

Written evidence submitted by Prof Luca Anceschi (University of Glasgow) to the Foreign Affairs Committee (ECA0008)

I am a Professor in the School of Social & Political Sciences the University of Glasgow, where I hold one of the few personal chairs in Eurasian Studies available across the entire European Education Area. My research looks at how authoritarian politics shapes decision-making in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Since 2015, I have been the editor of *Europe-Asia Studies*—the world’s leading scholarly journal for the study of the post-socialist countries of Europe and Asia. I would be happy to provide oral evidence to the Committee on these issues if it is in their interest.

Summary

This submission provides evidence on three of the questions posed by the Committee related to the United Kingdom’s engagement in Central Asia.

- The key challenge facing Central Asia is represented by the consolidation of authoritarian governance that is defining regional politics in the post-pandemic era.
 - ✓ Since 2022, the Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan more in particular—capitalised on the power grab that occurred during the pandemic to complete a process of regime regeneration that led to a further consolidation of authoritarian governance in the region.
 - ✓ Regime regeneration in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan failed to promote any qualitative improvement in governance standards across Central Asia.
 - ✓ Post-pandemic authoritarian entrenchment is likely to have significant implications for UK policy in Central Asia for the next decade and beyond.
 - ✓ In response to this major challenge, the United Kingdom ought to deploy a strategy of regional engagement that juxtaposes medium-term pragmatic agendas with longer-term partnerships centred on the promotion of good governance, human rights and the rule of law.
- The opportunities and challenges provided with regards to Central Asia’s relationship with China and Russia are all connected with the way in which the United Kingdom will tackle the rise of authoritarianism in the region.
 - ✓ Reaffirming the importance of a rules-based order in its renewed approach to Central Asia may offer the United Kingdom increased visibility in the region.
 - ✓ The implementation of a new Central Asia policy that puts a premium on the promotion of a rules-based order in Central Asia will allow the United Kingdom to maximise its regional impact at the margins of the Central Asia-Great Powers relationship.
 - ✓ To maximise UK focus on a values-based policy in Central Asia, and highlight the different between the UK approach and the partnerships options made available in the region by Russia and China, I recommend that the United Kingdom calibrates its regional engagement around the promotion of civil society, freedom of expression, and good governance.
- Finally, there are two key opportunities for the United Kingdom to enhance its regional visibility through multilateral institutions, and the OSCE more in particular.
 - ✓ First, the United Kingdom ought to spearhead a relaunch of OSCE activities in Central Asia, by promoting human rights as a fundamental element in the OSCE security framework.
 - ✓ Second, and always within the OSCE framework, the United Kingdom ought to increase its funding for extrabudgetary human-dimension projects to be carried by OSCE field institutions in Central Asia.

What are the key challenges facing the region and its people in the coming decade and what implications do these have for UK foreign policy?

1. The persistence of authoritarian governance represents to my mind the most significant threat to the long-term stability of Central Asia as a whole, constituting at the same time a direct challenge to the livelihoods of ordinary citizens across the region.
2. Non-democratic politics is entrenched in Central Asia, a region where, since the achievement of independence, quality of governance evolved in a constantly downward trajectory: no election held in Central Asia since 1992 has in fact met international standards of competitiveness and fairness. Recently, however, we have witnessed a worrying process of further authoritarian entrenchment, one that, most significantly, is bound to affect regional politics in the coming decade.
3. The politics of the pandemic has brought up a power grab across Central Asia. Here, my ongoing research¹ argues that the onset and persistence of emergency politics has led to a long-term deterioration of governance standards in the region. In framing their response to the eruption of the Covid pandemic or when addressing the anticipated economic downturn caused by large-scale infection, the Central Asian regimes introduced a series of emergency measures that pursued an authoritarian agenda disguised under the umbrella of crisis management. There are two areas in which this power grab emerged more visibly throughout 2020-2022.
4. First, the introduction of measures pursuing epidemiological control (e.g. total or partial lockdown; quarantine; isolation and self-isolation; travel restrictions) became functional to the implementation of legislative frameworks that, in the long term, further limited the freedom of association of ordinary Central Asians. At the same time, the increased securitisation of the region's urban spaces, pursued predominantly yet not exclusively through the installation of cameras featuring facial recognition technology in Central Asia's main cities, became a further indicator of the state's growing intrusion in the private lives of the wider population.
5. Second, the policies whereby the regional regimes communicated the Covid crisis led to a substantive deterioration of freedom of expression across Central Asia. Here, we witnessed the regional elites engaging in a multilevel strategy of disinformation, data manipulation and outright repression that had the net effect to shrink further the space available to independent media operators in a region where state outlets were already exerting a nearly complete monopoly over information policy.
6. The pandemic, therefore, made possible a further consolidation of Central Asia's authoritarian power. The regional states have, since 2022, endeavoured to capitalise on the power grab completed during the Covid-19 crisis and engaged in a process of authoritarian regeneration that is developing strikingly similar traits across three of the region's key constituencies, namely Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.
7. In Kazakhstan, the regime led by Qasym-Zhomart Toqaev is engaged in a process of elite rejuvenation focused on the marginalisation of cadres associated with former president Nursultan Nazarbayev. Throughout 2022-2023, the government in Astana held a sequence of public votes—a constitutional referendum (5 June 2022), a presidential election (20 November 2022), and a parliamentary election (19

¹ See, for instance, the seminar I delivered at the University of Oxford on 14 February 2022. A summary is available online at: <https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/events/authoritarian-contagion-central-asia-and-international-politics-pandemic>

March 2023)—that, due to their fundamentally uncompetitive nature, secured Toqayev’s hold onto power for the rest of the 2020s.

8. In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who pursued since his accession to power in late 2016 a process of authoritarian modernisation², is now attempting to enact an extensive agenda of constitutional change. Amongst other reforms, this includes the removal of presidential term limits, which will allow the incumbent to extend his mandate for two more terms in office, possibly beyond 2030.
9. In March 2022,³ Turkmenistan perfected a hitherto unprecedented authoritarian feat, formalising the accession to the presidency of Serdar Berdimuhamedov, the son of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, who had been ruling the country in increasingly mercurial fashion since the death of first president Saparmurat Niyazov in December 2006. The finalisation of an orchestrated succession in Turkmenistan—ruled by one of the most authoritarian leaderships amongst those in power across the wider Asian continent—established a dynastic regime, wherein, due to Serdar’s relative youth (he was 41 at the time of his accession to power), the Berdimuhamedov family is likely to control Turkmen politics for the foreseeable future, well into the 2040s.
10. Post-pandemic authoritarian entrenchment perpetuates the region’s authoritarian stability—one model of state control that, as the events of January 2022 in Kazakhstan⁴ and the protests erupted in Karakalpakstan [west Uzbekistan] in the summer of 2022 confirmed, is ultimately unsteady. At the same time, the post-pandemic version of authoritarian politics crystallised in Central Asia has begun to threaten even more directly the freedoms of ordinary citizens. The regeneration of the regimes ruling over Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan did not entail heightened regard for the population’s social and political rights and it moreover failed to promote any qualitative improvement in governance standards across Central Asia.
11. The process of authoritarian entrenchment redefining Central Asia’s politics in the post-pandemic years is likely to have direct, significant implications for UK regional policy in the coming decade. The elites who are in power across Central Asia in March 2023 have laid out the foundations to remain at the helm of their respective regimes for the rest of the decade and beyond. In recognising that such continuity of power is authoritarian in nature, the UK government ought to deploy a strategy of regional engagement that differentiates between medium-term linkages pursuing pragmatic collaboration and longer-term partnerships focusing in turn on the promotion of good governance, human rights, and the rule of law.

Where do the relationships between Central Asian states and neighbouring countries, including the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, pose challenges for UK foreign policy, and where do they provide opportunities?

² Luca Anceschi, “Modernising Authoritarianism in Uzbekistan”, *open Democracy Russia*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/modernising-authoritarianism-in-uzbekistan/>.

³ Maximilian Hess & Luca Anceschi, “Turkmenistan Is All About the Berdimuhamedovs”, *Foreign Policy*, 9 March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/09/turkmenistan-election-berdimuhamedov-dynasty/>.

⁴ Luca Anceschi, “Kazakhstan: Secrets, Lies, and Foreign Troops”, *Carnegie’s Strategic Europe*, 11 January 2022, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/86172>.

12. Their complexity and comprehensiveness notwithstanding, the partnerships that the Central Asian states have established with the Russian Federation and People's Republic of China (the Great Powers) are by no means the only significant set of international linkages connecting the region with the global community.
13. The Central Asian states have moreover sought to avoid the emergence of patterns of over-dependency in their interaction with Russia and China. As they shrewdly exercised their foreign policy agency while dealing with the Great Powers, the regional states are not the clients of the regimes sitting in Moscow and Beijing.
14. Recognising the limits intrinsic to Central Asia-Great Powers relations allows for the identification of a set of challenges and opportunities that may define UK engagement patterns with the region in the decade to come. To my mind, these challenges and opportunities all connect with the key issue identified in point 11 above. It is only by establishing a new Central Asia policy that puts a premium on the promotion of a rules-based order in the region that UK diplomats will be able to successfully operate at the interstices of the Central Asia-Great Powers relationship.
15. Norms and values are in fact typically excluded from the priorities pursued in Central Asia by Russia and China: fostering a normative agenda while reaffirming the importance of these issues in their approach to Central Asia may offer the United Kingdom increased visibility in the region.
16. Opportunities for UK engagement in Central Asia relate to exploiting the vacuum left by the overly pragmatic policies pursued by Russia and China in the region. Focusing on this particular aspect of cooperation, which ought nevertheless to dovetail with a well framed economic agenda, will be at the advantage of the United Kingdom.
17. There are three main avenues to maximise UK focus on a values-based policy in Central Asia. Specifically:
 - a. Establishing a visible in-country presence that centres on nurturing civil society and upholds the human rights of ordinary Central Asians;
 - b. Increasing the number of exchanges available to Central Asian youth, activists and media operators to visit and study the United Kingdom;
 - c. Probing, with more determination and greater regularity, the regional regimes so far as their commitment to political pluralism.
18. In the decade to come, the main threat to UK policy in the region arises from the implementation of a regional policy that, conversely, tries to catch up with Russia and China by offering the Central Asian regimes a collaborative portfolio exclusively based on the advancement of a purely economic agenda. The resources available to China and the established commercial and infrastructural linkages that connect Central Asia with Russia will dwarf any UK policy framework that tries to compete on the same terms while approaching the Central Asian states. Therefore, I recommend that the United Kingdom focuses its engagement on promoting civil society, freedom of expression, and good governance.

What opportunities exist for the UK to work more closely with Central Asian states in multilateral institutions and to foster respect for the rules-based international order?

19. Multilateral cooperation is a policy area wherein the United Kingdom can, and definitely should, play a more active role in order to foster respect for a rules-based order in Central Asia. To my mind, it is within the

OSCE framework that UK diplomats face a most favourable set of conditions for a more meaningful human dimension engagement *vis-à-vis* their Central Asian partners.

20. As I argued elsewhere,⁵ the OSCE ought to adjust its conceptualisation of regional security to the current international landscape, which is constantly remade by the process of democratic decay at play globally. As rights and norms appear to be in retreat in virtually every region across the OSCE area, a way to update this organisation's security concept is the enhancement of OSCE effort to promote human rights as a fundamental element in its security framework. The OSCE, in other words, ought to begin considering non-democratic politics as a security threat.
21. Notwithstanding the impasse currently experienced by the OSCE due to Russia's continuing obstructionism, the United Kingdom's Central Asia policy, when it comes to the OSCE framework, is faced with one practical policy option so far as enhancing its commitment to the promotion of a rules-based order in the region.
22. Specifically, the United Kingdom as a participating OSCE member, ought to increase its funding for human-dimension projects to be carried by OSCE field institutions in Central Asia, with particular reference to the OSCE Programme Office in Astana (Kazakhstan) and the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat (Turkmenistan).
23. This refers to a targeted increase in the United Kingdom's financial contribution for these centres' extrabudgetary projects. Enhanced funding, in turn, ought to be exclusively linked to an expansion in the range and number of human-dimension projects carried out by the OSCE field institutions in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Should this funding be awarded, and the projects implemented, these institutions will gain greater local exposure as actors promoting good governance and rule-of-law projects in two political landscapes that have recently experienced a further round of democratic decay.

27 March 2023

⁵ Luca Anceschi, "An Intractable Partner: Whither the OSCE's Relations with Turkmenistan?," in *OSCE Insights*, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748933625-04>