

Written evidence submitted by the Foreign Policy Centre (ECA0015)

1. Summary: The Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) is an international affairs think tank, which coordinates the ‘Britain as a ‘force for good’ in Central Asia’ Working Group. Established in October 2021, this informal Working Group brings together academics and NGO representatives from the UK and Central Asia to look at the role the UK can play to improve human rights and governance in the region.

This submission, and its recommendations, draws upon a series of individual country briefing papers for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, published by FPC in December 2022 on behalf of the Working Group.¹ Reflecting the findings of these papers, this submission takes stock of some of the key challenges and opportunities facing Britain’s role in the region. Particularly, in relation to what the UK Government can do to support good governance, human rights and political freedoms. The submission also reflects upon the UK’s engagement with the region and examines the extent of the diplomatic and economic tools available to it to support positive change both bilaterally and in partnership with local partners. Lastly, it also highlights the changes needed at home to prevent the UK from enabling some of the worst practices in Central Asia, notably to stop it being a repository for dirty money from the region.

2. Key Recommendations for the UK Government:

On human rights:

1. Call upon all Central Asian countries to fully comply with their international human rights obligations, in particular under the Convention against Torture, Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
2. Support projects in the region that are aimed at protecting religious freedom, the rights of women, LGBTIQ people and other minorities, as well as those tackling domestic violence and sexual harassment.
3. Continue to raise concerns about the misuse of anti-extremism narratives and powers against peaceful opposition groups, as well as addressing the abuse of ‘freedom restriction’ sentences.
4. Back international efforts at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to prevent the abuse of labour and trade union rights in the region.
5. Ensure the inclusion of human rights within the political dialogue process of any UK-Country specific Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and include human rights conditionality on any trade or other significant benefits offered.
6. Explore opportunities to strengthen human rights and governance conditionality as a requirement to unlock stalled EU and UK partnership agreements, open future opportunities for debt relief, and further government related aid and new investment.

On tackling financial crime and corruption:

¹ This submission was prepared by the Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) and reviewed by two members of the Working Group, Dr Aijan Sharshenova, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, and Adam Hug, FPC Board member and former FPC Director (until December 2022). The individual country papers forming the ‘Can Britain be a ‘force for good’ in Central Asia?’ series, published by FPC in December 2022, are available at: <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/can-britain-be-a-force-for-good-in-central-asia/>.

7. Bring back the National Crime Agency's presence to the Central Asian region to help tackle organised crime and illicit financial flows from the region. An increased cooperation on Unexplained Wealth Orders, and to bring stolen public assets from Central Asian republics back from the UK, requires a strong liaison on the ground.
8. Raise concerns about the use of the UK's Overseas Territories as shelters for potentially corrupt transactions and improve the UK's transparency and accountability.
9. Examine the use of Magnitsky Sanctions and Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions in relation to Central Asia.
10. Consider Global Anti-Corruption sanctions designations against those whose origins of wealth can be tied to assets they have illegally seized and apply the principles of the Global Forum on Asset Recovery's Principles for Disposition and Transfer of Confiscated Stolen Assets in Corruption Cases ('GFAR Principles') – which includes active involvement of local civil society as well as governments – when seizing and repatriating assets against said individuals to allow for a transparent recovery process that is beneficial for wider society.
11. Find ways to protect independent business from persecution, strengthen systems of governance and to boost competition, ensuring that cooperation on economic reforms (such as privatisations) avoid creating new opportunities for corruption and nepotism.

On supporting civil society:

12. Ensure independent voices are able to participate in UK schemes such as Chevening and liaise with the Department of Education, Ofsted and British experts on further opportunities to support reform of education systems, including encouraging UK universities that operate in the region to have regard for the protection of academic freedom.
13. Review and strengthen engagement with civil society and independent mass media as these two groups of domestic actors seem to be the only genuine agents of change for the better. Donor supported investigative journalism and civic action have brought to public attention a lot of previously hidden issues of corruption and organised crime.
14. Encourage staff in UK Embassies in Central Asian countries to speak out against egregious abuses and to bolster support for trial monitoring where activists and journalists are being repressed.

Q.1 - 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?

3. The Foreign Affairs Select Committee notes in its Call for Evidence, Central Asian countries that *“sit on the fault lines of great power competition between two of the UK's foremost competitors: China and Russia.”* While it is indeed correct that both Russia and China have strong and (in the latter case) growing interests in the region and that this has an influence over how the UK seeks to engage, it is, however, important to recognise the value of region in its own right as well as a broader range of strategic priorities than simple competition. How these countries operate internally, the level to which they respect their international obligations and respect governance norms naturally has an impact on the ability for the UK to effectively engage both as a bilateral and multilateral partner. As the UK Government *“seeks to deepen its engagement on security, energy, trade, environment and investment to pursue mutually beneficial objectives”* it must be

alive to the issues that affect each country's level of good governance or lack thereof, as well as the impact of the UK's own policies and failings, as can be seen particularly the area of tackling corruption.

4. Human rights standards vary across the Central Asian region. Turkmenistan is, as all international human rights rankings show, one of the most repressive countries in the world and one of its most isolated. However, regressive attitudes and policies towards women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, as well as the right to protest and rights to basic labour standards are widespread to various degrees across other Central Asian states (covered in more detail in the sections below). The lack of universally applied human rights poses the greatest challenge for citizens in the region and will likely stall cooperation, whether through trade or expertise. Addressing these issues through the UK's engagement with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, must therefore be an important component if the UK has aspirations to act as a 'force for good' in the region through its foreign policy.

Women and LGBTQ+ rights

5. We are aware that the UK Government has commissioned scoping work on the important issues of domestic violence and women's rights in Uzbekistan, this perhaps should extend to the wider Central Asian region. International experts see Kazakhstan's legislation and enforcement on domestic violence as being weak, with cases usually dealt with under the administrative code (for minor offenses) rather than Criminal Code (which is used only for severe assaults), leading to a situation where the penalties for dropping a cigarette on the street (classified as petty hooliganism) are harsher than for most domestic violence cases.² Meanwhile, traditional and secular-conservative attitudes to issues of gender and sexuality are widespread across society in Tajikistan and part of the President's approach to building a post-Soviet Tajik identity.

6. Similarly, the LGBTQ+ community in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan remains heavily repressed by the state. In both countries consensual sex between men remains criminalised and subject to a two-year prison sentence in Turkmenistan, which remains one of the eight countries in the world where 'law enforcement officials, working in tandem with medical personnel subject men and transgender women who are arrested on homosexuality-related charges to forced anal examinations, with the purported objective of finding "proof" of homosexual conduct'.³ Whilst, LGBTQ+ rights remain one of the most difficult topics on which to engage the Uzbek Government. Across the region, irrespective of legal status members of the LGBTQ+ communities are targeted by blackmail and assault, including by law enforcement.

7. Overall, when engaging with Central Asian States, the UK will need to persevere in making the case for tolerance and to reduce attacks and exploitation of minority communities. It is important that the UK Home Office is fully aware of the extent of the repression against LGBTQ+ community in each Central Asian country when considering applications for asylum.

Forced Labour/Blocks to Unionising

² Amina Chaya, What's wrong with the domestic violence law in Kazakhstan? Part two, Masa Media, November 2020, <https://masa.media/ru/site/chto-netak-szakonom-obytovom-nasilii-vkazakhstane-chast-vtoraya>

³ Amnesty International Public Statement, Amnesty International urges Turkmenistan to resolve all enforced disappearances and end criminalization of same sex relations, September 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR6191262018ENGLISH.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, Dignity Debased-Forced Anal Examinations in Homosexuality Prosecutions, July 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/12/dignity-debased/forced-anal-examinations-homosexuality-prosecutions>

8. In several Central Asian countries, independent Trade Unions have been repeatedly undermined and closed through bureaucratic harassment, with their leaders jailed or placed under freedom restrictions. It therefore remains important that the UK backs international efforts at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to bring, particularly, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan into alignment with international best practice.

9. For example, every year, the Turkmen Government sends thousands of people from both the public and private sectors into the cotton fields, including some key workers such as teachers, doctors and nurses, forcing them to leave their daily jobs to harvest cotton for the State instead, or to pay money to hire pickers to replace them. The State imposes quotas on cotton picking, and those who fail to meet their quotas face harassment from the authorities and risk losing their jobs. Any attempts by workers to assemble outside the supervision of the State would be severely punished.

10. This is not a problem unique to Turkmenistan. Whilst Uzbekistan has made meaningful and significant progress to end state-imposed forced and child labour in cotton production, leading to the ending of the international boycott on Uzbek cotton. However, it is worth noting that cotton pickers and factory workers have no independent organisations or trade unions to voice concerns and defend their rights. All union activity in the country continues to be dominated by the government-aligned Federation of Trade Union of Uzbekistan. The UK Government should support international efforts to argue that freedom of association for both workers and farmers, and freedom of expression are critical to the long-term success of efforts to complete and sustain the eradication of forced labour and promote decent work in the cotton and textile sector. The UK should amend its overseas business guidance to fully reflect concerns around forced labour.

Protests

11. Within Kazakhstan, human rights groups remain deeply concerned about the treatment of those who were peacefully protesting and who were detained after the crackdown (against rioters and peaceful protestors alike), with allegations of punishment beatings, torture and threats of sexual assault, and street sweeps being conducted by police and those with videos from the protests being arrested after the fact.⁴ There are also concerns that cases of reported rape and assault against peaceful protestors by rioters are being summarily closed without investigation. The Coalition Against Torture (a group of local NGOs) has documented over 200 reported cases of torture in the aftermath of the January 2022 events.⁵ The international community will need to critically assess whatever information is provided by the Kazakh Government's investigation commission, in light of the widespread NGO and expert testimony already available, retaining the option to use the UK's Global Human Rights Sanctions legislation in relation to officials who sanctioned or participated in such abuses.

12. While not always effective, it has been shown that concerted international protest, particularly when supported by Western Embassies in concert, can sometimes push a regime to reverse itself as they did in the case of Khairullo Mirsaidov or Sharoffidin Gadoev within Tajikistan.⁶ It is important for local civil society to see public statements of support as well as the more private lobbying known to take place.

⁴ Saniyash Toyken, "A branch of the Belarusian "Akrestin"". Resident of Atyrau - about torture in custody, Radio Azattyq, January 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-atyrau-sergey-shutov-about-torture/31654602.html>

⁵ Botakoz Kassymbekova and Erica Marat, Kazakhstan Can't Torture Its Way to Stability, Foreign Policy, March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/16/kazakhstan-torture-tokayev-police-violence-protests/>

⁶ Realistically in cases without a link to the banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT- moderate Islamist).

UK Partnerships

13. Given the extent of the problems, any future agreements between the UK and Central Asian states should contain clear processes for political dialogue with human rights and governance at its heart; any benefits beyond the scope of the previous Partnership and Cooperation Agreement should not be considered without significant progress towards reform. For example, as the UK is currently negotiating its post-Brexit partnership arrangements with Kyrgyzstan there may be scope for conditioning the process to ensure some specific and measurable actions to prevent further backsliding on human rights (albeit perhaps limited in scope relative to the UK's negotiating weight). However, substantive trade incentives may be restricted by Kyrgyzstan's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union.

14. For Tajikistan, there are real challenges for the UK and its allies about deciding whether, when and how to engage with the country (and therefore the regime), which come with difficult trade-offs for those involved; and where development and human rights imperatives do not always align in the short-term. Tajikistan does not seem to be top of the priority list in Central Asia for the UK to convert the previous EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement into a bilateral arrangement (as it has with Uzbekistan). Given conditions on the ground it is right to be cautious about offering diplomatic benefits that could be seen as an endorsement of the Government of Tajikistan's behaviour. On the basis of persistent human rights abuses the UK should seek to add Tajikistan to its list of Human Rights Priority Countries, given that its performance on human rights is significantly worse than a number of the countries currently on the list.⁷

15. Turkmenistan is the one country in Central Asia which does not have an active Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU (the 1998 agreement was never ratified by the EU), meaning that the UK did not roll it over post-Brexit. Attempts by the European External Action Service (EEAS) to deliver an updated agreement have been blocked by the European Parliament, which has rightly insisted on strict human rights benchmarks before any new agreement can be brought into force. It would be a worrying sign in relation to the UK's commitment to Open Societies if the UK did not apply similar red lines to the EU before ever moving forward with a bilateral deal as Turkmenistan is appropriately listed as one of the UK's Human Rights Priority Countries.

Q.2 - What are the opportunities and risks of the UK strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?

16. In recent years, there has been an increasing public awareness of the scale of operations of organised crime and complaints against corrupt officials in all five Central Asian countries. Given corruption plays a central role in political life, there are economic risks for the UK Government. Below are recommendations from the Working Group, such as the restoration of the National Crime Agency (NCA), that will help to mediate these risks and bolster the region's economic stability,

National Crime Agency

⁷ FCDO, Human rights and democracy: the 2021 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office report, Gov.uk, December 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2021/human-rights-and-democracy-the2021-foreign-commonwealth-development-office-report#chapter-5-human-rights-priority-countries>

17. There is a strong case for retaining or restoring the NCA presence in Central Asia. There has been a NCA officer in Uzbekistan covering both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the recent past, but this locally hired position was removed by the NCA as of the end of March 2022 (with a previous UK national role removed 18 months ago) despite the roles being funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Similarly, the UK Government needs to take action to tackle kleptocracy within Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan by ensuring NCA and similar law enforcement agencies are empowered to take action despite previous difficulties. In general, the UK therefore has a responsibility to restrict opportunities for offshoring the proceeds of kleptocracy in UK companies and properties, and the protection of suspicious wealth by English law firms marketing to kleptocrats, are curtailed.

Economic reforms

18. One of the key ways in which the UK can assist with issues of governance across Central Asia is by getting its own house in order in terms of corporate governance through reforms to Companies House promised in the current (second) Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency bill and where appropriate the use of the UK's Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions. There is much the UK could do at the intersection between economic and governance reform, with a focus on the elements outlined in the Effective Governance for Economic Development (EGED) in Central Asia project particularly in relation to Tax and customs reform, the Governance of state-owned enterprises and Government procurement, where improving transparency and tackling corruption must be a central feature of these projects. The work of the UK's EGED in Central Asia project has the potential, therefore, to be a useful driver of change provided it is supported by political engagement to buttress reform efforts.⁸

19. Such a situation can be seen in Tajikistan, where the British Virgin Islands is the registered home of the Tajikistan Aluminium Corporation (TALCO), the notionally state-owned company and the largest legitimate source of income inside the country.⁹ Hasan Asadullozoda, the President's brother-in-law and head of Tajikistan's largest commercial bank (Orientbank) is claimed by Eurasianet to have control of TALCO and the company was the subject of a hugely expensive case in the London courts involving the Russian firm Rusal, run by Oleg Deripaska (currently the subject of US sanctions).¹⁰ The TALCO situation highlights two ways in which the UK is facilitating regime control of assets and rents, both through the use of opaque shell companies in its Overseas Territories and the use of the UK legal system for post-Soviet elites to settle their scores. It is to be hoped that the FCDO is making representations through its supervisory role for the Overseas Territories and to other relevant departments and agencies about improving transparency and accountability in relation to this and other cases (including company formation in the UK). Similarly, Turkmenistan's track record of economic reform is so weak as not to be listed in the World Bank's 189 country 'Doing Business' rankings.¹¹ In one example with a UK link, the OCCRP claimed that exports from Turkmen state Petrochemical plants were placed in the hands of two opaque Scottish Limited Partnership

⁸ See FCDO Development Tracker: <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300961/document>

⁹ In 2020 it equated to 48 per cent of official export revenues and used about half the country's electricity supply at the time. See: Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders Power and Money in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2017. A summary of the book can be found here: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/dictators-without-borders/>

¹⁰ David Trilling, *Russian Aluminum Giant Pries Open Books at Tajikistan's Largest Factory*, June 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/russian-aluminum-giant-pries-open-books-at-tajikistans-largest-factory>

¹¹ World Bank Group, *Doing Business 2019: Training for Reform*, October 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/doing-business>

Companies controlled by respectively by two of former President Berdimuhamedow's nephews, Hajymyrat and Shamyrat Rejepov.¹²

20. In Kazakhstan, there may be scope for the UK to offer technical assistance in reforming markets that had previously been unbalanced by the role of family and supporters of the first President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. For example, it was recently announced that the state would no longer do business with Operator ROP, a recycling monopoly linked to Aliya Nazarbayeva, the youngest daughter of Nazarbayev, (who has recently moved enormous amounts of wealth into the UK property market according to British newspapers).¹³ There may be a brief window of opportunity to embed more open and competitive practices in the economy if Kazakhstan is provided with the right support, but the risks remain high of power instead flowing to other politically connected players closer to the current President Tokayev.

Sanctions

21. Central Asian human rights activists have been building a case to meet the criteria for triggering Magnitsky Sanctions against those directly implicated in the imprisonment and death (through withheld medical assistance) of human rights activist Azimzhan (Azimjon) Askarov. This is a case upon which, despite years of international pressure, the Government of Kyrgyzstan has refused to take action, fearful of the complex web of culpability in relation to the situation in the City of Osh between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz. This leaves the international community as the only plausible route for accountability for this crime. When negotiating the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Kyrgyzstan the UK Government should be encouraged to include specific provisions on human rights within the framework of the future political dialogue processes with Bishkek. If possible, there should be scope for human rights conditionality linked to potential benefits offered to Kyrgyzstan through the agreement.

22. On a related note, the UK may wish to examine the work done by the US Government in placing Raimbek Matraimov, the former deputy chair of the State Customs Service of Kyrgyzstan, on its list of Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions. More generally, the UK should look again at ways to use its new Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions and the further deployment of Unexplained Wealth Orders (UWOs), with a particular focus on assessing the suitability of the thirty cases raised in the House of Commons by Dame Margaret Hodge in February 2022.¹⁴ The current Foreign Secretary James Cleverly was the minister responding to Hodge, promising her that, *"my officials, and indeed the House, will have taken note of the individuals she highlighted in her speech"*.¹⁵ However, thus far, the UK has taken no publicly declared measures to introduce sanctions, Account Freezing Orders, UWOs or civil recovery procedures against any of these individuals.

¹² Ruslan Myatiev, Matthew Kupfer, and Bayram Shikhmuradov, State Petrochemical Plants in Turkmenistan Channel Exports Through Obscure U.K. Companies - With Ties to President's Nephews, OCCRP, October 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/the-pandora-papers/state-petrochemical-plants-in-turkmenistan-channel-exports-through-obscure-uk-companies-with-ties-to-presidents-nephews>

¹³ Chris Rickleton, Kazakhstan's green economy: Greenbacks for the Nazarbayevs?, Eurasianet, June 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstans-green-economy-greenbacks-for-the-nazarbayevs>; Bruce Pannier, The Campaign Against Nazarbaev And The Cronies of Kazakhstan's First President Has Begun, RFE/RL, January 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-nazarbaev-cronies-togaev/31651330.html>; See this recent story in relation to UK investments by Aliya Nazarbayeva: Patrick Sawyer, Kazakh despot's daughter went on London spending spree after moving \$300m out of country, The Telegraph, January 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/01/08/kazakh-despots-daughter-went-london-spending-spreed-moving-300m/> and Jamie Phillips, Kazakh despot's daughter, 41, splashed £220m fortune on £18m luxury jet and £8.75m mansion in London spending spree, Mailonline, January 2009, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10383503/Kazakh-despots-daughter-41-bought-18m-luxury-jet-8-75m-mansion-London-spending-spreed.html>

¹⁴ Hansard, Kazakhstan: Anti-corruption Sanctions, Volume 708: debated on Thursday 3 February 2022,

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-02-03/debates/41000B02-86AB-499E-85470F5AA84611B0/KazakhstanAntiCorruptionSanctions>

¹⁵ Todd Prince, As Kazakhstan's President Targets Nazarbaev's Wealth, The Biden Administration Faces A Dilemma, RFE/RL, January 2022,

Q.3 - 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?

23. Due to their geographical location and political history Central Asian states have a complex relationship with Russia, a number of them participating in Russian-led institutions including the Collective Security Treaty Organization CSTO (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan) and the Eurasian Economic Union (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Russia remains the primary security actor in the region but faces increasing competition for influence from China, whose economic reach into the region has dramatically expanded over the last decade (with the region forming a central part of the 'road' element of Belt and Road). Though to a certain extent competitors in the region both China and Russia form the backbone of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in which Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan participate on security matters.¹⁶ In addition to China's growing role, Turkey and the Gulf States have been increasing their links to the region, providing further competition to Western voices at a time where engagement had to a certain extent waned in the wake of the Afghan drawdown a decade ago. UK policy (and indeed Western policy in general) towards the region needs to recognise the inevitability of these regional relationships but that taking steps to bolster the independence of action of Central Asian states and their political, social and economic development (where possible towards more rules based political systems and economies integrated into international systems) should be in the interests of both the UK and Central Asian partners. For all Central Asian states, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the need to try and increase independence from Russia, although a number of their Governments are at the same time taking steps to avoid antagonising Moscow.

Strategic influence

24. The UK is likely to have a strategic interest in helping provide alternatives to a Russia-China duopoly of influence over the Central Asia region. In Kyrgyzstan, given the circumstance of the controversial rise to power of President Japarov, his rather inconsistent and un-strategic foreign policy, and uneven relations with Russia (which has seen to favour relations with Tajikistan's President Rahmon in the context of recent border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), there remains significant opportunities to engage with him and offer him increased international visibility. Amongst members of our Working Group there was a clear feeling that it would be helpful to find ways to provide reassurance to local partners (and to the Government of Kyrgyzstan) around the perceived importance of Central Asia within the wider region.

25. While no criticism has been raised at a political level, there has been a degree of popular disquiet over the treatment of ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who have been victims of the Chinese Government's policies targeting Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang.

Russian invasion of Ukraine

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-corruption-biden-transnational-graft-toqaev/31654605.html>

¹⁶ Turkmenistan's formal diplomatic isolation is subject to a UN declaration of Permanent Neutrality <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/284240?ln=en>

26. Central Asian states have sought to navigate the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, with impacts crossing economic, political and human rights dimensions, the region's dependencies on Russia and vulnerabilities to external shocks have been exposed.

27. The economic fallout of sanctions against Russia are destabilising Tajikistan's economy, which is part of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union and reliant on both remittances from migrant workers based in Russia and imports from there, with inflation running at 30 per cent for some food and significant rises in the cost of oil.¹⁷ Kyrgyzstan too is a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and similarly has a high reliance on remittances from migrant workers based in Russia.¹⁸ Whilst Kazakhstan is part of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, it is less exposed than others in the region to the loss of remittances from the Russian economy. For Uzbekistan, the impact of sanctions has also stalled previously live debate around whether Uzbekistan would join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and whether it allows Russia to use Uzbekistan's jurisdiction for bypassing the sanctions regime (there are at least some signs of that).

28. Both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have abstained from major votes at the UN and both publicly recognise Ukraine's territorial integrity.¹⁹ In Kazakhstan, nationalist sentiment towards Russia is being further stoked by the conflict, with Russian politicians and commentators reanimating long-running calls for the north of Kazakhstan (which contains a substantial number of ethnic Russians who form a local majority in some districts) to be absorbed into Russia.

29. Both have also offered support by welcoming Russian refugees. Kazakhstan has provided refuge for around 100,000 Russians who fled recent military mobilisation efforts and barred certain Russian TV channels that push pro-war narratives.²⁰ Whilst, Uzbekistan has also played host to a significant number of Russians who have left the country over the course of the year, with real concerns that Uzbekistan (and its banking system) may act as a conduit for Russian nationals getting around sanctions.

30. In Kyrgyzstan, the Russia-Ukraine war is having an impact on the human rights situation, due to the Government's concerns about economic instability and potential pressure from Russia.²¹ This saw the

¹⁷ Kamila Ibragimova, Tidal wave of austerity crashing against Tajikistan as Russian economy nears precipice, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/tidal-wave-of-austerity-crashing-against-tajikistan-as-russian-economy-nears-precipice>; Joanna Lillis, Central Asia to suffer as remittances from Russia nosedive, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asiato-suffer-as-remittances-from-russia-nosedive>; Maximilian Hess, Explainer: The ruble's rubble: Economic fallout on Central Asia, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/explainer-the-rubles-rubble-economic-fallout-on-central-asia>

¹⁸ See: Joanna Lillis, Central Asia to suffer as remittances from Russia nosedive, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asiato-suffer-as-remittances-from-russia-nosedive>; Maximilian Hess, Explainer: The ruble's rubble: Economic fallout on Central Asia, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/explainer-the-rubles-rubbleeconomic-fallout-on-central-asia>. Grain imports from Russia to Central Asia have also been suspended until the autumn, see *риа новости*, Twitter post, Twitter, March 2022, <https://twitter.com/rianru/status/1501962684732002305>

¹⁹ See: Nikita Makarenko, Twitter post, Twitter, March 2022, <https://twitter.com/nikmccaren/status/1504341639862571013>; Bruce Pannier, Understanding Central Asia's Cautious Approach to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/understanding-central-asias-cautious-approach-to-russiasinvasion-of-ukraine/>

²⁰ The Economist, Old politics in the "new Kazakhstan", November 2022, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/11/17/oldpolitics-in-the-new-kazakhstan>; AFP, Kazakhstan to Ensure Safety of Russians Fleeing Draft – President, The Moscow Times, September 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/27/kazakhstan-to-ensure-safety-of-russians-fleeing-draft-president-a78902>; Matthew Luxmoore, Twitter post, Twitter, September 2022, <https://twitter.com/mjluxmoore/status/1574775670370177025?s=11&t=LrtVY8bllRvxyeKFvU4lvQ>

²¹ See: Joanna Lillis, Central Asia to suffer as remittances from Russia nosedive, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asiato-suffer-as-remittances-from-russia-nosedive>; Maximilian Hess, Explainer: The ruble's rubble: Economic fallout on Central Asia, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/explainer-the-rubles-rubbleeconomic-fallout-on-central-asia>. Grain imports from Russia to Central Asia have also been suspended until the autumn, see *риа новости*, Twitter post, Twitter, March 2022, <https://twitter.com/rianru/status/1501962684732002305>

Government initially banning protests of any kind in the area near the Russian Embassy and the Kyrgyz Parliament for several months and raiding a TV station (with links to opposition figures) that commented on possible Kyrgyz military assistance to Russia.²² The country is facing falling remittances from migrant workers based in Russia.²³ There are also concerns regarding the actions taken by the Kyrgyz authorities towards dissenting Russians, who try to protest against the war in Kyrgyzstan.²⁴

31. With regard to the UK, regional instability in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has helped hit recent trade between the UK and Uzbekistan, with a 63.8 percent decrease in total trade over the last year (2022) driven by an 88.4 per cent drop in imports from Uzbekistan, after several previous years of income growth.²⁵ Increasing exports to Uzbekistan is seen as a key strategic priority for the UK, with particular focus on education and high-end services (for example legal and architecture). As the UK is currently negotiating its post-Brexit partnership arrangements with Kyrgyzstan there may be scope for similar negotiations to bolster the economies of Central Asian states in the face of the instability they are facing after the invasion.

Q.4 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?

32. The UK has some potential influence over the investment and operational decisions of the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), with both institutions having explicit responsibilities in relation to supporting good governance, democracy and human rights. These mechanisms can be extended to debt forbearance, economic and political transparency as well as capital investment, which in turn can function to bolster the Central Asian region's independence and adherence to the rules-based order.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, World Bank and International financial institutions (IFI)

33. There is a strong case for undertaking a further review of all IFI spending in Tajikistan, particularly schemes that involve close collaboration with or direct funding of state structures.²⁶ There is potential to expand the role that the UK can play in supporting local NGOs monitoring the performance of IFI lending and to improve their operational transparency. The UK could also encourage its IFI partners to make sure information is available in Tajik about all major donor funded projects, in order to improve accountability and to increase the overall amount and detail of project information that is made publicly available.

34. Similarly, the UK should look at ways to influence the discussion on debt forbearance (such as interest relief) and debt reductions and relief on the portion of Kyrgyzstan's debt held by multilateral banks (around 44 per cent of total external debt, which at \$1.7 billion is a relatively small figure by global standards) and

²² CPJ, Kyrgyzstan authorities raid broadcaster Next TB, detain director over Ukraine war posts, March 2022, <https://cpj.org/2022/03/kyrgyzstan-authorities-raid-broadcaster-next-tv-detain-director-over-ukraine-war-posts/>

²³ Ayzirek Imanaliyeva, Kyrgyzstan National Bank predicts 20% decline in remittances, Eurasianet, June 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-national-bank-predicts-20-decline-in-remittances>

²⁴ Nurbek Bekmurzaev, Eurasianet, Kyrgyzstan: Exiled Russians facing pressure for anti-war stance, March 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-exiled-russians-facing-pressure-for-anti-war-stance>

²⁵ Department for International Trade, Trade & Investment Factsheets, Uzbekistan, November 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1117957/uzbekistantrade-and-investment-factsheet-2022-11-18.pdf

²⁶ The World Bank, Projects Tajikistan, https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/projectslist?lang=en&countrycode_exact=TJ&os=0

other Western partners.²⁷ Such efforts could help to free up funding for services in the governance revenue budget and give the country the policy space to consider new capital investment projects. If the politics of this vis-à-vis Kyrgyzstan's separate debts to China prove too problematic, an alternative option might be to write off old-debt to the IFIs in return for new investment in mutually agreed priority areas, such as green energy. A comprehensive approach to existing debt relief could also be linked to finding ways to improve transparency and accountability over new lending by China and other partners.

35. The EBRD describes Turkmenistan as being the 'least competitive economy among the EBRD's countries of operations' and pointing out that a 'heavy state presence dominates economic decision-making' and that 'corporate governance is hampered by a lack of managerial independence even in private firms'.²⁸ A number of members of the Working Group would question whether it is appropriate for the UK to have a Prime Ministerial Trade Envoy to Turkmenistan, given that only 72 countries are given the privilege, many of whom are likely to be more deserving and fruitful in terms of delivering genuine new trade opportunities.²⁹

36. The UK has an important role to play in encouraging the EBRD, World Bank and other institutions in which it has influence to ensure the issues around transparency, and in the Bankwatch report, are fully considered in future lending, with a greater emphasis on improving governance and if possible a degree of conditionality on the lending to incentivise progress on reform.

Q.5 - What is the Government doing to maximise UK soft power influence in Central Asian states?

37. There are three major areas where the UK is wielding its soft power, through the global embassy network, its promotion of media freedom as well as its capacity to be an international education partner. Whilst all are showing the success of the UK's diplomatic resources and network, more can be done to support Central Asian states through these more informal channels.

Embassies and Human Rights

38. From the perspective of local human rights activists, how the UK is seen in each country, particularly given the modest size of the local footprint when compared to the US or EU, is often directly related to the extent to which the Ambassadors play an active role in openly speaking out on individual cases of human rights abuse and attending relevant trials. It is often perceived that the approach taken is driven by Ambassadors themselves (through a mix of personal judgement, preferences and approach) rather than being driven by policy. It would potentially be helpful to find ways in the Country Business plans to ensure that Embassies and Ambassadors feel supported and encouraged to be seen to be advocating for human rights both systemically and in specific cases, including endorsing decisions made by the UN Human Rights Committee.

Media Freedom

²⁷ Adam Hug, *Retreating Rights – Kyrgyzstan: Conclusions and recommendations*, FPC, March 2021, https://fpc.org.uk/retreating-rights-kyrgyzstan-conclusions-and-recommendations/#_ftn11

²⁸ EBRD, *Turkmenistan Country Strategy 2019-2024*, <https://www.ebrd-consultations.com/assets/CountryStrategies/Turkmenistan/67961d1592/turkmenistan-strategy-2019.pdf>

²⁹ UK Government, *Prime Minister's Trade Envoys*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/trade-envoys>

39. In line with the UK's leading role in the Media Freedom Coalition, and with media work in Kazakhstan being an embassy priority, it is important for Embassies to speak out on behalf of journalists and independent outlets that are under pressure, call for prompt, effective and impartial investigation of attacks on media workers and media outlets. Embassies should follow the developments in cases of arrested and interrogated journalists and voice a serious concern in case of any criminal charges against them, and urge the local government to recognise an important role of media workers rather than putting the blame on journalists and further restricting their work. For example, it will be important for the FCDO in Tajikistan to support and encourage efforts by the Embassy to speak out on egregious abuses and to bolster support for trial monitoring where activists and journalists are being repressed.

40. The UK could share its extensive expertise in broadcast regulation, press self-regulation and guaranteeing freedom of expression and access to information that could potentially contribute to a long-term change.³⁰ It is more important than ever that British Embassies, UK based officials and ministers are encouraged to speak out, in a targeted manner, to draw attention to cases of human rights abuse. It is imperative that local civil society knows that the UK and its allies are actively and publically standing up on its behalf in relation to these issues. There are concerns however that the recent cuts to the BBC World Service will negatively affect Central Asian services, specifically Kyrgyz and Uzbek language services.³¹

41. Overall, in Uzbekistan, the media freedom situation seems to have deteriorated over the last two years with the red lines marking the boundaries between tolerated ('constructive') criticism of the Government and attacks deemed unacceptable have been drawn tighter and tighter. It is clear that without international efforts to help spur future progress, the current situation of tightly managed freedom may ossify into a permanent settlement. Whilst, Tajikistan finds itself in a very difficult place, combining extreme poverty (the least economically developed country in Central Asia and on some measures the 22nd poorest country in the world) and heavy repression (it is close to the bottom of the global freedom rankings for political competition, civic space, and media and religious freedom).³²

Education

42. While recognising existing efforts in this area it is important to ensure that a broad range of Central Asian citizens, particularly in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, are able to apply for the UK's Chevening Scholarship programme. That is, beyond those who would be offered opportunities by the Bolashak Programme (the scheme run by the Government of Kazakhstan for the purposes of helping people onto international university courses), and those who would be offered opportunities in Uzbekistan by the El-Yurt Umidi Foundation (founded by President Mirziyoyev for the purposes of helping people onto Western university courses).³³

³⁰ Kemelbek Oishibaev, Key issues of improving legislation, Adilsoz, <http://www.adilsoz.kz/upload/1smilaw.docx>

³¹ France24, BBC to cut hundreds of jobs at World Service, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220929-bbc-to-cut-hundreds-of-jobs-at-world-service>

³² Avery Koop, Mapped: The 25 Poorest Countries in the World, Visual Capitalist, April 2021, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-the-25-poorest-countries-in-the-world/>; Tajikistan's position is slightly better when it is ranked by purchasing power parity; Freedom House currently ranks the country 198th out of 210 in its Freedom in the World index, with a score of 0 for political rights. Freedom House, Countries and Territories, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores?sort=desc&order=Total%20Score%20and%20St>

³³ The UK Government also needs to work with Universities to ensure Kazakhstanis are not being forced into paying large agents fees to politically influential people in order to receive student placements through the Bolashak scheme.

43. Similarly, there is a need to find opportunities for independent minded scholars who will struggle to be supported in academia in Tajikistan. Working Group members have suggested looking at ways to simplify the application procedure or provide assistance with it to take into consideration the level of expertise within Tajikistan's system at present. It is also important to ensure that a broad range of Uzbekistani citizens are able to apply for Chevening Scholarships. Similarly, programmes such as the John Smith Trust should be encouraged to keep ensuring participation by members of independent civil society to avoid being dominated by participants close to the Government of Uzbekistan.

44. The UK's growing role in Uzbekistan's education sector not only provides economic opportunities that the Government is keen to develop, but provides an opportunity to raise academic standards and increase academic freedom if the Government is able to support partners in that direction.

Previous FPC publications on Central Asia:

- **Can Britain be a 'force for good' in Central Asia?**, December 2022, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/can-britain-be-a-force-for-good-in-central-asia/>
- **Retreating Rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Kazakhstan**, July 2021, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/retreating-rights-examining-the-pressure-on-human-rights-in-kazakhstan/>
- **Retreating Rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Tajikistan**, May 2021, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/retreating-rights-examining-the-pressure-on-human-rights-in-tajikistan/>
- **Retreating Rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Kyrgyzstan**, March 2021, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/retreating-rights-examining-the-pressure-on-human-rights-in-kyrgyzstan/>
- **Spotlight on Uzbekistan**, July 2020, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/spotlight-on-uzbekistan/>
- **Spotlight on Turkmenistan**, July 2019, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/spotlight-on-turkmenistan/>

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