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## Russia faces new realities in Central Asia

By Michal Romanowski

11/12/2014

Events in Ukraine have posed important questions concerning Russia's future approach to Central Asia.

Firstly, Central Asia is claimed as the next place where the Kremlin could seek the chance through a Russian diaspora, to exert its authority. Secondly, with the Eurasian Economic Union to be launched in January 2015, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries will inevitably become focal points of the Russian-led initiative.

The former argument could be challenged, while the latter is undermined by the weakness of the new bloc itself.

What then is the current state of affairs between Russia and the former republics of the Soviet Union in Asia? And to what extent Moscow can impact political, social and economic processes in the region today?

Russia should be given its due, as it maintains the status of a regional leader. The Kremlin's engagement in Central Asia is more holistic than of any other player and touches upon an array of issues. China is mainly interested in economic ties, the West - in security. Only Russia has been exploring a range of fields, from politics, through economy and military cooperation, to

culture.

In the 1990s, Central Asian countries did not fly the Russian nest so much as they were abandoned by passive policy. Over the last 10 years, Russia has re-entered a regional game that's rules had changed dramatically.

Today, the Kremlin focuses more on countering other superpowers in the region than revitalizing its eroded sphere of influence. At the same time, all the five Central Asian states have developed a more independent stance toward external partners, including Russia. A degree of political and economic sovereignty varies from country to country, with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan the most exposed to Moscow's pressure.

The crucial aspect, given the conflict in Ukraine, is the population of the Russian minority in Central Asia.

It is estimated that in 1989, there were 9.5 million ethnic Russians in the region. But Russians in Kazakhstan today account for less than one-quarter of the population, with a 15% decrease between 1999-2009. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have experienced an even more significant decline of 30% and nearly 50% respectively.

Security is the most robust of the Kremlin's activities in Central Asia. Only Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan do not host Moscow's facilities. Long-term contracts have been signed with Astana, Bishkek, and Dushanbe. Tajikistan is the home for the largest Russian contingent abroad. Russia's determination to preserve its status is occasionally tested. That was the case of the disagreement with Kazakhstan over the Baikonur Cosmodrome in 2012, or previously, the constant bargain with Tajikistan over the closure of the US Manas base.

As far as finances are concerned, Moscow has been outmatched by Beijing. China's multi-billion investments leave Russians far behind, and are making the Middle Kingdom a key trade partner for all the Central Asian countries, maybe with Tajikistan as an exception.

Russia's economic position is predominantly related to the energy sector. Both Dushanbe and Bishkek are dependent on oil and gas imports from Russia. Moscow, however, is undergoing a full-scale trial of strength with the energy champions of the region - Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Opening new transit routes bypassing Russia has been high on their agenda. Beijing's energy needs were a powerful incentive for them to shift away from the monopolistic partner. Kazakhstan, traditionally standing by Moscow's side and being its closest regional ally, has decreased oil transported through Russia by 10% in the last seven years. Turkmenistan already sells the majority of its gas to China.

Moscow's soft power in the region has also suffered a costly failure. In the language field, the role of Russian has greatly diminished. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the Cyrillic-to-Latin transition took place in the early 90s. Kazakhstan, a stronghold of the Russian language, plans to switch to the Latin script till 2025. Bishkek and Dushanbe require that all the official documents

are in the national language only. And finally, the ratio of people speaking Russian in Central Asia, except for Kazakhstan, is roughly 50% now.

The language dimension is not the solely one that went through the process of nationalization. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have closed two-third of Russian schools.

The language of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, though still common in academia, is present only in 20% of schools in Kazakhstan, and less than 9% in Uzbekistan. Russian media and cultural centers' access is either very limited or of no real political and social value.

With time, Russia's "listen-to-me" approach towards Central Asia has been mitigated. Moscow is still well-positioned in the security field, but today the countries of the region have many alternatives, which they skillfully juggle.

Moscow, with Ukraine evidently off the table, seems to be doomed to engage with Central Asia. It is more of a tactic then - like in the past - strategic partnership. Russia cannot risk to apply military thinking, which might only exacerbate the situation. Central Asia, being the last, and possibly the most crucial pillar of Russia's integration project, may not accept such treatment.