

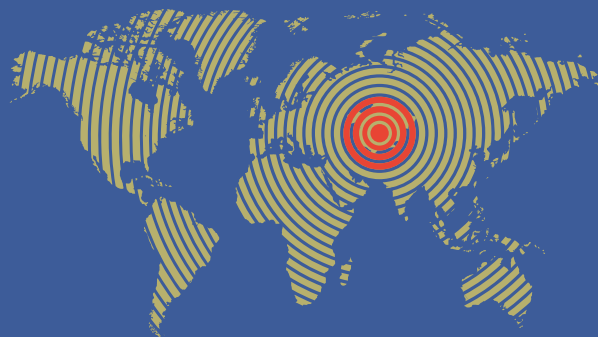


CAN RUSSIA FIND MORE FRIENDS AND SUPPORTS IN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE?

POSITION AND REACTIONS OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

By Civic IDEA
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Russia Ukraine Central Asia



Russia's invasion of Ukraine found Central Asian states in surprise. Undoubtedly their attention was occupied by events in Kazakhstan beginning of 2022 and developments following widespread unrest when Russian military aggression against Ukraine shook the world.

As for the facts, all Central Asian states and their economies are intertwined with Russia. Some are members of the Eurasian Economic Union as well. The cooperation and interdependence are so high that the threat of Western sanctions over the Kremlin having an effect on them is very tangible and high.

Moreover, three countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, along with Armenia and Belarus, are members of the Russian-led security/military alliance – the CSTO. Therefore, Moscow's expectation of demonstrated support, including military, was rather realistic and projected.

Despite relatively clear links and bondages to Moscow, the reactions and political statements of national governments from Central Asia differed from complete silence to support or concerns over the developments in Ukraine. President Putin's recognition of breakaway regions and dismissal of Ukrainian statehood should have rung a bell in some Central Asian states, particularly those with significant Russian minorities.

KYRGYZSTAN



The position of Kyrgyzstan especially catches the eye. On February 22nd, two days prior to the commencement of the war, the President of Kyrgyz Republic, Sadyr Japarov, openly expressed his direct support to Russia, claiming that Ukraine's failure to follow the Minsk Agreement triggered Russia's intrusion into the Donbas region as if to "protect" the local population. He also justified Russia's recognition of Ukraine's breakaway regions by saying that every country has the supreme right to recognize a specific country. Also, it is worth mentioning that regardless of the Kremlin claiming that Mr. Japarov supported the invasion in his telephone conversation with President Putin on the 26th of February, the Kyrgyz readout, officially published the same day, never mentions any support and endorsement of Russia's actions and stays neutral. It is important to note that the official statement of the MFA of Kyrgyzstan distanced itself from the president's support, taking a more neutral and restrained stance on this issue, expressing hopes for a peaceful de-escalation. On March 3rd, Kyrgyzstan officially abstained from voting in the UN General Assembly (GA) on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the neutrality of the Kyrgyz state in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict did not last long. On March 14th, Kyrgyz authorities banned rallies supporting Ukraine near the Russian Embassy, claiming that they opposed Kyrgyzstan's neutral position. Already on April 7th, Kyrgyzstan officially voted against expelling Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (HRC).

On March 4th, a director of the Kyrgyz independent TV station NEXT was detained, and a probe against the television channel was launched for inciting inter-ethnic hatred after quoting former Kazakh Chief of Committee for National Security, saying that "Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had agreed to support Moscow's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by sending troops to help Russia." Kyrgyz government denied accusations and demanded the accuracy of the information from the media. The case was significant as by proceedings; official Bishkek demonstrated its position and no decision over military support of Russia's cause in Ukraine. According to the facts obtained by Radio Liberty, many Kyrgyz natives who have Russian passports or reside in Russia are fighting alongside Russia. However, it is still unknown whether Kyrgyz citizens living in Kyrgyzstan themselves were called up for war in support of the Russian Federation.

UZBEKISTAN



On February 25th, the official Kremlin announced that during the phone call, the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, backed Putin's aggression by "expressing understanding for Russia's actions." Later, President's administration clarified that official Uzbekistan maintains a neutral standpoint over the war in Ukraine and supports its peaceful resolution. Later on the 17th of March, the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, in his address to parliament, denounced the military actions and aggression against Ukraine, claiming that Uzbekistan recognizes its territorial integrity and provides humanitarian aid to it. "Uzbekistan recognizes Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. We do not recognize the (so-called) people's republics of Luhansk and Donetsk". Additionally, Uzbekistan's Parliamentary Deputy Speaker Alisher Kadirov, distinguished for his anti-Russian sentiments, criticized Putin's actions, praising Ukraine for courage and the ability to fight back.

Despite all the formal support expressed towards the Ukrainian side, Uzbekistan's votes in the UN GA seem controversial and contradict its initial stance about the ongoing war. In April, similar to other Central Asian states, except Turkmenistan, the Uzbek representatives voted against Russia's expulsion from the UN HRC. Moreover, Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Komilov, had to step down after expressing his open support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, calling for a "peaceful resolution" of the war.

KAZAKHSTAN



Kazakhstan has initially taken a tough stance on the Ukraine crisis while rejecting to participate in Russian military activities despite being a member of the CSTO. One might think that Kazakhstan is Russia's closest ally in the Central Asian region, both in economic and military domains. It is also essential that nearly a month before military aggression in Ukraine, CSTO sent its military forces to Kazakhstan to calm mass protests and rescuing the government. Thus, it is not surprising that Russia requested the Kazakh government to assist its troops in the fight against Ukraine. Nevertheless, Kazakh President, Mr. Tokayev, refused to send the army in support of Russia, and no recognition of the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk was expected. Additionally, Tokayev insisted on the principle of the indivisibility of Eurasian security and offered mediation. It is no surprise that Kremlin's Ukraine rhetoric reminded many ones from 2014 when President Putin used similar dismissive language over Kazakh statehood during his meeting with President Nazarbayev. In early March 2022, unlike Kyrgyzstan, Kazakh authorities permitted public marches of civil activists backing Ukraine with anti-Kremlin banners. One week after the rallies, Kazakhstan also sent Ukraine generous humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, for fear of Russia, Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian countries, refrains from taking an official position in support of Ukraine and avoids speaking out against Russia in the UN. This is evidenced by the fact that on March 3rd, Kazakhstan abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly's resolution concerning the condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, on April 7th, just like Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, Kazakhstan voted against expelling Russia from the UN HRC. Meanwhile, the Kazakhstani government decided to boost the defense forces of Kazakhstan amid the war crimes orchestrated by Russia in Ukraine, and increase the budget for the military, policing, and emergency services.

TAJIKISTAN



As the poorest in the region, Tajikistan has been severely affected by the sanctions imposed on Russia. Nevertheless, official Tajikistan abstained from commenting or backing any conflicting countries. Only one state media agency sent an indirect message by citing the UN secretary General who addressed Russia to refrain from its military actions in Ukraine. The leadership of Tajikistan has made no other official remarks. Tajikistan's state media outlets also try to avoid the subject of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Tajikistan, similar to member states of the Eurasian Economic Union Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, abstained from the vote at the UN General Assembly on resolution ES-11/1, on March 2nd, 2022. Two other countries in the region, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, were not present as well. The resolution deplored Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded a complete withdrawal of forces and a reversal of its decision to recognize the self-declared People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. On April 7th, Tajikistan also voted against dismissing Russia from the UN HRC, which was expected considering its dependency on the Russian Federation.

Likewise Kyrgyz soldiers, Tajiks, are also fighting beside Russia in the war against Ukraine. This occasion was revealed after local media outlets reported the death of several Tajik soldiers who died in the war during their service in the Russian army. However, no official statement about the deployment of Tajik soldiers has been made by the government of Tajikistan. As mentioned by the local experts and media representatives, the citizens of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan received calls from unknown persons from some "law firms" who offered to obtain Russian citizenship at the expense of three months of contract service in the Russian army. This probably was one of the methods used by the Kremlin to try to lure the Central Asian nations into war.

TURKMENISTAN



Knowing the authoritarian rule in Turkmenistan, it is not surprising that its government has taken no position on the ongoing events in Ukraine. No public statements have been aired by the Turkmen authorities, and the country representatives have not participated in the UN voting concerning Russia's seizure of Ukraine. Overall, the public is strongly dejected from commenting on foreign affairs by the authority, which itself never speaks about any international affairs issues. It is to be noted that there were United States-Turkmenistan Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) conclude-ed beginning of March, where the US insisted on "the importance of condemning Russia's premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine and of maintaining solidarity with the people of Ukraine." However, the US state department's media note does not mention any position expressed by the Turkmen side.

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