



Uzbekistan: The Hundred Days

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Executive Summary

The first 100 days of Uzbekistan's new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, hint at the possibility of much-overdue change in one of Central Asia's most repressive states. But as its long-time prime minister, Mirziyoyev was a key player in the 25-year rule of his predecessor, Islam Karimov, and he inherits a system designed to protect those in power at the expense of the population. It would be premature to conclude that release of a few political prisoners, an early focus on urgent economic issues and a thaw in relations with neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, welcome departures from past practice though they are, promise an intention for systemic reform policies of the sort needed to cope with rising pressures over social and economic issues. Uzbekistan's Western partners share an interest with Russia and China in the country's sustainable stability, however, so should cautiously work with the new administration to encourage change while being prepared to call out any backsliding.

A cabinet re-shuffle in January appears to have done much to consolidate the president's position. Numerous visits to Uzbekistan's regions are allowing the population a degree of interaction with the head of state that was unthinkable under Karimov. Steps like that and acknowledgement of the economic hardship in rural areas have created some genuine popular support for him and a degree of optimism in the national mood. He has a complicated relationship with Rustam Azimov, an ex-finance minister, and Rustam Inoyatov, the head of the National Security Service (SNB), though the former has been somewhat sidelined. Mirziyoyev needs to cultivate their continued support and that of others, including rich Uzbeks living in Russia and elsewhere, who may have a limited interest in significant changes to the system they know so well.

Uzbekistan has pressing domestic issues, unpredictable neighbours and a jihadist extremism threat. Though its border with Afghanistan is one of the region's most secure, it looks to the south with nervousness. Citizens need economic and social policies that improve their living standard. Pensioners and public sector workers exist on meagre benefits and salaries, often not paid on time. According to Russian authorities, as many as 3.35 million Uzbeks have felt obliged to find work in that country. Though Mirziyoyev has made a point about creating dialogue between citizens and the state, discontent finds no expression through civil society or in the narrow political space. Uzbekistan's partners need to find a balance between building a relationship with the new administration and providing a critique of Karimov's institutional legacy.

Bishkek/Brussels, 15 March 2017

Uzbekistan: The Hundred Days

I. Introduction

On 4 December 2016, for the first time in the history of independent Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov was not elected as the country's president. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, prime minister since 2003 and acting president following Karimov's death on 2 September, received 88.61 per cent of the vote after a campaign "devoid of genuine competition".¹ As acting president, he said he would stay true to Karimov's course, yet he made several statements and gestures that suggested he would deviate from some of his predecessor's policies. These included promises to improve difficult relations with neighbours, liberate the state-controlled economy with its foreign-currency black market and listen to the people, who had been deprived of their civil voice under Karimov's heavy-handed rule.²

This report, Crisis Group's third paper on Uzbekistan since Karimov's death, aims to provide perspective on executive decisions and other political processes in President Mirziyoyev's first 100 days and assess the scope for engagement with the new government. Research was done in Tashkent, Fergana, Bishkek and Brussels. Though Crisis Group was able to conduct field work there, access in Uzbekistan remains somewhat restricted due to security concerns for staff and interlocutors.

¹ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefings N°s 84, *Uzbekistan: Reform or Repeat?*, 6 December 2016; and 82, *Uzbekistan: In Transition*, 29 September 2016. See also, "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions", OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission.

² Crisis Group Briefings, *Uzbekistan: In Transition* and *Uzbekistan: Reform or Repeat*, ops. cit.

II. Loose Ends and Fresh Starts

Following his election, Mirziyoyev declared 2017 the “Year of Dialogue with the People and Human Interests” and held a modest inauguration on 14 December.³ Listening to his constituency had been the central theme of the campaign, during which Mirziyoyev established a personal virtual address at which every citizen could submit concerns. It is still uncertain, however, what kind of follow-up there will be to that initiative, and Uzbeks remain wary. The practice has now been adopted by the foreign ministry and even the National Security Service (SNB), but their responsiveness is also unclear.⁴ The SNB remains a shadowy entity about which little public information is available.

100 days have been insufficient to answer the key questions asked during the three months between Karimov’s death and the election: were Mirziyoyev’s pledges merely a campaign tactic, or did they indicate a genuine interest in addressing the country’s political, social and economic realities; and in turn, what would the answer mean for Uzbekistan’s international partners?

Mirziyoyev’s earliest moves as acting president were to consolidate his position with a series of reappointments and cabinet adjustments. Abdulla Aripov, deputy prime minister between 2002 and 2012, was returned to that post on 14 September.⁵ After the inauguration, Mirziyoyev obtained Aripov’s installation as prime minister by the rubber-stamp parliament’s two chambers. Oxford-educated Rustam Azimov, once seen as a potential rival, kept his post as deputy prime minister for macroeconomic development and foreign investments but lost the finance ministry to Batyr Hodjayev, a former (2006-2009) economy minister. This was a clear message from Mirziyoyev about who is in charge. The president also singled him out for criticism at the 16 January cabinet meeting, questioning his commitment to solving the problems of entrepreneurs and the management of his portfolio, pointedly urging him to be self-critical and rebuking the finance ministry that he had run for eleven years.⁶

If Azimov is further, or even permanently, sidelined, it implies the powerful SNB at least tacitly approves. Mirziyoyev’s engagement with the security service is a sign

³ “In Uzbekistan, 2017 has been declared the Year of Dialogue with the People and Human Interests”, Uzbekistan National News Agency, 8 December 2016; “Inauguration of President of Uzbekistan”, video, Gazeta.uz, 15 December 2016.

⁴ “ЕПИГУ запустил онлайн-обращения в СНБ Узбекистана” [“SPISS launched online appeals to SNB”], Anons.uz, 25 January 2017.

⁵ Aripov was tainted by a corruption scandal involving Gulnara Karimova, Islam Karimov’s daughter, in 2012. A criminal case was opened against him for allegedly assisting her deals with foreign telecommunications companies but closed in 2013. Until Karimov’s death, he was a university lecturer. He is described as a telecommunications professional and a supporter of Russian investment. “Abdulla Aripov back to government”, Gazeta.uz, 14 September 2016.

⁶ “Абдулла Арипов возглавил правительство Узбекистана” [“Abdulla Aripov heads the Uzbekistan Government”], Gazeta.uz, 14 December 2016. “В узбекском правительстве произошли серьезные кадровые перестановки” [“Serious reshuffle in the government”], Radio Ozodlik, 16 December 2016. “Батыр Ходжаев назначен Министр финансов Узбекистана” [“Batyr Hodjayev is appointed finance minister”], Uzreport.uz, 15 December 2016. “Как Шавкат Мирзиёев разносил членов правительства Узбекистана” [“How Shavkat Mirziyoyev scolded the members of the government of Uzbekistan”], Center-1, 16 January 2017.

of his confidence. Its long-serving head, Rustam Inoyatov, 72, is believed to be in poor health. The deputy, Shukhrat Guliamov, was transferred to a lesser position in Surkhandarya in December, and his family reportedly went to the U.S. where brother Bakhtiyar is Uzbekistan's ambassador.⁷ Replacing key SNB officials and eventually Inoyatov himself with his own appointees would allow Mirziyoyev to make his power virtually absolute. Inoyatov is reportedly still capable of making trouble for Mirziyoyev, however. There is speculation that he may be blocking much needed economic reforms, specifically a liberalisation of the currency market that could deprive senior figures of black market exchange profits.⁸

Beyond the regional governors and SNB generals, another sector the new president needs to win over or neutralise includes organised crime groups involved with prostitution, drugs, money laundering and, allegedly, selling government positions. They are said to have close links with similar groups in Russia or Ukraine. Salim Abduvaliev, who has longstanding connections with Uzbekistan's political elite and is alleged to be "boss of the Uzbek mafia", was appointed deputy chairman of the National Olympic Committee.⁹ Approval from and cooperation with a variety of actors lends stability to the regime, and establishing ties with individuals such as Abduvaliev was arguably mandatory for Mirziyoyev.

Mirziyoyev knows everyone and everything from thirteen years as prime minister. As president, he told his government: "My tragedy is in the fact that I know everything about all of you".¹⁰ He is at least co-author of his "tragedy", but the statement bookmarks his new authority while distancing him from old colleagues.

As part of promoting dialogue with citizens by example, Mirziyoyev began visiting the regions, making an early stop in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, where he walked through crowds allowing people to take "selfies" with him, something unprecedented in Uzbekistan.¹¹ The visit suggested a strategic approach and desire to burnish credentials as champion of the country's territorial integrity. The autonomous region has the constitutional right to secede, and though a fledgling dissident movement has gained little traction, there is resentment against the Tash-

⁷ "Первый заместитель главы СНБ Узбекистана снят с должности" ["The first deputy head of the Uzbek National Security Service dismissed"], *САtoday.org*, 7 January 2017. In several conversations with Crisis Group, interlocutors in Tashkent referred to apparent insider reports on Inoyatov's poor health.

⁸ Olzhas Auyezov, "Exclusive: Uzbekistan's rulers at odds on reforms – sources", *Reuters*, 7 March 2017.

⁹ "Mafia bosses hail 'Salim the Great'", U.S. embassy Tashkent cable, 18 April 2007, as made public by WikiLeaks, "Босс узбекской мафии' назначен зампредом Национального Олимпийского комитета Узбекистана" ["The boss of Uzbek mafia' is appointed Deputy Chairman of National Olympic Committee of Uzbekistan"], *Radio Ozodlik*, 7 January 2017.

¹⁰ "Шавкат Мирзиёев – подчинённым: 'Трагедия моя в том, что я всё о вас знаю!'" ["Shavkat Mirziyoyev to his subordinates: 'The fact that I know everything about all of you is my tragedy'"], *Ferghana News*, 8 February 2017.

¹¹ "Close dialogue with people is an important factor in ensuring human interests", press service of the president, 20 January 2017. "Жители Каракалпакстана смогли сделать селфи с Мирзиёевым (видео)" ["Karakalpakstan residents took selfies with Mirziyoyev (video)"], *Radio Ozodlik*, 21 January 2017.

kent government.¹² Mirziyoyev seeks to secure the same support and loyalty of its formal and informal leaders as Karimov had.

Speaking in Nukus, Karakalpakstan's capital, Mirziyoyev stressed the importance of developing entrepreneurship in Uzbekistan. Outlining a scheme for all rural households to possess 100 chickens and enjoy the financial benefits of egg-selling, he tasked Azimov with implementing it, and it kicked off in Jizzakh mid-February with 257 low-income families each receiving twenty chicks.¹³

A focus on rural development should be welcomed, but there are doubts about the feasibility of a proposal that may indicate the government and its president retain a Soviet, top-down command economy mentality. An Uzbek observer suggested responsibility was given to Azimov to create a pretext for eventually firing him. However, the scheme, along with other initiatives outlined in a draft document published in February such as investments in small-scale fruit farming, do appear to indicate that much-needed rural development is at least on the government's radar.¹⁴ This might give the European Union (EU) and member states an opportunity to test the new government's reform instincts by offering technical help. The "chicken project" would require phyto-sanitary and logistical support for collecting, processing, packaging and, crucially, developing a market for the eggs.

His statements and efforts to hear out people's needs, combined with public criticism of officials, are earning Mirziyoyev a measure of popularity. "Mirziyoyev is a person who knows Uzbekistan's real picture, he can make things better", a 55-year-old teacher said.¹⁵ "He definitely has his eye on the public mood", a Western journalist recently returned from Uzbekistan said. "He's more [Kazakh President Nursultan] Nazarbayev than Karimov in that sense".¹⁶ Speaking out and spotlighting corruption can still be dangerous for a citizen, however, as shown by the arrest of a businessman, Olim Sulaymonov, who appealed to the then acting president about corruption via YouTube. His video resembled a collective cry from a business community under great pressure from supervising bodies that it must bribe in order to function. Sulaymonov's arrest on 15 February on fraud and slander charges raises doubts

¹² Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Uzbekistan: Shadowy group agitates for 'Free Karakalpakstan'", RFE/RL, 5 April 2008. "The Republic of Karakalpakstan has the right to secede from the Republic of Uzbekistan on the basis of a general referendum of the people of Karakalpakstan", Karakalpakstan constitution, Chapter I, Article 1. In 2014, inspired by the annexation of Crimea, activists under the slogan of "Alga Karakalpakstan" (Forward Karakalpakstan) called for a referendum but appeared to garner little local support.

¹³ "Узбекистан: Главный финансист страны Рустам Азимов станет заниматься разведением кур" ["Uzbekistan: The country's chief financial specialist Rustam Azimov will be in charge of raising chickens"], Ferghana News, 23 January 2017.

¹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Uzbek analyst, February 2017; interview, EU diplomat, Bishkek February 2017; "Указ Президента Республики Узбекистан о Стратегии действий по дальнейшему развитию Республики Узбекистан" ["Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the strategy for action on the further development of the Republic of Uzbekistan"], Lex.uz, 7 February 2017, http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=3107042.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, 55-year-old male teacher, Fergana, February 2017.

¹⁶ Crisis Group email interview, Western journalist based in Kazakhstan, 8 March 2017.

about the government's willingness to engage in genuine dialogue when faced with criticism.¹⁷

Widespread corruption and mismanagement of resources continue to lead to gas and electricity shortages even in the major cities. Karimov's native Samarkand had extensive blackouts in January. Like elsewhere in Central Asia, infrastructure is worn out and in need of repair and modernisation.¹⁸

The president is involved in nearly every sector of Uzbekistan's life, from financial reform to health care and education, from designing new buildings to fighting corruption and crime. Mirziyoyev is highly critical of the civil service and has proposed both monetary reward for positive work and monetary for failure. Civil servants at all levels are feeling the pressure, with Western officials noting that ministries and agencies they deal with seem more flustered than usual.¹⁹

Mirziyoyev has released four political prisoners, several with long sentences. Muhammad Bekjan, younger brother of Muhammad Solih, the leader of the opposition party Erk in exile since 1993, was freed on 22 February after nearly eighteen years. Bekjan edited the party's newspaper until kidnapped by SNB in Kyiv in 1999, brought home and convicted of involvement in bomb attacks in Tashkent that year. Abused and tortured, he is among thousands of victims of Karimov's regime. Upon release, Bekjan praised Mirziyoyev for efforts to liberalise the system and urged the government to also release his colleagues, Yusuf Ruzimurodov, Agzam Turgunov and Solijon Abdurakhmanov, as well as Erk activist Muhammad Rajab. Jamshid Karimov, the late president's nephew, who had been held in psychiatric facilities for his reporting off and on since 2006, was released on 1 March.²⁰

Though welcome, these releases are not a clear sign the government will engage seriously on human rights.²¹ A systematic approach to past abuses and preventing

¹⁷ "Узбекистан: Рассказавший на Youtube о коррупции в прокуратуре бизнесмен арестован" ["Uzbekistan: businessman who told about corruption in prosecutor's office on YouTube is under arrest"], Ferghana News, 17 February 2017. "Мурожат нома хурматлий Шовкат Мирзияевга" ["Appeal to the respected Shovkat Mirziyoyev"], Sulaymonov's YouTube Channel, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGMtcGK5XHO; "Арестован предприниматель из Ташкента Олим Сулаймонов!" ["Entrepreneur from Tashkent, Olim Sulaymonov is arrested!"], Centre-1, 16 February 2017.

¹⁸ "Звёзды ярче фонарей: Жители Самарканда сутками живут без электричества" ["... Samarkand dwellers spend days without electricity"], Ferghana News Agency, 23 January 2017. Black outs and gas shortages in winter have long been commonplace; Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°233, *Water Pressures in Central Asia*, 11 September 2014; Crisis Group Asia Report 201, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*, 3 February 2011.

¹⁹ "Шавкат Мирзиёев предложил мотивировать хокимов деньгами" ["Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed financial motivations for governors"], Sputnik Uzbekistan, 16 January 2017. Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Bishkek, February 2017.

²⁰ "Мухаммад Бекжан – брат главного оппонента покойного Каримова освобожден после 18-летнего заключения" ["Muhammad Bekjan – the brother of late Karimov's key opponent – released after 18-year sentence"], Radio Ozodlik, 22 February 2017; Rachel Alexander, "Imprisoned for 18 years, pro-democracy Uzbekistan newspaper editor hopes to join family in Spokane", *The Spokesman-Review*, 3 March 2017. "Узбекистан: Вышедший на свободу Мухаммад Бекжан просит президента освободить из тюрьмы его коллег" ["Uzbekistan: Freed Muhammad Bekjan asks the president to release his colleagues"], Ferghana News, 1 March 2017.

²¹ Olzhas Auyezov and Alexander Smith, "U.S. urges more tolerance in Uzbekistan's treatment of dissent", Reuters, 7 March 2017.

recurrences is needed. Uzbekistan's Western partners should continue to press on this, as hundreds of political prisoners remain in custody. Having released some of Karimov's critics, Mirziyoyev should not re-stock the jails with his own opponents or persons falsely accused of crimes or persecuted for religious beliefs.²²

Cotton is another sensitive issue. Human rights defender Elena Urlaeva, who reports on child and forced labour in the cotton fields, said she was again under pressure not to meet with World Bank and International Labour Organisation officials.²³ Her 1 March detention underlines the limits of Mirziyoyev's human rights agenda to date. If his government wishes to repair the regime's reputation, it must end such tactics, eradicate forced labour and refrain from repressing activists and rights defenders. This should be a priority issue for Uzbekistan's trade partners.

The situation of Gulnara Karimova, the late president's daughter, is unclear. A Swiss lawyer confirmed that she is alive and under house arrest. The U.S. has frozen \$300 million in assets in connection with an investigation of Karimova, whom it accuses of receiving and laundering kickbacks; Tashkent seeks return of those assets.²⁴ If she testifies, her version of events could be damaging for the government. Her cousin, Akbarali Abdullayev, sentenced to fifteen years in Uzbekistan in 2014 for embezzling state assets, illegal acquisition of currency and bribery, was arrested in Kyiv in January 2017 for the crimes committed on Uzbek territory. Karimov's younger daughter, Lola, is Uzbekistan's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO and recently established the Islam Karimov Foundation with the objective of promoting the country's historical, cultural, and literary heritage.²⁵

Mirziyoyev appears poised to take a different approach to migration and movement than Karimov. 3.35 million Uzbeks work in Russia, the Russian internal affairs ministry says, almost double what the now defunct Federal Migration Service released in February 2016. In 2013, Karimov called these Uzbeks lazy; in January, Mirziyoyev

²² "OSCE representative welcomes positive step releasing another journalist in Uzbekistan", 1 March 2017; "Uzbekistan 2016 Human Rights Report", U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2016.nh.

²³ "Узбекистан: Правозащитница Елена Урлаева рассказала о причинах её задержания и помещения в психбольницу" ["Uzbekistan: Human rights defender Elena Urlaeva spoke about the reasons behind her detention and placement in a mental hospital"], Ferghana News Agency, 3 March 2017.

²⁴ "Uzbekistan: Swiss prosecutor visit reveals a defiant Karimova", Eurasianet.org, 16 January 2017; Joanna Lillis, "Uzbekistan: Frozen millions on agenda as minister holds talks in U.S.?", EurasiaNet.org, 20 January 2016.

²⁵ Abdullayev was accused in October 2013 of embezzling more than \$800 million in state assets and sentenced in November 2014 to fifteen years in prison, later reduced to six and a half years. After serving two and a half years, he was paroled, but illegally left Uzbekistan after Karimov's death. He was arrested in Ukraine on the basis of a 15 October 2016 decree of Tashkent's Yashnabad district criminal court. "Узбекистан направил в прокуратуру Украины запрос об экстрадиции Акбарали Абдуллаева" ["Uzbekistan sent a request to Ukraine on extradition of Akbarali Abdullayev"], Radio Ozodlik, 16 February 2017; "Племянник жены президента Узбекистана обвиняется в присвоении 800 миллионов долларов" ["Nephew of Uzbekistan's President's wife is accused of embezzling \$800 million"], Radio Ozodlik, 3 February 2015; "About Islam Karimov Foundation", Lola Karimova-Tillyaeva personal blog.

promised to create conditions to motivate labour migrants to return.²⁶ Uzbekistan's unemployment is officially 5.2 per cent.²⁷ In reality, unemployment and under employment, particularly in rural areas, compel many to seek work abroad. Social and economic development must be a priority for the government.

The exit visa regime, which requires citizens to apply for permission to leave the country, is also under review. Only a handful of countries still use an exit visa, including North Korea – not an attractive comparison for the new president – and change is likely, perhaps replacing it with a new international passport. Mirziyoyev's promise to replace entry visas with 30-day tourist visit permission for citizens of fifteen countries and for citizens over 55 of another twelve countries was quickly postponed due to a stated need to establish proper tourist facilities, but the SNB may have felt overwhelmed by the prospect of more foreign visitors.²⁸

Given Uzbekistan's long emphasis on total control, it is likely to struggle with liberalisation of border crossing. Easing foreign national entry is put off for at least four years, but abolishment of exit visas for Uzbeks may happen sooner. International partners may have opportunity to provide expertise and equipment for managing border security that do not deprive Uzbeks of basic free movement rights.

Under Mirziyoyev, who praised achievements of the country's ethnic Kyrgyz community, the state has given citizenship for the first time in decades to foreign nationals and stateless persons. That step will improve hundreds of lives. Gaining Uzbek citizenship was nearly impossible under Karimov.²⁹ Numbers of labour migrants, minorities and stateless persons in Uzbekistan are rough estimates. The last census was in 1989, and the country would benefit from a new one that would allow coherent understanding of its demographics and ethnic composition and provide other valuable information.

²⁶ “Статистические сведения по миграционной ситуации в Российской Федерации за 12 месяцев 2016 года с распределением по странам и регионам” [“Statistical data on migration situation in the Russian Federation for the last 12 months of 2016 with a breakdown by country and region”], Internal affairs ministry, 30 January 2017. «Шавкат Мирзиёев намерен вернуть в Узбекистан граждан, которые уехали на заработки в другие страны ...» [“Shavkat Mirziyoyev plans to return Uzbek citizens who left for labour ...”], Universal Portal Last News, 8 February 2017; “Президент Мирзиёев: Надо вернуть наших ведущих врачей – мы создадим им все условия для работы” [“President Mirziyoyev: We need to return our key doctors and will make all necessary conditions for their work”], Anhor.uz, 9 January 2017.

²⁷ “Уровень безработицы в Узбекистане не изменился” [“Level of unemployment did not change”], Kommersant.uz, 17 January 2017.

²⁸ “Ввести загранпаспорт или оставить выездной стикер? Рекомендации граждан будут учтены” [“To introduce international passport or maintain the system of exit visas? Recommendations of citizens will be considered”], Nuz.uz, 31 January 2017. “Uzbekistan postpones visa abolishment for tourists”, Gazeta.uz, 9 January 2017.

²⁹ Subanbek Tashbaltaev, “Мирзиёев наградил активистов кыргызской общины Узбекистана” [“Mirziyoyev awarded Kyrgyz community activists in Uzbekistan”], Kloop.kg, 25 January 2017. “179 человек приняты в гражданство Узбекистана” [“Uzbek citizenship granted to 179 people”], Gazeta.uz, 20 December 2016. “Президент Узбекистана предоставил гражданство почти сотне человек” [“The president granted citizenship to nearly 100”], Sputnik Uzbekistan, 23 February 2017. “Узбекское гражданство: Выхода нет?” [“Uzbek citizenship: no exit?”], Ferghana News, 23 January 2014.

III. Friends and Neighbours

Border management and security, energy and water are significant issues for Uzbekistan and its neighbours that require domestic, regional and wider international efforts. Mirziyoyev is charting a more open course than Karimov. He has already struck a more constructive tone with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, frequent subjects of Karimov's ire. Talks on resolving border issues with Kyrgyzstan are underway, though Bishkek remains wary.³⁰

The first Dushanbe-Tashkent flight in 25 years took place on 10 February, but the route is unlikely to be profitable, and regular service was postponed to April.³¹ A visa system is in place with Tajikistan, while Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens enjoy a 60-day visa-free period in each other's country. Despite its previously uncompromising position against upstream hydropower projects, Tashkent has been silent about the construction of the Rogun dam on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan, a possible sign of an agreement and even a shared, integrated energy system.³²

Mirziyoyev's family ties with Uzbek-Russian oligarch and Putin ally Alisher Usmanov make him a comfortable partner for the Kremlin, despite Uzbekistan's non-alliance position in economic and military matters that complicates Russia's ambitions in the post-Soviet space. Uzbek relations with Kazakhstan should move on from the competition Islam Karimov felt he had to deny existed and focus on partnerships in trade, security and other sectors. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are working toward better trade relations, with the focus on energy.³³

Tashkent has expressed interest in resuming negotiations on border issues and finalising the demarcation process with all its neighbours.³⁴ While regular talks and meetings of border demarcation committees are a significant improvement over years of confrontation and incidents, actual delimitation is challenging, as in some cases the borderline runs through households.³⁵ The Kyrgyz presidential campaign has produced fine promises and statements on relations with neighbours and demarcation of borders. But the issue is both political and technically complex, so swift progress should not be expected.

³⁰ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°233, *Water Pressures in Central Asia*, 11 September 2014; interview, ex-senior Kyrgyz Border Service official, Bishkek, November 2016.

³¹ "Самолёты из Ташкента в Душанбе начнут летать с апреля" ["Flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe to resume in April"], CA-News.org, 27 February 2017.

³² If completed, Tajikistan's Rogun dam on a major Amu Darya tributary, 100km downstream of Dushanbe, would be the world's tallest (335 metres, with a 3,600 MW capacity). Crisis Group Report, *Water Pressures in Central Asia*, op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, Uzbek analyst, January 2017; also, Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan-Tajikistan: game over, but what is the score?", The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst (CACI), 15 December 2016.

³³ "Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are not competitors: ... Karimov", Tengrinews, 14 June 2013. "Узбекистан и Туркменистан намерены интенсифицировать сотрудничество" ["Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan plan on intensifying cooperation"], Gazeta.uz, 26 January 2017.

³⁴ "Узбекистан активизирует переговоры с соседними странами по границе" ["Uzbekistan to initiate border negotiations with neighbors"], Gazeta.uz, 19 January 2017.

³⁵ Alexander Morrison, "Stalin's giant pencil: Debunking a myth about Central Asia's borders", Eurasianet.org, 13 February 2017.

Though border integration is a distant prospect for Central Asia, not least because of the complex Afghanistan situation, EU expertise with external border security could help ease some of the existing barriers to movement of people, goods and services within the region. Western partners could assist, for example, with programs to install effective equipment for safe, secure, and swift border-crossing.

Vladimir Putin's February 2017 Central Asian tour is a reminder that Russia is everywhere present in the region. The Russian president visited Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) member states, with security high on the agenda.³⁶ Neither Turkmenistan nor Uzbekistan are CSTO members, but the former's president received a phone call from Putin on 28 February, while Naryshkin, the director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, met with Mirziyoyev in Tashkent the same day.³⁷

With Uzbekistan's neighbours drawing closer to Moscow, Mirziyoyev is left with few other foreign policy options. While welcoming Chinese investments, he is unlikely to want Beijing to become too influential. Russia and China are powerful actors, but they have no interest in liberalisation. Relations with China have been courteous but not very substantive, centring on infrastructure projects, though work has been paused on a gas pipeline, Line D, connecting Turkmenistan and China through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan is contracted to export ten billion cubic metres of gas each year. Falling demand in China for gas could hurt the Uzbek economy, as well as those of its neighbours.³⁸

Mirziyoyev chose Turkmenistan over Russia and Kazakhstan for his first foreign visit as president (6-7 March), signing a protocol on strategic partnership that may mean a collective attempt to counter-balance Russia's influence in the region by two countries that prefer neutrality and non-alliance.³⁹ Putin visited neither during his regional tour, but Russia considers Turkmenistan the weak link in Central Asian security and Uzbekistan the top exporter of violent extremists to Syria and Iraq. Both will thus continue to be subjects of Russian pressure.⁴⁰

With uncertainty surrounding the U.S. approach to Central Asia under the Trump administration as to so many areas, the EU is one of the few Western actors with capacity and likely interest to pursue a comprehensive agenda of economic reform, good governance and human rights. On resuming textiles trade with Uzbekistan in December 2016, the EU acknowledged positive steps toward eradicating child labour and urged an end all forms of forced labour. Uzbeks are still forced to pick cotton,

³⁶ "Russia: Putin tours the Central Asian periphery", Stratfor, 28 February 2017.

³⁷ "Telephone conversation with President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov", website of the Russian president, 28 February 2017. "Президент Узбекистана принял главу внешней разведки России" ["The President of Uzbekistan met with the Head of Russia's foreign intelligence service"], Gazeta.uz, 28 February 2017.

³⁸ Ky Krauthamer, "China signals shrinking demand for Central Asian gas", TOL, 7 March 2017.

³⁹ "Узбекистан и Туркменистан – стратегические партнеры" ["Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are strategic partners"], press service of the Uzbek president, 6 March 2017.

⁴⁰ "Замир Кабулов: число боевиков ИГ в Афганистане может возрасти в разы" ["Zamir Kabulov: number of IS fighters in Afghanistan might increase by many-fold"], TASS, 9 February 2017.

but pressure from European partners might improve the situation.⁴¹ Its need to develop and modernise its agriculture could give the EU and member states a chance to build links with Tashkent and local government and businesses. Western democracies and international organisations should use such opportunities to test the new president's intentions, while encouraging reforms, including good governance, a transparent judiciary, quality health care and education.

⁴¹ "MEPs back textiles trade deal with Uzbekistan, welcome end to child labour", European Parliament News, 14 December 2016. Crisis Group interviews, Fergana, November 2017; telephone interview, EU official, Brussels, December 2016.

IV. Conclusion

Mirziyoyev did not merely inherit a system of governance built on tight, often brutal control and suspicion of change. He had an important part in creating and implementing it. Nevertheless, his first 100 days showed something of a shift from his predecessor's approach to domestic, regional and wider international issues. If he expands on this to address the difficult issues and receives conditional support from abroad, there may be potential for sustained, broad and genuine cooperation. For now though, much more is needed. It is progress that the new administration acknowledges all is not perfect, and a beginning is needed to resolve the issues impacting society. But content is as yet lacking and delivery is uneven.

Mirziyoyev's efforts to restore relations with neighbours should be welcomed, as Central Asian states are intertwined culturally and historically, and their border, trade, resource and security issues are interdependent. Border demarcation should be accompanied by mutual efforts to establish favourable conditions for legal movement of people as well as goods and services across the borders.

The political prisoner issue should remain high on the agenda. Hundreds of Uzbeks are still in custody; speech and expression remain suppressed. Concrete steps to free political prisoners and end torture must be undertaken to establish the new government's credibility. Uzbekistan lacks genuine political competition, and Mirziyoyev's power can grow – or he can choose to open political space and liberalise the economy to allow the country to transition beyond Karimov's legacy. Which way he wants to take Uzbekistan is still uncertain.

Bishkek/Brussels, 15 March 2017

Appendix A: Map of Uzbekistan



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013. Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in nine other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington DC. It also has staff representation in the following locations: Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Caracas, Delhi, Dubai, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, Kiev, Mexico City, Rabat, Sydney, Tunis, and Yangon.

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March 2017

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Europe and Central Asia since 2014

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Watch List 2017, Special Report N°3, 24 February 2017.

Ukraine

Ukraine: Running out of Time, Europe Report N°231, 14 May 2014.

Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter, Europe Report N°235, 18 December 2014.

The Ukraine Crisis: Risks of Renewed Military Conflict after Minsk II, Europe Briefing N°73, 1 April 2015.

Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°79, 5 February 2016.

Ukraine: The Line, Europe Briefing N°81, 18 July 2016.

Ukraine: Military Deadlock, Political Crisis, Europe Briefing N°85, 19 December 2016.

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Water Pressures in Central Asia, Europe and Central Asia Report N°233, 11 September 2014.

Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°72, 20 January 2015 (also available in Russian).

Stress Tests for Kazakhstan, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°74, 13 May 2015.

Kyrgyzstan: An Uncertain Trajectory, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°76, 30 September 2015.

Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°78, 11 January 2016.

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Uzbekistan: In Transition, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°82, 29 September 2016.

Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°83, 3 October 2016 (also available in Russian and Kyrgyz).

Uzbekistan: Reform or Repeat?, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°84, 6 December 2016.

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Bosnia's Future, Europe Report N°232, 10 July 2014.

Macedonia: Defusing the Bombs, Europe Briefing N°75, 9 July 2015.

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Chechnya: The Inner Abroad, Europe Report N°236, 30 June 2015 (also available in Russian).

North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (IV): Economic and Social Imperatives, Europe Report N°237, 7 July 2015 (also available in Russian).

The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?, Europe Report N°238, 16 March 2016 (also available in Russian).

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Divided Cyprus: Coming to Terms on an Imperfect Reality, Europe Report N°229, 14 March 2014 (also available in Greek and Turkish).

Turkey

The Rising Costs of Turkey's Syrian Quagmire, Europe Report N°230, 30 April 2014.

Turkey and the PKK: Saving the Peace Process, Europe Report N°234, 6 November 2014 (also available in Turkish).

A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks, Europe Briefing N°77, 17 December 2015 (also available in Turkish).

The Human Cost of the PKK Conflict in Turkey: The Case of Sur, Europe Briefing N°80, 17 March 2016 (also available in Turkish).

Turkey's Refugee Crisis: The Politics of Permanence, Europe Report N°241, 30 November 2016 (also available in Turkish).

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