

UZBEKISTAN: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

The post – communist transition of Central Asia has been different from Eastern Europe. Two decades after the main swing to democracy has substantially changed the heart of Europe, Central Asian countries still seem somewhat frightened and hesitant to join the train of progress and democratization. What are the main internal and external reasons for this difference?

Authors representing one of the two remaining U.S. - funded non governmental organizations engaged in democracy building on the ground in Uzbekistan try to reflect the local perceptions both as outsiders and insiders in the ongoing transition process in Uzbekistan, the most populous Central Asian country.

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The post – communist transition of Central Asia has been somewhat different from what has been witnessed elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Almost two decades after the main swing to democracy has substantially changed the heart of Europe, Central Asian countries still seem somewhat frightened and hesitant to join the train of progress and democratization. What seem to be the main internal and external obstacles to Central Asian countries' transformation?

Western Miscalculations

Most of the Western attitudes towards the post-communist East derived from the cold war power struggles – in Central Asia these attitudes were perceived to be arrogant or, at least, lacking respect for local aspirations. Most of the Central Asian countries had no previous experience in either sovereignty or democratic rule. While people longed for better life, they also feared to lose whatever little freedoms and means of life they had, and were generally willing to offer obedience for stability, which provided them with at least a basically predictable environment. Critical thinking was encouraged neither in Soviet times, nor in traditional societies of Central Asia. Unlike the Western cultures, where individual rights, freedoms and responsibilities are the foundation of society, these cultures are based on community values. Being different from your community is much harder than in the West, speaking up with individual attitudes and positions is not received with understanding; to the contrary, it is often regarded as rude and clashing with local culture.

To speed up the process in somewhat slower Central Asia, the West – eager to go global - tried to stir the dynamics by using mainly two techniques that seemed to have worked in Eastern Europe. The first one, called the “name and shame” approach, includes undefined sanctions permanently hanging in the air as the worst punishment and disgrace at the end of the road. The second technique focuses on the election process; diligently pointing out the numerous mistakes of often relatively primitive techniques used by these societies that tried hard to at least nurture the impression that they want to become democratic and part of the “club of the rich and successful”. However, the West has never been very systematic and consistent in this – while this approach resulted in enthusiastically praised “color revolutions” in some states, it sadly turned into bloodshed and bitter experiences in other.

The problem with the first technique, sometimes also called “advocacy” is that it only works if you have all different pillars developed providing for checks and balances – most importantly a qualified and professional press. If the press does not know how to reach out to population in a timely manner and contribute to transparency and open arguments in such a way that issues and problems can be publicly discussed and digested, the “name and shame technique” simply does not work. It neglects to reward accomplishment and emphasizes errors – thereby further paralyzing the growth of much needed self-confidence, and painfully strengthening the legacy of the Soviet era that mistakes are inevitably lethal

for individuals involved. It only deepens the gap between those that are eager to introduce new approaches in their society and those that rigidly try to stick to old ways. It leads to simplified and often unfair international ridicule that does not encourage learning how to practice sovereignty and independence with individual responsibility. In societies where institutions have not recovered from the old Soviet legacy, and the situation on the ground is far from well developed rule of law, practicing confrontational approaches is highly counter-productive. The argument of power and superiority with those that have mainly been in inferior positions throughout their history is irrational and short-sighted policy, to say the least.

The problem with the second one (focus on elections) is that it has led to convictions that some countries are given better (or harsher) treatment than the others for purely selfish interests of the Western actors. There has indeed not been enough international consistency in this approach thus one can not seriously expect the goal of free and fair elections to be the main trigger of progress and development (for a variety of reasons, not just because of lack of sincere will and interest). International focus is dictated by different factors, and without its serious attention, the power mechanisms present in any country - usually strongly backed by available capital - just take the lead into their own direction, not really paying much attention to what is free and fair. This, too, has become a pretty well-understood lesson around the world leading some to use democracy -as a generally accepted promise of a better future- many times as lip service.

The world has dramatically changed since those euphoric times of 1991 when the Berlin Wall became a modern icon for some, and when the US and EU were the only success stories on the map. New walls, some real, some mental, have been set up since – and this does not make life any easier for the ill-prepared institutions and impoverished nations of Central Asia. Many new challenges emerged since, new threats to stability and new models of survival – and not all are related to the modern danger of terrorism. New giants on the rise – like China and India with their enormous human potential and somewhat different approaches – also should have more impact on Western judgments as to what their strategy and messages should be towards people on other continents, having different cultures.

The West and Russia

Most American and European actors have not sufficiently understood these developments, thus have not used the advantages they hold and have not been able to satisfy the high expectations of those they encouraged towards democracy. Russia, healing its wounds of humiliation from its early period of the post Cold War era, aggressively occupied the niche and advanced towards Central Asian countries mainly using its arrogant dominance as a former imperial nation of the communist federation. Lacking their own well-developed networks with the outside world and burdened by the Soviet mentality, Central Asians became an easy target for their former compatriot nation to “teach them” what the West’s

“real” intentions were. Russians enthusiastically got involved in the emerging tensions between Central Asian countries and the West by courting them with rhetoric that would increase those tensions rather than bridge differences. At the same time in its discussions with the West, Russia continued to position itself as the best avenue and partner for the Westerners in their dialogue with Central Asia, thereby denying Central Asians a chance to be understood and dealt with directly. One can understand Russian political reflexes – there is nothing wrong with pursuing one's own national interests. The Western sin is that they allowed this to go on for too long. They should have known better. Russians implemented a very simplistic policy – yet – the poison worked for a while – on both sides. Unfortunately, it did little or nothing to help the Central Asian countries. And – it has definitely so far worked for the benefit of Russia.

Central Asian Nations – Chapter One

Central Asian nations, initially happy to get out of the unpleasant inferior and humiliating situation of negotiating with the tougher actors from Europe and US, saw no alternative other than to turn to their former compatriot nation for support. But they forgot that they were no longer the same country – and that every country pursues mainly its own national interests.

Being master of yourself does not allow the comfort of easy exits, or any instant solutions, especially not when faced with significant problems. Building democracy and a stable society with a healthy economy and welfare that allows the majority of the population to live a decent life is a long and tiring road that takes courage and hard work. It takes vision and persistence to tackle the core of problems. Problems, if ignored and pushed into the background, never go away – they always re-appear. The danger is that they become bigger and resurface at the worst possible time.

The Period of The 90s

From the early 90s onward until 9/11, the West found it convenient to deal with Central Asia through Russia – it was simply comfortable. They knew most of the main Russian actors, while they knew little or nothing about other personalities and local players, especially in the countries of Central Asia.

In those times Russia was experiencing a lot of turmoil and had little time and capacity to deal with anyone else but itself. The race for resources probably came only with US aspirations to run a different policy in the Middle East – that helped skyrocket Russian energy business. What an irony!

Russian economy was once bankrupted too, but the West channeled enormous resources to help Russia reach the level of the developed world in terms of human capital, institutions, and businesses and offered it broad political access generally. At the same time, the West offered little to any other former Soviet republic (with the exception of the Baltic countries). Europe was totally pre-occupied

with Eastern Europe while the US probably saw no reason why they should become engaged and thus put most of their eggs into the Russian basket.

This, too, is the reality of the crucial period throughout the 90s when all these countries were eagerly looking towards the West for advice and help. The truth is they were more or less ignored in their most needy times.

Present Decade

Russia changed, too – and it rediscovered Central Asia again. While the main Russian motivation behind this new approach of offering a patronizing friendly umbrella to its former compatriots might have been to show its own muscles to the West, another solid reason to embark on this quick train to success was actually to gain from the ongoing privatization in these countries and to expand its own economic gains. They also hoped for an easy access to energy resources that Central Asian nations are rich with. It is apparent that Russia's success in the recent years has for a large part been based on immense profits it made as the main trader of the Central Asian natural resources – while only leaving peanuts to the countries where the resources come from.

For additional predominance, Russia quickly engaged in extensive negative campaigns among local populations emphasizing how the West is evil and bad and immoral, and how these countries can only lose from Western engagement. This has been a relatively easy task, since Russia controls most of this landscape linguistically and Russian media, superior to locals, has a larger impact on local populations than national media outlets do. While their messages often contradict local visions and messages of local politicians, the impact of Russian media has been an obstacle to the aspirations for independence and sovereignty of these countries.

Last but not least – one should not forget that Central Asian and Caucasus nations present a non-demanding and cheap labor resource for the Russian New Age (referring to the current economic boom). Because of the fear of nuclear conflict which kept the world on silent stand by, the Soviet Union never concluded a proper and fair succession process. Most of the power and development tools remained strongly in Russia's hands, while the other successor countries were left with rigid institutions, poorly educated administrators, little or no international experience, bankrupted economies, collapsed social welfare systems and armies of unemployed masses. There was also an abrupt lack of capable managers that could move things forward fast enough not to risk internal confrontations that can only delay a process of national recovery.

We hear little about the enormous cheap labor force from the Central Asian countries, left practically without any rights or protection, de facto kept as the main hostage of these countries in Russia today. It is true they might be important providers for many Central Asian families left behind today, but at the same time, their flow towards Russia further erodes local human resources and

hampers the development of local economies. We also hear practically nothing about the coffins in which too many of them return from Russia. The pain and desperation of Central Asian families when their loved ones – husbands, fathers, sons and brothers or even daughters - return this way - is not properly addressed. This issue may well return as a boomerang one day.

Central Asia – Chapter Two

What we witness today is the sobering of the Central Asian countries. We believe they have understood the first lesson of sovereignty and independence: freedom and stability comes with responsibility for a country's own destiny, this is also the sole guarantee for survival. We see them looking at their own potential and at their own resources with different attitudes today.

They seem to have gotten over the first shock and anger of the realization that their own destiny is in their hands only. We see many courageous moves, albeit somewhat cautiously made, in the right direction. They have made one point clear to all main actors – that they need to be treated with respect and as equals, even if they remain junior partners who are yet learning the art of successful economic and political relations. They do understand that shutting off from the world will not help them resolve anything that they need to urgently address. All these nations have a long history of survival, even if they sometimes have paid the price with too many human lives lost. They are incredibly innovative in making ends meet, and very determined to keep community values strong. While stubbornly boosting their demographic indexes, with wedding celebrations to this day being one of the main massive social events equally in rich or poor layers of population, they have also started to spread to different areas of the world. Yet – especially Uzbeks never give up the commitment and longing for their own country and their own culture. Their identity has been maintained through centuries: slow and introverted in nature, but surprisingly stubborn. This, too, is a good pillar for independence – provided that they are willing to learn from their own mistakes, heal their own wounds and – most of all - do better next time.

What they have learnt in their culture of community values and sharing should translate into the political system as well – elders should teach and train the younger generation, they should give them a chance and the luxury of a safe period of trials and errors. The big question of independence and survival lies in the transition of power from the older generation – indeed slower and at times too rigid for fast changing modern times - to the younger generation. The good news is that the younger generation has the patience and resilience of the older generation yet also faster reflexes and better insight into global priorities of today's world.

Conclusion:

As two of the those still on the ground in Uzbekistan - often called the very heart and brain of Central Asia - we remain ready to help Central Asian countries

start writing the third chapter with pride, self confidence and the much needed optimism they deserve. We strongly believe democracy is not about suffering and being a victim. We believe the wisdom of politeness, sense of quiet solidarity, remarkable tolerance and generally peaceful attitudes are gifts well respected in today's world, and can make Central Asians potentially strong partners.

However: while it is against Central Asian cultural traditions to clearly say NO to outsiders (often a very confusing experience for anyone not familiar with this typically Muslim cultural credo) –when they actually say so, it is a highly emotional process for them. It is not enough to learn how to say NO either. One needs to learn how to make a decision and say YES, too – saying it loud and clear, not with promises or excuses, but with concrete action and with consistent behavior. Without giving clear signs, followed up by clear actions, they can miss out on what is offered to them.

We are all interdependent. This, too, is an old wisdom that has not changed through the history of mankind. It remains very much valid in modern times – much like in personal lives it is also the main drive in the art of politics.

Independence and sovereignty – being master of his own – is about making decisions and following up with them. And without making a decision of giving it a try one can never bring any vision into real life, however good it may be.

And this seems to be the biggest challenge for the Central Asian nations today. The historic window of opportunity for them is finally wide open. It is up to them to notice it in time and become more self- confident and courageous owners of their own future. This is their best ticket to global partnership and respect, so they should think twice before they throw it away – just because they might be afraid of the future. The brutal reality check for the Central Asian nations is that they are making their future today, and they will have no one else but themselves to blame if their future is no different from today or yesterday. That is what independence is all about: the country's own people share both rewards for successes and the price for failures at the end.