

EUCAM Watch



Photo: by Natallia Rak, "Minsk Protest Rally 30.08.2020. Via Flickr under Creative Commons license



**Central Asian views
on Eurasia's turbulent 2020 events**

Covid-19 takes a backseat to war, protests, and power struggles

While the world continued to struggle with Covid-19 and had their eyes set on the outcome of the US elections, Eastern Europe and Central Asia were startled by the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, the protests in Minsk and the sudden power change in Bishkek. The protests in Belarus, which began in September, did have some media coverage and caught some attention in Western Europe, but the fraudulent elections in Kyrgyzstan and subsequent power grab by the rather unknown Sadyr Japarov went largely unnoticed to most Europeans. In the meantime, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh only began to attract substantial attention in Western Europe when a deal was suddenly struck by Russia. If these events were largely missed by the European public and politicians alike, how have Central Asians perceived such intense developments in the former Soviet space?

In this EUCAM Watch, five Central Asian analysts shed some light into how these events were regarded and reported in their respective countries. Whereas it seems that none of these developments got the coverage they deserved in neither Europe nor Central Asia (perhaps with the exception of the Kyrgyz events in Central Asian media), there are some differences and similarities among them.

First, there was a difference in the offer and consumption of media. National media in Central Asia seems to play a secondary role; the elderly tend to follow Russian media where they hear one thing, while youth is on social media where they discuss another thing. A lot of the debates on Belarus and Kyrgyzstan were fleshed out on social media platforms, while Central Asian governments clumsily tried to steer the traditional national media debate, but without having a clear direction of where they wanted to go: ignore protests in other countries or cover them as something evil? There is a clear difference between Central Asia and Europe; in most European countries, media and social media are free and tend to run more in parallel, but the stories or trending topics are becoming increasingly inward looking (perhaps with the exception of the US elections).

A *second* difference lied in the view of Russia's role. In Central Asia, views and analyses on Russia's involvement strongly dominated the news regarding the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Belarus protests. Who would Russia support? What would be decided in Moscow? Russia is clearly seen as having the power to determine the course and the fate of neighbouring countries. Besides the obvious military and diplomatic power wielded by Russia in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, there is also a lingering strong historical sentiment of a shared Soviet past that is recognisable in language, mentality, and architecture. In Europe, the debate on Belarus did not centre on Russia's role but more on the street protests themselves and the heavy-handed reaction by President Aleksander Lukashenko's security forces. Regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, the European focus was on Turkey and Russia. Turkey's role in actively supporting Azerbaijan in its war effort is seen by Europeans within a broader context characterised by additional grievances between Europe and NATO ally Turkey.

But there are also similarities.

First, religious sentiments that could have played a role in the reporting of the war over Nagorno-Karabakh remained very modest. One would have expected public sentiment in Europe siding with Armenia and Christianity, and in Central Asia supporting Azerbaijan as an Islamic country. But this was not so much the case. Yes, in Central Asia, especially among the broader population, Azerbaijan was seen in a more positive light, especially in claiming back territory in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. But this was mostly without vigour, given that Russia – a Christian ally of Armenia – is still dominant in Eurasia, and several Central Asian countries are members of the same regional Russian-led organisations as Armenia is. In Western Europe, the war only received attention when it was over; following a Russian-brokered deal, several traditional media outlets realised what had happened and started reporting about the Armenian refugees and the many churches that were being abandoned in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Second, for Europe and Central Asia alike, there was a feeling of being mere bystanders and spectators in a geopolitical game played by others in the former Soviet space, foremost Russia and, to a lesser extent, Turkey. The EU has not been very active in supporting Belorussian protesters seeking democratic change, and only some sanctions were applied against the country's leadership. The EU was also absent in Nagorno-Karabakh and was taken by surprise by the quick unravelling of events in Kyrgyzstan (as probably most external parties). Meanwhile, in Central Asia, Kazakhstan's role as a mediator and bridge-builder (previously displayed in Ukraine, Syria or Afghanistan) was not sought by the international community. In short, in recent Eurasian events, Central Asia and the EU were largely absent.

Those interested in taking a break from Covid-19-related news and learning about Central Asia's take on matters of war and peace in Eurasia, please have a look at this issue of EUCAM Watch.

*Editorial by **Jos Boonstra**,
EUCAM Coordinator,
Centre for European Security Studies, Groningen*

Table of Contents

- 2** Editorial by Jos Boonstra
- 4** *Interview with Aizhan Erisheva and Begimai Bekbolotova – Kyrgyzstan*
- 5** *Interview with Sergey Marinin – Kazakhstan*
- 6** *Interview with Muslimbek Buriev – Tajikistan*
- 7** *Interview with Ruslan Myatiev – Turkmenistan*
- 8** *Interview with Khurshid Zafari – Uzbekistan*
- 10** EUCAM upcoming publications

Interviews

Kyrgyzstan: Begimai Bekbolotova and Aizhan Erisheva, EUCAM Research Fellows

Aizhan: Is attention devoted to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh or the protests in Belarus in Kyrgyz media and public debate or is all focus on internal matters?

Some attention was devoted to these subjects, but neither was top news because today's main focus is on internal political developments in Kyrgyzstan. Even Covid-19 receives only modest attention. In the public discourse (mostly on social media) of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the focus was on Russia's actions, especially since Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) together with Armenia and Russia; for some Kyrgyz it was illustrative to see how CSTO did not play any role and is not a security guarantee for its member states. Regarding the protests in Belarus, the Kyrgyz public did follow the news and expressed their strong support to Belarussians in their quest toward democracy. Moreover, Kyrgyzstanis have high expectations that a regime change in Minsk would prompt the extradition of former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who is responsible for police violence against protesters in 2010 and who has been living in exile in Minsk.

Begimai: Do Kyrgyz people take a specific interest in events taking place in Eastern Europe or the Caucasus or is attention nowadays primarily focused on (Central) Asia?

Central Asian people are mostly concerned with events in their own region, in Russia or with developments that receive a lot of coverage in Russian media. It is interesting that the comments of French President Emmanuel Macron about Islam in early November did receive ample attention in Kyrgyzstan, even though not so much through official national media. There was even an anti-Macron protest in Jalal-Abad. This shows that the growing Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan has their own sources of information via different online groups and messaging services. People react to information they receive through these channels. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was not communicated through these channels as a conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. That's why there was not the same kind of reaction to it.

Begimai: Do Kyrgyz people see parallels between the struggle in Belarus and the earlier power changes in Kyrgyzstan (2005/10 and 2020)?

The ongoing protests in Belarus have not been covered extensively by official, state-sponsored media in Kyrgyzstan. Yet, Kyrgyzstan's younger generation is following the events closely via independent media and social media. Young people, who grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union and have experienced two revolutions, understand that one person should not rule the country for 25 years. Comments show that many of them are siding with the protestors. '#zhivebelarus' (long live Belarus) was a popular hashtag on Twitter at the start of the protests. Social media users drew parallels between the protests in Belarus and the situation in Kyrgyzstan. 'If 20.000 people went out to demonstrate in

Bishkek, we could have changed five governments' in Kyrgyzstan, wrote one user in August. People also commented on how well behaved and peaceful the protestors in Minsk were. A video was shared in which demonstrators took off their shoes before standing on a bench to watch a protest. Kyrgyz people, the comments were, would never do that. But the Belarus events, along with earlier Kyrgyz anti-corruption gatherings, have also inspired young Kyrgyzstanis, especially in Bishkek, who are moving away from aggressive protests and favour organising peaceful demonstrations.

Aizhan: How was the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan reported in Kyrgyzstan? What are the initial views about the peace agreement and the roles of Russia (and Turkey)?

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was covered in a rather unbiased fashion. The position of both countries was presented without taking anyone's side. The content was neutral, balanced and purposed to provide information, often using foreign media sources. It was also clear that a geopolitical chess game was being played between Russia and Turkey. Despite its close cultural ties with Azerbaijan, economic cooperation under the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Programme, and economic and political relations with Armenia within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and CSTO, Kyrgyzstan did not have its own position due to its own political crisis and the lack of legitimate power in the country.

Kazakhstan: Sergey Marinin, Alumnus EUCAM Research Fellow

Is there ample attention being devoted in Kazakhstan to the protests in Belarus? Is this considered a far-away matter or is the struggle in Belarus recognisable to the average Kazakh?

The case of Belarus was widely covered by the Kazakhstani media in the first days of the protests. Attention was riveted on the protests being peaceful, but not legitimate, due to the fact that President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev rushed to congratulate his Belarusian colleague for his overwhelming electoral victory. Therefore, state media were generally on the side of the newly-elected Belarusian president and not the protesters. However, Kazakhstan's public was well aware of how rigged election campaigns tend to be, thinking back about last year's Kazakh presidential elections, in which alternative candidate Amirjan Kossanov managed to mobilize many protest votes but, according to official estimates, only obtained 15 per cent of the vote. Many analysts noted that he received much more. But due to massive electoral violations and the swift repression of popular discontent by law enforcement agencies, Kazakhstan did not see such lengthy protest rallies as in Belarus.

How was the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan reported in Kazakhstan? What are the initial views about the peace agreement and the roles of Russia (and Turkey)?

Kazakhstan is ethnically and culturally close to Azerbaijan on the one hand, and bound by the CSTO with Armenia on the other hand. So here lays the discrepancy between the official stance of being diplomatic and neutral and not supporting any separatist tendencies in neighbouring countries, and the popular sentiment of Turkic brotherhood. Kazakh President

Tokayev endorsed Russian President Putin's peaceful efforts in Nagorno-Karabakh, as a way of demonstrating his country's diplomatic politesse and manoeuvring between regional players. The public was generally on Azerbaijan's side.

What is the general view in Kazakhstan about Kyrgyzstan's annulled October parliamentary elections, the subsequent power struggle and the rise of Sadyr Japarov?

The most popular and hot topic in Kazakhstan was, of course, the third 'non-revolution' in Kyrgyzstan and the subsequent political crisis. The way Kyrgyzstanis swept the president stroke the minds of all post-Soviet neighbours, including Kazakhstan. The October events even became a topic for anecdotes and popular memes, comparing long and overly peaceful and dull Belorussian protests with the dynamic and vigorous, and speedy wave of change in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz and Kazakh people have a lot in common, and ordinary citizens in Kazakhstan were positively amazed by the bravery and boldness of their Kyrgyz counterparts, who poured out onto the streets to march against the rampant corruption and enormous electoral fraud during the parliamentary elections. However, the Kyrgyz phenomenon of violent power change is seen as common for a country that is torn by clan infighting. The lack of power continuity, of a peaceful transition and of an independent judicial system and functioning parliament that was supposed to take responsibility have all led to the governance chaos. Amidst a wave of uncertainty, Sadyr Japarov is now trying to change the constitution and transform the country from a parliamentary to a presidential republic. Kazakhstan's political leadership is closely watching how the story of Japarov unfolds, however it will not become directly involved, considering what is happening across the border as the internal affairs of its neighbour.

Tajikistan: Muslimbek Buriev, Alumnus EUCAM Research Fellow

Is there ample attention being devoted in Tajikistan to the protests in Belarus? Is this considered a far-away matter or is the struggle in Belarus recognisable to the average Tajik?

The protests in Belarus are not regarded as important in Tajikistan. Some local independent media covered the events in Minsk on a regular basis, but there has not been much public debate over the matter. The Tajik state media have largely ignored the protests. Anonymous Telegram channels were attentive to the events in Belarus, often supporting the protests. Telegram is not yet that popular in Tajikistan, and it could be that some Tajik non-affiliated journalists and activists are beginning to take their first steps in civil journalism, sharing information and data that big media companies do not always provide. Meanwhile, Tajik authorities follow the events in Belarus closely as they fear a similar course of developments in Tajikistan, especially with a view towards the country's future presidential elections. In the end, the Belarusian and Tajik authoritarian systems are very similar in the way their leaders are portrayed and the system of nepotism and corruption that blocks any development but keeps the regime in place.

How was the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan reported in Tajikistan? What are the initial views about the peace agreement and the roles of Russia (and Turkey)?

Most of the attention was riveted onto Russia's mediatory role in the conflict. The Moscow-brokered peace agreement was warmly welcomed by Tajiks. Russia is still regarded as a 'big brother' that will not ignore international quarrels within the post-Soviet space. Tajik media reported poorly on the Nagorno-Karabakh war, but there was some popular interest to know more. Most people followed Russian TV or were informed via social media platforms.

What is the general view in Tajikistan about Kyrgyzstan's annulled October parliamentary elections, the subsequent power struggle and the rise of Sadyr Japarov?

Regarding the events in Kyrgyzstan, the main question was whether it could somehow influence Tajikistan. Politicians and experts had different views. Politicians spoke negatively about the protests, pointing out the senselessness of the demonstrations, the 'faults' of the democratic model in Kyrgyzstan, and stressing that the events could provoke 'groups' in Tajikistan, which could seize the opportunity and start demonstrations there as well. Several experts, however, spoke in a neutral manner, arguing that there was no implication to Tajikistan and that the developments were an internal matter of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan is often portrayed as an anarchic, volatile and unstable country, but there is actually little knowledge among the public about what actually happens there or who are the main politicians or political forces. The newspaper Asia-Plus conducted an online survey among its readers, trying to assess how people felt about the October protests in Kyrgyzstan. Respondents were asked, rather bluntly, to choose between 'this is criminal lawlessness that we can do without' or 'this is a revolution, the Kyrgyz are great'; 60 per cent chose the first option, showing that the majority still has a negative attitude towards public protests. As some politicians have argued, Tajiks will not agree with any public unrest, as they still remember the civil war of the early nineties.

Turkmenistan: Ruslan Myatiev, Director Turkmen.news

Is there ample attention being devoted in Turkmenistan to the protests in Belarus? Is this considered a far-away matter or is the struggle in Belarus recognisable to the average Turkmen?

Turkmenistan is keenly aware of the events in Belarus, primarily due to the fact that Belarus hosts some 8,000 Turkmen students. Naturally, Turkmen state media do not normally cover Belarusian politics, so most people get information from Russian or other external sources. On top of the protests, many students are affected by Covid-19, which is a cause for concern among families back home. Relatives are concerned about students' general well-being, but are also emphatically urging them not to engage in any protests (even though some have). Regarding the public's views on the protests, many Turkmen inside Turkmenistan support the street protests, but will not publicly share their feelings. They reiterate that if such protests were to occur in Turkmenistan, the government would shoot the entire crowd within an hour and lambast them as drug users or subversives funded by Turkmenistan's overseas enemies.

How was the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan reported in Turkmenistan? What are the initial views about the peace agreement and the roles of Russia (and Turkey)?

Much like the developments in Belarus, the Karabakh war was not covered by state media. Only the Jahan ýaňy (Planet's echo) news programme gave some very brief information about the war, but the material was very blasé from an informative standpoint. The people we spoke with are happy that the war has ended though. Those sympathizing with Armenia hate to accept peace on the current terms, but the majority of respondents support Azerbaijan chiefly out of a sense of 'Muslim [Turkic] brotherhood'.

What is the general view in Turkmenistan about Kyrgyzstan's annulled October parliamentary elections, the subsequent power struggle and the rise of Sadyr Japarov?

The political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan is the least understood event for the average Turkmen. Many do not understand how the results of parliamentary elections can lead to a change of president because such elections in Turkmenistan are an incredibly boring event that will not impact the lives of ordinary citizens at all. Those Turkmen citizens who are aware of the situation say that the Kyrgyz are exceedingly admirable given that normal citizens demonstrated their power to effect change once again and did not acquiesce to government pressure. Many Turkmen stated that they wished for a hundred of these Kyrgyz in Turkmenistan, so that they could replicate the abrupt change of government overnight. While the majority of Turkmen sympathize with the actions of Kyrgyz citizens, many also believe that the new Kyrgyz rulers will not lead to renewed prosperity in Kyrgyzstan and that the presidency will be weak compared to Turkmenistan's presidential office.

Uzbekistan: Khurshid Zafari, Alumnus EUCAM Research Fellow

Is there ample attention being devoted in Uzbekistan to the protests in Belarus? Is this considered a far-away matter or is the struggle in Belarus recognisable to the average Uzbek?

Uzbekistan, like other countries around the world, has experienced an uneasy year. The biggest challenge was obviously Covid-19 and the concomitant quarantine measures. Due to the decline of economic activity and the shortage of labour demand, the majority has been preoccupied with the everyday struggle of making ends meet. Only a limited number of people who have a stable source of income followed international news, including items from Eurasia. Therefore, the attitude of the Uzbek people towards recent events in post-Soviet countries is mostly the perspective of a narrow group. Uzbekistan was one of the first countries to congratulate Alexander Lukashenko on his contested victory in the Belarusian presidential elections. In reality, the results were not a surprise for Uzbek voters, because presidential elections in Uzbekistan are also largely characterised by a pre-defined main candidate who usually receives more than 90 per cent of the votes. Therefore, Lukashenko's victory with 80 per cent seemed a familiar situation. However, with the eruption of mass protests, many in Uzbekistan expressed their sympathy and solidarity with protesters, while understanding the difficulty of changing a long-ruling strongman. Lukashenko's visit

to Moscow and his deal with Russian President Putin as an attempt to keep his authority reminded of Islam Karimov's visit to Moscow after the Andijan events in 2005.

How was the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan reported in Uzbekistan? What are the initial views about the peace agreement and the roles of Russia (and Turkey)?

Since the emergence of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the official position of Uzbekistan has been to say that it supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Even though diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Armenia were established in 1995, neither has an embassy in each other's country, and there have never been any high-level political visit. Islam Karimov always openly expressed his position in support of the Azerbaijani side. Shavkat Mirziyoyev's foreign policy has been more pragmatic, and the Uzbek foreign ministry's official message has called on both sides to agree to an immediate ceasefire. The media discourse showed a clear support to the Azerbaijani side and portrayed news from Baku's standpoint. People's support to Azerbaijan is backed by ethnic and linguistic closeness, and religious solidarity, even if the two countries practice different branches of Islam. However, in general, Azerbaijan's operations were justified under the claim of defending territorial integrity. Reclaiming land that was controlled by the Armenian forces for 30 years brought back, to some extent, pan-Turkic sentiments of unity in Uzbekistan, especially in the hope of the establishment of a corridor to Nakhchivan and further to Turkey.

What is the general view in Uzbekistan about Kyrgyzstan's annulled October parliamentary elections, the subsequent power struggle and the rise of Sadyr Japarov?

The reaction of Uzbek citizens to the October events in Kyrgyzstan was modest. Kyrgyzstan has long been portrayed in Uzbek media as a land of political instability. Therefore, protests in Bishkek, clashes in the streets between supporters of different political figures, the release and rise of Sadyr Japarov, and the resignation of President Sooronbay Jeenbekov were seen as usual practice. On the official level, Uzbekistan was one of the first countries to congratulate Japarov on his appointment as prime minister, the Uzbek and the new Kyrgyz leader held a telephone call, where they discussed further development of joint projects and programmes, and more specifically to revitalise the joint commissions that discuss delimitation and demarcation of borders and bilateral cooperation concerning border regions. Whereas this seems very positive for the new leadership in Bishkek, it is mostly a 'wait and see' approach by Tashkent, as no one knows when elections will be held and what these will bring.

Upcoming publications
www.eucentralasia.eu

Emancipation or Back to the Kitchen? Gender and civil society in Kyrgyzstan

EUCAM commentary No. 42

Begimai Bekbolotova

Not safe at home: Covid-19 in Kyrgyzstan

EUCAM Commentary No. 43

Irina Kulikova

Out of the frying pan and into the fire: Kyrgyz women abroad

EUCAM Commentary No. 44

Aizhan Erisheva



EUCAM

Established in 2008 by FRIDE as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. As part of CESS, EUCAM will continue to raise the profile of European-Central Asian relations in general, and more specifically to:

- Critically, though constructively, scrutinize European policies towards Central Asia;
- Enhance knowledge of European engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research;
- Raise awareness on the importance of Central Asia and Europe's engagement, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from Europe and Central Asia and provide a forum for debate.



CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance political development, democracy, human rights and in particular security, by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges.

CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.



Supported by grants from the Open Society Foundations and the European Endowment for Democracy.