

## Political leadership and its role in Russian - Central Asian relations

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**Abstract.** This article investigates the role of political leadership in Russia's foreign policy towards Central Asia from 1991 through 2014. It lays out the goals, the main achievements and failures of Russian diplomacy during the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), Vladimir Putin (2000-2008), Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012), and Vladimir Putin's second term (2012 – present). The author concludes that the heads of state have always played a central role in the process of shaping and implementing Russia's foreign policy towards the region.

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### Introduction

In the modern social sciences, there are two main approaches to the assessment of the role of individuals in history. The first may be called "objective": it holds great events do not depend on the will of leaders; the appearance of key actors in the political arena is predicated by these crucial events rather than a causal factor. The second approach can be termed "subjective": it, in contrast, holds that the evolution of different societies, states, and the world as a whole are determined by the remarkable individuals who shape history.

This article aims to determine the role of political leadership in the evolution of Russian – Central Asian relations. It will examine the main achievements and failures of each of the four presidents of Russia – Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin "2.0" – in their respective foreign policy aims.

### Russia's Central Asia policy under four heads of State

In the wake collapse of the USSR, the development of ties with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States has remained Russia's top foreign policy priority [1]. However, each president has taken his own approach to the region.

Boris Yeltsin favored the development of cooperation between the former Soviet republics mostly on a multilateral basis. Until the middle of 1992, when a bloody civil war broke out in Tajikistan [2], he paid practically no attention to the Central Asian states, which he saw as an economic burden and a major source of the problems Russia faced in the early 1990s. In summer of 1992, he realized that such an approach was unconstructive, but until 1996, his diplomacy remained West-oriented, and Moscow did not promote interaction with the five Stans. Its foreign policy in Central Asia was both arrogant and

inconsistent, which aroused distrust and hostility among the "Sunshine republics" toward Russia. However, Yeltsin's support abroad was weak, and Russia did not turn into a particularly European nation. Meanwhile, it plunged into a deep crisis, precipitated largely by the rupture of its traditional ties with its southern neighbors. In January 1996, pro-western foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev was dismissed, and an outstanding economist, orientalist, and academician, Yevgeny Primakov, was appointed Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs. He tried to correct the mistakes of his predecessor, but the window of opportunity for Moscow to establish a dialogue with the Stans on favorable terms had already passed, and until Boris Yeltsin's resignation, Russia did not recover its standing in the region [3].

Unlike his precursor, Vladimir Putin immediately recognized the vital importance of Central Asia for the Russian Federation, that explains why the first foreign visits following his inauguration were made to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Putin tried to arouse the interest of the "Sunshine republics" by taking a more pragmatic approach to relations and launching joint projects indispensable for the Stans. As a result, from 2000 through 2008, Russian – Central Asian relations reached a peak: all the countries of the region became Russia's strategic partners, and four of them, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, military allies [4].

The end of Putin's first stint as a head of state and the transfer of power to Dmitry Medvedev had a largely negative impact on the further development of Russian – Central Asian cooperation. The new Russian leader was much younger than most of his colleagues and held alien political views: his liberal ambitions caused their deep concern, and his diplomacy reoriented to the West, evoking the approach of Yeltsin and Kozyrev [5]. In January 2009, Russia was beset upon by the global economic crisis, which drastically reduced the specter of its

interaction with the Stans. While its partners needed urgent subsidies, Dmitry Medvedev exhibited rigidity and did not provide them with the necessary financial support. As a result, Uzbekistan turned away from Russia and started looking westward [6]. In April 2009, a serious gas conflict arose between Russia and Turkmenistan. Even Kazakhstan, which requested from Moscow \$10 billion to stave off the effects of the crisis, was denied, and subsequently expanded cooperation with China and the EU. Consequently, it deprived Russian companies of their monopoly on its Kazakh uranium and high-tech markets. Such a situation prevailed until the autumn of 2010, when the economic recession passed. Nevertheless, the Central Asian states, which had notably diversified their foreign policy, did not return to the previous principles of cooperation with Russia [7].

Vladimir Putin's return into power in 2012 led to a certain reanimation of Russia's foreign policy towards Central Asia, but the ground lost over four years of neglect seemed unrecoverable. This situation was complicated by the fact that in October of 2011, on the eve of presidential elections in Russia, Vladimir Putin made an initiative to establish a Eurasian Union on the basis of the Eurasec Customs Union [8]. While several of the "Sunshine Republics" (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) expressed approval, the other ones were frightened that it would be a first step to restore the USSR. While Turkmenistan took a relatively cautious stance, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan lashed out against it [9]. Another significant challenge for Russian – Central Asian relations was the decision of Moscow to accede to the request of the Crimea to enter the Russian Federation in March of 2014. While most of Russia's regional partners expressed concern about this choice, but neither did openly condemn it, the Foreign Ministry of Uzbekistan issued a statement which underlined the importance on keeping the territorial integrity of the Ukraine [10]. Only the leadership of Kazakhstan openly supported Moscow's undertaking [11].

### Conclusion

Over the 22 years that have passed since the collapse of the USSR, the role of the head of state in the formation of Russia's foreign policy toward Central Asia has been extremely important. The presidents have determined the general aims and key principles of Russian diplomacy in the region as well as its particularities. It is highly probable that this tendency will not change any time soon.

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### Findings

Over the course of the Post-soviet period of the Russian history (1991-2014), the head of state has played a crucial role in the shaping of Moscow's foreign policy towards Central Asia. The contributions of each of the four presidents to the development of the regional diplomacy significantly differed. The most successful foreign policy was that set by Vladimir Putin in 2000-2008. Dmitry Medvedev's diplomacy lacked effectiveness, and Boris Yeltsin's was devoid of any planning and full of contradictions. As for of Russia's present foreign policy toward Central Asia, it seems to be a work in progress – it has yet to reach full maturity.

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