2018 turned out to be quite productive and outlined some trends and events patterns that might occur in 2019 in the Central Asian region. The editors of the analytical platform CABAR.asia interviewed experts in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on the developments during this year, the most important challenges and trends.

The past 2018 year is marked by important integration activities and domestic political events in each of the five Central Asian countries. In addition to the traditional meetings of the presidents in the framework of international integration projects like the SCO, the EEU, the CSTO and the CIS, the following can be noted:

- The first in a long time informal meeting of four countries’ leaders in Astana;
- Adoption of the Convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea;
- Kazakhstan’s chairmanship of the UN Security Council;
- Uzbekistan’s active cooperation with its neighbors and world leaders;
- Summit of Turkic-speaking countries and the Second World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan;
- Launch of the first unit of the Roghun HPP;
- Summit on saving the Aral Sea in Turkmenistan;
- Strengthening cooperation with Afghanistan.

The editor of the analytical platform CABAR.asia interviewed experts in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on the developments during 2019, the most important challenges and trends:

ELECTIONS

In some countries of the region, this year is marked by the beginning of a new electoral cycle. This starts the process of preparation of interested political forces for elections. In 2020, in Kazakhstan, presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as elections of deputies of maslikhats (local councils) at all levels, should be held. It is possible that some of them will be held during this year, ahead of schedule. The main intrigue of the upcoming presidential election is the likelihood of nomination of a potential successor to the current President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

In Kyrgyzstan, similarly, in 2020, legislative elections to the Supreme Council (Jogorku Kenesh) are expected. Thus, the elections will become the main political event of the republic. Interparty dialogue will be intensified; parties will strengthen their work in the
socio-political sphere. The results of party intrigues in the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) will be visible: members of the SDPK who oppose the party leader, former President Atambayev will join other political associations or create their own party. In early 2020, parliamentary elections should be held in Tajikistan, and it can be assumed that political parties will begin active preparations for this event from mid-2019. In Uzbekistan, the elections to the Supreme Assembly (Oliy Majlis) of both houses – to the Legislative Chamber and to the Senate are expected to take place in 2019. Until recently, four political parties were officially registered in the country. In early 2019, a new Ecological Party of Uzbekistan joined them. The upcoming parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan are remarkable for country’s implementation of the Unified Electronic Voter List and the managing the electoral process.

The countries of the region will pay special attention to security issues related to the presidential elections in Afghanistan in 2019. Photo: afghanistantimes.af

Also in July 2019, the presidential elections in Afghanistan will be held. The presidential elections in this country will be a formally significant event for the Central Asian region in a broader sense, at a time of external players’ attempts to find a compromise with the Taliban. Traditionally, during such periods, terrorist groups’ attempts to disrupt elections tend to intensify. Accordingly, the countries of the region will pay special attention to security issues in Central Asia.

POWER TRANSITION

In 2018, Kazakhstan adopted a Law “On the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan”, which proficiently strengthened the role of this institutional body. One of its
innovations is the status of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Nursultan Nazarbayev’s life-long leadership in the Security Council of Kazakhstan. According to experts, innovations have allowed to lay foundations for the power transition in a stable and controlled way. In this regard, it is likely that not Nazarbayev, but his potential successor will run for President at the next presidential election. The “Leader of the Nation” (Elbasy) himself will rule the country in fact, from the position of the Security Council’s chairman.

On the other hand, the power transition may be postponed indefinitely, and early presidential elections will be held ahead of schedule, with Nazarbayev’s re-election for a new presidential term. Now, there are several options of power transition’s mechanism and, perhaps, the situation will clear in the next two to three months.

In 2019, perhaps, there will be another career progression of the President of Turkmenistan’s son, Serdar Berdimuhamedow. In a short time, he has already tried himself in various high government positions. Now he is the deputy governor of Ahal Region. Previously, he held the position of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan.
INTEGRATION

Most of the interviewed experts told that one of the most important for the region events of 2019 will be the second consultative meeting of the Central Asian states’ leaders, scheduled for March 2019 in Tashkent. It is possible that President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow will participate this time, that is, the leaders of all five countries of the region will be represented. This event will contribute to continuity of the process of relations normalization between Central Asian countries, which began last year, with a completely new level of multilateral interaction.

Also in 2019, traditional CSTO and SCO summits are planned to be held, in which Kyrgyzstan gained the chairmanship. Leading politicians will speak about terrorism and other topics that are important from these organizations’ point of view. For Sooronbay Jeenbekov this will be a debut in hosting the honored guests as a president, and, of course, the Kyrgyz authorities will try to hold the events at a very high level.

In 2019, Tajikistan is planning to launch the second unit of the Roghun hydropower plant, as well as to start the reconstruction of other large hydropower plants in Nurak and Qayroqqum. These actions will allow Tajikistan to ramp up the supply of cheap electricity to
foreign markets, primarily to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.
In addition, a major political event will be held in Tajikistan this year – the Summit of Heads of States of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which will be attended by the Heads of CICA member states.
The launch of the “Silk Visa” project between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in February 2019 is considered as one of the significant integration events for the region. It is assumed that this Central Asian analogue of the EU Schengen visa will help to increase the flow of foreign tourists to the region. “Silk Visa” allows foreign citizens to visit both countries on the same visa received in any of these countries. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are observing this project with interest.
This year a new European Union Strategy on relations with the countries of our region will be adopted, which focuses on cooperation strengthening between Central Asia and the European Union. The implementation of the existing Strategy, adopted in 2007, has its pros and cons. How well Brussels understands and is able to enhance the strengths and eliminate the imperfections of the Strategy determines the quality of the newly developed document.
One of the key foreign policy events in Kyrgyzstan may be the signing of a new “Agreement regarding Cooperation to Facilitate the Provision of Assistance” with the United States, based on which a number of USAID humanitarian projects have been functioning for many years. Signing this Agreement can mean a thaw in Kyrgyz-American relations, and help to strengthen the US positions as an international donor in this country. The government of Kyrgyzstan denounced the previous agreement on a unilateral basis in 2015, in protest against awarding a prize by the US State Department to Azimzhan Askarov, a human rights defender from Kyrgyzstan who was life sentenced.

TRENDS

During the last years, a relatively positive tone in relations between all countries of the region have settled. Most likely, this trend will continue to exist, without any breakthrough new processes. Central Asian leaders will also continue to maintain their positive relations with the outside world, even facing the difficulties in relations between big actors.
Central Asia – 2019: Trends and Challenges

In 2019, the positive tone in relations between all countries of the region will exist without any breakthrough processes. Photo: president.kg

The key issue for Central Asia in 2019 is the preservation of socio-political stability in a setting of declining economy in the Russian Federation. Another key issue is the search for own trade and logistics niches in the markets of the EEU, China, the EU (with geopolitical strategies / vectors of foreign policy) within the framework of China – US clash, sanctions against the Russian Federation, expansion of trade partnership with the USA and the EU. In 2019, Central Asian countries will remain in the triple influence zone of Russia, China and Western countries. Infowars between global powers will increase in both national and regional media in Central Asian countries’ infosphere.

Read full experts’ notes for each country:

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