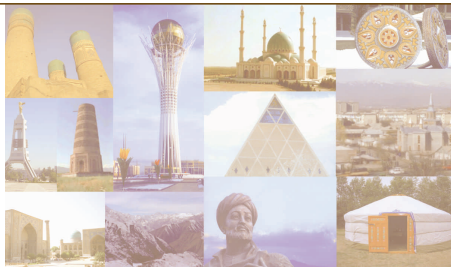


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UZBEKISTAN



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Highlight

The overall situation in Uzbekistan in the period November-December 2008 was calm but shaky. The end of 2008 saw a number of ordinary events, but even ordinary and orderly events were symptomatic in terms of reflecting uncertainties in domestic and –especially– foreign policy.

Internal affairs

At domestic level, a number of “showcase” undertakings can be singled out, mirroring a very modest democratic movement.

The most important political event of this period was the celebration of Constitution Day on 8 December, marking the 16th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of Uzbekistan. President Islam Karimov made his traditional speech, in which he briefly highlighted the country’s economic, social and other achievements since independence. This event has traditionally taken place in a context of Soviet-like euphoria.

A new political organization was established in December 2008 called the “Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan” (EMU), triggering an immediate amendment of election legislation. The adoption of this amendment gives the EMU 15 seats in the Oliy Majlis (lower house of Parliament) in the upcoming elections. This decision was strange to say the least, because it effectively deprives independent candidates of their 15 seats in the forthcoming elections. However, it is hoped that the EMU members of parliament will be more professional than the independent deputies in terms of going about their parliamentary business.

On 17 December 2008, President Karimov signed the new amendments to the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, concerning guarantees of the activities of non-governmental and non-commercial organizations. These amendments imply the creation of the Public Foundation to support non-governmental non-commercial organizations and other civic society institutions, and of a Parliamentary Commission to manage the Foundation’s finances. Whether such a Foundation will be able to stimulate NGOs as important actors of civil society is hitherto unclear.

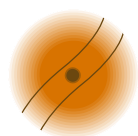
On 10 December 2008 Uzbekistan officially ratified the Second Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the cancellation of the death penalty (adopted in New-York, 15 December 1989).

Foreign and International Policy

Perhaps the most notable foreign policy action of Uzbekistan was its withdrawal from the Euro-Asian Economic Community (EAEC) in November 2008. Uzbekistan entered this organization in 2006, its membership symbolizing Tashkent’s response to what was perceived as a Western or American offensive, allegedly inspiring so-called “colour revolutions” in post-Soviet countries. Many observers interpreted Uzbekistan’s withdrawal from the EAEC as mirroring a steady improvement of relations between Uzbekistan and the United States and the European Union throughout 2008.

Within the EAEC itself, however, relations between members are far from being harmonious and, so to speak, prone to integration. Uzbek-Tajik relations were marked by a re-emergence of tension in relation to the water problem. Uzbekistan could not accept the principle of joining the Custom Union within the EAEC.

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In the field of international relations, there is call to highlight a number of interesting developments. The Fund “Forum of culture and art of Uzbekistan” and the British Council signed a memorandum of understanding which envisages enhanced cooperation in the field of education, culture and arts in the period 2008-2010. The signing took place during the visit of the chairman and executive director of the British Council, Martin Davidson, to Uzbekistan. The Fund Forum is a large organization that works towards reviving national traditions and spiritual heritage, and developing culture, arts, education and sports. The fund was the first public organization in the CIS to become an official UNESCO partner. The Fund also signed similar memorandums with the Swiss bureau for cooperation and China’s Sun Tsinlin public fund.

On 3 December 2008 an important EU-sponsored international conference took place in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. This conference, headed “The platform for cooperation in the field of protection of environment and water resources”, was attended by officials and leading specialists in the field of water management and environmental problems from both Central Asian countries and the EU.

The EU’s special representative for Central Asia, Pierre Morel, drew the participants’ attention to the necessity of joint management of water resources of the Aral Sea basin on the basis of international law. He also pointed out the importance of understanding how sensitive and important this issue is for Central Asian countries.

Despite efforts by Tajik and Kyrgyz representatives to claim their right to construct hydro-technical installations (hydro-power stations) on the upper stream of Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya rivers, representatives of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, supported by delegations from Italy, Germany, France and other EU countries, emphasized the unacceptability of such unilateral actions.

On 12 December, the Uzbek Parliament ratified the Protocol to the “Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the Republic of Uzbekistan and Communities of Europe and their Member-States”, in connection with the entry of Bulgaria and Romania in the EU on 20 May 2008.

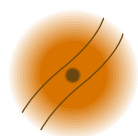
On 14 November, a round table was organized in Brussels in the European Parliament in the framework of the 7th meeting of the Uzbekistan-EU Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, which was devoted to the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At this meeting, a discussion of overall reforms in Uzbekistan in the sphere of human rights and democratization took place.

Romania’s foreign minister, Lazar Comanescu, visited Uzbekistan on 18 November. The delegation headed by Comanescu met the Speaker of the Legislative Chamber of Oliy Majlis, Dilorom Tashmuhamedova. The two sides discussed the development of inter-parliamentary relations. Comanescu also held talks with Uzbek foreign minister Vladimir Norov. The ministers discussed the strengthening of political, economic and humanitarian relations between the two states.

The latter five events, albeit independent from each other, could testify to a degree of orderly and steady dynamism in overall Uzbek-EU relations. These relations are developing in almost all the spheres implicit in the EU’s new Central Asian Strategy, adopted in June 2007 with a special focus on democratization and human rights issues. Finally, Uzbekistan ignored the traditional informal summit of CIS countries on 20 December, leading some observers to assert that Uzbekistan is keeping a distance from Russia/CIS.

Economy and business enterprise

On 2 December 2008, the Free Industrial-Economic Zone (FIEZ) was established in the Navoi province



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of Uzbekistan, essentially for the purpose of creating better conditions for attracting foreign direct investment for the organization of modern high technological production of goods that meet world standards and that can be demanded on the world markets.

The FIEZ will be governed by special custom, monetary and tax regimes, and rules governing the entry, exit and licensing of the business activities of non-residents of Uzbekistan will be facilitated. On 22 December, a Business Forum of Uzbek and Turkish businessmen took place in Tashkent. Jointly organized by the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, Investments and Trade of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Foreign Trade of Turkey, this event was devoted to further advancing and expanding trade and economic and investment cooperation between the two countries. Among the areas represented in the Forum were trade, banking, finance, building, agriculture and water management, light and textile industry, chemical industry, transport communications, aviation, services and tourism.

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