



EU-UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS ON THE MOVE

SPECIAL REPORT | NOV 2021

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SPECIAL REPORT

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President Mirziyoyev: 'Building New Uzbekistan is an objective necessity'

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By Georgi Gotev | EURACTIV.com



Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev attends a meeting of the Council of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Heads of State in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, 11 October 2019. The CIS leaders meet in Ashgabat to review trade, economic, social, foreign policy and security cooperation of their countries. EPA-EFE/ALEXEI DRUZHININ / SPUTNIK / KREMLIN POOL MANDATORY CREDIT

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is spearheading major changes in his country, comparable with three glorious periods in the country's long history.

Mirziyoyev took charge of Central Asia's most populous country in 2016 in the wake of the death of his hard line predecessor and former patron Islam Karimov, signalling a shift in foreign policy during which the country opened to the world and engaged in regional cooperation.

Muslim-majority but staunchly secular Uzbekistan is home to 33 million people, 20 million of whom

can vote. Mirziyoyev was re-elected on 24 October with 80% of a vote in which opposition candidates were able to measure their influence.

In an interview with *Yangi Uzbekiston* newspaper Mirziyoyev enumerated the country's achievements in nation-building over the last 30 years, also mentioning the mistakes of the past and touched on recent efforts aimed at abandoning the totalitarian regime and building a democratic society. He spoke of a "New Uzbekistan" and of the next stage of its development, which he called the "third Renaissance."

Uzbekistan's First Renaissance in the 9th-12th centuries, also called the Eastern Renaissance, produced hundreds of great scientists and famous thinkers, with the authorities creating the necessary conditions for the country's development.

The Second Renaissance in the 14th-16th centuries was called the "Renaissance of the Timurids." Military leader Amir Temur idolised enlightened people, saying: "Victory is not in strength, but in the mind." The Emir has always encouraged and appointed highly intellectual experts to high positions.

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“It should be noted that the building a New Uzbekistan is not a whim, not a subjective phenomenon, but an objective necessity, which has its own fundamental historical foundations, due to the current political, legal, socio-economic, spiritual and educational situation, based on the centuries-long aspirations of our people and fully conforming to their national interests”, Mirziyoyev said.

Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan put emphasis on developing the tourism sector and preserving and developing world heritage sites such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva.

The president described “New Uzbekistan” as “a state developing in strict compliance with the universally recognised norms in the field of democracy, human rights and freedoms, on the basis of the principles of friendship and cooperation with the international community, the ultimate aim of which is to create a free, comfortable and prosperous life for our people”.

Although by Western standards Uzbekistan cannot be described as a full-fledged democracy, under Mirziyoyev democratic reforms have been introduced, which are akin to the “controlled democratisation” underway in its Central Asian neighbour, Kazakhstan.

“Actually, the fact that our democratic reforms have become irreversible is the most important result we have achieved today,” said Mirziyoyev, adding that the country’s leadership has admitted “the existence of problems in our lives with forced labor, especially among children, unemployment, poverty, corruption, housing, education and

health, and we are addressing them along with our general public.”

Indeed, [the International Labour Organization \(ILO\) has recognised](#) that the systematic and systemic use of child labour and forced labour in Uzbekistan’s cotton industry has come to an end, although some local vestiges still remain. Since Soviet times, school children took part in the harvesting of cotton, which was considered a normal practice.

“Today’s Uzbekistan is not Uzbekistan that we dream about. We still have a long and thorny way to go. Before, our path was not easy, and after it will not be easy, as well. However, we should not be afraid to move forward boldly, to make the unconventional unexpected decisions [...] in the interests of our people,” Mirziyoyev said.

The president highlighted that the “New Uzbekistan” was primarily about the new economic relations, the new economic vision. “The economic system of our country is being completely restructured and even if it is difficult, we have begun to put into practice the market mechanisms,” he said.

Under Karimov, Uzbekistan had the most restrictive and bizarre foreign currency regime, which discouraged foreign investors. Mirziyoyev said that these were now “things of the past” and nothing was easier than cashing in of money from debit cards through the ATMs, or acquisition and registration of housing and property in any region of Uzbekistan.

International experts say that pre-pandemic, Uzbekistan became the regional leader in the growth of the

influx of foreign investment. In 2019, the amount of foreign investment increased by 2.3 times, amounting to \$4.2 billion. The greatest interest was shown by China, Germany, the US and Russia.

In his interview, Mirziyoyev also touched upon regional cooperation, saying that the problems accumulated over the years in the country’s relations with neighbouring countries had been resolved.

“The borders were opened. The broken bonds between neighbours, brothers, relatives, father and son, were restored. The people began traveling freely from one country to another. The visa issues have been resolved. The trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian ties are developing at an accelerated pace,” he said.

Uzbekistan received praise by the global community, notably the EU, for having hosted a high-level conference on connectivity in Central Asia on 15-16 July.

On Afghanistan, the president also struck a constructive tone.

“Uzbekistan, as the closest neighbour of Afghanistan, is interested in the early establishment of peace and stability in this country”, the president said.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted fears in the region of a possible spill-over of tensions.

In an exclusive interview for EURACTIV Uzbekistan’s foreign minister advocated ‘pragmatic’ relations with the new rulers in Afghanistan.

INTERVIEW

Foreign Minister: Uzbekistan is promoting 'pragmatic relations' with Afghanistan

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By Georgi Gotev | EURACTIV.com



Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the new embassy of Uzbekistan in Beijing, China, 19 August 2019. [Pool/EPA/EFE]

In a wide-ranging interview, Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov discussed his country's relations with the EU, the situation with "fraternal neighbour" Afghanistan, regional cooperation, and strategies for a 'Third Renaissance' of Uzbekistan.

Abdulaziz Kamilov has been the

minister of foreign affairs of Uzbekistan since 2012. Previously, he served in the same post from 1994 to 2003.

He answered written questions from EURACTIV's Senior Editor Georgi Gotev.

What is bringing you to Brussels, and what are the highlights of the EU-Uzbekistan relations?

The agenda of my visit to Brussels is quite extensive. The main purpose of the visit is to hold the [16th meeting of the EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council](#) [On 16 November]. We will discuss several topical issues of cooperation between our country and the EU. Among them are general and political issues, including the course of negotiations on the Enhanced

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Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) between Uzbekistan and the EU, discussion of the reforms underway now in the country, including justice and internal affairs, human rights and the rule of law; trade, economic and investment cooperation, connectivity and energy issues. We will also discuss important regional and international issues of mutual interest.

In addition, several bilateral meetings are planned with representatives of the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission.

I am sure that the planned events in Brussels will help further strengthen the positive trends in our cooperation with the EU and confirm the parties' interest in continuing a constructive dialogue and mutually beneficial partnership in a wide range of areas to support the socio-economic and democratic reforms being carried out in Uzbekistan.

We consider investment, trade, cooperation in the spheres of financial and technical assistance, science, technology, education, ecology, tourism, health care and culture, and strengthening regional security as key areas of interaction with European partners.

Europe has traditionally been a source of advanced technologies, knowledge, investments, innovations for Uzbekistan. We consider the EU as an important partner in the formation and strengthening of democratic institutions, development of parliamentarism and support of civil society.

It is pleasant to note that relations between Uzbekistan and the EU have

been increasing in recent years. European partners positively perceive and support the republic's reforms, looking at Uzbekistan through different eyes than a few years ago. One might say they are rediscovering our country for themselves.

The reforms initiated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the open, pragmatic and active foreign policy pursued by Tashkent have led to a significant increase in the level and dynamics of our cooperation with almost all foreign partners. At the same time, the European direction – building friendly, constructive, equal and balanced relations with the EU and its member states – has been put forward among the priorities of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy.

These considerations formed the basis for the agreements on the development of the Expanded Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), which was announced in November 2018. To date, nine rounds of negotiations have already been held, during which we've been able to agree on the political part of the draft Agreement, practically complete the sectoral section and make significant progress on the trade part of the document.

In April 2021, the European side granted Uzbekistan the status of a beneficiary country of the Generalised System of Preferences "GSP+", which allows duty-free export of about 6,000 items of Uzbek products to the EU countries. We are confident that this is in the interests of both sides and will serve to strengthen bilateral relations further. In turn, Uzbekistan is taking the necessary measures to effectively fulfil its obligations under 27 international conventions.

The EU provides tangible support for Uzbekistan's accession to the WTO, mainly through technical assistance.

Considering the fundamental reforms carried out in our country in the spheres of education, science and innovation, we are cooperating with the EU through Erasmus+ and Horizon-2020 programs. Currently, 22 joint projects are being implemented in Uzbekistan with 34 national higher educational institutions and 71 universities from 25 European countries. We welcome expanding network of branches of leading universities of European countries in Uzbekistan. Currently, three higher educational institutions are working jointly with the EU countries on 23 double degree programs.

I have to mention the importance of implementing the updated EU Strategy for Central Asia, adopted on 19 June 2019. An important feature of the updated Strategy is that it is based on three key areas, which generally correspond to cooperation priorities between Uzbekistan and the EU.

These are, *first*, increasing the stability of the Central Asian countries through supporting reforms, ensuring security, protecting the environment, the rule of law and democratisation; *second*, ensuring the prosperity of the countries of the region through economic development, education, research, regional cooperation; and, *third*, strengthening the institutional mechanisms of our interaction.

How have relations with Kabul been since the Taliban took power, and what positive joint action could Uzbekistan have with the EU to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe?

For centuries we have lived side

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by side with the Afghan people in a single cultural and civilisational space. Uzbekistan is linked with Afghanistan by centuries-old bonds of friendship, shared history, religion, customs and traditions.

Concerning this fraternal neighbouring country, we are pursuing a friendly policy based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, non-interference in internal affairs, and consideration of mutual interests.

Everyone knows that the Afghan war, which lasted for decades, harmed our ties with Afghanistan and posed serious regional and international security threats. The continuation of this situation has hampered the sustainable development of a vast region, including Central Asia, undermining its investment and economic prospects.

Therefore, promoting a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict and building pragmatic relations with the southern neighbour has been among Uzbekistan's most important foreign policy tasks.

Uzbekistan established working contacts with the Taliban movement back in the 1990s and made a practical contribution to the initiation of the peace process in Doha. All this provided Uzbekistan with a unique role in the Afghan settlement.

The results of the High-Level International Conference on Connectivity between Central and South Asia, held in Tashkent on 16 July 2021, showed how strongly we are interested in Afghanistan becoming not an obstacle but a bridge between the two regions.

At present, the interim Taliban government that has come to power is seeking international recognition. This gives the world community a real opportunity to establish a constructive dialogue with the new authorities of Afghanistan to help the Afghan people return to a peaceful life. We must not allow the transformation of this country into the so-called "rogue state", as was the case in the 1990s.

We should not isolate Afghanistan in this difficult time and leave the Afghan people alone with their most challenging problems.

The humanitarian situation in the country is close to catastrophic, but it is within our power to provide effective and emergency assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

As priority steps, we believe the world community possesses all the necessary tools for unfreezing Afghanistan's international assets, lifting sanctions, and providing effective assistance in restoring the country's entire banking system.

It is necessary to provide a humanitarian corridor to the country and do everything possible so that the people of Afghanistan do not starve and can survive the difficult winter period.

These measures will help prevent a large-scale humanitarian crisis and increase the flow of refugees from Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan was among the first countries to send humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, including food, medicine and clothing.

We have also established a dialogue with the Afghan side on topical issues of cooperation. On 16 October 2021, the city of Termez hosted the first extended working meeting at the level of deputy heads of government of the two countries, during which trade and economy were discussed.

I want to emphasise that the Uzbek side is carrying out all these actions with one goal – to help the Afghan people restore the national economy and prevent the country from sliding into the abyss of ruin.

We continue to adhere to the position that a key aspect in the Afghan settlement is developing a post-conflict strategy. More active involvement of Afghanistan in regional economic processes should remain a priority for the international community.

We stand for the further implementation of socio-economic projects in the country, including energy and transport.

At the same time, we hope that the new Afghan authorities will do everything possible to fulfil their promises and international obligations, including the creation of an inclusive government, respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, including the rights of women and national minorities, fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking, prevention of the deployment of various terrorist groups on the territory of the country, and the support of good-neighbourly relations with the countries of the region.

Even the slightest threat to other

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states should never again come from the territory of Afghanistan.

We think that the interim government of Afghanistan can take these essential steps so that this country could become an equal entity of interstate and international relations in the near future, part of the common civilised world.

There is no other way; only this can lead the Afghan people to progress and prosperity and Afghanistan to the long-awaited peace.

How do you assess regional cooperation in Central Asia, and what role can the EU play?

Achieving long-term stability and sustainable development in Central Asia is inextricably linked with strengthening mutual trust among the states of the region, development of regional political, economic, humanitarian cooperation, and the joint solution of common problems in the region.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has identified the development and strengthening of friendly, good-neighbourly and mutually beneficial relations with Central Asia as the main foreign policy priority of Uzbekistan.

In this regard, the leadership of Uzbekistan attaches high priority to the fundamental improvement of the political environment in Central Asia. Together with neighbouring states, Tashkent is pursuing a consistent and responsible foreign policy aimed at constructively resolving all regional issues that in the past gave rise to disagreements and created the impression of Central Asia as a fragmented and poorly integrated

region.

We have made significant progress in resolving topical issues, primarily in the delimitation and demarcation of borders, rational and fair use of water and energy resources, free cross-border movement, development of the transport and communication systems, and cooperation in the field of security.

Let me stress that all these issues are resolved based on mutual trust, open dialogue, consideration of mutual interests and reasonable compromises. Due to the peculiarities of the culture, traditions and values of the countries of Central Asia, there is no alternative for us to such a pragmatic and mutually respectful approach.

Today, trade, investment, transport, industrial, cultural and humanitarian ties, cross-border and interregional cooperation, and interaction in the field of security are expanding between the region's countries.

I want to draw special attention to the promising prospects for the development of economic integration in our region, a capacious and rapidly growing market of more than 74.5 million people. Over the past 10 years, the population of Central Asia has been increasing by an average of one million people annually. According to experts, if this region becomes a common economic space, then the possibilities of our countries to attract investors and participate in the international division of labour and international cooperation would significantly increase.

In this regard, it is essential to use and develop our experience of trade and economic interaction within the

CIS and actively develop cooperation and study the experience of forming common markets of the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, and other integration structures.

Speaking about other prospects for regional cooperation in Central Asia, it is important to note the following initiatives of Uzbekistan:

The first is to identify new growth points, new drivers of our development for the long term, including industrial cooperation, innovation and digital technologies, and the creation of long value chains.

Second is the effective use of transport and transit potential of the region. The ramified and integrated transport system of the Central Asian countries can become a crucial transit hub on the Eurasian continent. In particular, there are great prospects in terms of use by the countries of our region of the seaports of the Caspian Sea, the creation of large cross-border logistics centres, and the trans-Afghan corridor Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar.

Third, improving the region's energy system, expanding mutually beneficial cooperation in the implementation of "green" energy and energy-efficient technologies.

Fourth – interaction in the field of strengthening food security of the region's countries, including through the establishment of sustainable food production.

Fifth, joint initiatives to address environmental problems in the region and mitigate the consequences of the Aral Sea disaster and climate change.

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Uzbekistan attaches great importance to developing a mutually beneficial, multifaceted strategic partnership with the European Union (EU), including within the framework of the CA-EU dialogue.

We consider it is important to continue this dialogue and cooperation, especially concerning the participation of European companies in the modernisation of the economy, technical and technological re-equipment of industries, development of agriculture, transport infrastructure, tourism industry, implementation of socially significant projects in Uzbekistan and other countries of the region.

Uzbekistan has set itself ambitious goals, speaking of a New Renaissance and New Uzbekistan. Many of the ideas are linked to strengthening democratic institutions and the use of digital technologies and green energy. Can you elaborate?

The main goal of the reforms being carried out in Uzbekistan is to lay the foundation for the Third Renaissance.

Speaking about this new period of revival, about New Uzbekistan, we mean, first of all, transformations in the field of education and knowledge through large-scale democratic reforms.

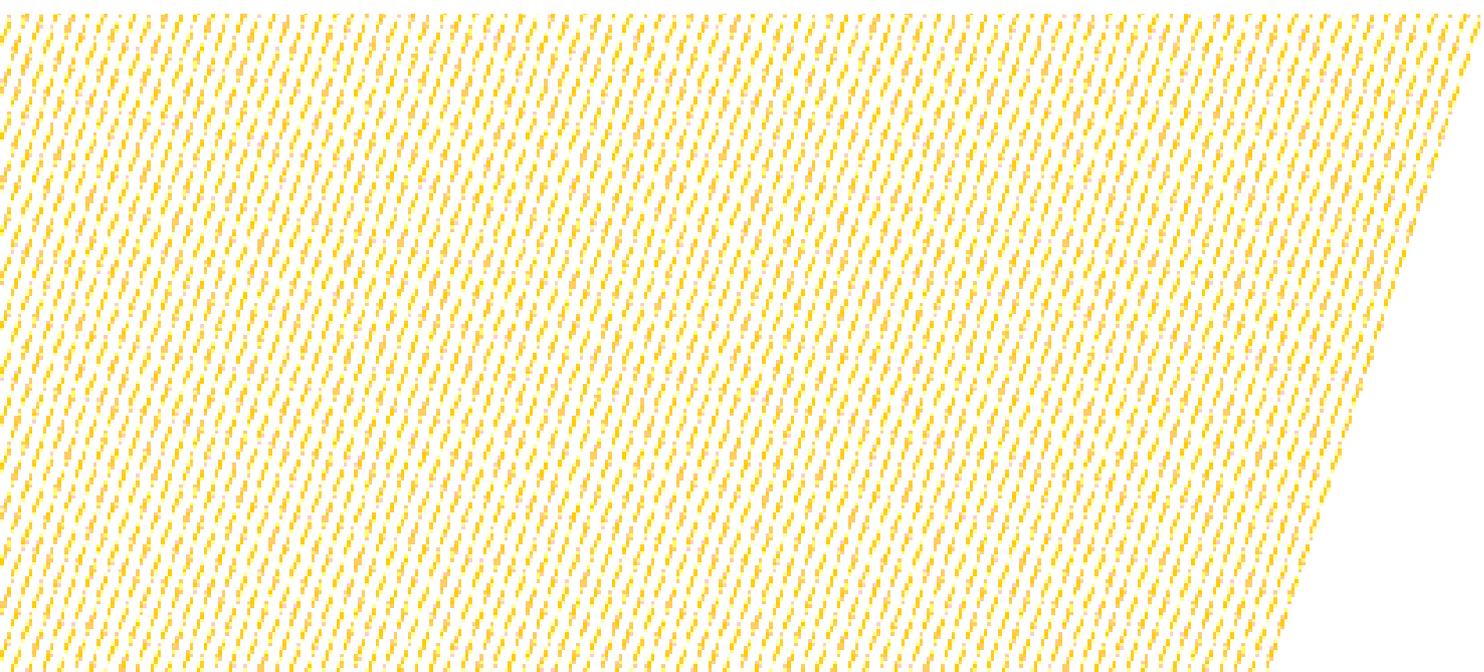
As President Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasises, the primary tasks are the development of education and fundamental sciences necessary to achieve overall progress. Funds invested in this area, in any case, will give results and, first of all, contribute to the implementation of our tasks to form a new economy of knowledge, innovation and technology.

And in this, we see one of the main promising areas of our interaction with the EU and European partner states. Europe can play a unique role in supporting the improvement of the education system in our country, increasing its quality and coverage. For example, through the Erasmus+ project, student exchange intensifies and opens new branches of European universities in Uzbekistan.

We are also convinced that

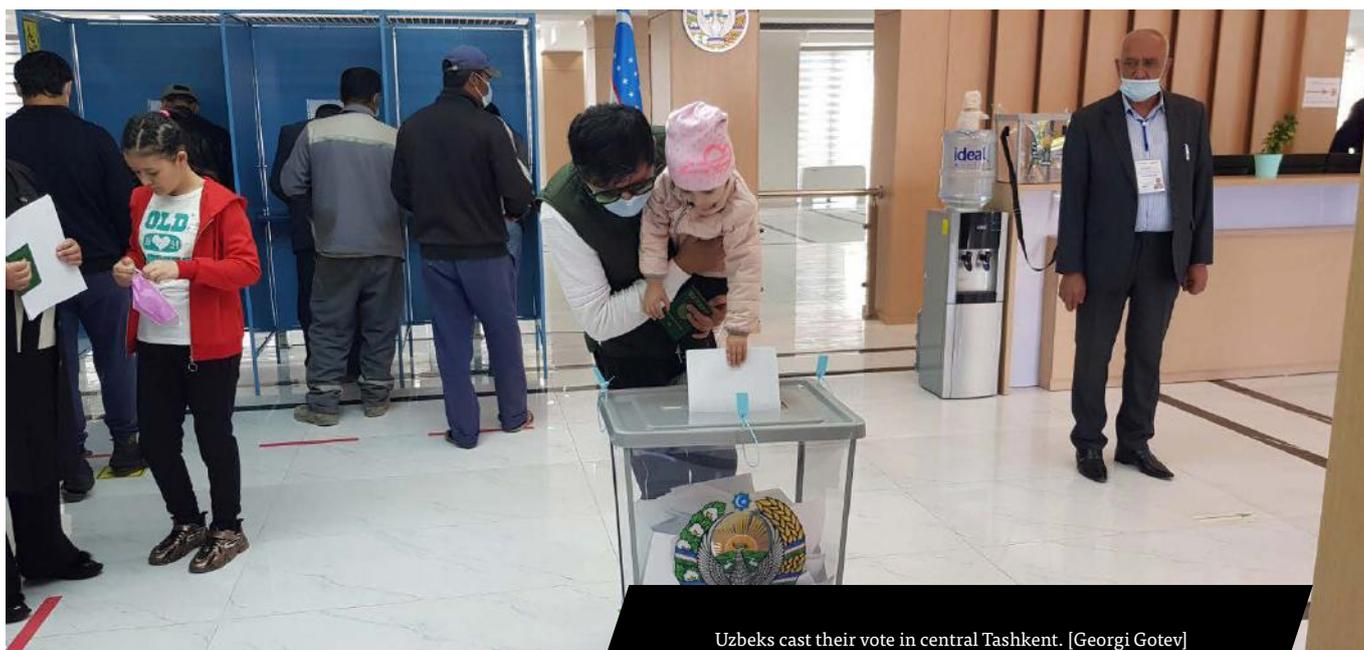
strengthening cooperation with the EU is becoming one of the important factors in increasing the diversification and competitiveness of our economy, creating new jobs, and realising national objectives in the fields of research and innovation, agriculture, ecology, health and sustainable urban development.

In general, there are the broadest prospects for enhancing our interaction with the European Union in the interests of the peoples of Central Asia and Europe.



Uzbeks vote to re-elect their president

By Georgi Gotev | EURACTIV.com



Uzbeks cast their vote in central Tashkent. [Georgi Gotev]

Uzbekistan held presidential elections on Sunday (24 October) amid little doubt that incumbent Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has opened the Central Asian country to the world in recent years, will be re-elected for another five-year term.

This correspondent saw voters in Tashkent proudly casting their ballot without folding it, which often made visible their choice inside the transparent ballot boxes.

In all these cases, Mirziyoyev's name was ticked on the ballot. Many voters EURACTIV spoke to said they wanted him to continue to transform the country as he had been doing since he took over five years ago. Several

called the election "a celebration".

The voting cabins had no curtains because of COVID, organisers explained but this did not seem to bother anyone.

Mirziyoyev, now 64, took charge of Central Asia's most populous country in 2016 in the wake of the death of his hardline predecessor and former patron Islam Karimov, who had ruled for almost three decades.

Mirziyoyev has been lauded for opening the country to the world, which improved living standards. On the foreign scene, he facilitated regional cooperation and engaged constructively with the world players.

In the election, Mirziyoyev faces four relatively low-key challengers.

LOW-KEY CHALLENGERS

Each of the five candidates runs on behalf of one of the five political parties represented in Uzbekistan's parliament: the Liberal Democratic Party (Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businesspersons) to which Mirziyoyev belongs, the People's Democratic Party, whose candidate is Maqsuda Vorisova, a therapist by training, the Social Democratic Party 'Adolat' with its candidate Bahrom Abdulhalimov, the Democratic Party 'Milliy Tiklanish', with candidate Alisher Qodirov, and the most recent party, the Ecological

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Party, and its candidate Narzullo Oblomurodov.

The electoral system only allows each political party to name one candidate, either someone from its ranks or a non-partisan candidate.

Independent and non-partisan candidates cannot legally stake their candidacy themselves.

In Tashkent, there were few visible signs of the campaign on Sunday like posters or billboards, due to a legal requirement banning their display on the election day.

Some 120,000 Uzbeks abroad have voted during the past week, the vast majority of them in Russia and other post-Soviet republics. Inside the country, for the first time, citizens present in another area than the one of their residence have been allowed to vote, thanks to improving cooperation online among the electoral authorities.

Western media sometimes criticize Mirziyoyev for not being a reformist also in the political sphere. But journalist Shoxruz Mirzaqobilov told EURACTIV these elections had “nothing to do” with elections under Karimov when, according to his words, many of his colleagues were in jail. He stressed that as a journalist, he was now feeling free to do his job without undue pressure.

Uzbekistan has been relatively spared from the COVID-19 crisis and a large number of foreign observers and guests came for the election. The vast majority were short term observers, mostly on election day.

One of them was Aygul Kuspan, a former ambassador of Kazakhstan to Belgium, who is now chief of the foreign affairs committee of the Kazakh parliament.

She told EURACTIV that the election provides a chance to measure the support for the current leadership of the neighbouring country, which she praised for its liberalism and modernisation. She said this had brought about a trebling of trade between the two countries, and a boom in visits and exchanges.

Kuspan said Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were engaged on the same path of democratisation and both champion regional cooperation.

Internet restrictions are still in force in Uzbekistan. Human Rights Watch still describes the country’s political system as authoritarian. Western diplomats say Uzbekistan cannot be compared to EU members in terms of democratic standards but in general, acknowledge some progress.

One diplomat said Mirziyoyev could have followed in the footsteps of Putin and introduced legislation that would keep him in power to life, but he instead initiated some reforms that make the presidential election somewhat more democratic.

At the time of the publishing of this article, the turnout was put at 80% of the 16 million voters. No exit polls were conducted and no preliminary results are expected. The official results are expected on Monday.

The previous election in 2016 was criticized by the OSCE in particular for ballot stuffing and, apparently, there is still no safeguard against one voter casting more than one ballot.

After the publication of this article, the authorities announced the elections’ results, with Mirziyoyev winning 80% of the votes. The other candidates got:

6,6% — Vorisova;

5,5% — Qodirov;

4,1% — Oblomurodov;

3,4% — Abduhalimov.

STAKEHOLDER OPINION

DISCLAIMER: All opinions in this column reflect the views of the author(s), not of EURACTIV Media network.

Uzbekistan-EU cooperation moves into new qualitative stage

By Eldor Aripov



Performers pose in Tashkent on 19 November 2018. [Georgi Gotev]

For Uzbekistan, relations with the EU now and in the future remain the most critical element of its foreign policy strategy, writes Eldor Aripov, on the eve of its presidential elections.

Eldor Aripov is Director of the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is on the eve of an important political event – presidential elections. The election campaign is in full swing, and it is taking place in a new political atmosphere. Five parties

that have nominated their candidates are actively promoting their program ideas and platforms.

The elections will be held in the conditions of new national electoral legislation, updated in accordance with generally recognised international standards. For example, a procedure has been introduced to include citizens of Uzbekistan living abroad on the voter list. They can vote regardless of whether they are registered in the consular register of diplomatic missions or not.

There is high interest from

the international community. In particular, election observers from 50 countries and a dozen international organisations are expected to attend.

It is worth emphasising that the upcoming election will be an assessment of the reforms initiated by the head of state Shavkat Mirziyoyev and determine the further vector of Uzbekistan's development.

Mirziyoyev has been nominated and unanimously approved as a candidate by members of the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan. At the 10th Congress of the party,

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Mirziyoyev presented key points of his election program “Strategy of New Uzbekistan”. The main message in his speech was that nowadays, the democratic reforms in the country have acquired an irreversible, stable character, and the state intends to continue their implementation.

Indeed, over the past five years, under the leadership of Mirziyoyev, the living conditions of the Uzbek people have improved. The atmosphere of openness has become an integral part of the life of society. The irreversibility of the political and economic modernisation of the country is being ensured by the rule of law, the continuation of the development of civil society and market economy.

Championing human rights and people interests determines the essence of all reforms and transformations carried out in the country. In particular, in recent years, the government has gradually eliminated forced and child labour and has created a comprehensive social protection system.

In the economic sphere, the direction has been taken towards liberalisation, development of entrepreneurship and improvement of the investment climate. Privatisation of state assets, transformation of state-owned enterprises, unification of exchange rates have become the main conditions for increased economic growth. During 2017-2020, country's economy grew by 24%, industry – by 34%, and GDP per capita reached \$ 1,700, up from \$ 1,068 in 2011-2016.

The level of investment activity has

significantly grown: the total volume of investments in a short period of time increased by 2.1 times, including foreign investments – almost 3 times. Thanks to the liberalisation of the economy and the simplification of customs procedures, the volume of exports in 2020 reached \$15.1 billion, which is 25% more than in 2016.

Important steps have been taken to ensure the transparency of government bodies, their accountability to the population. The political activity of the population, parties, non-governmental organisations is growing; the media are gaining activity and independence.

The nature and content of the country's foreign policy have changed. Today, expert communities are talking about the emergence of the phenomenon of a new foreign policy in Uzbekistan.

Tashkent determined Central Asia as the priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. The goal is to transform the region into a zone of stability and sustainable development, to establish an atmosphere of trust and good neighbourliness, which is fully consistent with the approaches of the EU.

A symbol of this pragmatic approach is the regular Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, initiated by President Mirziyoyev. At the recent meeting, it was decided to prepare a five-sided document on friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation in Central Asia in the 21st century and

agree on a draft Roadmap for the development of regional cooperation 2022-2024.

As cooperation between the Central Asian countries increases, important joint decisions are made at all levels on regional and international issues of mutual interest to the countries of the region: in the field of security, economy, investment, tourism, culture, health care and the environment.

The situation in neighbouring Afghanistan has taken a special place in the new foreign policy of Uzbekistan. In response to the increased demand for food aid in Afghanistan, the UN World Food Program has established a main logistics centre in Termez (Surkhandarya region). Today, UN agencies are delivering necessary humanitarian supplies to the provinces of Afghanistan. The government of Uzbekistan also sent 1,300 tons of humanitarian aid with food, medicine and clothing to the Afghan province of Balkh.

Undoubtedly, the EU is one of the key partners of Uzbekistan in the international arena. Tashkent attaches great importance to the development of mutually beneficial cooperation with the EU and its member states in both bilateral and multilateral formats. It is worth emphasising that in recent years, the EU's dialogue has been strengthened not only with Uzbekistan but also with all countries of the region. EU diplomatic presence and involvement has expanded, and approaches towards Central Asia have been updated.

STAKEHOLDER OPINION

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A new development strategy in making Uzbekistan open and resilient

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Dr. Gulnoza Ismailova



Two female votes in Tashkent

The recently held presidential elections raised trust between the people and the state; they served as a factor in the consolidation of society, preparing it for a new stage of its development, writes Gulnoza Ismailova.

Dr. Gulnoza Ismailova is Member of Central Election Commission of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Vice-rector for Science and Innovation at the University

of World Economy and Diplomacy, Head of Tashkent Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence for European studies.

The last five years have been a turning point in the history of Uzbekistan. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country has made significant progress in implementing significant reforms. Their main goal is openness and transformation that involves

economic liberalization, market development, improvement of the business environment, digitization, and introduction of new technologies. Much attention is paid to education and enlightenment, civic engagement, and the protection of human rights.

Uzbekistan is opening up to the world and is now pursuing open and pragmatic foreign relations with the international community. Over

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the past short period, the country's political authority and role in the region and the world have increased significantly. The trends towards strengthening trust and cooperation with Uzbekistan are increasing in the world community.

First, relations of friendship and good-neighborliness were established with the States of the region. Indeed, a new political atmosphere has emerged in Central Asia. In the period 2017-2019, Uzbekistan's trade turnover with the Central Asian countries almost doubled from 2.7 to 5.2 billion dollars. At the same time, the growth of trade turnover with Kazakhstan increased by 1.6 times; with Kyrgyzstan – by 2.3; with Turkmenistan – by 3.1; and with Tajikistan – by 2 times. A new positive environment has been formed, characterizing the strengthening of cooperation between Uzbekistan and all Central Asian countries. These changes are visible not only in economic cooperation but also visa issues have been resolved; people have the opportunity to move freely between countries. In 2018, the UN General Assembly at the plenary session adopted a resolution “Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability, and sustainable development in the Central Asian region”. The document, the draft of which was developed by Uzbekistan jointly with the neighboring states of Central Asia, was unanimously supported by all UN member states. The adoption of the resolution became the practical implementation of the initiative of President Mirziyoyev, put forward during the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2017 in New York.

In recent years, effective agreements and arrangements have been reached with Russia, China, South Korea, Japan, Turkey, the UAE, and other states. New steps have been undertaken to strengthen further development of pragmatic cooperation with the US and EU countries.

There is now much more openness and transparency in the life of the state and society. A system of communication has been established between government and society. Human rights, human dignity, and freedom of speech are upheld. Persecution of people for religious and other reasons is no longer tolerated: the so-called “black lists” have disappeared, and the Jasliq prison has been closed. Forced labor, including child labor, was abolished. A serious fight against corruption has started.

Such changes are being recognized worldwide and they are bearing fruit. For example, Uzbekistan is now a member of the UN Human Rights Council, one of the most influential UN bodies. This year in Geneva, during the 48th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), a resolution was adopted, initiated by Uzbekistan, on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for human rights of youth. It should be noted that it received the unanimous approval of all 47 member states of the UN Human Rights Council without exception.

Uzbekistan has increased and intensified its dialogue with the countries of Central Asia; its relations have reached a new level. A new political environment has been created; mutual trust and

respect are significantly enhanced; economic ties have grown at an unprecedented rate; barriers to cooperation have been removed; the region is becoming an area of peace, sustainable development, and good neighborliness.

Systemic reforms are being carried out in the life of society and the state. This is primarily reflected in the principle that “the people are not in the service of government, but the government is in the service of the people.” Laws have also been passed to ensure the independence of judges and to improve the legal framework for citizenship. Two new committees were established in the Senate: (1) the Committee on Women and Gender Equality, and (2) the Committee for the Development of the Aral Sea Region. Under the auspices of the UN, a multi-partner Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region was created, which was initiated by Uzbekistan in 2018.

As part of its domestic social policy, Uzbekistan is taking serious steps towards promoting the wellbeing of people. So, poverty in Uzbekistan has been recognized for the first time as a crucial issue of government policy. There is now in place a single register of people who need social protection. Consequently, around 1.7 million people, or 400 thousand families, are now receiving government support.

As a result of such large-scale reforms in the economic sphere, Uzbekistan's international foreign exchange reserves have increased by almost \$6.5 billion in recent years and today have exceeded \$35 billion.

The pace of development of

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economic sectors can also be judged by the fact that the real incomes of the population as a whole increased by 28% compared to 2016. Currently, the average nominal monthly salary is 2.7 million Uzbek Soums, which is 2.1 times more than in 2016.

A new system of solving social problems has been created in Uzbekistan based on the introduction of methods of targeted work on unemployed, low-income families, women, youth, who need and are interested in social, economic, legal, psychological support, knowledge, and professional training. During 2017-2020, more than 140 thousand cost-effective, high-quality houses and apartments were built. This figure is almost 11 times higher than in 2016. The mortgage lending system is consistently developing. It should be noted that in our country, construction on a similar scale has not yet been carried out.

According to the analysis of the International Monetary Fund and reputable rating agencies, Uzbekistan is among a few countries in the world that managed to ensure financial and economic stability as well as the restoration of manufacturing industries and the growth of economic activity in the difficult conditions of the pandemic. The same conclusions are given in the analytical report of the American investment bank J.P. Morgan "Uzbekistan: Soum'er Solstice" ("Uzbekistan: on the way to the zenith") published on June 21, 2021.

An analysis of development over the past five years indicates the success of the ongoing economic reforms. So,

for the period 2017-2020, economic growth in the country amounted to 18.3%; the volume of the gross domestic product reached \$60 billion. It should be noted that foreign trade turnover increased from \$24 billion in 2016 to \$36 billion by the end of 2020. The volume of industrial production increased by 23.4% compared to 2016.

Due to the liberalization of the economy and simplification of customs procedures, the volume of exports in 2020 amounted to \$15.1 billion, which is 25% more than in 2016. It was possible to significantly strengthen investor confidence in the country's economy. This is evidenced by the fact that the total volume of investments in a short period increased 2.1 times, including foreign investment - almost 3 times. In 2017-2020, the total capital of the country's banks increased by 5.7 times, or by \$5 billion.

As a result of government support and the creation of favorable conditions, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have become the main driving force of Uzbekistan's economic growth. SMEs account for about 80% of the country's workforce and about 60% of GDP. The number of small businesses and private entrepreneurship in our country has doubled; 1 million 400 thousand new jobs have been created in this area. It should be noted that more than half of these enterprises have been organized only in the last three years.

To ensure freedom of entrepreneurial activity, 16 laws and more than 100 resolutions have been adopted.

The Government of Uzbekistan attaches great importance to the reform of healthcare, education, science, and culture as key areas of development of the state and society.

The country's healthcare sector is changing dramatically. The material and technical base of polyclinics and multidisciplinary hospitals is being strengthened; their personnel potential is growing. If in 2016 there were 10 specialized medical centers and only 2 of their regional branches in the republic, today the number of such centers has reached 20, with 124 branches in the regions.

Special attention is paid to the improvement of continuing education. If in 2017 there were 5,211 kindergartens in the country, then this year their number, please pay special attention, has reached 19,316. Due to starting these reforms, it was possible to increase the coverage of children with preschool education to 62%, including children aged 6 years - up to 77%.

In 2020 alone, 56 specialized schools in mathematics, 28 in chemistry and biology, and 14 in computer science and information and communication technologies were created in the country.

In 2020, 339 vocational schools, 194 colleges, and 195 technical schools were opened to provide young people with modern, in-demand professions.

Over the past 5 years, 64 new higher education institutions have been created in the country, and now there are 141 of them. The quotas for admission to universities have been

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increased 3 times. The coverage of young people with higher education reached 28%, whereas in 2016 it was at the level of 9%. Shortly, it is planned to increase this figure to 50-60%.

THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE

The presidential elections of the Republic of Uzbekistan were held on 24 October. They were held in full compliance with the national electoral legislation, for the first time based on the Electoral Code adopted in 2019. The electoral legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan reflects established international criteria and standards. The elections were held based on universally recognized democratic principles of openness, transparency, freedom, and justice.

A total of about a thousand observers from about 20 international organizations followed the elections, including the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Bureau for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Commonwealth of the Independent States and the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly, the Council of the Parliamentary Assembly Turkic-speaking countries, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as well as from fifty foreign countries, in addition, 1672 representatives of domestic and foreign media directly observed and covered the process. For the first time, observers from the European Parliament participated in the entire electoral process in the presidential elections.

According to statistics in 2007 - 249; 2015 - 296; 2016 - 555; and in 2021, 971

international observers participated in the elections in Uzbekistan. Such large-scale participation of international observers and the media this year is a record in the history of elections in Uzbekistan.

Besides, 64,450 representatives of five political parties and self-governing bodies of citizens who participated in the elections directly observed the elections.

For the first time, millions of people watched an online broadcast using 414 video cameras installed at 207 polling stations in districts and cities across the country.

The elections were held freely and democratically, openly and transparently, in the spirit of healthy competition and political struggle, which was also recognized by international observers.

Another feature of this year's presidential election is the civic responsibility of our voters, a growing sense of involvement in the reforms being carried out in our country. The elections once again demonstrated the growing interest in political life, social activity, and cultural level of the people of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan's multinational people took an active part in the elections. Out of 20,158,907 voters included in the electoral list, 16,212,343 voters took part in the presidential elections, including Uzbeks who voted abroad. This is 80.4% of the total number of those with right to vote. 421,176 voters took the opportunity to vote early from 14 to 20 October. During the elections, conditions were created for all our citizens living abroad, regardless of

whether they are on the consular list, to vote at 54 polling stations in 37 countries.

The adoption by the Central Election Commission of the program of the main measures for the preparation and conduct of the presidential elections of the Republic of Uzbekistan and its consistent implementation was important in ensuring that the elections were held under the requirements of legislation and at a high organizational level.

The adoption by the Central Election Commission of the program of the main measures for the preparation and conduct of the elections of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and its consistent implementation was of great importance in ensuring the conduct of elections following the requirements of the legislation and at a high organizational level.

Election commissions of all levels organized their work in full compliance with the requirements of the Electoral Code, the program of the main events for the election of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Calendar Plan as well as the principles of legality, independence, impartiality, openness, transparency, and openness.

During the election campaign, equal and broad opportunities were created for the election campaigning of political parties and presidential candidates.

Proper protection of the health of the voters and other participants in the electoral process has been ensured at polling stations in the conditions of the Covid pandemic.

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Shavkat Mirziyoyev being a representative of the Movement of Entrepreneurs and Business People – the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan received 80.12% of the votes. The election results once again confirmed the correctness of the course of development that was determined and implemented together with our people.

The elections raised trust between the people and the state; they served as a factor in the consolidation of society.

A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The new Uzbekistan has shifted its growth model to one that prioritizes the rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of all of the country's citizens.

The President mentions in his inaugural address that the New Uzbekistan Development Strategy would signal the start of a new stage in our country's development. We shall structure our efforts from now on according to a new principle: "human-society-state".

Over the last five years, society has gotten more liberal, and the country's emotional climate has radically transformed. The business has completed the first step of modernisation, and the results have been positive. A new stage is ahead, based on fundamental and systemic changes in transforming our country. The reforms will continue and deepen. The main objective of the new development strategy is to build a secular democratic state based on a modern sustainable market economy

and an ecologically developed society.

The New Uzbekistan Development Strategy comprises seven major areas:

First, large-scale reforms will be taken to a new level, with the goal of creating a state that values human dignity and protects the legitimate interests and well-being of all of its citizens, all while promoting the growth of a free civil society.

Second, establishing the judicial system's true independence and transparency, boosting the actions of law enforcement agencies, strengthening the role of the legal profession's institution, and digitizing the whole region are all priority.

Third, the most important objective is to expand the national economy and boost growth rates. We have set a target for ourselves to increase the country's gross domestic product per capita by utilizing the resources and possibilities available to us. As a result, Uzbekistan is expected to join a group of countries with per capita incomes above the global average by 2030.

Fourth, as the most significant components in the development of human capital, we will continue to focus on the execution of a fair social policy, assuring quality education and upbringing.

Fifth, we rely on two crucial components in constructing the future: a robust economy based on market principles and a strong spirit.

Sixth, coping with environmental concerns.

Seventh, maintaining peace and

security in the country is our top concern.

In conclusion, the results of the recent Presidential elections have once again reaffirmed the legitimacy of the course for widening political reforms. The interests of every citizen of the country, regardless of origin, gender, language, or religion, are at the core of its renewal objectives, which are based on the rule of law and the promotion of a free civil society. The implementation of a fair social policy and upbringing as the most important factors in the development of human capital in all areas of the life of the state is becoming the cornerstone in making Uzbekistan a reliable and strong partner in the global community.



For information on
EURACTIV Special Reports...

Contact us

Georgi GOTEV

Senior Editor

georgi.gotev@euractiv.com

tel. +32 4 99 528 725

Teresa DOMINGUEZ

EU Affairs Senior Manager

teresa.dominguez@euractiv.com

tel. +32 (0) 47 601 78 26