Russia's geo-energy interests and secessionist conflicts in Central Asia: Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan

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Abstract: The break-up of the Soviet Union heralded a highly unstable decade of decline for Russia, while also generating numerous conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Russia regained influence at global and, chiefly, regional level from 2000, with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin and the rise in the price of hydrocarbons. Energy policy arguably played an essential role in this situation. Central Asia, the scenario of two secessionist conflicts at present, is crucial to Russian geo-energy interests. This article examines and discusses the impact of these conflicts on Russia's geo-energy interests, in particular since Putin came to power. Our conclusion is that, in a context of Russian dominance of the post-Soviet space and direct Russian intervention in secessionist conflicts in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe in defence of its geo-energy interests, the two post-Soviet secessionist conflicts in Central Asia (Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan) have greatly benefited Russian geo-energy interests. [Received: April 10, 2020; Accepted: July 14, 2020]

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1 Introduction

The present article necessarily commences with a brief historical overview of the decadence suffered by Russia following the break-up of the USSR in the 1990s (prePutin Russia) and with the following observation:

> "[f]ollowing the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Russian Federation remains an energy superpower. However, in the 1990s the country experienced a decade of instability and decline during which its international influence and, more troubling for Russia, regional influence declined. The dissolution of the USSR also coincided with surplus crude oil on the world market in combination with price stability and suppression. Consequently, energy became less prominent as a traditional Russian tool of influence. This occurred in conjunction with the Russian state's loss of control over the country's energy sector." [Peña-Ramos, (2017), p.1; (2018), p.486]

However, as of 2000 Russia began to regain global and, more importantly, regional influence with Vladimir Putin's rise to power, the recovery of oil prices post-1998 (in a new cycle characterised by excess demand) and the outbreak of the Second Gulf War.

Thus, a mere decade later, it was already being noted that "the Russian foreign and security policy framework is characterised by a regional power that is striving to reacquire the global power it enjoyed during the Soviet era" [translated from Marquina, (2012), p.6].

Russia's energy policy is the cornerstone upon which this recovery rests. It has two interrelated functions: an internal function, which essentially involves the practice of 'energy nationalism', and an external function (the focus of this article), which concerns Russian influence in three regions: the South Caucasus, post-Soviet Europe and Central Asia. These regions make up Russia's 'near abroad' or 'sphere of influence' and include the 14 former Soviet republics [Peña-Ramos, (2017), pp.1–2; (2018), p.486]. The term Central Asia in its classical sense refers to the region formed by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, former Soviet republics which became independent states in 1991.

Historically, Central Asia has been vital to Russian national interests: "Russia's presence in Central Asia has its direct origins in the Russian Empire's military conquests from the second half of the 19th century onwards, following defeat in the Crimean War […] [,] although it had already occupied the Kazakh Steppe at the beginning of the century. This presence was maintained throughout the Soviet period" [translated from Morales, (2012), p.36]. Russian geo-energy interests have heavily influenced Russia's post-Soviet relations with Central Asia, where unresolved secessionist conflicts exist in Karakalpakstan (Uzbekistan) and Gorno-Badakhshan (Tajikistan).

There are, or there were, many unresolved territorial, maritime and ethnic tensions and conflicts in post-Soviet Central Asia, particularly in and around the ethnically-diverse Fergana Valley, which includes territories belonging to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. For example:

a border disputes between Uzbekistan and, respectively, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

b Vozrozhdeniya Island in Uzbekistan/Kazakhstan

c two Tajik enclaves (Vorukh and Kayragach) in Kyrgyzstan and another (Sarwan) in Uzbekistan d a Kyrgyz enclave in Uzbekistan (Barak)

e four Uzbek enclaves in Kyrgyzstan (Sokh, Shohimardon, Jhangail and Chon-Kara)

f two Tajik-majority towns (Samarkand and Bukhara) in Uzbekistan

g farming lands on the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

h the conflict between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (coastal states along with Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan) over the delimitation of the Caspian Sea.

A further factor has been the presence of a sizeable Russian minority in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan (especially the north) and Kyrgyzstan.[1]

The conflicts over Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan are of a secessionist nature, however. Both territories declared their independence following the collapse of the USSR, although today they form part – as theoretically autonomous territories – of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan respectively. Both Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan account for an important portion of the total size of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (approximately 33% and 45%, respectively) and both have been the scenarios of episodes of armed clashes or violence and repression. Consequently, they will be the primary focus of the present article. In the context of Russian energy policy, a central strategy adopted by the country to secure geo-energy benefits in the post-Soviet South Caucasus and Eastern Europe has involved political, economic and military intervention in secessionist conflicts (Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Crimea, Donbass and Transnistria). In turn, the expansion of Russian regional influence – the traditional goal of its foreign policy – is predicated on the aforementioned energy policy. Hence, the strategy is self-reinforcing [Peña-Ramos, (2017), p.2; (2018), pp.486–487] and heavily conditions the conflicts, particularly those of a secessionist nature, in a third scenario: post-Soviet Central Asia.

Over the past 25 years, various researchers have discussed this strategy and analysed the conflicts in the post-Soviet South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, as well as Russia's intervention in said conflicts and its defence of its geo-energy interests (Lacoste, 1996; Van der Leeuw, 1998, 2000; Blank, 1999; Olcott, 1999; Yakemtchouk, 1999; Ebel and Menon, 2000; Hewitt, 2001; Thual, 2001; Ashour, 2004; Taibo, 2004, 2006; Fall, 2006; Hoesli, 2006; Rachinskiy et al., 2007; Novikova, 2012; Goodrich and Lanthemann, 2013; Peña-Ramos, 2017, 2018). However, despite the fact that Central Asia is key to Russia's geo-energy interests and that Russian interest in the conflicts referred to above is evident, two shortcomings have been identified in the literature, including literature focused on energy issues.

Firstly, a direct, specific and clear connection between the two secessionist conflicts in Central Asia and the concrete benefits for Russian geo-energy interests is lacking. A second omission is a comprehensive and systematic presentation of these benefits, particularly since Putin's rise to power. The present article aims to address both shortcomings.

The research problem can be summarised in the following question: how have the two post-Soviet secessionist conflicts in Central Asia affected Russian geo-energy interests? Our hypothesis is that, in the context of Russian dominance of the post-Soviet space and direct Russian intervention in the secessionist conflicts of the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe to defend its geo-energetic interests, the two post-Soviet secessionist conflicts in Central Asia (Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan) have benefited Russian geo-energy interests greatly.

First, we analyse post-Soviet Russia's geo-energy interests and regional influence, particularly the importance of Central Asia. Second, we analyse the Russian influence in Central Asia and secessionist conflicts in terms of geo-energy benefits (Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan, Badakhshan in Tajikistan). Finally, some conclusions are provided.

2 Post-Soviet Russia's geo-energy interests and regional influence: the importance of Central Asia

Russia is a quintessential energy superpower. The country is self-sufficient in energy and its immense energy resources represent one of its main geopolitical strengths [Peña-Ramos, (2017), p.2; (2018), p.487]. This article focuses on oil and natural gas resources. According to the US Energy Information Administration [US EIA, (2017), p.1],

> "Russia is the world's largest producer of crude oil (including lease condensate) and the second largest producer of dry natural gas. […] Russia is a major producer and exporter of oil and natural gas. […] Russia was the world's largest producer of crude oil including lease condensate and the third largest producer of petroleum and other liquids (after Saudi Arabia and the United States) in 2016, with average liquids production of 11.2 million barrels per day (b/d). Russia was the second-largest producer of dry natural gas in 2016 (second to the United States), producing an estimated 21 trillion cubic feet (Tcf)."

Russia supplies Europe with approximately one third of its oil and gas needs and increasingly supplies oil to East Asia. Approximately 50% of its revenue is derived from energy. However, "the energy sector is far more than a commercial asset for Moscow; it has been one of the pillars of Russia's stabilisation and increasing strength for more than a century" [Goodrich and Lanthemann, (2013), p.1]. Moreover, even though the "instrumentalisation of power for political purposes is a well-known strategy in Russia [...] and goes back to Soviet times [...], with Putin's arrival to power, a policy was established to restore Russia's influence – increase its power – in neighbouring regions but also beyond. It is also the case that this has been based on its energy capacity" [translated from Sánchez Ortega, (2014), p.234].

Russia's energy policy possesses the two features described [Peña-Ramos, (2017), p.3; (2018), p.488]. Domestically, Russia has practised energy nationalism, which is also practised by Venezuela and Algeria (Mañé, 2006); this has been accompanied by highly coercive measures focussing on control of pipelines and by the expeditious and opaque nature of Russian approaches to political power (Politkovskaya, 2005, 2007, 2011). The state has asserted control over virtually the entire Russian gas sector through its state-owned monopoly Gazprom and, since 2003, the oil sector has undergone a process of disguised renationalisation through the creation of state-owned companies (Rosneft and Gazpromneft) and state-linked private companies (Lukoil, TNK-BP and Surgutneftegaz) (Hanson, 2009; Pirani, 2010).

In terms of external energy policies, which are the focus of this article, Russia has manipulated energy to alter the balance of power in neighbouring regions: post-Soviet Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. It has maintained its dominant position in the European market, the dependency on former European Soviet republics, and control over pipeline systems that run from post-Soviet Europe to Western Europe. Likewise, Russia has managed to retain its position as the main export route for oil and gas from Central Asia [Peña-Ramos, (2017), p.3; (2018), p.488], a circumstance of direct relevance to the aims of the present article.

Central Asia, a globally significant geopolitical and geostrategic region, is bordered to the north by Russia; to the south by Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan; to the west by the Caspian Sea and Russia; and to the east by China (Russia's rival for influence over Central Asia). Central Asia is particularly relevant given, inter alia, its critical geoenergy importance. The region is of great interest to Russia for two fundamental reasons:

a It is very rich in proven hydrocarbon reserves, even if these reserves are distributed unevenly and are concentrated mainly in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Of the former Soviet republics, Kazakhstan is the second leading producer of oil behind Russia: in 2017, Kazakhstan's estimated total petroleum and other liquids production was 1.77 million b/d (US EIA, 2019). Moreover, Kazakhstan is the second largest endowment in Eurasia after Russia and the twelfth largest in the world. Kazakhstan had proven crude oil reserves of 30 billion barrels as of January 2018 [OGJ, (2017), p.20]. Its estimated proven gas reserves were 85 Tcf as of January 1, 2018 [OGJ, (2017), p.20]. Annual gross gas production increased considerably from 2006 to 2016 (from 0.9 Tcf to 1.6) (US EIA, 2019).

   For its part, Uzbekistan possesses important gas reserves [65 Tcf of proven reserves as of January 2016 (US EIA, 2016a)]. In 2015, it was the third gas producer in Eurasia, behind Russia and Turkmenistan, with output in excess of 2 Tcf (British Petroleum – BP, 2016, cited in US EIA, 2016a). In 2016, Uzbekistan had 594 million barrels of proven crude oil reserves (OGJ, quoted in US EIA, 2016a). Total petroleum and other liquids production was 78,900 b/d in 2015 (US EIA, 2016a). Turkmenistan too has important oil and gas reserves, the Galkynysh gas field being one of the biggest in the world.

b The main export route for oil and gas from Central Asia is Russia. Four strategic oil pipelines across Central Asia pass through Russia:

   The Uzen-Atyrau-Samara (UAS) pipeline: this 1395 km pipeline connects Kazakhstan and Russia and "[…] remains an important outlet for producers in west Kazakhstan. It is operated by KazTransOil […] in Kazakhstan and Transneft in Russia" (Wood, 2019; Mackenzie, 2018), where it joins the world's longest oil pipeline, the Druzhba (8,900 km).

The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline (including the CPC-Expansion): this is operated by Transneft and "is a major international crude oil transportation project […], created for construction and operation of a trunk pipeline more than […] [1.500 km]. The primary source of crude oil is from […] Kazakhstan with additional crude oil from […] Russia. This crude oil is transported […] to […] Novorossiysk […] [(Black Sea, Russia)] where it is loaded on ocean-going tankers […] [.] CPC is one of the most economic and reliable routes for crude oil transportation from the Caspian and Black Sea Region to world markets […] [and] annually transports more than one third of all export crude oil from Kazakhstan […]" (CPC, 2014).

The Kenkyak-Orsk Pipeline: operated by Transneft, this carries crude from the Aktyubinsk fields (Kazakhstan) to the Orsk refinery (Russia).

The Russia-Kazakhstan-China Pipeline: operated by Transneft, the China National Oil Development Corporation (CNODC) and KazTrans Oil, this pipeline carries crude a distance of almost 3,000 km from Omsk (Russia) to Alashankou (China) via Pavlodar and Atasu (Kazakhstan).

In the case of gas pipelines, the main route (much more than the Turkmenistan-IranKorpezhe-Kurt-Kui route) is the system of Central Asian pipelines – tens of thousands of km – connecting Turkmenistan and Russia via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and featuring two branches (Uzbekistan-Russia/Bukhara-Urals and the branch to the Soyuz gas pipeline that crosses Ukraine from Russia to Europe).

For its part, the Central Asia Centre (CAC) pipeline connecting Turkmenistan and Russia through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (primarily for exports of Turkmen gas although it is used also for Kazakh and Uzbek gas) is a pipeline system controlled by Gazprom, which also controls the Bukhara-Urals gas pipeline from Uzbekistan to Russia via Kazakhstan. The CAC pipeline also enables Kazakhstan to export gas to China via the connection to the Beineu-Shymkent pipeline.

3 Russian influence in Central Asia and secessionist conflicts: geo-energy benefits

The management (production and diversification) of energy resources remains a permanent source of tension and conflict in Central Asia, affecting the important hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian Sea in particular. What little real regional cooperation exists has been driven from outside, particularly by Russia via the Community of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) – which in 2014 replaced the Eurasian Economic Community that originated from the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO, of which China is also a member). As noted by Bordachev and Skriba (2014, p.21), "[y]et for Moscow, Eurasian economic integration is first and foremost a political project. This means that Russia's Eurasian policy must be understood in a much wider context than Eurasian integration itself. It enables Russia's claims to great power status in the world, ensures its regional security, and creates new opportunities for strengthening its influence and control over post-Soviet territory".

Kazakhstan is a member of all the aforementioned structures led by Russia, which is therefore a priority partner of the country. For its part, Uzbekistan's foreign policy is also determined to a large extent by its relations with Russia – its main trading partner and investor and with whom it has close economic ties – and the country is part of the CIS and SCO, although not the EAEU. It left the CSTO in 2012. Meanwhile, although not a member of any of the above-mentioned organisations (it left the CIS in 2005 to become an associate member), Turkmenistan is in practice closely tied to Russia. Lastly, Tajikistan is a member of the CIS, CSTO and SCO but not EAEU, and Russia is its chief strategic and trading partner.

Relations between Russia and the five Central Asian republics (not just Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the direct scenarios of the secessionist conflicts referred to earlier) are conditioned by Central Asia's energy capacities and the conflicts in Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan play a major and specific part in these relations.

The present article does not intend to explore the origins and evolution of the two conflicts. Rather it seeks to explain Russian interest and to show how Russia's ability and eventual willingness to intervene directly (for example, militarily, citing the need to protect Russian citizens, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers among other reasons) may be favoured by certain characteristics of the conflicts and by regional and geopolitical dynamics.

3.1 Uzbekistan: Republic of Karakalpakstan

Uzbekistan comprises an autonomous republic (the Republic of Karakalpakstan), 12 provinces and an autonomous city: its capital Tashkent. Karakalpakstan is situated geographically in the westernmost point of Uzbekistan and is bordered to the west and north by Kazakhstan and the Aral Sea, and to the south by Turkmenistan and Lake Saryqamysh (shared by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Its capital is Nukus. At 165,600 km^2, Karakalpakstan is the largest of the territories that make up Uzbekistan and accounts for approximately one third of the size of country (CMRK, 2020a). At 1 April 2017, Karakalpakstan had a population of 1,822,400 (CMRK, 2020b) and according to the 2013 census there were 400,000 ethnic Karakalpaks, 400,000 Uzbeks and 300,000 Kazakhs. The Karakalpak language, the official language in Karakalpakstan, is a member of the family of Uraltaic languages and is related to Kazhak and Uzbek. Prior to Sovietisation, it was written in the Arabic script but was replaced by Cyrillic and in 1996 adopted Latin script.

The contemporary history of Karakalpakstan commences with the declaration in 1925 of the Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast (KAO) within the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). In 1930 it became a direct part of the Russian Soviet Socialist Federative Republic (RSSFR, of which the Kazakh ASSR was also part) and was granted ASSR status in 1932. Finally, following the declaration of the Kazakh SSR, the Karakalpak ASSR was separated from the RSSFR and attached to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1936. However, as an ASSR (the only one in Soviet Central Asia) with its own Supreme Soviet, it was allowed to develop its own culture and receive separate support from Moscow. Thus, the fact that Karakalpakstan currently belongs to Uzbekistan is largely due to administrative reasons and the ad hoc drawing of borders by the Soviet government (indeed, the initial KAO had been created by separating lands of the ethnic Karakalpaks from the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and Khorezm People's Soviet Republic). In terms of culture, therefore, Karakalpaks may be more closely related to the Kazakhs.

In December 1990, against the backdrop of the collapse of the USSR, Karakalpakstan proclaimed its separation from the Uzbek SSR, although the separation was vaguely defined and did not envision the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Yet, Uzbekistan's declaration of Independence [in 1991] also gave rise to some discussion on Karakalpakstan's status, mostly in intellectual circles. Several initiative groups such as Hal[y]k [M]api (The People's Interest) emerged in the country. The idea of full independence for Karakalpakstan or transferring the territory to Kazakh administration resonated also in neighboring and newly independent Kazakhstan (Horák, 2014).

Figure 1 Karakalpakstan (Uzbekistan) (see online version for colours)

However, following the independence of Uzbekistan, President Karimov succeeded in stifling the separatism swiftly thanks largely to disagreements within the Karakalpak political elite, which was split into four groups under their respective leaders (Omirbek Forpress, 2015): Tazhiev advocated maintaining the status quo; Aralbaev, the leader of Halyk Mapi, supported Karakalpakstan joining the Russian Federation; the ethnic Kazakh Salikov advocated joining the independent Kazakhstan; lastly, Shamshetov, who held the presidency of the autonomous republic from 1991 to 1992, wanted full independence for Karakalpakstan.

The Constitution of Uzbekistan of 1992 recognised Karakalpakstan as an autonomous republic, a status confirmed by the Constitution of Karakalpakstan in 1993. Moreover, under Art. 74 of the Constitution of Uzbekistan, "The Republic of Karakalpakstan shall have the right to secede from the Republic of Uzbekistan on the basis of a nationwide referendum held by the people of Karakalpakstan", while according to Art. 1 of the Constitution of Karakalpakstan, "The Republic of Karakalpakstan has the right to secede from the Republic of Uzbekistan based on a referendum by the people of Karakalpakstan". In 1993, a 20-year treaty was signed which recognised genuine autonomy for the territory and even its right of secession, although it expired in 2013 with minimal implementation and no referendum was ever held.

Advocates of increased autonomy for Karakalpakstan have been systematically silenced and "[t]he loyal heads of the autonomous territory's government were appointed and removed according to the republic's economic performance. Since 2002, Karakalpakstan is ruled by Supreme Soviet Head Musa Yerniyazov […]" (Horák, 2014).

Nonetheless, there have been several outbreaks of secessionism and, although Uzbekistan has flatly denied their existence and disseminates counterpropaganda on the issue, "[g]roups such as *Erkin Karakalpakstan* (Free Karakalpakstan) and others have appeared in the news […]. Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 also gave rise to debates over a similar step for Karakalpakstan". In addition, the Uzbek authorities "implicitly acknowledge […] Karakalpakstan's problem and the risk of social tension" because they "allow migration from Karakalpakstan to Tashkent and the Tashkent […] [province], which remains blocked for the inhabitants of Uzbekistan's other […] provinces […]" (Horák, 2014).

The considerable migration (chiefly to Kazakhstan and Russia) has been caused by Karakalpakstan's high poverty and unemployment, the negative socio-economic and public health consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea, and the growing importance of Kazakh Mangyshlak Peninsula hydrocarbons. Moreover, "[t]hose who have moved to Kazakhstan often claim to be ethnic Kazakh in their documents; it makes obtaining citizenship and social assistance from the state easier. [And] [s]ome of those who have stayed change their nationality to Uzbek to make job-hunting easier at home" (Omirbek, 2015). Meanwhile, the secessionists have accused Uzbekistan of prioritising Uzbek over Karakalpak nationality in Karakalpakstan for access to jobs in the public administration and state-run companies.

The secessionists have also accused Uzbekistan of not passing on to Karakalpakstan the benefits of the exploitation of Karakalpak oil and gas, even if oil and gas extraction facilities and pipelines have been developed. Domestic problems and growing social unrest in Karakalpakstan have been key to reviving Karakalpak nationalism and "[o]n occasion, these attitudes led to protests, the most dramatic of which occurred in 2010, when Karakalpaks went out into the streets with anti-Uzbek slogans to protest Tashkent's plans to close a local Factory" (Goble, 2014).

As Omirbek (2015) notes, in 2013, when the crisis in Ukraine was under way,

> "[t]wo online activists with the […] [pseudonyms Kungradskyi and Mamytov] appeared on [popular in Russia and Central Asia] social networks […] calling for a referendum on Karakalpak independence [(after the movement attracted media attention across the post-Soviet countries, Kungradskyi revealed himself to be A. Sagidullaev, an ethnic Karakalpak who left Karakalpakstan in 2011 and in that moment lived in Kyrgyzstan after years of wandering in Russia and other post-Soviet countries, and Mamytov is also thought to lived in Kyrgyzstan)]. Their posts, written in […] Karakalpak, demanded the government in Nukus [(controlled by the Uzbek Tashkent)] be overthrown and ended with "*Alga Karakalpakstan!*" (Go Karakalpakstan!)[.] After a while, the phrase became [a self-designation of this] […] movement. The internet separatists pointed out that the agreement between Tashkent and Nukus signed in 1993 had stipulated that a referendum on Karakalpak independence be held 20 years later." (Omirbek, 2015)

This agreement was the main, but by no means only, argument of the secessionist movement and, although Karakalpakstan's government remained silent – the Uzbek regime stifles any open debate on the matter, the urgent visit to Karakalpakstan at the time by the President of Uzbekistan was proof that the threat was being taken seriously.

Other authors, including Horák (2014), Sadykov (2014) and Pannier (2014), have noted as follows:

> "[T]he crisis in Ukraine is having ramifications also in this region of Uzbekistan. Leaflets have been distributed around the region in recent weeks, appealing for the organization of a referendum on the […] [republic's] independence and secession from Uzbekistan and/or to request annexation to Kazakhstan or even Russia. Can we expect a new round of instability and state partition in Central Asia in line with the continuing dissolution of Ukraine? […] Starting from March and April […] [2014], Karakalpakstan is seeing increasing activism. Several activists were detained for alleged or real distribution of leaflets calling for a referendum on […] independence. The

> leaflets were signed in the name of *Alga Karakalpakstan Azatlyk hareketi* (Cheer up Karakalpakstan Freedom Movement), which has not yet been detected in the region. The activity is assumed to have emerged from below […].” (Horák, 2014)

> “On May 5, Twitter user @amankar67 posted an announcement reminding followers that an […] pro-independence movement that appeared this year [2014], Alga Karakalpakstan (‘Forward Karakalpakstan’), would hold a ‘peaceful rally’ against the regime of President Islam Karimov. ‘Forward Karakalpakstan people’s movement!!! Karakalpak people are called to a[n] […] action in Nukus[…]’ the announcement reads in […] Karakalpak. […] Last week Forward Karakalpakstan claimed credit for a mysterious leaflet found in the town of Kungrad calling for Karakalpak independence, according to an April 29 [2014] press release by the […] ‘Shyrak Information Center’ (which claimed to be set up this year [2014] by ‘activists of the Karakalpak democratic movement’ to cooperate with ‘various dissident groups in the country and abroad’).” (Sadykov, 2014)

> “[A]t the start of June [2014], the Alga Karakalpakstan movement used social network sites to send a message urging the World Bank to withhold a $411 million loan intended for improvements in Karakalpakstan. The group said the money would only help Uzbek authorities continue infringing on the rights of minorities, particularly the Karakalpaks.” (Pannier, 2014)

Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014, “Alga Karakalpakstan! returned with greater determination, claiming Karakalpakstan would also join Russia if separatists ‘hear a good signal from the Kremlin’. Though the group had mentioned such aspirations before, Russia’s actions in Ukraine made a Crimean scenario in Karakalpakstan seem possible” (Omirbek, 2015). The reference to a ‘signal’ did not just mean that Russia, capitalising on the growing Karakalpak desire for secession in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, should encourage – for example – demands for an independence referendum; rather, it was a clear request to Russia for “financial and military assistance to Karakalpaks in organization of resistance against Tashkent” (Omirbek, 2015). Uzbekistan issued an international arrest warrant for Sagidullaev, although the secessionist movement continued to voice its demands on social media and through its own press service (Shyrak News).

Even though Russia did not adopt a formal and public stance on the issue, “Uzbekistan’s central government denounced [it] as ‘a provocation’ organized by a foreign state” (Kozhemyakin, 2014, quoted in Goble, 2014). Although “Uzbekistan did not name the foreign state involved […], despite suggestions by some Moscow commentators to the contrary, the country involved almost certainly was Russia” (Goble, 2014). According to Horák (2014):

> “apart from short-term and situational motives for encouraging separatist movements, the Russian government has several long-term reasons for at least threatening to destabilize Uzbekistan. Russia’s ability to access and defend its investments in Uzbekistan, the U.S.-Uzbekistan rapprochement, the perspective of an approaching but unpredictable change of leadership in Uzbekistan, as well as Uzbekistan’s relationship to Russia-backed integration organizations could all present sufficient arguments for Russia to use the Karakalpakstan issue to its own advantage. Uzbekistan left the Collective Security Treaty in 2013 […] and has refused any discussion of membership in the Eurasian Customs Union. […] [Moreover,] interviews with the local population as well as discussions on internet forums demonstrate that a fertile ground for such agitation exists at least among parts of Karakalpakstan’s population. In case

support is provided from the outside and the voices favoring separation from Uzbekistan become louder, the quantity of independence supporters could increase.

3.2 Tajikistan: the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region

Tajikistan is made up of the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region (Gorno-Badakhshan), two provinces (Qurghoneteppa and Khujand) and various districts under direct state administration. Gorno-Badakhshan is situated geographically in east Tajikistan and is bordered to the north by Kyrgyzstan, to the south by Afghanistan and to the east by China.

Figure 2 Gorno-Badakhshan (Tajikistan) (see online version for colours)

Source: Roth (Springtime of Nations) (2014)

Gorno-Badakhshan is a special region of Tajikistan. In fact, it is the only territory named specifically in the country's Constitution, which refers to it on multiple occasions and even devotes an entire chapter to it (chapter VII). Its capital is Khorog. It is situated in the Pamir Mountains – which are among the world's highest – and accounts for around 45% (64,100 km^2) of Tajikistan. The region is home to approximately 3% (226,900 inhabitants in 2018) of the population of the country (Agency on Statistics, 2020).

The majority of the population is not of Tajik ethnic origin: Pamiris are the main ethnic group and a minority of the population are ethnic Kyrgyz and other nationalities. Moreover, the majority are Shia Muslims, specifically Nizari Ismailis – followers of the Aga Khan – (Tajiks are mostly Sunni Muslims), and they use several languages and dialects of the Pamir languages group, although Russian, Tajik and Kyrgyz are also spoken in Gorno-Badakhshan (for an analysis of the formation and consolidation of the Pamiri people in Tajikistan, see Davlatshoev, 2006). However, although "[t]he [postSoviet] conflict in Tajikistan often was portrayed in Western news reports as occurring primarily among clans or regional cliques […] [,] [m]any different lines of affiliation shaped the configuration of forces in the conflict […] and both sides were divided over substantive political issues" (Global Security, 2020a).

Unlike other regions of Tajikistan, Pamir joined Tsarist Russia voluntarily. In 1925, the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) was created within the ASSR of Tajikistan (in turn, part of the SSR of Uzbekistan) and in 1929 it became the Tajik SSR. During the 1950s, many natives of the GBAO – including large numbers of Pamirs – were forcibly moved to southwestern parts of the Tajik SSR.

On its disappearance in 1955, part of the Gharm Oblast was annexed to the GBAO (the remainder was annexed to the Regions under Republican Subordination Oblast) and much of the population – the Gharmi people – was also forced to move to the Tajik SSR during the 1950s.

Later, in the second half of the 1980s, when still under the control of the USSR, political activists in Pamir expressed their desire to split the region from the Tajik SSR and join the RSSFR. Among other grievances, the Pamirs considered that they were under-represented in the government of the Tajik SSR.

Following the collapse of the USSR and subsequent independence of Tajikistan (1991), the GBAO became Tajikistan's Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region. After the removal of President Nabiyev in 1992, the new Rahmon-led government

> "[…] extended its control over all major towns and most roads throughout the country except in […] [Gorno-Badakhshan] where, by agreement with the regional authorities, its security forces did not enter. In return, the regional authorities pledged to control their own territory and to preclude operations by opposition forces. [But] […] [Gorno-Badakhshan] officials were unable to prevent armed opposition elements and their foreign allies (Afghan mujahedin) from using their territory for antigovernment attacks. Opposition forces, based in Afghanistan and supported by mostly fundamentalist Afghan forces, posed a serious military challenge to the Government […] by staging frequent raids across the border in southern Khatlon province and western […] [GornoBadakhshan]. […] [T]hese raids and incursions […] caused casualties, blocked roads, and interfered with the movement of relief supplies and refugees." (Global Security, 2020a)

In 1992, thus, marked the beginning of the Tajik Civil War and the local government in Gorno-Badakhshan proclaimed its independence. During the war, which saw clashes between various tribal factions and caused around 100,000 deaths and 1.2 million refugees, the Pamiris, who were persecuted by the Sitodi Melli (Popular Front), supported the opposition and Gorno-Badakhshan became a bastion of the Front.

The conflict ended formally in 1997 with the ceasefire signed by the opposition parties and President Rahmon. On 27 June 1997, Rahmon, the leader of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) – Nuri, and Merrem, then Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and Head of Mission of the United Nations Mission of Observers to Tajikistan (UNMOT, established by the Security Council in 1994), signed the 'General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan' and the 'Moscow Protocol' in Moscow. Finally, the local government in Gorno-Badakhshan withdrew its proclamation of independence.

The La'li Badakhshon Association (LBA) movement/political party had been created in 1991. This secularist democratic group mainly represented the Pamiris and sought the political, economic, social and educational development of Gorno-Badakhshan, as well as greater autonomy for the territory. The LBA published a newspaper called Bokhtar and at one point boasted 3000 members, mostly drawn from the Pamiri intelligentsia. In the presidential elections of 1991, it joined the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT), the

Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and the nationalist Rastokhez movement in supporting Khudonazarov as candidate [Abdullaev and Akbarzadeh, (2010), p.214].

The LBA joined the above organisations also in the demonstrations of spring 1992 and played an important role in the ousting of President Nabiyev that same year (Global Security, 2020b). It joined the UTO in 1993 although its activities were confined to Gorno-Badakhshan. Despite being banned between 1993 and 1999, it continued to operate outside the law. It eventually disappeared in 2000, having left the UTO in 1999, the year in which President Rahmon was re-elected with a landslide majority in presidential elections denounced as fraudulent by the opposition.

In 2002 members of the former Party of Justice and Progress created the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT), led by Zoirov. It currently has thousands of members and is the last secular, democratic, independent opposition party standing after the collapse – fostered by the Tajik government – of the DPT. It is supported by intellectuals from Gorno-Badakhshan, where it enjoys significant support, and other Tajik territories. "The SDPT competed in the elections as a party list and strategically ran candidates for individual mandate seats in areas where it has significant support" (Global Security, 2020b).

In 2008, following the biggest protests in Khorog since independence – calling for greater regional autonomy, Tajikistan sent troops to the area.

On 24 July 2012 (following the start of the Tajik army's Hafiz-2012 military exercises in Khorog and several weeks of rumours of a special operation against the remaining opposition groups), a genuine war lasting several days broke out in Gorno-Badakhshan between an armed group and the Tajik army over drug trafficking and organised crime (Rotar, 2012, 2014a), issues that have traditionally been bound up closely with the political and territorial conflict in Gorno-Badakhshan.

Three days earlier (21 July), General Nazarov, the National Security Committee chief for Gorno-Badakhshan, had been killed in the Pamirs region and the killing was blamed by the Tajik Government on an armed group led by border-police commander Ayombekov. June had already witnessed the assassination of Kholmumin Safarov, a high-ranking government official and brother-in-law of the Tajik President. Although unrelated to that of Nazarov, the assassination contributed to heightened tensions in the country.

The Tajik army used helicopter gunships to attack Khorog during the brief war, causing dozens of deaths. Given that the remoteness and inaccessibility of Gorno-Badakhshan had prevented the Tajik army from reaching the territory during the earlier Civil War, the 2012 "military raid on Khorog is essentially the first instance of violent conflict reaching the Pamirs during the post-Soviet era" (Rotar, 2012).

The traditional tensions between Gorno-Badakhshan and Tajikistan returned in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis and in March 2014 "a prominent Tajik deputy said that […] Badakhshan region […] should be stripped of its 'autonomous' status because Russia could use it stir up rebellion and split the country" (Sadykov, 2014).

Indeed, in May 2014, following bitter confrontations between the Tajik police and protestors in Khorog, demonstrators in the city issued a resolution that the 2013–2014 clashes were the result of conflict between the Gorno-Badakhshan people and Tajikistan. Indeed, "[m]any local experts believe that the armed violence that spread throughout the Pamir region in 2012 was actually provoked by the Kremlin as a means of political pressure on Dushanbe [Tajikistan's capital]" (Rotar, 2014b). For example, according to Mirsaidov (2012, quoted in Rotar, 2012),

> [m]ost […] articles about the situation in Pamir were published by the Russian media. Now [2012], the Kremlin and Dushanbe are discussing the future of Russian military bases in Tajikistan […]; and for Moscow, it is profitable to make Emomalii Rahmon scared. The President of Tajikistan is planning to visit Khorog in August [2012]. He will take a lot of money and gifts. He should be able to make an agreement with the Pamiri elite […]. And as to small military groups, they will be destroyed without hesitation […].”

Thus, situations of violence have been a recurring phenomenon to date in this secessionist, pro-Russia region.

3.3 Geo-energy benefits for Russia

Given its geographical proximity, Russia continues to set the rules in post-Soviet Central Asia and retains its hegemony over a region with abundant energy resources and a key geostrategic position in the world and which therefore attracts the attention of third countries and sees its independence seriously undermined. Russian interest in Central Asia has increased in recent years due to its deteriorating relations with the West, particularly in the wake of the annexation of Crimea, and to global geopolitical dynamics that could well lead to a restructuring of the hierarchy of global power [Nieto, (2017), p.10]. Among other interests – and competing increasingly with other leading international actors such as China, the USA, Iran and India, Russia aims to “integrate and institutionalise the EuroAsian area and […] retain its position as a key actor in decisions affecting energy resources” [translated from Nieto, (2017), p.9].

This context, which is shaped also by Russia’s direct intervention in the secessionist conflicts in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe in defence of its geo-energy interests, would suggest that direct intervention is likely also in the conflicts in Central Asia. We will now turn to examine how the evolution and characteristics of the secessionist conflicts in Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan have helped bring significant geo-energy benefits for Russia, particularly since Putin’s rise to power. Both conflicts have played an important role in Russia’s relations with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as with Asia Central generally.

To begin with, for Uzbekistan the secession of Karakalpakstan would entail the loss of a third of its territory (rich in hydrocarbons and with energy infrastructure) and the obligation to have to pass through an additional country – an independent Karakalpakstan – to reach the Caspian Sea (inland sea) or the Black Sea (open sea). For Tajikistan, Gorno-Badakhshan secession would mean the loss of almost half of its territory, with an independent Gorno-Badakhshan standing between it and China (to whom Tajikistan had to hand over 1,000 km^2 belonging to Gorno-Badakhshan in 2011, following a border dispute dating back to the early 19th century). Moreover, the existence of one or two new pro-Russia states in Central Asia with hostile relations with their former states (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) would constitute a further major geoenergy advantage for Russia.

Given Russia’s recognition of self-proclaimed territories as independent states after intervening militarily in their favour (South Ossetia, Abkhazia) and its annexation of territories of third states (Crimea), Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – and by extension Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan – are fully aware that they must not harm Russia’s geo-energy interests if they wish to preserve their territorial integrity. It should be recalled also that the Karakalpak and Pamir secessionists have called for

Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan to be annexed to Russia. Furthermore, the five Central Asian states are aware that, to be successful, secession would need Russia to at least give its blessing and this could destabilise Central Asia in its entirety and affect its many unresolved territorial, maritime and ethnic conflicts. Indeed, Russia could decide to intervene in said conflicts (favouring or harming some states ahead of others), for example, militarily, citing – among other reasons – the need to protect Russian citizens, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, given the sizeable Russian minority in Central Asia.

> "The 'frozen' conflicts inherited from the collapse of the Soviet Union can become hot again at any moment, especially if Moscow seeks to make it happen under the pretext of protecting minorities or Russian-speaking populations. This raises questions about the future of formerly contested terrain in central Asia, such as the Uzbek enclaves in Kyrgyzstan, the mostly Russian populated north of Kazakhstan, or the towns of Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan." (Laruelle and Roberts, 2014)

In addition, as mentioned above, the secessionist movements in Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan are aware that any unilateral independence for their territories would require if not direct interference by Russia, at least its blessing not just for independence to be effective but also to ensure recognition by Russia. Likewise, they realise that any change to the current status quo in their favour (including increased political autonomy within Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) will only be possible if Russia's geo-energy interests are not harmed.

Russia has continued to reap geo-energy benefits from Central Asia's energy resource problems. Firstly, it has continued to capitalise on the serious export limitations faced by the region due to its isolation, mountainous terrain and poor road and rail infrastructure, as well as the lack of access to open sea (Ordabayev, 2015) given that the near-disappeared Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea are inland bodies and access to the Black Sea – controlled by Russia – is therefore required to reach open sea.

Secondly, Russia has capitalised on the scant economic diversification of a region whose growth depends largely on the manufacture of capital goods and exploitation of natural resources (specifically, oil and gas in the case of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), the prices of which fluctuate with fluctuations in world commodity prices. Moreover, "the unfavourable business climate, foreign exchange difficulties and the circulation of local currency are key impediments to direct foreign investment" [translated from Nieto, (2017), p.11] in Central Asia (The World Bank, 2016), another situation benefiting Russia in geo-energy terms.

Thirdly, Russia has continued to take advantage of Central Asia's abundant oil and gas reserves, which have made the region excessively dependent on their extraction and management and will hinder the long-term diversification of its economies. Moreover, Russia has managed to maintain its position as the main export route for Central Asian oil and gas and has thus far blocked a connection between the region and the South Caucasus through the Caspian Sea, damaging the interests of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in particular. Both the regional pipeline system built during the Soviet period and the pipelines to Europe built later must pass through Russia, as will future ones (including some to China, including the Russia-Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, the initial plans for which did not contemplate passage through Russia but the latter finally succeeded in being included in the project).

Given the Russian presence in Central Asia, the strategic pipelines that cross the region and are primarily Europe-bound provide Russia with an instrument for exerting pressure on the West. The pipelines are owned and operated wholly or partially by Russian companies and cross Russian territory, thus consolidating Central Asia's dependence on Russia. Russia therefore has a strong interest in maintaining and strengthening its influence in Central Asia and in opposing the construction of offshore pipelines through the Caspian Sea so that extracted resources are transported by land.

Furthermore, plans for new oil pipelines that aim to avoid passing through Russia face difficulties. Russia has so far blocked the construction of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline, which would connect Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, where it would link up with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Main Export Oil Pipeline (in detriment therefore to the interests of Kazakhstan, US companies Chevron (2018) Texaco and Exxon Mobil, and also the Anglo-Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell). Likewise, plans for new gas pipelines face difficulties: Russia has also blocked the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) linking Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, thus harming the interests of these countries and of companies that might damage Russia's geo-energy interests.

> "[I]n order to accomplish this, Russia (and, to a lesser degree, Iran) would need to unblock the building of offshore pipelines in the Caspian Sea, which is highly unlikely, as this would contradict Russian geo-energy interests (for Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea is a lake, but for Russia and Iran, it is an inland sea). Pipeline-building would thus require an agreement between the five countries that likely would not include Russia, which is interested in operating pipelines that cross its own territory." [Peña-Ramos, (2017), p.4]

We will now turn to examine in detail Russia's geo-energy benefits in relation to each of the five Central Asian republics, country by country. We will begin with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the two countries directly affected by secessionist conflicts in the region.

Russia has ensured that Uzbekistan continues to be a transit country for gas from Turkmenistan to Russia (and China). In 2015, Uzbekistan exported almost 265 billion cubic feet – Bcf – of gas (US EIA, 2016a), half of it to Russia. In addition, and with regard to Karakalpakstan specifically, the Gazli-Kagan and Gazli-Nukus gas pipelines connect the Ustyurt and Bukhara-Khiva region to the pipeline system. The Ustyurt gas chemical complex in Karakalpakstan was commissioned in 2016. It processes 4.5 billion cubic metres (Bcm) of gas per year and produces 3.7 Bcm of sales gas, 387,000 tons of polyethylene, 83,000 tons of polypropylene, 102,000 tons of pyrolysis distillate and other by-products (UzDaily, 2014). In 2018, following a visit by an Uzbek delegation led by Yerniyazov to the head office of the Russian TAIF group, the latter confirmed readiness to consider proposals for participation in a new gas chemical complex project in Karakalpakstan (The Tashkent Times, 2019).

Moreover, Karakalpakstan may have sizeable reserves of oil and gas in the dried-up bed of the Aral Sea (the Uzbek part of which lies in Karakalpakstan) and Uzbek and Turkmen gas bound for Russia passes through the territory, which would be extremely important to Russia in the event of secession. In fact, Russian firms Gazprom and Lukoil buy considerable amounts of Karakalpak gas and participate in the exploitation of Karakalpakstan's energy resources.

The Uzbek economy is heavily reliant on energy exports and, as Uzbekistan's main trading partner, Russia has important geo-energy interests in the country in the shape of the aforementioned Lukoil and Gazprom, two of the main investors in the Uzbek oil and gas sectors (remittances by Uzbek workers in Russia are also key to the Uzbek economy). In 2016, Lukoil and Uzbekneftegaz – the Uzbek state company that manages the oil and gas sectors – began construction in Uzbekistan of the Kandym Gas Processing Complex (KGPC), one of the largest plants in the region and which will process more than 280 Bcf of gas per year, according to Lukoil (US EIA, 2016a).

Furthermore, Russia has benefited from Uzbekistan's weaknesses in the oil sector – according to the US EIA (2016a), its three refineries, with a capacity of 232,000 b/d, typically operate below capacity due to insufficient production – and a single international oil pipeline, linking Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, passes through Uzbekistan.

Russia has thus managed to keep Uzbekistan within its sphere of influence, even after the rise to power in 2016 of President Mirziyoyev, who will probably seek membership of the EAEU in 2020 despite his initial reluctance (there has even been speculation that Uzbekistan will return to CSTO due to Russian pressure). Indeed, "[t]he reforms launched by […] Mirziyoyev and the opening up of the country to foreign investors is aimed at bringing new agreements, especially in the energy field. The first example of this is a new agreement between Russia and Uzbekistan on the construction of a nuclear power plant" (Tskhay, 2019).

Turning to Tajikistan, according to CIA (2020b) data, its proven gas reserves on 1 January 2018 were estimated at 5.663 Bcm and its proven crude oil reserves at 12 million barrels. However, its gas output in 2017 was a mere 19.82 million cubic meters, all for domestic consumption. In 2018, its crude oil output was just 180 b/d and in 2015 its production of refined petroleum products was just 172 b/d, compared to imports of 22,460 b/d. Petroleum products are among the main commodities imported by Tajikistan, with imports mainly from Russia (38%, ahead of Kazakhstan – 19%, China – 8.7% and Iran 4.4%).

In this regard, efforts to date by Gazprom – the main investor in the country – to produce oil and gas (initially in Rengan, Sargazon, Sarykamysh and West Shokhambary) have not met expectations given that exploitation is not viable economically and commercially. However, Gazprom has plans for new energy projects in north and southwest Tajikistan. In fact, in 2019 Gazprom EP International B.V. began to study possible collaboration with state companies OAO Naftu Gaz and OAO Sugdnaftugaz to identify new projects. Moreover, approval was speeded up for an agreement between Gazprom EP International B.V., PAO Gazprom and Tajikistan for a geological study of the subsoil of prospection and exploration sites as well as for the exploitation of existing hydrocarbon fields in Tajikistan (Gazprom International, 2019).

In 2003, Gazprom and Tajikistan signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement in the gas sector which envisages cooperation on the prospection, exploration and exploitation of gas fields under a production-sharing arrangement, and also sets out Russia's rights and obligations (field development; well work-over and reactivation; construction, reconstruction and operation of gas pipelines and other infrastructure facilities; provision of services; processing, transport and marketing of gas; training of Tajik experts). Gazprom Zarubezhneftegaz ZAO (now Gazprom International) was designated as the operator for projects in Tajikistan (Gazprom International, 2019).

In return for accepting more Tajik emigrants (remittances from the approximately 1.5 million Tajiks in Russia are crucial to the economy of Tajikistan), contributing to training Tajikistan's army and Border Guard, and increasing exports of tax-free fuel to the country, Russia keeps its biggest contingency of troops deployed abroad (7,500) in Tajikistan. In addition, in 2012, the two countries signed an agreement to extend the lease on the Russian military base near the capital, Dushanbe, for a further 30 years. Russia has taken advantage of Tajikistan's need for help to secure its borders against Islamic groups – from the south and Uzbekistan, drug traffickers and arms traffickers. Moreover, despite Tajikistan's opposition, Russia hopes to have Russian border patrols controlling the Tajik-Afghan border (where Gorno-Badakhshan is situated) once again. Lastly, the recurring violence in the pro-Russian and secessionist Gorno-Badakhshan works in favour of the interests of Russia, which is pressuring Tajikistan to join the EAEU.

The other three Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan would also be affected by the potential secession of Karakalpakstan and/or Gorno-Badakhshan, even if indirectly and only because Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan share a border with Karakalpakstan, and Kyrgyzstan with Gorno-Badakhshan, and due also to the extensive mix of ethnic groups – including Karakalpaks and Pamirs – and large number of conflicts and tensions in all the territories and countries of Central Asia.

Taking Kazakhstan first, the country's oil production is dominated at present by two onshore fields (Tengiz and Karachaganak) and one offshore field in the Caspian Sea (Kashagan, which in 2017 began to ramp up production – around 225,000 b/d in December) (Energy Intelligence, 2018). Furthermore, in 2016 the Tengiz Chevroil consortium (which includes LukArco B.V., a subsidiary of the Russian company Lukoil) made an investment decision on the Future Growth Project to increase liquids production by about 260,000 b/d in 2022 (US EIA, 2019).

Kazakhstan had three major crude oil refineries with a crude oil distillation capacity of 340,000 b/d as of January 1, 2018 (OGJ, 2016). In 2017, Kazakhstan exported around 1.3 million b/d of crude oil and condensate. Most of Kazakhstan's crude oil exports travel around or across the Caspian Sea to European markets, with between 1%–2% exported to Russia and other Euro-Asian states (US EIA, 2019), a sizeable percentage in economic terms given the high volume of Kazakh exports. Moreover, the Pavlodar refinery is supplied mainly by a crude oil pipeline from Siberia (Russia): the OmskPavlodar Pipeline.

In 2017, the Kashagan field became a significant producer of gas, and when the project reaches full capacity it is expected to produce around 100 Bcf per year (US EIA, 2019). In fact, in 2017 this field and the Karachaganak and Tengiz fields together accounted for about 65% of Kazakh commercial gas production and Kazakhstan exported more than 350 Bcf, mainly to Russia – and China – (US EIA, 2019), generating massive economic benefits for the country.

However, Kazakhstan lacks access to open sea and is situated geographically a long way from international oil markets. As a result, it is largely dependent on oil pipelines (which pass through Russia) and the ports of the Black Sea – which is dominated by Russia and of which Kazakhstan is not a coastal state – for exports of crude oil and petroleum derivatives to Europe, the main customer of Kazakh crude. An added difficulty is the need to pass through two Turkish Straits, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Importantly also, Kazakhstan is a transit country for pipelines carrying oil and gas to China. Moreover, Russia has capitalised on the fact that, while Iran is an alternative route for exports of Caspian crude – via swaps, such swap arrangements are rendered difficult by the interests of the regime of the Ayatollahs and by international sanctions.

In addition, with the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in 2018, Russia succeeded once again in imposing on Kazakhstan – and Turkmenistan –

its customary position concerning the requirement of consent by all five coastal nations to allow infrastructure and offshore exploration.

> "Because of Kazakhstan's landlocked location and the continued use of Sovietera infrastructure, much of Kazakhstan's oil and natural gas export infrastructure is integrated with major Caspian oil and natural gas export routes [in which Russia plays a key role] that interlink the region. […] Major crude oil export pipelines include the […] CPC […] pipeline to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk [(Russia)] […] and the Uzen-Atyrau-Samara pipeline to Russia […][.] Kazakhstan also exports crude oil via the Caspian Sea and via rail. Oil is loaded onto tankers or barges at Kazakhstan's port[s] and then shipped across the Caspian Sea, where it is loaded onto the […] [BTC] pipeline or the Northern Route pipeline (Baku-Novorossiysk [Russia]) for onward transport, mainly to Europe. In addition, Kazakhstan has an extensive rail network, which it uses to transport liquid fuels for domestic consumption and for exports.: (EIA, 2019)

As with oil, Tengiz and Karachaganak are the largest gas fields. However, the "Karachaganak project has insufficient natural gas processing capacity. Most of the raw marketed production from the Karachaganak field must be exported to Russia to be processed at a natural gas processing plant in Orenberg" (US EIA, 2019). Lukoil is present in Tengiz (and Korolev) and Karachaganak.

One of Kazakhstan's main gas export pipelines, the CAC pipeline connecting Turkmenistan and Russia through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and used mainly to export Turkmen but also Kazakh and Uzbek gas (enabling Kazakhstan to export to China via the connection to the Beinu-Bozoi-Shymkent pipeline), is a gas pipeline system controlled by Gazprom, which also controls the Bukhara-Urals gas pipeline connecting Uzbekistan and Russia through Kazakhstan.

Turning to Turkmenistan, the country's foreign policy is conditioned by the need to export its hydrocarbons (approximately half of its export earnings are derived from gas, with Russia one of the main clients). Turkmenistan is one of the chief gas exporters in the Caspian and Central Asia. In 2015, it exported 1.3 Tcf via gas pipelines, with part imported by Russia (US EIA, 2016b), while in 2018 it exported over 800,000 tons of petrol (Mackenzie, 2018).

However, Turkmenistan lacks the required infrastructure and, although it has endeavoured to diversify its export routes (China, Iran, India, Europe) to transport its energy resources to international markets, it still depends to a large degree on the gas and oil pipelines of Russia, with whom it has close ties at military and security level. It also lacks access to open sea – like Kazakhstan – and to international oil pipeline infrastructure, except the pipeline linking Seidi (Turkmenistan) and Shymkent (Kazakhstan) through Uzbekistan. As already noted above, the CAC pipeline, which connects Turkmenistan and Russia and is used mainly for exports of Turkmen gas, is a gas pipeline system controlled by Gazprom.

Moreover, with the aforementioned signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in 2018, Russia succeeded once more in imposing on Turkmenistan – and Kazakhstan – its traditional position on the compulsory consent of the five coastal states to allow infrastructure and offshore exploration. Similarly, 2019 also saw

> "the return of Turkmen gas supplies to Russia after a three-year break. The export of natural gas to Moscow […] was put on hold over the dispute in 2014-2015 over gas prices and supplies. Russia's importation of Turkmen gas is as much a geopolitical move as it is an economic one. The cheaper supplies from

> Turkmenistan are supposed to supplement domestic consumption in Russia and make more gas available for Russian exports. The pause in the energy relations between these two countries left Turkmenistan with only one customer for its gas-China. Such overreliance on Chinese interest in gas supplies (36 billion cubic meters in 2018), a continuous economic decline and dependence on gas exports as the major commodity in Turkmenistan creates a fragile situation. Geopolitically, the return of Russia is worth paying attention to, as Moscow can try to scale down Turkmen's desires for alternative pipeline routes for gas exports." (Tskhay, 2019)

Also in 2019, Turkmengaz, the national gas company and the largest gas company in Central Asia, discovered a new deposit of sulphur-free gas in southeast Turkmenistan. That year also, the first deputy chief of staff of the Russian government revealed that Rosneft, Lukoil and Gazprom were interested in developing fields in Turkmenistan. In fact, in 2019 Gazprom signed a new long-term contract with Turkmengaz, the Russian firm Tatneft and Turkmennebit signed a memorandum of understanding, and KazTransGas resumed the transit of the Turkmen marketable gas through Kazakhstan to Russia via the CAC pipeline. In 2020, meanwhile, Lukoil announced its strategic interest in fields in this country.

Lastly, Kyrgyzstan has strong ties to Russia and receives technical, financial and military assistance (Russia has a lease on an air force base in Kant – near the capital, Bishkek – until 2032). Remittances from Kyrgyz workers in Russia are crucial to the economy of the country.

In 2019, for the first time in half a century, Kyrgyzneftegaz discovered a new gas field in Kyrgyzstan; also in 2019, Gazprom and Kyrgyzstan signed the roadmap for the Russian company's acquisition of the property and assets of Kyrgyzneftegaz.

Kyrgyzstan's proven gas reserves are estimated at 6 Bcm, according to Gazprom (2018), and its proven crude oil reserves were estimated at 40 million barrels at 1 January 2018 (CIA, 2020a). Gazprom EP International B.V. has been conducting geological exploration in the Kugart and Eastern Mailu-Suu IV areas since 2008 (the Kugart prospect may contain over 17 Bcm of gas and about 4,000,000 tons of oil and gas condensate). Under the General Scheme of Gas Supply to and Gasification of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2030 developed by Gazprom, the latter is undertaking large-scale efforts to reconstruct and upgrade the gas transmission, underground gas storage and gas distribution facilities based in Kyrgyzstan. In 2003, Gazprom and Kyrgyzstan entered into the Cooperation Agreement in the gas industry, which will run until 2028. In 2006, Gazprom Neft set up Gazprom Neft Asia (a Kyrgyzstan-based subsidiary), the largest operator in the Kyrgyz fuel market (Gazprom Neft holds over 70% of the shares in the company, whose assets include 108 filling stations, eight oil tank farms and two liquefied natural gas tank farms) (Gazprom, 2018).

In 2011, Gazprom Neft and Kyrgyzstan established joint venture company Gazpromneft-Aero Kyrgyzstan to deliver jet fuel and refuel the civil aircraft of most airlines operating in Kyrgyzstan. In 2013, Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed the Cooperation Agreement in the field of gas transmission, distribution and sales in Kyrgyzstan (Gazprom acquired a 100% stake in Kyrgyzgaz). In 2014, Gazprom and Kyrgyzgaz signed a sales and purchase agreement for a 100% stake in KyrgyzgazProm – now Gazprom Kyrgyzstan, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Kyrgyzgaz (Gazprom Kyrgyzstan has exclusive rights to import gas to Kyrgyzstan and owns the national gas transmission and distribution systems). In addition, the final section of Phase II of the Bukhara Gas/Bearing Province-Tashkent-Bishkek-Almaty gas main has been operational since

2016 (the work was carried out by Gazprom), allowing the pipeline's annual throughput at the Chuy custody transfer point in Kyrgyzstan to be almost doubled (reaching 3.9 Bcm) (Gazprom, 2018).

4 Conclusions

The present article has illustrated the direct and clear connection between the two secessionist conflicts in Central Asia and the defence of Russian geo-energy interests in the post-Soviet era, particularly since the rise of Putin to power. Both conflicts have played an important role in Russia's relations not just with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan but with Central Asia generally. For Uzbekistan, the secession of Karakalpakstan would entail the loss of a third of its territory (rich in hydrocarbons and with energy infrastructure) and the obligation to have to pass through an additional country to reach the Caspian Sea or the Black Sea. For Tajikistan, the secession of Gorno-Badakhshan would mean the loss of almost half of its territory and the prospect of an independent Gorno-Badakhshan standing between it and China. Moreover, the existence of one or two new pro-Russia states in Central Asia with hostile relations with their former states (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) would afford a major geo-energy advantage for Russia.

Given Russia's recognition of self-proclaimed territories as independent states after intervening militarily in their favour and its annexation of territories belonging to third states, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – and by extension Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan – are fully aware that they must not harm Russia's geo-energy interests if they wish to preserve their territorial integrity. Furthermore, the five Central Asian states are aware that, to be effective, secession would need Russia to at least give its blessing and this could destabilise Central Asia in its entirety and affect its many unresolved territorial, maritime and ethnic conflicts. Indeed, Russia could decide to intervene in said conflicts – for example, militarily, favouring or harming certain states ahead of others.

In addition, the secessionist movements in Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhshan realise that any unilateral independence for their territories would require – as noted earlier – if not direct Russian interference, at least its blessing not just for the independence to be effective but also to be recognised by Russia. They are equally aware that any change to the current status quo in their favour (including increased political autonomy within Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) will only be possible if Russia's geo-energy interests are not harmed.

Russia has continued to reap geo-energy benefits from Central Asia's energy resource problems. Firstly, it has continued to capitalise on the serious export limitations faced by the region. Secondly, it has capitalised on the very limited economic diversification of the region. Thirdly, it has continued to take advantage of the extensive oil and gas reserves of Central Asia. Moreover, Russia has managed to maintain its position as the main export route for oil and gas from Central Asia and has thus far prevented a connection between the region and the South Caucasus through the Caspian Sea. Thus, both the regional pipeline system built during the Soviet period and the pipelines to Europe built subsequently necessarily pass through Russia, as will future ones also (including some to China).

Given the Russian presence in Central Asia, the strategic pipelines that cross the region, mainly in the direction of Europe, provide Russia with an instrument for exerting pressure on the West. The pipelines are owned and operated totally or partially by

Russian companies and cross Russian territory, thus consolidating Central Asia's dependence on Russia. Russia therefore has a strong interest in maintaining and strengthening its influence in Central Asia and in opposing the construction of offshore pipelines through the Caspian Sea so that extracted resources are transported by land. In this regard, projects for new pipelines aimed at avoiding Russian soil face difficulties; Russia has, for example, blocked the construction of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline and the TCGP.

Therefore, how have the two post-Soviet secessionist conflicts in Central Asia affected Russian geo-energy interests? We conclude that both have greatly benefited these interests. It will be interesting to follow the future evolution of these conflicts.

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Notes

1 For further details of these tensions and conflicts, see Stanganelli (2002) and the partial update offered by Nieto (2017, pp.13–14).