as well as along the eastern borders of the East Kazakhstan and Pavlodar regions (see map). In addition, ethnic Kazakhs tend to be underrepresented in urban populations, making the predominance of the Russian identity in these regions even more substantial.



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Discussing a possible Russian intervention in Kazakhstan might sound unnecessarily alarmist, but since this theme is already present in the media, ignoring it is hardly a good idea either. Besides, one lesson learned from Crimea is that even if a scenario looks unbelievable given a particular historical situation, it can suddenly materialize with a change in circumstance. Instead of ignoring the risks or overreacting to imagined threats, one is better off assessing the probability of various outcomes in a sober and realistic way.

This memo attempts to contribute such a risk assessment. I adopt the logic of the worst-case scenario, while differentiating between intentions and capabilities. We know little about the former, but I assume that given the chance, the Kremlin would again use the idea of the “Russian world” to violate the territorial integrity of its neighbors. To assess the latter, I look at one key aspect of the Russian intervention in Ukraine which is typically ignored when reasoning by analogy in other cases.

A crucial element of capability is legitimacy in the eyes of domestic audiences. This applies to authoritarian regimes probably even more than democracies. In Russia’s case, one of the major reasons for aggression was to boost the leadership’s popularity by rallying the public against a postulated external threat. This involved a massive propaganda campaign, but one that did not operate in a vacuum: it had to rely on pre-existing socially accepted attitudes and narratives. Comparing the Ukrainian and Kazakh cases in this regard reveals significant differences, which suggests that the repetition of the same sequence of events in Kazakhstan is unlikely in the short term. This does not exclude other scenarios of potential intervention, but it does invalidate the analogy between Ukraine and Kazakhstan based on the presence of Russian minorities. In the longer run, monitoring public discourse can be used as a predictive tool in risk assessment.

Kazakhstan as a Proxy?

Russian intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine was made possible by the acute destabilization of the domestic situation in Ukraine in the context of the Euromaidan revolution. This domestic instability within Russia’s neighbor was then grossly exaggerated by Russian propaganda, making it possible to present the ethnic Russian population of Ukraine as facing an imminent threat of large-scale violence.

While Kazakhstan has remained relatively stable throughout the post-Soviet period, personalist regimes are always fragile and in the shadow of inevitable transition. As demonstrated by the disturbances in Zhanaozen in December 2011, which echoed throughout the country, there remains a significant potential for mobilization against the current ruling elites. Moreover, Kazakhstan’s location makes it vulnerable to the potential spread of instability from the south, in view of Afghanistan’s uncertain future

and a rather unstable equilibrium in the rest of Central Asia, especially Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Instability, however, is not by itself sufficient grounds for intervention. Starting at least with the “Orange Revolution” of 2004, Ukraine was perceived as a battleground in a global geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West, in particular the United States. Both the 2004 and the 2013–14 Maidans were seen as directly instigated from Washington with the final goal being regime change in Russia. This picture resonates with the commonsense worldview of ordinary Russians, inherited from the Soviet times, in which NATO has always been Russia’s main adversary and a quintessentially anti-Russian force. It was this interpretation of events that precipitated the Russian intervention in Ukraine.

In the hypothetical case of a Kazakh “color revolution,” Russian elites will most probably be inclined, once again, to view developments as the product of an anti-Russian intervention. However, presenting this as a direct threat to Russia’s sovereignty and security will be a much more difficult task. Unlike Ukraine, Kazakhstan has no realistic membership prospects in either the European Union or NATO. There will be few incentives for whatever government would be in power in Astana to pull out of Vladimir Putin’s pet project of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Even should that happen, there would be fewer chances for such a move to be seen as part of an encirclement of Russia by the West.

Closer relations with China might in fact be a better alternative for a future Kazakh ruling class. In principle, a Kazakh shift to China might present a more tangible threat to Russia’s interests than any putative rapprochement with the West. However, China has been consistently portrayed by the Kremlin as a friendly power, a partner in the promotion of a multipolar world in defiance of U.S. hegemony. The Russian public would not be ready to immediately accept a framework in which China replaces NATO as Russia’s main adversary, with Kazakhstan associated to this newly hostile force. Mobilizing memories of the Sino-Soviet confrontation or the flaring up of fears of a Chinese demographic takeover in the Far East would be relatively easy, but it would not be sufficient to justify any action in northern and eastern Kazakhstan. Even such a construction, moreover, would still miss a crucial element needed to justify any territorial claims: the idea that “compatriots” in the borderlands are in grave and immediate danger.

Contrasting Images of the “Russian World”

Even if Russia ends up facing a material and undeniable challenge to its interests in Central Asia, such as the spread of radical extremist ideologies or a new assertive Chinese policy, this would not be enough to put the existing borders in question. If the Ukrainian script were to be used for that, Moscow would have to demonstrate that the

instability is a direct and imminent threat to Russian-speaking communities there. With all due regard to the power of the Russian state-controlled media, this cannot be done overnight, in the absence of pre-existing points of reference.

With Ukraine, clear “friend-enemy” images, conflicting historical narratives, and symbols had all been established long before the conflict started. A whole generation of nationalist Russian politicians, most prominently former Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov, made their careers promoting the myth that Crimea had always been a piece of the “Russian world,” that the Russian language was all but banned in Ukraine, and that Ukrainian leaders were forcefully promoting false, anti-Russian interpretations of history domestically and in the West.

This memory and culture conflict was actively waged also on the Ukrainian side, thus helping the Russian state to promote an image of Ukrainians as a hostile nation. Of particular importance was the 2006 law officially defining the famine of 1932–33 (known by its Ukrainian name *Holodomor*) as a genocide against the Ukrainian people, as well as the later unsuccessful attempts by then-president Viktor Yushchenko to criminalize denial of the *Holodomor*. Steps toward the political rehabilitation of radical nationalist leaders who fought against the Soviets during and after the Second World War, along with relentless debates on the status of the Russian language, also contributed to alienation between the two nations. It is indicative that one of the major pretexts for the annexation of Crimea was the adoption by the Ukrainian parliament immediately after the Euromaidan of a bill (that was never signed into law) repealing the 2012 language law, which had endowed Russian with official status as a regional language.²

What needs to be highlighted is the contrast between the two cases. For Ukraine, Russian propaganda had plenty of established reference points on which to construct an enemy image that could be further radicalized. Nothing of the kind is present with regard to Kazakhstan. The Russian language in Kazakhstan enjoys official status as the “language of interethnic communication” and is spoken by 95 percent of the population, as opposed to Kazakh, which is spoken by less than 65 percent of the population. Also, no region in northern or eastern Kazakhstan has any special symbolic significance in Russian national mythology. Places associated with major achievements of Soviet times—the Baikonur launch site, the “virgin lands” that were converted to agricultural use in the late 1950s–early 1960s, the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing ground—cannot be even remotely compared to Crimea in either symbolic or geopolitical terms. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who suggested in 1990 that Kazakhstan, or at least its northern and central part, should remain in a union with Russia after the imminent end of communist rule, is still respected by many, including Mr. Putin. However, his proposal is mostly discussed

² The question of whether and to what extent these policies by Ukrainian governments were justified is important but has no bearing on the key argument of this memo.

by critics of the Kremlin, especially among Kazakhstani intellectuals, and does not really constitute a major part of the Russian world concept.

More broadly, Kazakhstani elites are certainly anxious about Russia's plans with respect to their country. This, however, is not matched by an equal degree of attention to Kazakhstan in the Russian public space. Furthermore, Kazakhstani and Russian elites largely share a common memory of the Second World War, the focal point in the contradictions between Russia and its neighbors in the West, while existing points of controversy are never politicized. While Kazakhstan is trying to establish its own national narrative in opposition to Russian and Soviet colonialism, this is done in a low-key manner, without any major symbolic steps that would draw the attention of the Russian media.

Still today, Russian public opinion remains in denial about the country's imperial past and the consequences of Russian and Soviet colonialism for subaltern nations. In relations with Russia's Western neighbors, this leads to head-on confrontations between national narratives. When it comes to Russia's attitude to Kazakhstan, however, the lack of postcolonial reflection, while still morally reprehensible, has a defusing effect. In the Russian public mind, there is no established image of a "Kazakh nationalist," which could be quickly radicalized to produce scarecrows like "Ukrainian fascists," a key element of the Russian narrative justifying annexation of Crimea and support for the Donbas separatists. While one might wish Russia would come to terms with its past in a more democratic way, for the time being this suboptimal equilibrium seems to be better than open confrontation.

Listen to Your Neighbor

The dramatic events of 2014 have taught us not to discard any possible scenarios just because we believe they contradict what we assume are the norms of rational international conduct. However, regardless of the type of rationality behind a certain policy line, the question of capabilities remains essential in risk assessment. In this memo, I have highlighted one key moment that a regime like Putin's Russia is bound to take into account: the need for its actions to appear legitimate in the eyes of the Russian public. The Kremlin sees the West as pursuing regime change in Russia using its neighbors as proxies in an undeclared war. Yet exactly for this reason, it has to conform to public expectations in its foreign policymaking: ignoring them would amount to undermining the domestic stability that is the key goal of the regime.

Putin was able to use the idea of endangered "compatriots" to justify the annexation of Crimea and the support of separatists in Donbas. However, even if Kazakhstan, along with Ukraine, is perceived as part of the "Russian world," it is a part that is presented as friendly and well integrated. While Kazakhstan's Russians might have their problems, these are generally not on the radar of Russian media. What is important for the latter is

the role of the country as a key partner in the EEU and as Moscow's key ally in the region.

As long as this image is sustained and there are no open provocations (such as a nationalist force openly harassing ethnic Russians), the Kremlin will not be able to immediately use the "Russian world" as a concept legitimizing an intervention. In this respect (and in this respect only) the analogy with Ukraine seems to be false. Should Moscow decide to use this card, Russian public opinion will first have to be mobilized against Kazakhstan. The reference points needed for such a mobilization would have to be nurtured before any massive propaganda campaign could start. Unless we see signs of this in the Russian public space, any challenge to the post-Soviet territorial settlement in this part of the "Russian world" is highly unlikely.

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