Central Asia Forecasting 2023

RESULTS FROM AN
EXPERT SURVEY

Index

Executive Summary

Central Asia Forecasting' is a collaborative analytical project that aims to identify and track regional trends in Central Asia over time. The first study was launched in 2021, and the current edition is an updated follow-up on the first report. For this study, a human-judgement forecasting method was employed in the form of an opinion survey among relevant experts on the developments in Central Asia in the next three-to-five years. The survey was designed by an editorial team of four experts and reviewed by 11 external experts before the survey went live for a month in March-April 2023. Over the four weeks 122 respondents took the survey. The results of the survey were analysed by a team of four researchers (editorial team) and 11 advisors and reviewed by two additional experts.

In this report, the editorial team presents the key findings of the survey and analyses what the survey responses might imply for regional developments in Central Asia in the near future.

This report analyses the survey responses regarding domestic politics, regional and international affairs, as well as economics, energy, and climate change-related issues. In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked about potential domestic risks, challenges, and political priorities. Regarding the key risks that Central Asia will likely face in the next three-to-five years, the survey highlights three patterns in the received responses. First, the entire region seems to share two key risks: economic slowdown, and crackdown on freedoms and human rights. Second, the perception of political instability seems to be higher in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and lower in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Finally, environmental and climate emergencies were listed as one of the top risks for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are seen as better prepared to address the existing and potential risks compared to their peers in the other three republics. The survey outcomes indicate that regime security remains the top priority in Central Asia. An important departure

from the previous survey is that Kyrgyzstan, which is usually perceived to have a more open political system, seems to be moving towards authoritarian consolidation.

In the second part of the survey, the respondents had a chance to comment on the state of affairs in international relations in the region. The Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, and the continuing rise of China as a regional economic power have contributed to the current survey results. China and Russia are seen as the two top external partners for the Central Asian republics, although China seems to have gained a few points at the expense of Russia in the eyes of the respondents. Türkiye seems to be on a rise compared to the 2021 survey, while the EU has slightly lost position. The US concludes the top five external parts for the region. Within the region, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan remain the two top internal partners. Against the background of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Central Asian republics are seen to be inclined towards increasing military capacity and decreasing their trust in Russia. Yet, responses also suggest Russia remains a top priority partner for the region, revealing the complex and multifaceted nature of Central Asia - Russia relations.

In the third part of the survey, the respondents reflected on Central Asian trends in the area of economics, energy and climate change. As in 2021, respondents noted the need to cut down dependence on natural resources and to diversify national economies as pressing issues in the region. Similarly, domestic energy security is highlighted as an area of concern for the surveyed experts, which seems to reflect on the ongoing energy crises that have taken place in recent years in each country of the region. The impact of climate change is felt strongly in the region as harsh weather conditions were often highlighted in the survey. Generally, climate change and sustainability seem to occupy a bigger place in the survey responses as compared to 2021, which is also an important development reflecting reality on the ground.

Introduction

Over 30 years ago, the five countries of the Central Asian region – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – gained independence from the Soviet Union and began to engage proactively in foreign policy in the international arena (with Turkmenistan doing so by declaring neutrality). Domestic processes of state formation and nation-building have transformed the states and societies of Central Asia considerably since 1991 but are still a work in progress. Regional cooperation and integration have been constrained by a variety of domestic, regional, and global factors, ranging from different national foreign policy goals to unresolved disputes over borders and shared resources. While Central Asia covers a vast territory between the Caspian Sea, Russia, China, and Afghanistan, with a total population of over 77 million people, it is often under-represented in global debates, such as those on sustainable development, climate change, and green transformation. The region thus constitutes an object of maturing academic inquiry and international foreign policymaking. In 2019, the European Union (EU) adopted a renewed strategy on relations with Central Asia focused on partnering for resilience and prosperity (European Commission, 2019).

We, a group of experts and researchers from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, and other institutions collaboratively launched this project on 'Central Asia Forecasting' in 2021 to survey academics, practitioners and other interested stakeholders on upcoming developments in Central Asia. Building upon the success of the first survey of 2021, we are delighted to present the second Central Asia Forecasting Survey Report. In this report, we analyse the survey responses regarding three main areas of interest: domestic politics; regional and international politics; and the economic, energy and climate change challenges affecting the region. This report provides a snapshot of collective expert thinking on Central Asia in 2023, where experts come from both inside and outside of the region. This mixed insight should prove useful for policymakers and academia alike.

Methodology and limitations

For this study, a human-judgement forecasting method was employed in the form of an opinion survey conducted among experts on developments in the region in the near future. The breadth of expert judgements ensures a diversity of represented opinions. This combination has an edge over expert-only forecasts and has not been employed much in the context of Central Asia. However, it is important to note that judgement-based forecasting is subjective and has certain limitations. For example, one should note that, while over half of the respondents come from the region, there are certain country imbalances: Kazakh respondents comprise 21% of the total number of respondents while Kyrgyz and Uzbek respondents account for 12.30% and 10.66% respectively. In other words, the number of respondents does not correspond to the population sizes of the respective countries.
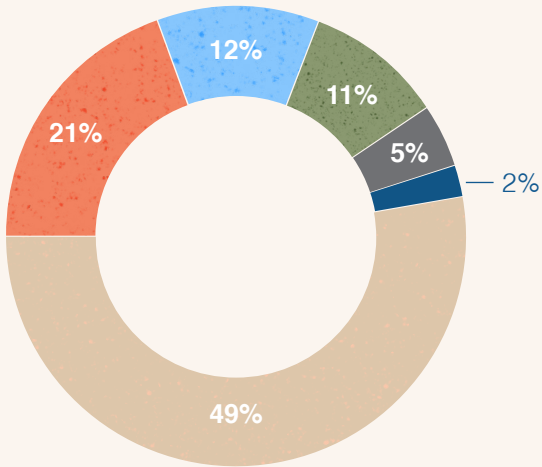
The survey was developed through a participatory process with the active involvement of scholars from all Central Asian states and beyond the region. However,

Gender of the Participants

- MALE — 57%
- FEMALE — 38%
- PREFER NOT TO SAY — 2%
- NO ANSWER — 3%
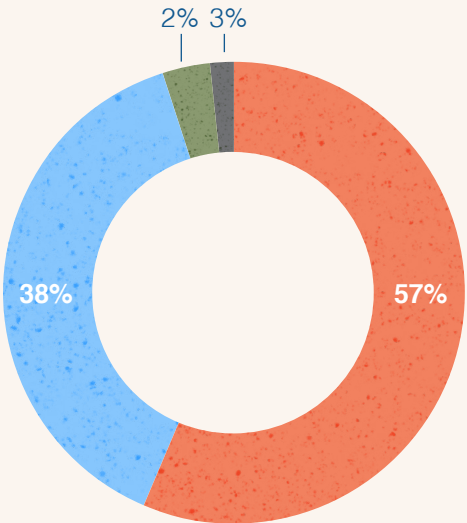
Citizenship of the Participants

- KAZAKHSTAN — 21%
- KYRGYZSTAN — 12%
- UZBEKISTAN — 11%
- TAJIKISTAN — 5%
- TURKMENISTAN — 2%
- OTHER — 49%

Age of the Participants

- 18-29 — 9%
- 30-39 — 39%
- 40-49 — 31%
- 50-59 — 14%
- 60-69 — 2%
- OVER 70 — 1%
- NO ANSWER — 3%
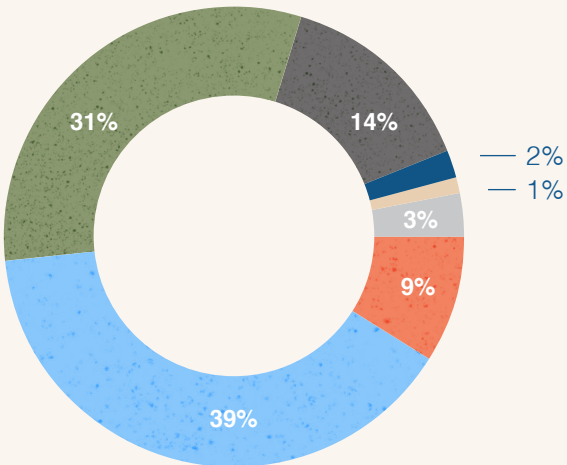
Education
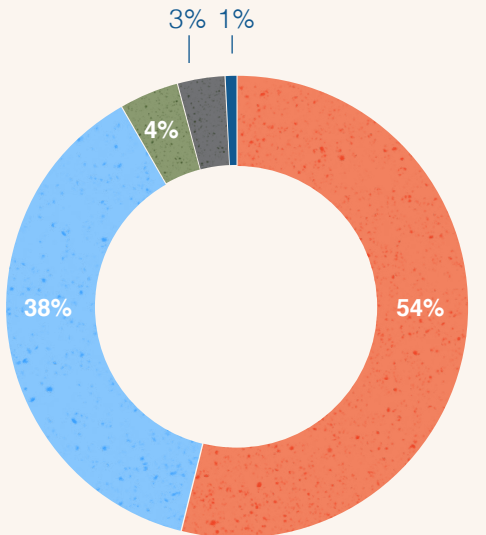
- DOCTORATE — 54%
- MASTER'S DEGREE (INCLUDING DIPLOMA AND SPECIALIST DEGREE) — 38%
- BACHELOR DEGREE — 4%
- NO ANSWER — 3%
- HIGH SCHOOL DEGREE OR EQUIVALENT — 1%

there may still be important issues and trends that the study was unable to incorporate and address.

Additionally, it should be noted that the survey questions were drafted in February 2023, with the survey taking place in March-April 2023. Given the volatility of global and regional politics at the present, unexpected global or regional shifts may have occurred since, altering the impact of the ongoing Russian invasion in Ukraine on Central Asia.

Finally, the majority of questions address development trends in Central Asia without specifying whether they apply to the government, the public, or specific social groups. While every effort was made to include expert views on public perceptions, these are difficult to comment on due to the lack of reliable and large-scale public opinion polls in the region.

In the second phase, the team implemented the online survey system, which ensured respondent anonymity and compliance with EU data protection laws. The online survey was tested internally with the help of 11 experts split into two specialist advisory groups: One group of advisors commented on the domestic politics and regional politics section while the second group of advisors provided their feedback on the survey section devoted to economics, energy, and environment.

The bilingual survey (in English and Russian) was launched on 14 March 2023 and was active until 15 April 2023. In total, 122 respondents took our 20-minute survey. In terms of demographics, gender representation was approximately 38.42% female and 56.56% male; 4.92% declined to indicate their gender. Half of the respondents have Central Asian citizenship, while the majority of participating experts from outside the region come from EU Member States. A majority of respondents were 30 to 49 years old, and slightly more than half of the respondents are currently affiliated with academic institutions and think tanks while 16.4% are representatives of various international organisations, civil society, and media.

In the third phase, the raw survey data was cleaned and analysed by the authors and editorial team before being sent to the advisory group for feedback and initial impressions. A survey report was then drafted by Shairbek Dzhuraev (parts 1 and 2) and Aliya Tskhay (part 3) and edited by Aijan Sharshenova and Sebastian Schiek. Two external reviewers were invited to provide their feedback on the first report draft.

Report structure

The report is split into three parts. The first part focuses on the Central Asia Forecasting Survey results in the area of domestic politics and society in Central Asia. The second collates and analyses the survey data on regional and global politics. The final part analyses the survey outcomes on the section on economics, energy and environment. The report ends with an outlook concerning the future of this study. This report offers insights of interest for policymakers, scholars, and students interested in or engaged with the region of Central Asia.

Domestic Politics and Regional Affairs

_____

Top risks in Central Asia: Political instability, economic slowdown and crackdown on rights and freedoms

Taking stock of a country's most salient risks is an important entry point to forecasting developments for the next 3-5 years. The first section of the survey sought to solicit experts' views on the most likely risks for each country of the region in the next 3-5 years, with the follow-up question of how well-prepared the respective governments are to address the risks and challenges.

The findings suggest three patterns concerning the risks that Central Asian countries will likely face in the coming years. First, common to the entire region is the relevance of two risks: a) economic slowdown/crisis and b) crackdown on freedoms and human rights (see Table 1). These risks feature among the top three risks for each country of the region. Second, there is a clear distinction between the countries regarding expected political instability. This risk is seen as the highest for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan but is absent among in the top three risks for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The latter, in turn, share 'crackdown on freedoms and human rights' as the highest-ranked risk. Third, adding to the above distinction is the presence of environmental/climate emergencies as one of the top risks for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In contrast, this risk was less likely to be cited for the remaining three. It is worth noting that the consensus on most likely risks is highest for Kyrgyzstan

Table 1

What are the most likely risks to occur in Central Asian countries over the next 3-5 years? Top three responses for each Central Asian state

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
1st	Political instability (confrontation, protests, etc.)	Political instability (confrontation, protests, etc.)	Economic slowdown/ crisis	Crackdowns on freedoms and human rights	Crackdowns on freedoms and human rights
2nd	Economic slowdown/crisis	Economic slowdown/ crisis	Crackdowns on freedoms and human rights	Economic slowdown/ crisis	Environmental/ climate emergency
3rd	Crackdowns on freedoms and human rights	Crackdowns on freedoms and human rights	Political instability (confrontation, protests, etc.)	Environmental/ climate emergency	Economic slowdown/crisis

and Turkmenistan: The top three risks were the only ones that garnered more than 30% of mentions. At the other extreme is Kazakhstan, where six risks received more than 30% of mentions, with environmental risks, external military threats, and internal cleavages coming after the top three listed in Table 1. Qualitative research could help interpret the implications of such differences. On the one hand, the greater diffusion of risks, as in the case of Kazakhstan, may speak about a greater number of competing risk factors. On the other hand, more optimistically, it may indicate a lack of self-evident risk factors.

National governments: shared priorities, divergent capacities

National governments are central actors in addressing emerging challenges and risks. The survey results suggest a stark difference between the countries in this respect (see Table 2). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan stand out as having governments best prepared to address the risks. Thus, 43% and 38% of respondents marked the Kazakh and Uzbek governments' preparedness to be above average, contrasting with 4%, 3% and 8% for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan respectively. Interpreting these results requires the caveat that national governments may be key actors causing, rather than addressing, some of the risks, such as crackdowns on freedoms and human rights.

Chart 1

How do you assess the preparedness of Central Asian governments to successfully address the most important risks and challenges that the countries face?
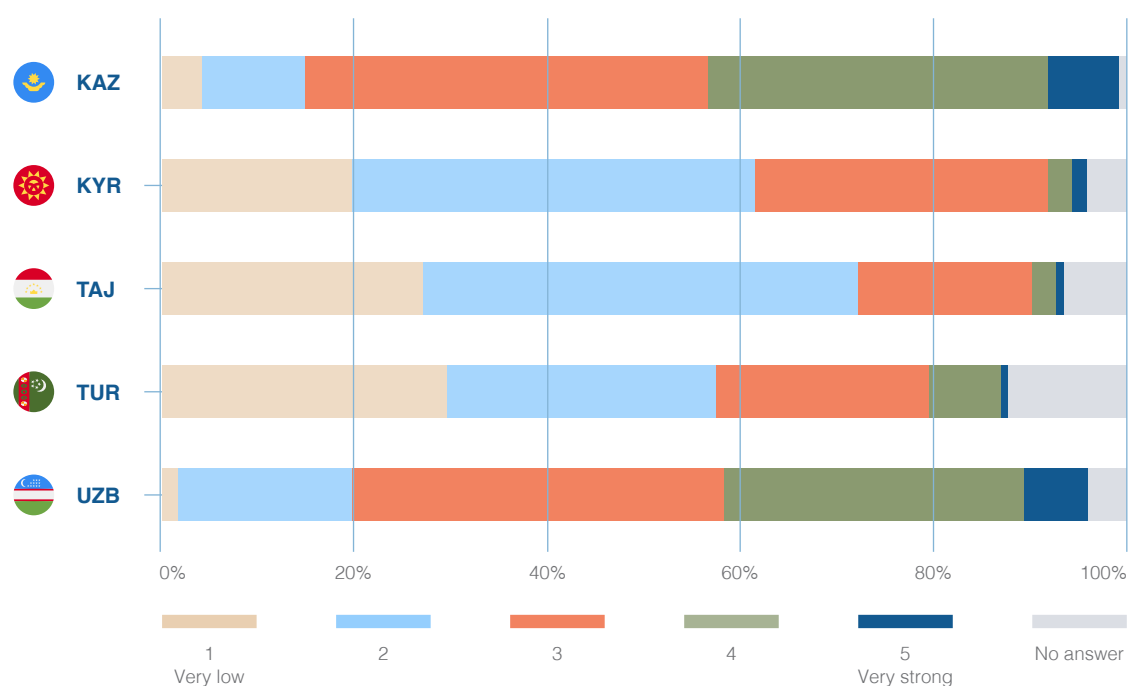
Respondents were asked to indicate the policy areas they believe belong in the top three priorities of each government. Two priorities stand out as most relevant to all countries of the region: a) ensuring regime stability or smooth political transition, and b) maintaining socio-economic stability (see Table 3). The prominence of regime stability aligned with the results of the 2021 survey where it was found to be the second highest priority for Uzbekistan and the highest for the remaining four countries of the region.

In contrast, the priority of 'maintaining socio-economic stability' was ranked higher for all countries than in 2021. It was ranked as the second and third priorities for the Kazakh and Uzbek governments in 2021 but as the highest priority in 2023. In the other three countries, this problem was not among the top three in 2021 and was ranked second highest in 2023. Finally, of interest is the difference between the Central Asian states concerning the third priority. While all five states have 'economic reforms' in this spot, respondents believe the Uzbek and Kazakh governments are more likely to have it on their agenda (57% and 43%, respectively) than Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (25%, 16%, and 17% respectively).

Table 2

What policy areas will most likely be among top priorities for Central Asian governments in the next 3-5 years?

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
1st	Maintaining socio-economic stability	Ensuring regime stability or smooth political transition	Ensuring regime stability or smooth political transition	Ensuring regime stability or smooth political transition	Maintaining socio-economic stability
2nd	Ensuring regime stability or smooth political transition	Maintaining socio-economic stability	Maintaining socio-economic stability	Maintaining socio-economic stability	Ensuring regime stability or smooth political transition
3rd	Conducting economic reforms	Conducting economic reforms	Conducting economic reforms	Conducting economic reforms	Conducting economic reforms

Key trends: political regime, societal values, and stability

This battery of questions sought to assess key trends in the politics of the countries, with a focus on changes in political regimes, societal value systems, and political stability.

Concerning the nature of political regimes, experts see forthcoming changes to be primarily towards authoritarianism (see Table 4). with the average share of respondents who expect greater authoritarianism at 41.31%, in contrast to the 6.72% who mentioned greater democratisation. Three trends could be highlighted. First, 'greater authoritarianism' in Kyrgyzstan is the most highly anticipated trend (54.1%), similarly to in Tajikistan (60.7%) and in Turkmenistan (50.8%). In contrast, the figures for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are 16.4% and 24.6% respectively. Second, predictions for the latter two countries feature a high degree of 'mixed change' (i.e., changes featuring elements of both democratisation and authoritarian consolidation) at 57.4% and 54.9% for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan respectively. Finally, Turkmenistan and

Table 3

How do you think the political situation is likely to change in the next 3-5 years?'

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
1st	Mixed change	Greater authoritarianism	Greater authoritarianism	Greater authoritarianism	Mixed change
2nd	Greater authoritarianism	Mixed change	No change	No change	Greater authoritarianism
3rd	Greater democratisation	Greater democratisation	Mixed change	Mixed change	Greater democratisation
4th	No change	No change	Greater democratisation	Greater democratisation	No change

Tajikistan have the highest combined figure predictions of 'greater authoritarianism' and 'no change expected' (82% for Tajikistan and 90% for Turkmenistan).

In a separate question, experts were asked to share their views on trends in societal values, specifically focusing on trends in liberal and conservative values. The findings suggest that there is a broad overlap with trends in political regimes. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan stand out as two countries where change is least expected, combined with high expectations for the growth of conservative values. Kyrgyzstan features a similarly high turn towards conservative values but this is followed with 'mixed changes' rather than 'no change'. In turn, Kazakhstan emerges as a champion in the expected growth of liberal values, the highest among the five, even though this comes far behind the expectations for 'mixed changes' in the country.

Table 4

How do you think the value systems of the general public are likely to evolve in the next 3-5 years?

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
1st	Mixed change	Growth of conservative values	Growth of conservative values	No major change	Mixed change
2nd	Growth of liberal values	Mixed change	No major change	Growth of conservative values	Growth of conservative values
3rd	Growth of conservative values	Growth of liberal values	Mixed change	Mixed change	Growth of liberal values
4th	No major change	No major change	Growth of liberal values	Growth of liberal values	No major change

The final question of the section looked at likely changes in political stability in the Central Asian states (see Chart 1 below). The predicted overall trend is towards 'no change' (50.33% on average), followed by the expectation of political instability (35.41%). Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan stand out as two countries where little change is thought likely to occur (61.48% and 67.21% respectively), while Kyrgyzstan's predicted trend is towards greater instability (60.66%), followed by Tajikistan (with 44.26%). The only two countries with predictions in the double digits for greater political stability are Kazakhstan (17.21%) and Uzbekistan (20.49%) (see Chart 1). Unsurprisingly, this pattern aligns with the earlier assessment of national governments' preparedness to address risks.

To sum up, the survey results suggest that, according to the respondents, the security of ruling regimes remains the top priority in Central Asia. That said, there is a perceived 'homogenisation' of the region. Kyrgyzstan, a usual outlier in terms of having a more open and dynamic political system, is joining the crowd with the trend towards authoritarian consolidation. In turn, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, relatively fresh after their political transitions, continue generating mixed expectations, less authoritarian but also less stable than in the past.

Chart 2

Political stability in Central Asian countries

Political stability will increase   No major change   Political instability will increase   No answer
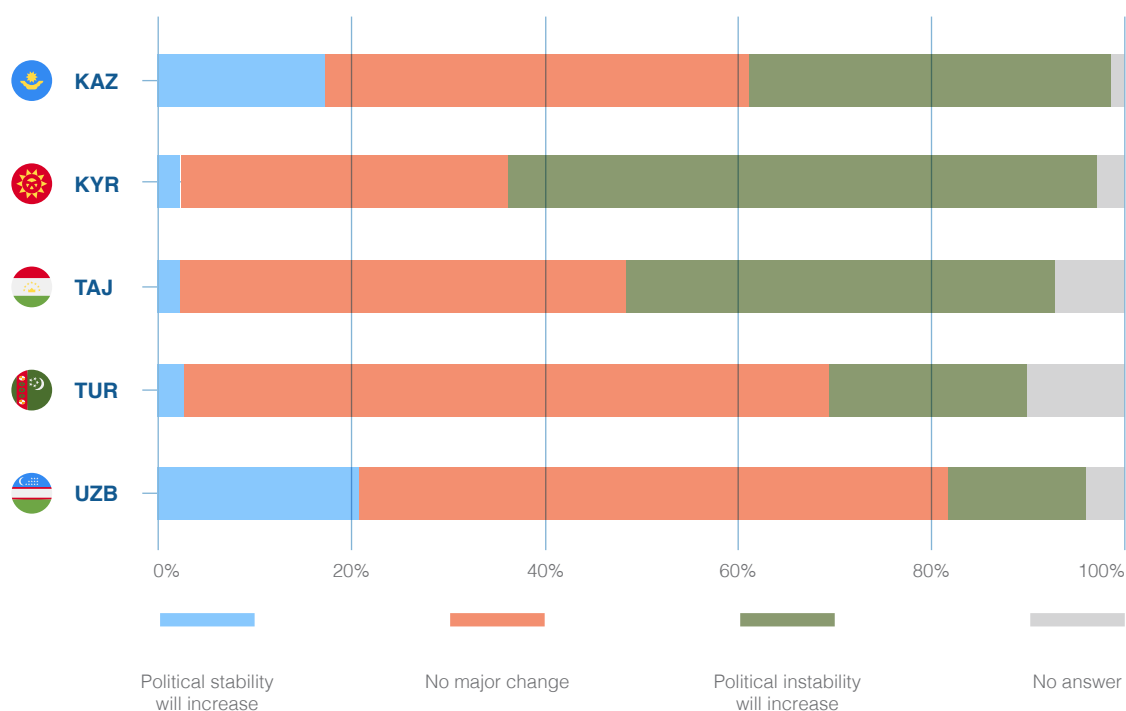
International Relations in Central Asia

In the second section, the survey focused on assessing the international relations of Central Asian states. In recent years, several events have marked important changes at the regional and global level: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the growing conflict between the West and Russia, the withdrawal of US troops and the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, and, more broadly, China's continued geopolitical and geoeconomic rise. These and other related factors continue to influence Central Asia's engagement with the outside world.

Central Asia's external partners: a changing of the guards?

There is a broad consensus that China and Russia are the top two extra-regional partners of Central Asian states. This is in line with findings from the 2021 survey. However, there are substantial differences too. First, in the 2023 survey, China made major gains in Central Asia at the expense of Russia. In 2021, Russia was seen as the top partner for Kyrgyzstan and had a slight advantage over China in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In the 2023 survey, experts expect Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as Turkmenistan to perceive China as the top priority partner. Russia retained its top position vis-a-vis China in Kyrgyzstan, albeit with a shrinking gap, and remained tied with China for Tajikistan. In other words, survey respondents expect China, already the top partner for Turkmenistan, to replace Russia as the leading partner for the region's two biggest economies, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan remains the only country where Russia remains the primary partner.

◇
◇ **Table 5:**
◇ Contenders for top external partner spot in Central Asia

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Top 1 Partner	China	Russia	China / Russia	China	China
Top 2 Partner	Russia	China		Russia	Russia
Top 3 Partner	EU and EU MS	Turkey	Iran	Turkey	Turkey
Top 4 Partner	USA	EU and EU MS	EU and EU MS	Iran	EU and EU MS
Top 5 Partner	Turkey	USA	USA	Afghanistan	USA

Another change concerns second-order external partners. From the perspective of the respondents, the European Union remained the third-priority partner for Kazakhstan but lost the same status in Uzbekistan to Türkiye. Indeed, Ankara's role appears on the rise in Central Asia, as in addition to becoming the 'third power' for Uzbekistan, it also solidified the same status in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan at the expense of the EU and Iran respectively. The US, in turn, is squarely behind the EU, seen as the fifth priority partner.

Intra-regional affairs: toward greater cohesion?

Closer regional cooperation is one of the ever-green topics in Central Asia, even though regional intergovernmental organisations ceased to exist by the early 2000s. The latest effort at developing a purely regional platform took the form of regional consultative meetings of heads of state in 2018. The process remains inconclusive, however. In 2022, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed an agreement on 'Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation', but tellingly, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan refrained from doing so.

The survey respondents were asked several questions on intra-regional dynamics. Unsurprisingly, one finding is that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan remain two centres of attraction in the region (Table 7). They are seen as top priority partners within the region by each of the remaining three countries. At the other extreme is Turkmenistan, which experts rank as the lowest priority for its regional neighbours, reflecting a relatively low degree of economic connection and interdependence.

Table 6:

In your opinion, relations with which Central Asian countries will the governments prioritise in the next 3-5 years?

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Top 1 Partner	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan
Top 2 Partner	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan
Top 3 Partner	Tajikistan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
Top 4 Partner	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan

On what policy issues do the Central Asian states mostly agree with each other, and what issues are likely to lead to divergence? Respondents expect that the countries of the region will have the highest convergence in the fight against terrorism and extremism, regional security issues, and regional trade policies (see Chart 2). These three also featured among the top five 'convergence' issues in 2021. Similarly, transboundary water resources remain the issue expected to cause the highest degree of disagreement in Central Asia, the same as in 2021. Curiously, border delimitation features in both the top-5 convergence and divergence lists. This may well relate to the fact that the violent military clashes at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border were balanced by Uzbekistan's proactive policies towards completing border delimitation, including with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Chart 3
Will Central Asian states have greater convergence (agreement) or divergence (disagreement) on the following issues in the next 3-5 years?
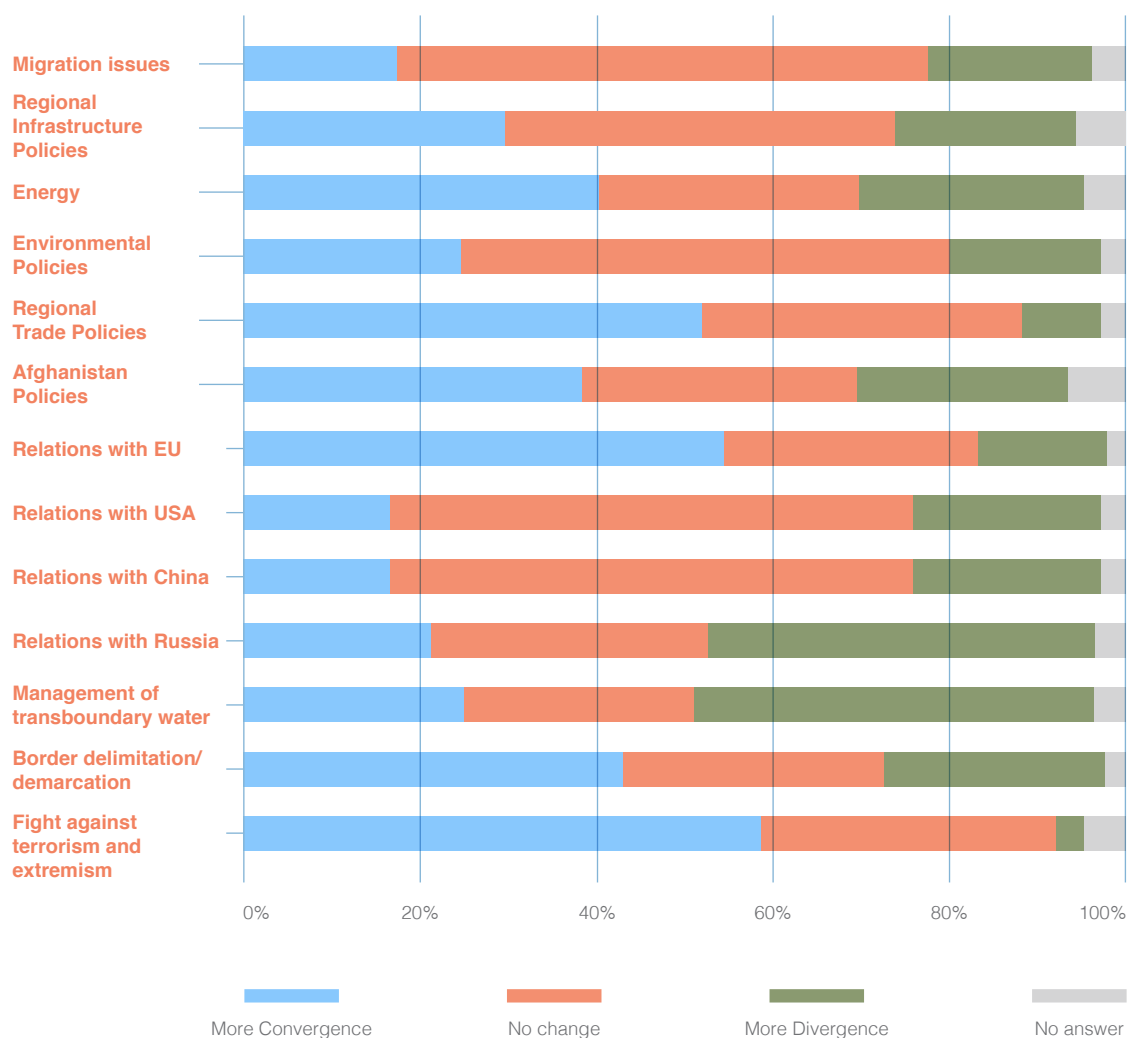
Together with continuing trends, there are several departures from the trends of 2021 too. First, following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Afghanistan stopped being the topic of the highest agreement in Central Asia. If the 2021 survey showed 68% convergence and 9% divergence, figures in 2023 are 38.5% and 23% respectively. The second change concerns expectations about relations with major external partners. Over 44% of respondents see relations with Russia as the topic that would generate divergences among Central Asian states, a contrast to 22% in 2021. In contrast, China is seen by 47.5% of experts as an issue of convergence, up from 30% in 2021.

In the context of the war: eroding trust in Russia and international law
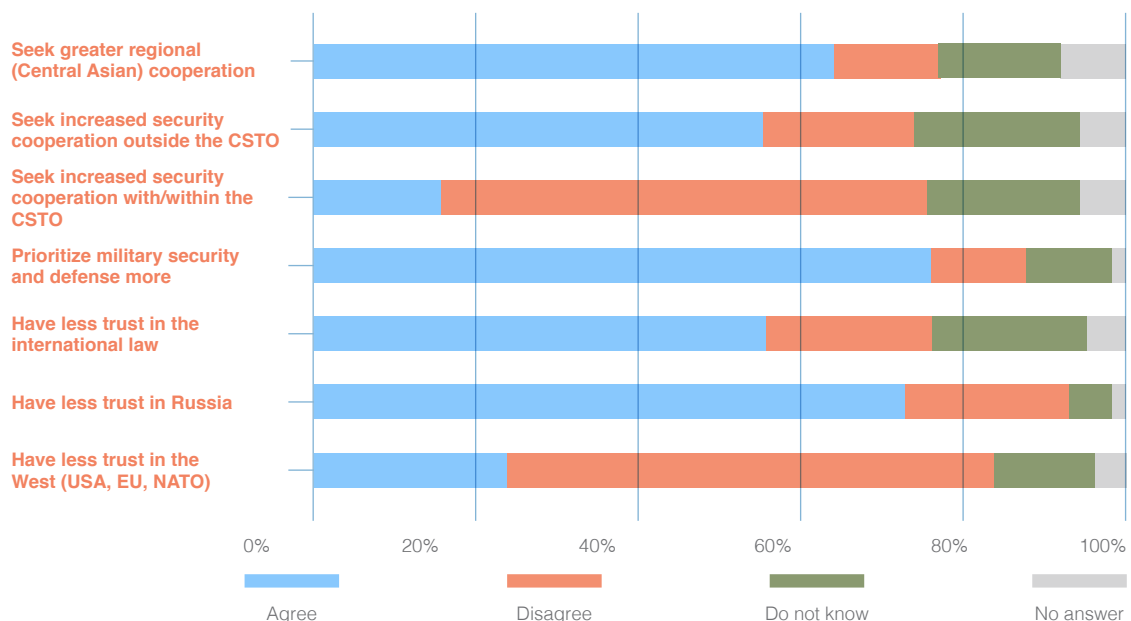
The survey asked respondents to weigh in on the implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for Central Asian states (see Chart 3). Top answers included 'more prioritisation of military security and defence' (75%) and 'less trust in Russia' (73%). The events are also predicted to lead to greater regional cooperation in Central Asia (64%) and lessened trust in international law (56%). Curiously, several public opinion surveys in Central Asia on the same question reveal results more favourable towards Russia, highlighting the discrepancies between academic/expert communities and the broader public.

The above results demonstrate dissonance with an earlier finding that put Russia among the top external partners of the region. A closer look may suggest there is no contradiction. Russia's invasion of Ukraine shook the world and put particular

Chart 4

In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian governments will...

Legend: Agree · Disagree · Do not know · No answer

Categories:
- Seek greater regional (Central Asian) cooperation
- Seek increased security cooperation outside the CSTO
- Seek increased security cooperation with/within the CSTO
- Prioritize military security and defense more
- Have less trust in the international law
- Have less trust in Russia
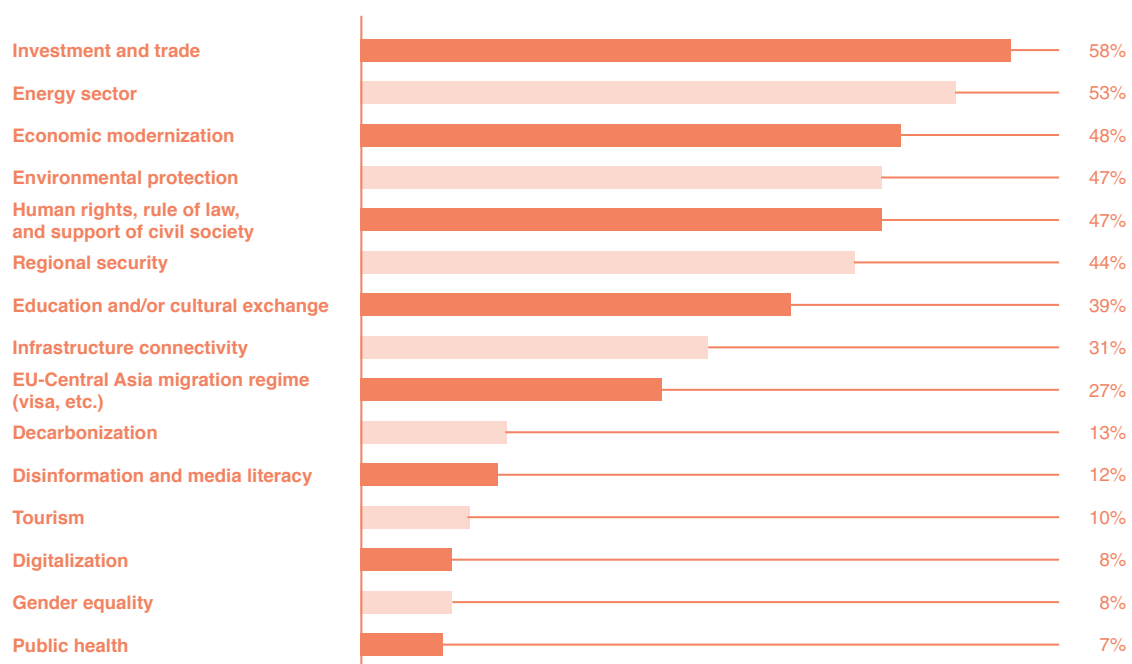- Have less trust in the West (USA, EU, NATO)

pressure on Central Asian states. On the one hand, the countries of the region have strong economic links, from trade to labour migration to transport dependence, with Russia. In addition, several Central Asian states share a collective security alliance and economic union with Russia. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine exposed Central Asia's vulnerability in the context of Russia's revisionism against smaller post-Soviet states. Thus, what the data suggests is an uneasy blend of distrust and dependence from Central Asian states toward relations with Russia. Moreover, the relative decline of Russia's standing vis-a-vis China (Table 6) correlates with the growing distrust in Moscow seen in Chart 3.

EU-Central Asia relations: a change of gears?

The European Union has been one of the major external partners of Central Asia. While it can hardly compete with the political or military role of Russia or the economic clout of China, the EU has been a consistent partner in a range of policy areas. The survey asked respondents to assess specific policy areas that, in their view, should be prioritised in EU-Central Asia relations. The results show strong dominance of economic cooperation topics. The top three policy areas for EU-Central Asia relations are 'investment and trade' (58%), 'the energy sector' (53%) and 'economic modernisation' (48%). This is a significant departure from 2021, when 'human rights, rule of law and support for civil society' was the top-ranked policy area for cooperation. Similarly, 'education and cultural exchange', the second highest policy area in the 2021 survey, fell to seventh in 2023 (see Chart 4 below).

Chart 5

What policy areas should the EU and Central Asian states primarily cooperate on?

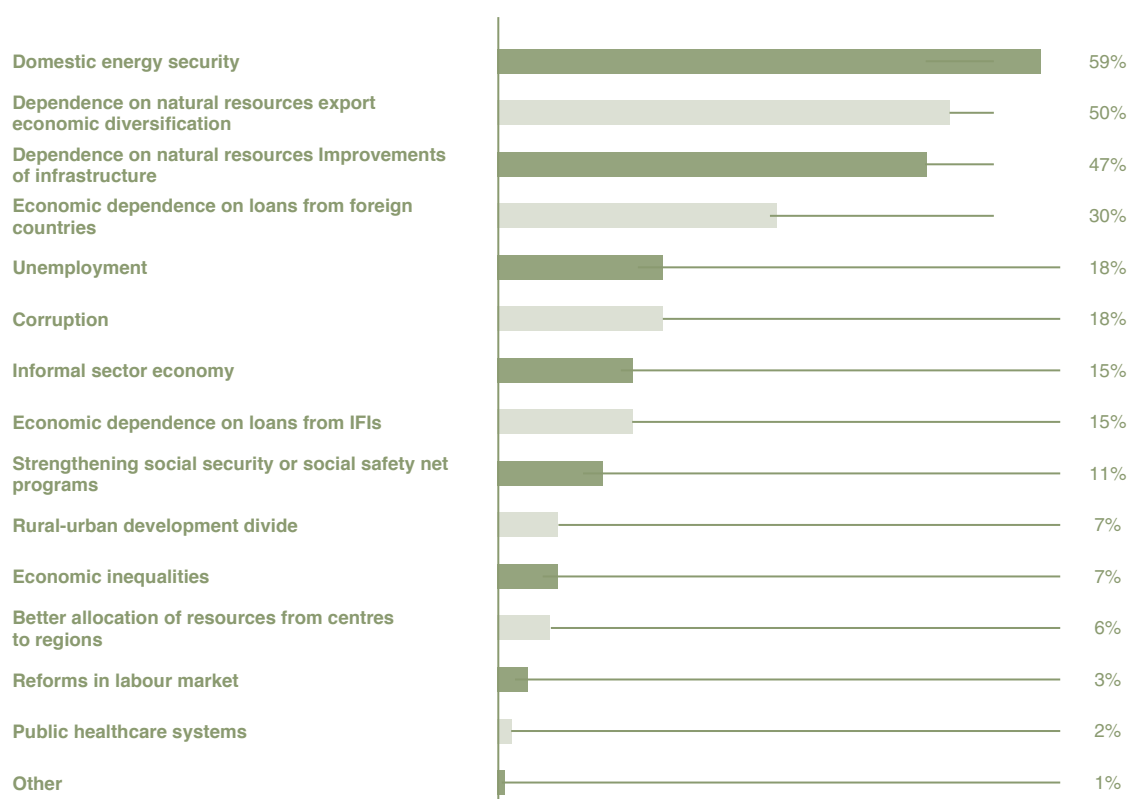| Policy area	Percentage
Investment and trade	58%
Energy sector	53%
Economic modernization	48%
Environmental protection	47%
Human rights, rule of law, and support of civil society	47%
Regional security	44%
Education and/or cultural exchange	39%
Infrastructure connectivity	31%
EU-Central Asia migration regime (visa, etc.)	27%
Decarbonization	13%
Disinformation and media literacy	12%
Tourism	10%
Digitalization	8%
Gender equality	8%
Public health	7%

Economics,
Energy, and
Climate Change

_____

In a departure from the survey of 2021, the topics of economy, energy, and climate change were given a separate section in the 2023 survey. The present survey set out to explore the perception of experts on future priorities for policies and challenges in these areas. Indeed, the economic situation and environmental challenges have become top concerns for the experts as the region is dealing with the effects of a global economic slowdown and the war in Ukraine, as well as experiencing the adverse effects of climate change. The indirect impacts on Central Asian states of global and regional geopolitical events have raised concerns for the expert community. Simultaneous developments in neighbouring Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia, as well as the wider effects of tensions between China and the West, the energy crisis in Europe, and challenges to the global order, all are listed as risks affecting Central Asia. This further demonstrates the centrality of the region and its interconnectedness to global political affairs.

Among the top three priority areas for the Central Asian governments are domestic energy security, infrastructure, and economic diversification. The dependence on natural resources and lack of economic diversification is highlighted by experts again, as they were in the 2021 survey, signifying the importance of these issues and the further progress that needs to be achieved.

◇ **Chart 6**
◇
◇ **Which economic policies will be prioritised by Central Asian governments**
◇ **in the next 3-5 years?**

Policy	%
Domestic energy security	59%
Dependence on natural resources export economic diversification	50%
Dependence on natural resources Improvements of infrastructure	47%
Economic dependence on loans from foreign countries	30%
Unemployment	18%
Corruption	18%
Informal sector economy	15%
Economic dependence on loans from IFIs	15%
Strengthening social security or social safety net programs	11%
Rural-urban development divide	7%
Economic inequalities	7%
Better allocation of resources from centres to regions	6%
Reforms in labour market	3%
Public healthcare systems	2%
Other	1%

It is noteworthy that domestic energy security is highlighted as an area of economic policy to be prioritised by Central Asian governments (by almost 60% of respondents). As the winter of 2022-2023 demonstrated the critical condition of the energy infrastructure in several countries of the region (e.g., Uzbekistan), issues of energy security rankly highly in the minds of experts. Harsh weather conditions are also an indication of the more acute impacts of climate change, and the people of Central Asia have begun to feel this more prominently. The combination of colder winters, old infrastructure, and inefficient resource distribution has pushed the energy security agenda higher in the priority list. This is an important development in the conversation around decarbonisation and energy transition in the region as well.
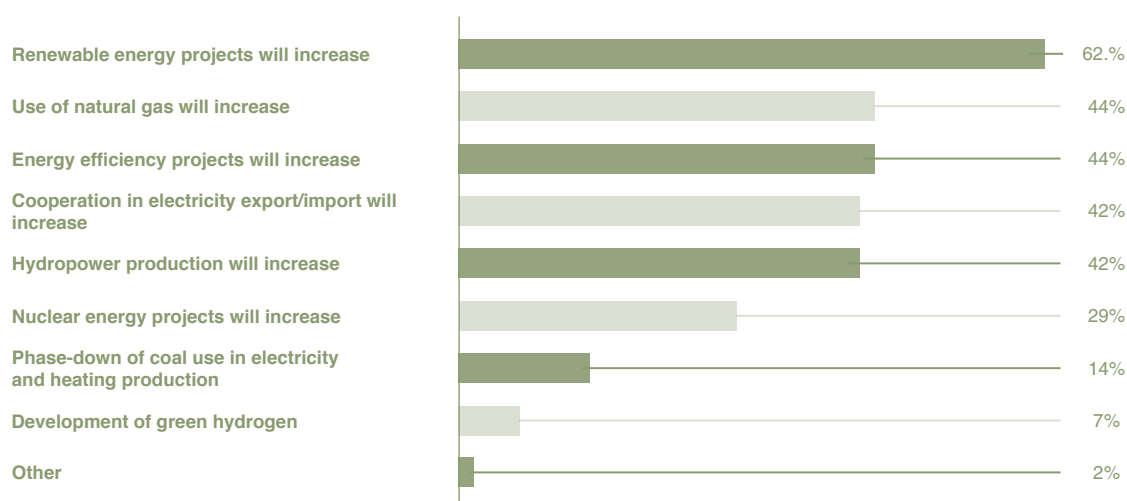
In comparison with the 2021 survey, the present one gave more attention to the topic of climate change and sustainability. The experts agree on the impacts of climate change on the region and the importance of mitigation policies. Glacier melt, desertification, land degradation, and extreme weather events are all highlighted as pressing effects of climate change, yet water scarcity is predominantly ranked highly in answer to this question. This is linked to long-standing disputes over water in the region, and even more importantly, over inefficient water management and use. Cooperation with foreign partners in this area is noted as a priority as well, which links to the existing programs implemented by the EU.

Other indirect impacts of climate change, such as food insecurity, ecological catastrophes, and migration are mentioned as well. This raises concerns for socio-economic wellbeing in the region, especially as the demographic growth of the population will also put a stain on resources under challenging climatic conditions.

◇
◇ **Chart 7**
Which future energy trends will take place in Central Asia?

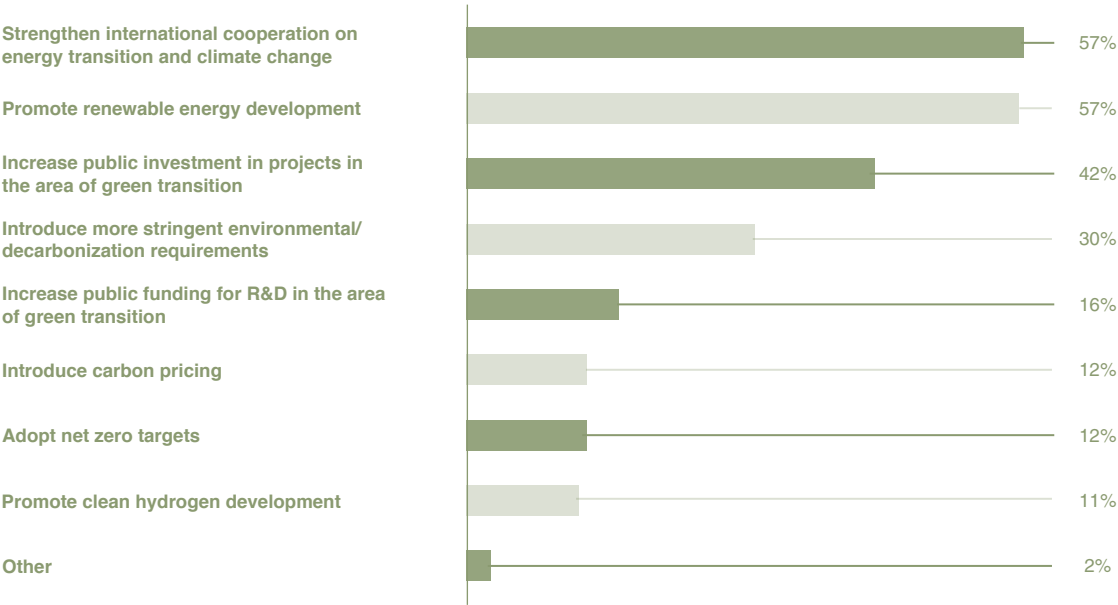| Trend	%
Renewable energy projects will increase	62.%
Use of natural gas will increase	44%
Energy efficiency projects will increase	44%
Cooperation in electricity export/import will increase	42%
Hydropower production will increase	42%
Nuclear energy projects will increase	29%
Phase-down of coal use in electricity and heating production	14%
Development of green hydrogen	7%
Other	2%

In the question of future energy trends in the region, respondents were tasked with choosing from several options. The answers given are varied around (as demonstrated in Chart 6), indicating the numerous challenges that lie in this sector for Central Asian states.

The options provided for respondents were options for low/zero carbon energy resources. However, the comments left in response to this question showed a noted scepticism among experts on the countries' commitments to decarbonisation and energy transition projects, primarily with regards to the implementation. Similarly, there is low expectation of international cooperation on such projects beyond the official announcements and slogans. This could be further explored to understand where such scepticism comes from. There is also a concern about the dedication to implementation of renewable energy projects and decarbonisation policies in Central Asia, with some respondents flagging the possible increase in the use of coal.

Among the future energy transition policies, international cooperation and renewable energy development were picked by more than half of the respondents. Yet, the experts have low expectations of stricter regulations on emissions and net-zero target commitment from the countries that have not yet committed to these. This question requires further interpretation and a follow up to inquire on the motivations for the given answers. For instance, to understand why carbon pricing or clean hydrogen development are not ranked higher despite the conversations on these already present among senior government officials.

◇ **Chart 8**
◇
◇ **Reactions of Central Asian governments to the challenges of the global**
◇ **energy transformation**
◇

Strengthen international cooperation on energy transition and climate change	57%
Promote renewable energy development	57%
Increase public investment in projects in the area of green transition	42%
Introduce more stringent environmental/ decarbonization requirements	30%
Increase public funding for R&D in the area of green transition	16%
Introduce carbon pricing	12%
Adopt net zero targets	12%
Promote clean hydrogen development	11%
Other	2%

Future
of the Study

_____

The 'Central Asia Forecasting 2023' report follows the success of the 'Central Asia Forecasting 2021' report. The second round of the forecasting survey was launched in order to ensure continuity and consistency of the human-judgement study method as applied to the Central Asian region two years ago. Building on the first attempt at setting up the infrastructure to obtain expert opinions, this year's survey was improved in the following ways:

1. In order to ensure local ownership and design of the study, three out of four editorial team members were recruited from within the region, i.e., they come from Central Asia;

2. For the same purpose, the advisory boards have been designed to include representatives of at least four Central Asian nations (with the exception of Turkmenistan due to the country's closed nature);

3. To better involve the informed public, this survey has built an inter-institutional cooperation between European and Central Asian research hubs and think tanks;

4. The design of the survey questionnaire has undergone series of extensive revisions and, this time, was divided into three large areas: 1) domestic politics; 2) regional and international politics; and 3) economics, climate change and energy;

5. The questionnaire included an opportunity for the respondents to provide feedback to improve the future editions of this survey. Open lines communications proved to be helpful back in 2021 and will be used again in future.

Although study designs need to be adapted from time to time, we will try to keep the current structure in future studies to enable comparability.
In follow-up studies, we intend to expand the database to include more experts, particularly from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which are currently still relatively underrepresented. In addition, there is a need to continue increasing the number of respondents who complete the survey in full.

If you have any comments or suggestions concerning the study design and this report, we would be very happy to receive your feedback. Please write to us at: survey@centralasia-forecasting.net

Suggested Reading

- Baldakova, O., Schiek, S., Rinke,T., and Wolters, A. (2021): 'Central Asia Forecasting 2021: Results from an Expert Survey'.Friedrich Ebert Foundation, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, SPCE Hub.
  Available at https://centralasia-forecasting.net

- Dzhuraev, Sh. (2022): 'The EU's Central Asia policy: no chance for change?', Central Asian Survey, 41:4, 639-653

- European Commission (2019): 'The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership' Available at the website of the European External Action Service at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf

- Isaacs, R. and Marat, E. (eds.) (2021): 'Routledge handbook of contemporary Central Asia', Routledge.

- Moisé, G.M. and Sorbello, P. (2022): 'The EU and European transnational companies in Central Asia: relocating agency in the energy sector' Central Asian Survey, 41:4, 770-787

- Sabyrbekov, R., Overland, I., and Vakulchuk, R. (eds.) (2023): 'Climate change in Central Asia: Decarbonization, energy transition and climate policy', Springer. Available open access at https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-29831-8,

- Sanghera, B. and Satybaldieva, E. (2021): 'Rentier capitalism and its discontents: Power, morality and resistance in Central Asia', Palgrave.

- Cornel, Svante E. (ed.) (2023): 'The Changing Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus', AFPC Press.

Credits