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## Uzbekistan after the Transfer of Power

### *Introduction*

For the first time since independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has a new president. The transfer of power occurred after President Islam Karimov died in September 2016 as a result of a stroke. In early presidential elections, held three months later, on 4 December, the prime minister and acting president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, was elected to succeed Karimov as head of state. This proved correct the many political observers who had predicted that a consensus among the elite in Uzbekistan would ensure a smooth transition of power. At the same time, however, and contrary to those prognoses, the transition appears to have been more than a mere formality. Since his appointment as acting president, Mirziyoyev has departed from well-trodden paths in Uzbekistan's politics. These actions clearly indicate an intention to revise a number of established practices in Uzbekistan's state-society relations, the economy, and foreign policy. The innovations can be summarized as a willingness, on the part of the state, to increasingly open itself up – both to the Uzbekistani society and to the external world. What these innovations certainly do not do is bring about a political transformation of Uzbekistan. They are unlikely to challenge the authoritarian nature of power. Nevertheless, Mirziyoyev's reform plans appear to be more than just decoration. This contribution aims to provide an overview of these new tendencies in Uzbekistan's domestic and foreign policy following the transfer of power.

### *The Transfer of Power*

During President Karimov's final years, political observers considered certain influential figures to be possible successors. Speculation centred on Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the prime minister, and Rustam Azimov, the first deputy prime minister and minister of finance. After Karimov's death, one indirect and one direct indicator suggested who was going to be the successor: Observers noted that, in the Soviet Union, being charged with organizing the funeral for the deceased head of state was a sign that one was being designated as his chosen successor. This task was given to Mirziyoyev. The second – direct – indicator concerned the question of who would act as president until the holding of new elections. According to the constitution (Article 96), if the incumbent president is incapable of fulfilling his duties, the Chair of the Senate of the *Oliy Majlis* (parliament) is to serve as acting president and organize new elections within three months. In this case, however, Nigmatulla Yuldashev,

the Chairman of the Senate, pointing to his lack of experience in state governance, refused to take on these duties and asked the parliament to appoint Prime Minister Mirziyoyev as the acting president.<sup>1</sup> The decision to appoint Mirziyoyev as the acting president was the final and unequivocal indicator of the presidential succession. In the presidential elections, held on 4 December, Mirziyoyev received 88.6 per cent of votes, while the other three candidates received 2.4, 3.5, and 3.7 per cent, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

### *Karimov and His Legacy: Respect, Continuity, and Change*

Karimov's personality remains the fundamental point of departure for official political discourse: He is regarded as the embodiment of an independent and stable Uzbekistan and someone whose work should be continued. Mirziyoyev issued a decree eternalizing Karimov in a number of ways.<sup>3</sup> Many sites were named after him or renamed in his honour, including the Technical University in Tashkent, an automobile plant in Asaka, and the international airport in Tashkent, as were central streets throughout Uzbekistan. A memorial complex is to be constructed at Karimov's grave in Samarkand, which has already become a place of pilgrimage. The decree also envisages the construction of monuments to Karimov in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Karshi and the establishment of a museum, a charity fund, and a student scholarship in his name. The same decree also made Karimov's birthday an annual celebration and declared the day of his death to be the Memory Day of the First President.<sup>4</sup>

The official discourse of the state rests foundationally on the image of Karimov and supports the continuation of his policies.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, Mirziyoyev has called for a break with old practices, demanding

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- 1 For a discussion of legal aspects of this transfer, see: Ferghana.news, *Kak pravilno izbrat prezidenta Uzbekistana, ili Budet li dovolen "dukh Yurtbashi"* [How to choose the President of Uzbekistan correctly, or Will the "spirit of Yurtbashi" be happy?], 26 September 2016, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/articles/9106>.
  - 2 Cf. OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Republic of Uzbekistan, Early Presidential Election, 4 December 2016, OSCE/ODIHR Observer Mission, Final Report*, Warsaw, 21 March 2017, p. 26, at: <http://www.osce.org/office-for-democratic-institutions-and-human-rights/elections/uzbekistan/306451>.
  - 3 Cf. Official Website of the President of Uzbekistan, *Ob uvekovechenii pamyati Pervogo Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Islama Abduganievicha Karimova* [On the perpetuation of the memory of the First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Abduganievich Karimov], 25 January 2017, at: <http://president.uz/ru/lists/view/200>.
  - 4 A monument to Karimov was also erected in the Turkmen city of Turkmenabad, while a square in Moscow was given Karimov's name, and a monument will also be erected there.
  - 5 For Mirziyoyev's speech after his appointment as acting president, cf. *Gazeta.uz, Tekst: Vystuplenie premer-ministra na zasedanii palat parlamenta* [Text: Prime Minister's speech at the session of the Chambers of Parliament], 9 September 2016, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2016/09/09/speech>; for his inauguration speech, cf. Official Website of the President of Uzbekistan, *Svobodnoe, demokraticeskoe i protsvetayushchee gosudarstvo Uzbekistan my postroim vmeste s nashim muzhestvennym i blagorodnym narodom* [We will build a free, democratic and prosperous state of Uzbekistan together with our courageous and noble people], 14 December 2016, at: <http://president.uz/ru/lists/view/111>.

that the authorities abandon old working habits and start to work for the people.<sup>6</sup> In particular, he has argued that the writing of exaggerated positive reports praising the government should stop, saying that “those days have passed”. Similarly, he called upon the media and television, in particular, to replace patriotic and jingoistic reporting with critical and analytical content.<sup>7</sup> His regular meetings with members of government were often staged as public dressings-down, made available to a wide audience through media outlets and social networks.<sup>8</sup> Mirziyoyev has been severely critical of almost every branch of the state and sector of the economy, revising established practices and initiating reforms.

### Reforms

Since his appointment as acting president, Mirziyoyev has issued many decrees and orders on reforming various sectors of the state in Uzbekistan. In February 2017 he released a comprehensive policy document entitled “Strategy of Actions”,<sup>9</sup> outlining priority directions for reform. This five-year-plan has five sections: 1. Improving the state administration, enhancing the role of parliament, and further developing civil society; 2. Ensuring rule of law and reforming the judicial and legal system; 3. Liberalizing the economy; 4. Developing the social sphere; and 5. Ensuring security, religious tolerance, and interethnic understanding, and conducting a constructive foreign policy. It is perhaps not necessary to elaborate on each of them. Instead, I will focus on a few points that seem to be particularly relevant or ambitious.

One of the first innovations concerns improving channels of communication between the state and society. Mirziyoyev declared 2017 to be the “Year of Dialogue with the People and Human Interests”. The annual announcement of such slogans is not new in Uzbekistan. It has been practised since the mid-1990s. What is new, however, is that the implementation of this slogan is genuinely producing a new pattern of state-society relations. At the end of September, while still acting president, Mirziyoyev created a “Vir-

6 Cf. Official Website of the President of Uzbekistan, *Kriticheskij analiz, zhestkaya distsiplina i personalnaya otvetstvennost dolzhny stat povsednevnoj normoj v deyatelnosti kazhdogo rukovoditelya* [Critical analysis, strict discipline, and personal responsibility should become an everyday norm in the activities of each leader], 15 January 2017, at: <http://president.uz/ru/lists/view/187>.

7 Cf. Kun.uz, “*Ura-urachilik zamoni o‘tdi*”. *Prezident televidenie haqida* [“Those days have passed”. President about TV], 31 March 2017, at: <http://kun.uz/news/2017/03/31/ura-uracilik-zamoni-utdi-prezident-televidenie-akida>.

8 Cf. Ferghana.news, *Shavkat Mirziyoyev – podchinennym: “Tragediya moya v tom, chto ya vse o vas znayu!”* [Shavkat Mirziyoyev – subordinates: “My tragedy is that I know everything about you!”], 8 February 2017, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/articles/9267>.

9 *Proekt ukaza Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan “O Strategii Dejstvij po Dalnejshemu razvitiyu Respubliki Uzbekistan”* [Draft Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “On the Strategy of action for the further development of the Republic of Uzbekistan”], at: <http://strategy.regulation.gov.uz/ru/document/2>.

tual Reception Room” function on his official website, which enabled people to address him with their questions and problems. Later on, similar online interfaces were established for almost every state ministry, agency, and administrative unit. According to statistics displayed on the president’s website, by the end of June 2017, the online portal had received some 920,000 requests; ca. 863,000 of which (93 per cent) had been answered.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the virtual receptions, Mirziyoyev ordered that “People’s Receptions” be created in cities and districts, where officials were instructed to talk directly with people and address their issues systematically.<sup>11</sup> Generally, there is a trend towards the digitalization of state services as well as greater visibility of and access to the authorities. Alongside the (virtual and physical) “receptions”, the establishment of the “International Press Club” (IPC), a non-governmental organization, in April 2017<sup>12</sup> created a platform for regular meetings between government officials, including ministers, the media and the public.<sup>13</sup> The IPC is also used to hold press conferences during visits of foreign delegations<sup>14</sup> and for public discussion of the latest events and reforms relating to Uzbekistan’s domestic and foreign policy.<sup>15</sup> In early July, Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov used this platform to answer questions from Uzbek citizens residing in and outside Uzbekistan via a live teleconfer-

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- 10 Cf. *Virtualnaya priemnaya Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Shavkata Miromonovicha Mirzieeva* [Virtual Reception of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mironovich Mirziyoyev], at: <https://pm.gov.uz/ru>.
- 11 Cf. *Gazeta.uz, Narodnye priemnye Prezidenta otkroyut v kazhdom gorode i rajone* [People’s Receptions of the President will be opened in every city and district], 28 December 2016, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2016/12/28/decreed>.
- 12 Cf. Dilshod Karimov, *Otkrylsya Mezhdunarodnyj press-klub* [The International Press Club was opened], *UzA – Uzbekistan National News Agency*, 7 April 2017, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/society/otkrylsya-mezhdunarodnyj-press-klub-07-04-2017>.
- 13 These included press club discussions of foreign political issues with the minister of foreign affairs, cf. *Uzbekistan Today, International Press Club: open dialogue, frank answers to sharp questions*, 14 April 2017, at: [http://ut.uz/en/other/theme\\_year/international-press-club-open-dialogue-frank-answers-to-sharp-questions/](http://ut.uz/en/other/theme_year/international-press-club-open-dialogue-frank-answers-to-sharp-questions/); there were also discussions with the minister of internal affairs of policing issues, cf. *Nasimov.pro, “A zhizn-to nalazhivaetsya!”* [“And life is getting better!”], 3 May 2017, at: <http://nasimov.pro/2017/05/a-zhizn-to-nalazhivaetsya>. Other meetings brought together relevant officials on topics such as higher education, the energy sector, sport, mass media, and telecommunications.
- 14 For example, both the President of the EBRD, Suma Chakrabarti, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid bin Ra’ad al-Husseini, spoke at the IPC during their visits to Uzbekistan; cf. *Novaya programma EBRR budet sootvetstvovat Strategii dejstvij* [The new EBRD program will be in line with the Strategy for Action], in: *Uzbekistan Today*, 17 March 2017, at: [http://www.ut.uz/ru/eshyo/theme\\_year/novaya-programma-ebrr-budet-sootvetstvovat-strategii-deystviy-/](http://www.ut.uz/ru/eshyo/theme_year/novaya-programma-ebrr-budet-sootvetstvovat-strategii-deystviy-/); and Anvar Samadov/Otabek Mirsagatov, *Verkhovnyj komissar OON po pravam cheloveka otvetil na voprosy zhurnalistov* [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights answered questions from journalists], *UzA – Uzbekistan National News Agency*, 11 May 2017, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/politics/verkhovnyj-komissar-oon-po-pravam-cheloveka-otvetil-na-vopro-11-05-2017>.
- 15 Cf. *Nasimov.pro, Mezhdunarodnyj press-klub. “Mnogostoronnee sotrudnichestvo: kollektivnyj otvet na vyzovy sovremennosti”* [International Press Club. “Multilateral cooperation: a collective response to the challenges of our time”, 23 June 2017, at: <http://nasimov.pro/2017/06/mezhdunarodnyj-press-klub-mnogostoronnee-sotrudnichestvo-kollektivnyj-otvet-na-vyzovy-sovremennosti>.

ence.<sup>16</sup> Such high visibility on the part of Uzbek officials and close interaction with the media and public are unprecedented in the history of state-society relations in Uzbekistan.

Another idea is the liberalization of the currency market, which is probably one of the most urgently necessary reforms in Uzbekistan. The lack of a free currency market is a chronic problem. Official exchange rates are set by the central bank on a weekly basis, yet heavy restrictions are placed on currency conversion, so that almost all exchange takes place on the black market.<sup>17</sup> Black market exchange rates are twice as high as the official ones, which not only means that official economic figures do not reflect reality, but also, as a local economist explains, distorts economic reality itself, nurturing underground economic structures and substantially damaging the domestic investment climate.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, because of heavy restrictions on currency conversion, foreign investors have faced systematic difficulties associated with the repatriation of their profits. Official plans<sup>19</sup> to liberalize the currency market have, therefore, become one of the most discussed topics in the country. Of note, over the year, the government has gradually implemented the liberalization of the currency market. Since September 2016, the central bank has been raising the exchange rates faster than usual. Observers have considered that the official rate will have to be raised to at least the same level as the black market rate, as the latter effectively constitutes the real market price of the som.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Central Bank increased its refinancing rate from nine to 14 per cent at the end of June, announcing that one goal of this was “to create the necessary conditions for transition to a market-based currency

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- 16 Cf. *anons.uz*, *Abdulaziz Kamilov otvetil na voprosy grazhdan* [Abdulaziz Kamilov answered questions from citizens], 6 July 2017, at: <http://www.anons.uz/article/politics/19669/>.
- 17 Cf. Yulij Yusupov, *Chego nam zhdet ot liberalizatsii valyutnogo rynka?* [What can we expect from the liberalization of the foreign exchange market?], *Kommersant.uz*, 17 January 2017, at: <http://kommersant.uz/kejs/cheho-nam-zhdet>.
- 18 Cf. Navruz Melibaev, *Vozmozhnaya ekonomicheskaya liberalizatsiya v Uzbekistane i realnoe oslablenie suma: kuda vedut mechty?* [Possible economic liberalization in Uzbekistan and a real weakening of the som: where do dreams lead?], *Central Asian Analytical Network*, 2 July 2017, at: <http://caa-network.org/archives/9569>.
- 19 Cf. *O dopolnitelnykh merakh po obespecheniyu uskorenno razvitiya predprinimatelskoj deyatelnosti, vsemernoj zashchite chastnoj sobstvennosti i kachestvennomu uluchsheniyu delovogo klimata, Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan* [On additional measures to ensure the accelerated development of entrepreneurial activity, the full protection of private property and a qualitative improvement of the business climate, Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan], *Uza – Uzbekistan National News Agency*, 5 October 2016, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/documents/o-dopolnitelnykh-merakh-po-obespecheniyu-uskorenno-razviti-05-10-2016>; *Postanovlenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan, O prioritnykh napravleniyakh valyutnoj politiki* [Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, On Priority Directions of the Currency Policy], 28 November 2016, at: <https://regulation.gov.uz/ru/documents/1086>.
- 20 Cf. Ozodlik, Yulij Yusupov: *Liberalizatsiya valyutnogo rynka, esli ee provodit gramotno, ne dolzhna okazatsya shokom dlya naselenia* [Yuli Yusupov: Liberalization of the currency market, if done correctly, should not be a shock for the population], 1 May 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28461538.html>.

system”.<sup>21</sup> Finally, in early September 2017 Mirziyoyev issued a decree,<sup>22</sup> which, among other things, provided for establishing foreign exchange rates “exclusively” in accordance with “the market mechanisms” as well as ensuring free currency exchange for juridical and physical persons.<sup>23</sup> Following the decree, the Central Bank set the market-based exchange rates, which resulted in an almost doubled value of the som against foreign currencies.<sup>24</sup> In fact, as earlier tendencies had already indicated, the official rates matched the black market rates (with a minor difference). Although this measure has not yet fully eliminated currency exchange on the black market, its role has been significantly reduced since then, as people have had legal opportunities (at official exchange offices) to sell their foreign currencies for market prices. In parallel to reforming the currency market, the government is also attempting to liberalize foreign trade in order to boost national exports. “Surrender requirements”, which oblige domestic private companies to sell foreign currency proceeds to the central bank, have gradually been removed. While initially, in February 2017, it was reduced from 50 to 25 per cent,<sup>25</sup> at the end of July it was removed altogether.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, with another presidential de-

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- 21 The Central Bank of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Pravlenie Tsentralnogo banka prinyalo reshenie o povyshenii stavki refinansirovaniya do 14% godovykh* [The board of the central bank decided to raise the refinancing rate to 14% per annum], 24 June 2017, at: <http://cbu.uz/ru/press-tsentr/press-relezy/2017/06/88241> (author’s translation).
- 22 Cf. Official Website of the President of Uzbekistan, *O pervoocherednykh merakh po liberalizatsii valyutnoj politiki. Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan ot 2 sentyabrya 2017 goda No. UP-5177* [On priority measures for the liberalization of currency policy. Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan of 2 September 2017 No. UP-5177], 3 September 2017, at: <http://prezident.uz/ru/lists/view?id=991>. The decree also provided that measures must be taken in order to prevent a possible significant rise of prices in the domestic consumer market as well as on socially vital products and services.
- 23 Concerning physical persons, for the exchange of soms to a foreign currency, the decree retained the previous regulation. That is, individuals can purchase dollars, for instance, only in a non-cash form through a bank account. According to officials, this was a temporary measure and the state was preparing to allow individuals to buy foreign currency in cash as well.
- 24 For instance, on 5 September, the new official exchange rate between the US dollar and the som was set as 1 US Dollar (USD) to 8100 Uzbekistan Som (UZS), while the previous official rate was 1:4210. Cf. *Gazeta.uz, TSB ustanovil kurs dollara na urovne 8100 sumov* [The Central Bank set the exchange rate of the dollar at 8100 som], 4 September 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/09/04/cbu>.
- 25 Cf. *Kommersant.uz, Norma obyazatelnoj prodazhi valyutnoj vyruchki eksporterov snizhena s 50% do 25%* [The requirement of obligatory sale of foreign currency earnings of exporters is reduced from 50% to 25%], 3 February 2017, at: <http://kommersant.uz/news/norma-prodazhisnizhena>.
- 26 Cf. Official Website of the President of Uzbekistan, *Postanovlenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan No. PP-3157 ot 28 iyulya 2017 goda o dopolnitelnykh merakh po stimulirovaniyu otechestvennykh predpriyatij-eksporterov* [Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PP-3157 from 28 July 2017 on additional measures to stimulate domestic exporting enterprises], 28 July 2017, at: <http://prezident.uz/ru/lists/view?id=833>. The decree on currency market liberalization, which was discussed earlier above, also provided cancellation of the “surrender requirements” for exporters “irrespective of their form of ownership”; cf. Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, On priority measures for the liberalization of currency policy, cited above (Note 22).

cree, the state monopoly on the export of fruit and vegetables<sup>27</sup> has been removed, allowing domestic private companies to directly carry out export operations.<sup>28</sup>

The problem of corruption has been another priority within the new president's reform programme. Early in October 2016, Mirziyoyev initiated the elaboration of a law on fighting corruption, which was adopted by parliament in early January 2017.<sup>29</sup> Later in February, the president introduced a state anti-corruption programme for 2017-2018, and created an anti-corruption commission.<sup>30</sup> As already mentioned, Mirziyoyev's regular meetings with government officials often feature harsh criticisms of authorities (examples include the medical,<sup>31</sup> banking,<sup>32</sup> and court<sup>33</sup> systems as well as the public prosecutor's office<sup>34</sup>) for abuse of office and corruption. Although this practice resonates considerably with the wider society, the same cabinet of ministers that is now subject to permanent criticism has been led by Mirziyoyev himself for the last 13 years. Moreover, many of the officials subjected to such criticism have, nonetheless, kept their posts or have been removed from one office while remaining within the government. Perhaps the most prominent exception to this so far is Rustam Azimov, the long-serving finance minister, a member of the elite, and one of the informal candidates to succeed Karimov. Mirziyoyev publicly discredited Azimov for the poor state of the financial system and gradually moved him away from the centre of power: He was dismissed from his posts of finance minister and deputy prime minister and appointed the head of "Uzbekinvest", the national export-import

27 As a result of Russian embargoes on food imports from the EU and other Western countries (as counter-sanctions because of the Ukraine crisis) and from Turkey (as a response to the shooting down of a Russian military jet), Uzbekistan has been significantly increasing its exports of food to Russia.

28 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, "Uzagroekspost" lishen monopolii na eksport plodoovoshchnoj produktii ["UzAgroExport" deprived of monopoly on export of fruit and vegetable products], 22 July 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/06/22/export>.

29 Cf. *Podrobno.uz*, *Prezident podpisal zakon o borbe s korrupsiyey* [President signs law on fighting corruption], 4 January 2017, at: <http://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/prezident-podpisal-zakon-o-borbe-s-korrupsiyey/>.

30 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, *Prinyata Gosprogramma po protivodejstviyu korrupsiy* [State Programme on combating corruption adopted], 6 February 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/02/06/corruption>.

31 Cf. *UzNews*, *Prezident: Nado zakanchivat s otkrytym vzyatochnichestvom v roddomakh* [President: It is necessary to end open bribery in maternity homes], 8 February 2017, at: <http://uznews.uz/article/3760>.

32 Cf. *Ozodlik*, *Mirziyaev nazval bankirov i finansistov "bezdelnikami i vzyatochnikami"* (audio) [Mirziyoyev called bankers and financiers "idlers and bribe-takers" (audio)], May 31, 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28520198.html>.

33 Cf. *Podrobno.uz*, *Mirzieev rasskazal o korrupsiy i nespravedlivosti v sudebnoj sisteme Uzbekistana* [Mirziyoyev spoke about corruption and injustice in the judicial system of Uzbekistan], 13 June 2017, at: <http://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/mirzieev-rasskazal-o-korrupsiy-i-nespravedlivosti-v-sudebnoj-sisteme-uzbekistana/>.

34 Cf. *Ozodlik*, *Shavkat Mirziyaev nazval prokurorov "samymi bolshimi vorami"* (video) [Shavkat Mirziyoyev called prosecutors "the biggest thieves" (video)], 4 August 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28658153.html>.

insurance company.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Mirziyoyev rehabilitated a number of officials who had been removed during the Karimov era. Most notably, Abdulla Aripov, the former deputy prime minister and minister of telecommunication, who was dismissed after an international corruption scandal,<sup>36</sup> was first reinstated as deputy prime minister and then, after Mirziyoyev's election, appointed as prime minister.<sup>37</sup>

The proposal with potentially the greatest prospect to enhance Uzbekistan's international image was the plan to reform the tourism sector. In early December 2016, Mirziyoyev issued a decree that, among other things, aimed to enhance the tourism infrastructure, create tax incentives for private companies operating in the sector, and simplify border-crossing procedures (creating "green zones") at airports for foreign tourists.<sup>38</sup> The most important part of this decree was the cancellation of the visa requirement for tourists (for 30 days) from 27 countries (mostly Western and European countries, including Australia, Canada, and the USA, as well as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and others) from 1 April 2017. However, this did not lead to Uzbekistan opening up as had been hoped for. In early January 2017, Mirziyoyev issued another decree postponing the implementation of this measure until the start of 2021.<sup>39</sup> The official explanation for this was that recommendations by government bodies, including the State Committee for Tourism Development, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the State Customs Committee, had pointed to the lack of the necessary technical infrastructure and relevant security requirements.

### *Foreign Policy*

"Continuity and change", the principle that has guided Uzbekistan's domestic policy in the post-Karimov period, is also being applied in the realm of foreign affairs. While the official discourse confirms Uzbekistan's fidelity to the

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35 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, *Rustam Azimov pokinul post vitse-premera* [Rustam Azimov leaves post of vice-premier], 6 June 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/06/06/rustam-azimov>.

36 The corruption scandal that erupted in September 2012 was associated with revelations that the Swedish mobile company "Teliasonera" allegedly made informal payments to an offshore company affiliated with Gulnara Karimova, the elder daughter of Islam Karimov, in order to enter the Uzbek market.

37 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, *Abdulla Aripov vozglavil pravitelstvo Uzbekistana* [Abdullah Aripov becomes head of government of Uzbekistan], 14 December 2016, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2016/12/14/pm>.

38 Cf. *O merakh po obespecheniyu uskorennoy razvitiya turistskoy otrasli Respubliki Uzbekistan. Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan* [On Measures to Ensure the Accelerated Development of the Tourism Industry of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan], *UzA* – Uzbekistan National News Agency, 6 December 2016, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/documents/o-merakh-po-obespecheniyu-uskorennoy-razvitiya-turistskoy-o-06-12-2016>.

39 Cf. *Ria Novosti*, *Uzbekistan otlozhil otmenu viz dlya turistov iz 27 stran do 2021 goda* [Uzbekistan postponed the abolition of visas for tourists from 27 countries until 2021], 9 January 2017, at: <https://ria.ru/world/20170109/1485275577.html>.



foreign policy principles established by Karimov,<sup>40</sup> Mirziyoyev's foreign policy practice contrasts clearly with that of his predecessor. Overall, Uzbekistan appears to be gradually shifting from its traditionally self-reliant and restrained foreign policy towards one that is more proactive and focuses on economic goals, such as stimulating foreign trade and attracting investment. The attempts to liberalize the domestic economy discussed above are closely linked to this more active foreign policy. At the same time, however, certain foreign policy decisions have also been made and signals given that run counter to Uzbekistan's traditional foreign policy orientation. Let us first turn to the regional level.

Significant changes are evident in the way Uzbekistan interacts with its most problematic neighbours in the region – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The key areas of concern between Uzbekistan and these countries are border security and the water-energy issue. Uzbekistan has maintained tight border controls with both countries since the late 1990s, establishing a visa requirement for travel from Tajikistan, and even mining some areas along the border with Tajikistan.<sup>41</sup> For many years, the frontiers between these three countries have seen regular incidents with casualties among both civilians and border guards. The most recent serious incident occurred in late August 2016, when Uzbekistan deployed a dozen police officers to a disputed mountain on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border and detained several Kyrgyz citizens.<sup>42</sup>

As for the water-energy issue, Uzbekistan has consistently opposed Kyrgyz and Tajik projects for the construction of large hydroelectric power plants (HPPs) on trans-border rivers. Each step towards carrying out these projects was quickly followed by an official protest from Tashkent. Moreover, Uzbekistan has also been accused of putting pressure on these countries, especially Tajikistan, by imposing transport and energy blockades. For Uzbekistan, large HPPs used to represent an almost existential threat: Back in 2012, Karimov even warned that exacerbating the water situation in the region could ultimately lead to war.<sup>43</sup> The last official protest by Uzbekistan was made in July 2016, when Mirziyoyev, the prime minister at the time,

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40 Cf. Mirziyoyev's speech after his appointment as acting president, *Tekst: Vystuplenie premer-ministra na zasedanii palat parlamenta*, cited above (Note 5); and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Vystuplenie ministra inostrannykh del Respubliki Uzbekistan A.Kh. Kamilova na obshchikh debatakh 71-j sessii Generalnoj Assamblei OON*, [Address by A. Kh. Kamilov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, at the General Debate of the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly], 24 September 2016, at: <http://www.mfa.uz/ru/about/speech/8514/?print=Y>.

41 Following incursions by militants into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from the territory of Tajikistan.

42 Cf. *Nastoyashchee Vremja*, *Uzbekistan obyavil, chto ubral so spornoj gory Ungar-Too sotrudnikov militsii* [Uzbekistan announced that it removed police officers from the disputed Mount Ungar-Too], 19 September 2016, at: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/27999636.html>.

43 Cf. *Ferghana.news*, *Prezident Uzbekistana rezko vyskazalsya protiv stroitelstva Kambaratinskoj i Rogunskoj GES*, [President of Uzbekistan sharply opposed the construction of Kambarata and Rogun HPPs], at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=19412>.

criticized the agreement signed between Tajikistan and the Italian company Salini Impregilo on the construction of the Rogun HPP.<sup>44</sup>

However, since Karimov's death, Uzbekistan's position on these disputes seems to have suddenly become much less confrontational and even cooperative.

In late October 2016, when the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmon, officially launched the construction of the Rogun HPP, Uzbekistan surprisingly responded with silence. In July 2017, commenting on the unusual silence, Foreign Minister Kamilov argued that Uzbekistan's position remained unchanged despite the absence of a reaction. He added that Uzbekistan was not against the construction of the Rogun HPP per se, but rather wanted the project to consider Uzbekistan's interests.<sup>45</sup> However, the latter statement appears to contradict sentiments expressed in the past, which tended to point to Uzbekistan's categorical disagreement with the construction of the Rogun HPP. In particular, back in 2014, Rustam Azimov, then vice-prime minister of Uzbekistan, stated directly that "Uzbekistan will never, under any circumstances, provide support for this project".<sup>46</sup> Some observers argued that Uzbekistan might be now considering the possibility of participating in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's HPP projects as a stakeholder, although it has always rejected such proposals in the past. During his state visit to Kyrgyzstan in early September 2017, Mirziyoyev confirmed this possibility, stating that Uzbekistan will financially support the construction of the Kambarata Dam.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Uzbekistan's regional engagement has made it possible to restart negotiations on the restoration of the Central Asian Unified Energy System. Uzbekistan has already reached a preliminary agreement with Turkmenistan on the transit of Turkmen electricity to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan via the Uzbek power network, and negotiations on this matter with Tajikistan are now underway.<sup>48</sup>

44 Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Press-reliz MID Respubliki Uzbekistan* [Press Release of the MFA of the Republic of Uzbekistan], 19 July 2016, at: <http://mfa.uz/ru/press/statements/2016/07/7920/>.

45 Cf. Radio Ozodi, *Abdulaziz Kamilov: Tashkent ne vozrazhaet protiv vozvedeniya Rogunskoy GES* [Abdulaziz Kamilov: Tashkent does not object to erection of Rogun HPP], 5 July 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/28597700.html>.

46 Radio Ozodi, *Azimov: "Uzbekistan nikogda i ni pri kakikh obshchestvennykh ne predostavit podderzhku etomu projektu"*. [Azimov: "Uzbekistan will never, under any circumstances, provide support for this project".], 4 August 2014, at: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/25479929.html> (author's translation).

47 Cf. *Ferghana.news, Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan dogovorilis po granitse i reshili vmeste stroit Kambaratinskuyu GES* [Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan agreed on the border and decided to build the Kambarata HPP together], 5 September 2017, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/news/26833>.

48 The Central Asian Unified Energy System integrated 83 power stations of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, South Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The system was launched in the early 1990s in order to effectively distribute electricity among member states in accordance with states' seasonal needs. However, as a result of subsequent disagreements Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan left the system in 2003 and 2009 respectively. Because of its geographic location, Uzbekistan's position was central in this system, which is why, after its exit, the network practically ceased to operate. Cf. Aleksandr Shustov, *Stanet li*

Similarly, since October 2016, Uzbekistan has been conducting regular talks with Kyrgyzstan<sup>49</sup> and Tajikistan<sup>50</sup> on the question of disputed sections of the countries' shared borders. During October 2016, Kyrgyz and Uzbek delegations, consisting of representatives of neighbouring regions on both sides of the border,<sup>51</sup> conducted an exchange of visits to Andijan<sup>52</sup> and Osh,<sup>53</sup> respectively. In September and October 2017, the heads of state paid state visits to Bishkek and Tashkent respectively, during which the parties concluded a range of agreements, including ones concerning common borders. In Bishkek, Mirziyoyev and Atambayev signed an agreement "On state borders",<sup>54</sup> according to which, disputes over 85 per cent of common borders were resolved. Another agreement was reached a month later during Atambayev's state visit to Tashkent. The parties signed an agreement on the joint use of the Kasansay (Orto-Tokoy) water reservoir. The ownership of this facility had been constantly contested by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, which led to regular incidents between law enforcement forces of the states. The reservoir is located on Kyrgyz territory. However, it was built by Uzbekistan during Soviet times and since then has been used almost completely for the latter's irrigation needs. According to the new agreement, Kyrgyzstan will have control over the reservoir and provide its security, while Uzbekistan will be responsible for its functioning.<sup>55</sup> Following those visits, Uzbekistan simplified<sup>56</sup> the border-crossing process for Kyrgyzstani citizens visiting Uzbekistan by abolishing the requirement of an invitation letter and by making checkpoints work round the clock.<sup>57</sup>

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*Uzbekistan energokhabom Srednej Azii* [Will Uzbekistan become an energy hub of Central Asia?], Eurasia.expert, 7 June 2017, at: <http://eurasia.expert/stanet-li-uzbekistan-energokhabom-sredney-azii/>.

- 49 Cf. Radio Azattyk, *Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan vozobnovili peregovory po granitse* [Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan resumed negotiations on the border], 18 October 2016, at: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28060358.html>.
- 50 Cf. Ferghana.news, *Tajikistan i Uzbekistan vozobnovili obsuzhdenie voprosa o delimitatsii i demarkatsii obshchej granitsy* [Tajikistan and Uzbekistan resumed discussions on the issue of delimitation and demarcation of their common border], 21 November 2016, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/news/25629>.
- 51 Batken, Jalalabad, and Osh in Kyrgyzstan; and Andijan, Namangan, and Fergana in Uzbekistan.
- 52 Cf. kloop, *Vstrecha v Andizhane: Kak Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan pytayutsja podruzhitsya* [Meeting in Andijan: How Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are trying to make friends], 4 October 2016, at: <https://kloop.kg/blog/2016/10/04/vstrecha-v-andizhane-kak-kyrgyzstan-i-uzbekistan-pytayutsya-podruzhitsya>.
- 53 Cf. Ferghana.news, *V Kyrgyzstane uzbekskoj delegatsii ustroili pyshnyj priem* [In Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbek delegation was given a magnificent reception], 27 October 2016, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/news/25533>.
- 54 Cf. Ferghana.news, *Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan dogovorilis po granitse i reshili vmeste stroit Kambaratinskuyu GES*, cited above (Note 47).
- 55 Cf. Ozodlik, *Orto-Tokojskoe vodokhranilishche v KR perejdet v kyrgyzsko-uzbekskoe polzovanie* [Orto-Tokoy reservoir in Kyrgyzstan will be transferred to Kyrgyz-Uzbek use], 13 December 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28913511.html>.
- 56 Uzbekistan introduced restrictions on the border crossing in 2010 following the coup in Kyrgyzstan.
- 57 Cf. Aleksandra Titova, *Otkrytie KPP "Dostuk": Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan oslabili kontrol na granitse* [Opening of the "Dostuk" checkpoint: Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have weak-

As for Tajikistan, although the visa regime is still in place, despite preliminary announcements of its impending cancellation, ongoing bilateral talks have led to “historic” results. In early April 2017, regular flights resumed between Tashkent and Dushanbe, following a 25-year suspension.<sup>58</sup> In the same month, Dushanbe hosted an exhibition of Uzbek industrial products<sup>59</sup> and a joint Tajik-Uzbek business forum<sup>60</sup> for the first time in the history of the two countries’ bilateral relations, which go back to 1991. Other “historic” events included the organization of the “Days of Uzbek Culture” festival in Dushanbe<sup>61</sup> and the broadcast of a documentary film on the long friendship between the Uzbek and Tajik peoples on Uzbek television.<sup>62</sup> This is remarkable, given that relations between the states have been anything but friendly during the last twenty years. This cultural rapprochement thus marks a sudden ideological about-turn in Uzbekistan’s stance toward Tajikistan. In mid-October, the same range of events took place in Uzbekistan: Tashkent hosted an exhibition of Tajik national products, a bilateral business forum, and the “Days of Tajik Culture”.<sup>63</sup>

Uzbekistan’s emerging regional engagement also concerns two other neighbours – Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Although relations with these countries have not changed substantially, as both are traditionally among Uzbekistan’s closer partners in the region, they have intensified. For example, between March and May 2017, Mirziyoyev visited both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan twice (one official visit and one working visit in each case). These were the first countries Mirziyoyev visited as President of Uzbekistan. Whether accidentally or not, the order of the visits – first to Turkmenistan, then to Kazakhstan – corresponded to the order Mirziyoyev made in his speech in parliament back in September 2016, in which he listed “Turkmeni-

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ened control at the border], kloop, 6 September 2017, at: <https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/09/06/otkrytie-kpp-dostuk-kyrgyzstan-i-uzbekistan-oslabili-kontrol-na-granitse/>.

58 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, *Sostoyalsya pervyj aviarejs iz Tashkenta v Dushanbe* [The first flight from Tashkent to Dushanbe took place], 11 April 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/04/11/dushanbe>.

59 Cf. *Avesta.tj*, *V Dushanbe otkryvaetsya vystavka-yarmarka promyshlennykh tovarov Uzbekistana* [Exhibition of industrial goods from Uzbekistan opens in Dushanbe], 17 April 2017, at: <http://avesta.tj/2017/04/17/v-dushanbe-otkryvaetsya-vystavka-yarmarka-promyshlennyh-tovarov-uzbekistana>.

60 Cf. *Ferghana.news*, *V Dushanbe vpervye proshel biznes-forum predstavitelej delovykh krugov Uzbekistana i Tajikistana* [First business forum of representatives of business circles of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan was held in Dushanbe], 19 April 2016, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/news/26295>.

61 Cf. *Radio Ozodi*, *V Tajikistane startovali Dni kultury Uzbekistana* [Days of culture of Uzbekistan open in Tajikistan], 10 May 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/28477706.html>.

62 Cf. *Radio Ozodi*, *V Tashkente vospeli “ispytannuyu vremenem” družbu s Tajikistanom* [Tashkent praises “proven” friendship with Tajikistan], 9 July 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/28604073.html>.

63 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, *Foto, video: Vystavka produktsii Tajikistana v Tashkente* [Photo, video: Exhibition of products of Tajikistan in Tashkent], 11 October 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/10/11/exhibition>; cf. *Avesta.tj*, *Dni tajikskoj kultury uzbekskie zriteli prinyali s vostorgom* [Days of Tajik culture were received with enthusiasm by Uzbek spectators], 14 October 2017, at: <http://avesta.tj/2017/10/14/dni-tadzhikskoj-kultury-uzbekskie-zriteli-prinyali-s-vostorgom>.

stan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan” as Uzbekistan’s “closest neighbours”. The visits to Turkmenistan<sup>64</sup> and Kazakhstan<sup>65</sup> had two structural similarities: In both cases, strategic partnership agreements were signed (in Kazakhstan’s case deepening an existing partnership) and new trans-border routes were opened up. During Mirziyoyev’s visit to Turkmenistan, the two presidents officially opened a new railway line and road connecting the border cities of Farab in Uzbekistan and Turkmenabad in Turkmenistan. However, it should be noted that the construction of these routes had been underway for several years as a part of a transnational rail project concluded in 2011, which aimed to construct a transport corridor between Uzbekistan and Oman. The meeting in Kazakhstan, for its part, was accompanied by the opening of a new rapid rail connection between Almaty and Tashkent.<sup>66</sup> In addition, in mid-July, a section of the M-39 highway that reduces the distance between two Uzbek regions by passing through Kazakh territory was reopened after a ten-year break.<sup>67</sup> Another package of agreements in different spheres was concluded during the state visit of President Nursultan Nazarbaev to Uzbekistan in mid-September 2017.<sup>68</sup>

The overview of Uzbekistan’s regional interaction indicates several core directions. First of all, Uzbekistan is demonstrating a willingness to discuss and resolve existing problems in bilateral relations, such as delimitation of borders and the water-energy issue. Second, Tashkent is pushing for more transport and economic connectivity in the region via facilitating trade<sup>69</sup> and trans-border interaction. Moreover, in order to maintain the dialogue on com-

64 Cf. Official Website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan: dobrososedskie i bratskie otnosheniya ukreplyayutsya* [Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan: good-neighborly and fraternal relations strengthened], 7 March 2017, at: <http://president.uz/ru/lists/view/301>.

65 Cf. Official Website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Uzbekistan – Kazakhstan: novyj etap sotrudnichestva, osnovannogo na istoricheskoy družbe i strategicheskom partnerstve* [Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan: a new stage of co-operation based on historical friendship and strategic partnership], 23 March 2017, at: <http://president.uz/ru/lists/view/345>.

66 Cf. Tengri News, *Zapushchen novyj skorostnoj poezd soobshcheniem Almaty – Tashkent* [New high-speed train launched between Almaty and Tashkent], 22 March 2017, at: [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/zapuschen-novyy-skorostnoy-poezd-soobshcheniem-almaty-314609](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/zapuschen-novyy-skorostnoy-poezd-soobshcheniem-almaty-314609).

67 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, *Uchastok avtodorogi M-39 cherez Kazakhstan otkryt* [The section of the M-39 highway through Kazakhstan has reopened], 11 July 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/07/11/m39>.

68 Cf. *Gazeta.uz*, *Uzbekistan i Kazakhstan podpisali ryad dokumentov* [Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan signed a number of documents], 16 September 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/09/16/talks>.

69 In the first half of 2017, Uzbekistan’s trade turnover with Central Asian countries reportedly increased by 13 per cent. In particular, trade turnover with Kyrgyzstan increased by 69 per cent, with Tajikistan by 22 per cent, and with Kazakhstan by eleven per cent. Cf. *Jahon, Tsentralnaya Aziya – glavnyy prioritet vneshnej politiki Uzbekistana* [Central Asia – the main priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy], 11 August 2017, at: <http://www.jahonnews.uz/ru/aktualno/124/37640/>.

mon regional issues, Uzbekistan is promoting the idea to hold regular meetings of the heads of state of Central Asian states.<sup>70</sup>

Uzbekistan's relations with external actors beyond Central Asia also show some new features. After Kazakhstan, Mirziyoyev officially visited Russia and China – traditionally Uzbekistan's most important partners outside the region. Contracts signed with Russian and Chinese companies on trade and investment projects during these visits were reportedly worth 16 billion<sup>71</sup> and ten billion US dollars,<sup>72</sup> respectively. Of course, these countries are Uzbekistan's biggest trading partners, and such agreements are, thus, nothing exceptional. However, new tendencies can also be observed, especially, with regard to economic co-operation with Russia. Some observers have pointed out that a significant portion of the contracts signed in Russia concern companies owned by Russian oligarchs of Uzbek origin. In particular, contracts on oil imports and the establishment of a new mining industry were signed with companies belonging to Alisher Usmanov and Iskander Makhmudov, respectively. Observers argue that, unlike Karimov, who did not favour co-operation with Uzbek oligarchs, Mirziyoyev, is specifically seeking to encourage them to invest in Uzbekistan, as attracting foreign investment is one of his principal interests.<sup>73</sup> Another new tendency concerns Uzbekistan's stance towards its labour migrants, for whom Russia remains the number one destination. In the official Uzbekistani discourse, labour migrants have tended to have a negative image, and the problems they face have generally been ignored. Back in 2013, Karimov called them loafers who discredit the Uzbek nation. However, under Mirziyoyev, the Uzbek authorities seem to have changed their position: Instead of condemning and ignoring, they are starting to facilitate the migration process. Specifically, the governments of Uzbekistan and Russia have signed agreements to co-operate on labour migration, envisaging the joint organization of recruitment processes

70 Cf. Official Website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Shavkata Mirziyoyeva na mezhdunarodnoj konferentsii "Zentralnaya Aziya: odno proshloe i obshchee budushchee, sotrudnichestvo radi ustojchivogo razvitiya i vzaimnogo protsvetaniya" v Samarkande* [Speech of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the international conference "Central Asia: one past and common future, co-operation for sustainable development and mutual prosperity" in Samarkand], 10 November 2017, at: <http://www.prezident.uz/ru/lists/view/1227>.

71 Cf. TVC.ru, *Rossiya i Uzbekistan podpisali 55 soglashenij na \$16 mlrd* [Russia and Uzbekistan signed 55 agreements for \$16 billion], 5 April 2017, at: <http://www.tvc.ru/news/show/id/113467>.

72 Cf. Gazeta.uz, *Uzbekistan i Kitaj podpisali ryad dokumentov* [Uzbekistan and China signed a number of documents], 13 May 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/05/13/china-docs>.

73 Cf. Ozodlik, *Uzbekskie milliardery v Rossii khotyat vlozhit kapital v ekonomiku svoej maloj rodiny* [Uzbek billionaires in Russia want to invest in the economy of their small homeland], 6 April 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28413517.html>; UzMetronom.com, *Oligarkh zachastil na istoricheskuyu rodinu* [Oligarch often visited his historical homeland], 3 October 2016, at: [http://www.uzmetronom.com/2016/10/03/oligarkh\\_zachastil\\_na\\_istoricheskuyu\\_rodinu.html](http://www.uzmetronom.com/2016/10/03/oligarkh_zachastil_na_istoricheskuyu_rodinu.html).

and the opening of agencies in both Russia and Uzbekistan for that purpose.<sup>74</sup> The intensification of economic relations with Russia has led to discussions on whether Uzbekistan will eventually join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Under the current circumstances, at least, this looks improbable. A number of observers have claimed that the EAEU was never mentioned during Mirziyoyev's visit to Moscow, which suggests that Uzbekistan retains its traditional preference for bilateralism or, at most, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) format.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Uzbekistan's principle of non-membership of military blocs seems to be intact: At a press conference in Tashkent, Foreign Minister Kamilov ruled out the possibility of a return to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), citing precisely that principle of foreign policy.<sup>76</sup> Yet in early October 2017, Uzbekistan and Russia conducted joint military exercises in Uzbekistan, something that has not occurred since 2005.<sup>77</sup> Although this does not violate Uzbekistan's position towards military blocs, it is, nevertheless, a remarkable shift in Uzbekistan's policy towards Russia.

Another remarkable development in Uzbekistan's foreign policy is its improving relations with Turkey. After the initial promising start of co-operation in early 1990s, bilateral relations gradually started to worsen from the end of the 1990s. Tashkent substantially reduced the level of political, economic, and cultural links with Turkey for harbouring some leaders of the Uzbek political opposition, such as Muhammad Salih, as well as alleged support of underground Islamists in Uzbekistan.<sup>78</sup> In the post-Karimov epoch, however, the parties have increasingly improved their relations. Uzbekistan simplified the visa regime with Turkey and reached an agreement about launching a new airline connection between Samarkand and Istanbul. Mirziyoyev's two-day state visit to Turkey in October 2017 resulted in signing a number of agreements on trade and investments.<sup>79</sup>

74 Cf. RIA Novosti, *Mirziyoyev utverdil soglashenie o sotrudnichestve s Rossiej po migratsii* [Mirziyoyev approves agreement on co-operation with Russia on migration], 20 June 2017, at: <https://ria.ru/world/20170620/1496888794.html>.

75 Cf. Gazeta.ru, *Uzbekistan ne speshit v Evrazijskij soyuz* [Uzbekistan is in no hurry to join the Eurasian Union], 5 April 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2017/04/05/10612535.shtml>.

76 Cf. Gazeta.uz, *"Vopros o vozobnovlenii chlenstva v ODKB ne stoit" – Abdulaziz Kamilov* ["The question of renewing membership of the CSTO is not worth raising" – Abdulaziz Kamilov], 5 July 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/07/05/odkb>.

77 Cf. Toshkul Beknazarov/Okil Gulyamov, *Sovmestnye ucheniya Booruzhennykh Sil Uzbekistana i Rossii zaversheny* [Joint exercises of the Armed Forces of Uzbekistan and Russia are completed], UZA – Uzbekistan National News Agency, 6 October 2017, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/society/sovmentnye-ucheniya-vooruzhennykh-vil-uzbekistana-i-rossii-z-06-10-2017>.

78 Among others, Uzbekistan unilaterally cancelled the visa-free regime, shut down Turkish schools and pushed out Turkish business. Cf. Petr Bologov, *Drug vtorogo urovnya. Udastysya li Turtsii stat strategicheskim partnerom Uzbekistana* [Friend of the second level. Will Turkey succeed in becoming a strategic partner of Uzbekistan], Ferghana. News, 26 October 2017, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/articles/9608>.

79 Cf. Anvar Samadov/Sarvar Urmanov, *Gosudarstvennyj vizit Prezidenta Uzbekistana v Turtsiyu byl plodotvornym* [The state visit of the President of Uzbekistan to Turkey was

Uzbekistan is becoming more active in its collaboration with Afghanistan as well. In May 2017, a new official post was created – the President’s Special Representative for Afghanistan.<sup>80</sup> Later, during an official visit of the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, to Uzbekistan in early December, the parties signed a range of agreements on trade, energy, and transport and agreed to open an Afghan consulate in Termez.<sup>81</sup>

Turning to the West, Uzbekistan is attempting to improve its relations primarily in the economic sphere.<sup>82</sup> Declaring goals for economic liberalization is apparently making it easier for Uzbekistan to reach out to Western institutions, with whom relations have been either effectively suspended or held at a minimum level since the early 2000s. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), for instance has expressed its willingness to support ongoing economic reforms in Uzbekistan,<sup>83</sup> and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has declared its intention to revive its financial co-operation with Uzbekistan.<sup>84</sup> Mirziyoyev met with the heads of the IMF and the World Bank, took part in the US-Uzbekistan business forum and made his first-ever speech at the United Nations General Assembly, during his visit to the US in September 2017.<sup>85</sup>

A number of signals are being given in the political sphere as well. After Mirziyoyev’s election, several hundred stateless persons living in Uzbekistan were given Uzbek passports.<sup>86</sup> Previously, stateless persons were

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fruitful], Uza – Uzbekistan National News Agency, 26 October 2017, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/politics/gosudarstvennyy-vizit-prezidenta-uzbekistana-v-turtsiyu-byl--26-10-2017>.

80 Cf. Afghanistan.ru, *V Uzbekistane vpervye naznachen spetspredstavitel prezidenta po Afganistanu* [In Uzbekistan, a special representative of the president for Afghanistan was appointed for the first time], 26 May 2017, at: <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/110495.html>.

81 Cf. Uza – Uzbekistan National News Agency, *Novaya stranitsa v otnosheniyakh Uzbekistana i Afganistana* [A new page in relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan], 5 December 2017, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/politics/novaya-stranitsa-v-otnosheniyakh-uzbekistana-i-afganistana-05-12-2017>.

82 In December 2016, the EU endorsed the so-called “textile protocol”, which required Uzbekistan’s commitment to combat child labour in the cotton harvest. The signing of the document allows Uzbek textile products to be exported to the EU at a reduced rate of duty. Cf. Kommersant.uz, *Evrosoyuz snizit poshliny na import tekstilya iz Uzbekistana* [European Union to reduce duties on the import of textiles from Uzbekistan], 15 December 2016, at: <http://kommersant.uz/news/textile>. It is difficult to situate this event within developments occurring since the change of leadership, as the relevant negotiations have been ongoing for several years.

83 Cf. Gazeta.uz, *MVF gotov podderzhat valyutnyuyu reformu v Uzbekistane – Kristin Lagard* [IMF ready to support currency reform in Uzbekistan – Christine Lagarde], 14 July 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/07/14/imf>.

84 Cf. Ozodlik, *EBRD “rezko uvelichivaet” obem investitsij v Uzbekistan* [EBRD “sharply increases” the volume of investments in Uzbekistan], 16 March 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28372772.html>.

85 Cf. Uzbekistan Today, *Itogi vizita Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Shavkata Mirzieeva v SSHA* [Results of the visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the USA], 23 September 2017, at: <http://ut.uz/ru/politika/itogi-vizita-prezidenta-respubliki-uzbekistan-shavkata-mirziyeeva-v-ssha/>.

86 Cf. Gazeta.uz, *Bolee 800 lits prinyaty v grazhdanstvo s dekabrya* [More than 800 people have been granted citizenship since December], 21 September 2017, at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/09/21/citizenship>.



granted citizenship only in extremely rare cases, and many had open applications stretching back 20 years or more. In addition, a number of political prisoners were freed,<sup>87</sup> and thousands of citizens were removed from the “black list”.<sup>88</sup> The authorities also decided to abolish exit visas from 1 January 2019.<sup>89</sup> Uzbekistan is one of the few countries in the world (the others include North Korea) to require exit visas, which complicates and restricts foreign travel for Uzbek citizens. Some steps have also been taken to reach out to human rights organizations. In May 2017, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, visited Uzbekistan, becoming the first holder of this office to do so.<sup>90</sup> In October 2017, the OSCE held its annual Central Asia media conference in Tashkent. The topic this year was “Open journalism in Central Asia”.<sup>91</sup> This was the first time the conference has been held in Tashkent since 2002. Finally, the BBC and Human Rights Watch (HRW) are both reportedly in discussions with the Uzbek government regarding the possibility of their returning to Uzbekistan.<sup>92</sup>

### Conclusion

While the reforms that have been undertaken do not target the essence of power in Uzbekistan – its authoritarian nature – nevertheless, the transfer of power has generated a number of new tendencies. Although Mirziyoyev refers to Karimov and claims to be continuing his politics, many initiatives and reforms now being promoted challenge the policies of the Karimov era, either via genuine innovation or by re-examining established practices. In the

87 Cf. Ferghana.news, *V Uzbekistane osvobozhden eshche odin politzaklyuchennyj – Solizhon Abdurakhmanov* [Another political prisoner is released in Uzbekistan – Solizhon Abdurakhmanov], 4 October 2017, at: <http://www.ferghananews.com/articles/9575>. Along with this, however, in September and October 2017 Uzbek security forces arrested two journalists. Their fate is uncertain yet.

88 Cf. Ozodlik, *V Uzbekistane bolee 4 tysyach musulman isklyucheny iz “chernogo spiska”* [More than 4 thousand Muslims are excluded from the “black list” in Uzbekistan], 27 July 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28641677.html>. The “black list” was created by the security services and contained individuals suspected of sympathy with religious extremist ideas or membership in religious extremist groups.

89 Cf. Uzbekistan24, *V Uzbekistane s 1 yanvarya 2019 goda poyavyatsya biometricheskie pasporta dlya vyezda za granitsu* [From January 1, 2019 biometric passports will appear in Uzbekistan for traveling abroad], 16 August 2017, at: <http://www.uzbekistan24.uz/ru/novosti/17/1137/>.

90 Cf. United Nations in Uzbekistan, *UN Human Rights Chief pays first-ever visit to Uzbekistan*, 16 May 2017, at: <http://www.un.uz/eng/news/display/211>.

91 Cf. OSCE, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, *Discussing media freedom in Central Asia, OSCE media freedom representative called for release of all imprisoned journalists*, Tashkent, 19 October 2017, at: <https://www.osce.org/fom/351046>.

92 Ozodlik, *Uzbekskaya redaksiya Bi-Bi-Si vozvrashchaetsya v Uzbekistan* [The Uzbek editorial office of the BBC returns to Uzbekistan], 6 July 2017, at: <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28598246.html>. Later, in September, a HRW delegation visited Uzbekistan. Cf. Uza – Uzbekistan National News Agency, *Delegatsiya “Human Rights Watch” v Uzbekistane* [Delegation of “Human Rights Watch” in Uzbekistan], 4 September 2017, at: <http://uza.uz/ru/society/delegatsiya-human-rights-watch-v-uzbekistane-04-09-2017>.

sphere of domestic policy, this has meant the intensification of state-society interaction, increased public visibility and accountability of authorities, and their engagement in discussions with the media and public. Uzbekistan also took an important step towards economic liberalization via adopting a market-based currency policy and removing a number of barriers for domestic exporters. Important steps were also taken in the human rights dimension. There have also been tentative indications of domestic social activism, as evidenced by open discussions and critical articles on social networks and in the media. As for foreign policy, the most evident practical change so far has occurred in Uzbekistan's active regional engagement, especially its rapprochement with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In essence, it appears to be moving from its traditional self-reliant isolationist position to a proactive one. Uzbekistan is demonstrating its readiness to discuss and solve long standing mutual problems and is seeking to enhance intra-regional ties, especially in trade, transport, and energy. Indeed, changes in Uzbekistan's domestic and foreign policy are underway. However, the extent to which it will retain its thrust for reforms and pursue their consistent implementation remains to be seen.