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**From a Security Community to a Post-Ukraine Uncertainty: Security
Actors and Security Perceptions
in Kazakhstan and Belarus**

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From a Security Community to a Post-Ukraine Uncertainty: Security Actors and Security Perceptions in Kazakhstan and Belarus

Vera Axyonova, PhD

Executive Summary

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has prompted a return to Cold War rhetoric and made clear that attempts to build an inclusive Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community following the break-up of the socialist block have not been fruitful. The development of parallel security structures – regional organizations dealing with similar security concerns – has not led to the creation of a comprehensive regional security architecture. The Ukraine crisis has demonstrated the absence of an effective system of conflict prevention in Europe and affected perceptions of security and regional security structures throughout the post-Soviet space.

This study, conducted as part of the Carnegie Endowment's Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative Hurford Next Generation Fellowship, examines how the Ukraine crisis has shifted perceptions of security challenges and attitudes toward (multilateral) security actors in Belarus and Kazakhstan, two former Soviet countries that are regarded as Russia's closest allies in the broader region. The paper particularly concentrates on the views on security by the states' governments and their respective response strategies, as well as opinions of leading security experts and young analysts, i.e. those who shape security discourses at present and those who are expected to do so in the future. As concerns multilateral actors, six stand central in this study: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

The study reveals a substantial impact of the Ukraine crisis on the perceptions of security in government circles and expert communities in both Kazakhstan and Belarus. In the context of these states, a Euromaidan-like scenario poses a particular threat to the stability of their leaderships, which have remained in power for more than twenty years. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war on Ukraine are objects of concern for both the regimes and the countries' societies, as these events have changed the rules of the game accepted by all former Soviet states after the dissolution of the USSR. In the official governments' rhetoric in Kazakhstan and Belarus, Russia remains a close ally and the main partner, but in the inner political circles and in the expert communities it is increasingly seen as an 'unpredictable big neighbor' and even a potential source of threat. This has led to the adjustment of the states' policies with a view to preventing a possible replication of the Ukraine scenario. At the same time, the Ukraine crisis has contributed to societal consolidation in Kazakhstan and Belarus and boosted support for the present leaderships, which are seen as symbols of political stability.

As concerns the regional organizations that are active in the post-Soviet space and supposed to provide security solutions in a range of areas, none of them is considered a serious security actor by the experts and young analysts who participated in the study. Instead, the organizations are either seen as largely incapable entities, or – especially in the case of the Russian-dominated institutions – are viewed with growing suspicion and uncertainty. In this context, boosting inter-organizational

dialogue and coordination of efforts in specific sectors might be the way towards strengthening the multilateral structures and broadening their shared security agendas. In the long run, this could help the organizations to overcome their infirmities as international security providers and at the same time create a foundation, if not for an inclusive security community based on common values, then for enhanced capabilities in crisis prevention and response.

Introduction

For two decades after the end of the Cold War, international diplomatic discourse was dominated by calls for the creation of a genuine security community that would involve both the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions. In early 2012, a group of senior policy-makers, military officials and business representatives from Russia, Europe and North America, brought together by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, released a report titled “Toward a Euro-Atlantic Security Community”. The report argued for the necessity of building trust in security issues in the entire region and provided concrete recommendations paving the way to an inclusive security community. On another note, later in 2012, a group of think tanks from Germany, France, Poland and Russia issued a similar report, “Towards a Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian Security Community: From Vision to Reality”. The report called for an increasing convergence in security relations among the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian actors and argued for strengthening the role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in this process.

Characteristic of these documents is the optimistic view of their authors on the possibility of creating a common security community, i.e., a system of governance among states that share a vision of security and do not pose a threat to each other, in territory that was previously torn by ideological antagonism. This optimistic view is based on the assumption that “a major war in Europe between states and alliances – the ever-present threat during the era of East-West confrontation – has become inconceivable”.¹ **With the return of the Cold War rhetoric only two years later in the context of the Ukraine crisis, it has become clear that building a common Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community is a goal that cannot be achieved any time soon.**

In fact, the Ukraine crisis underscored the dividing line between East and West and prompted a shift in perceptions of security (and security threats) in the entire post-Soviet region. This shift took place against the background of the development of parallel security structures – regional organizations that address similar security aspects, yet in many cases are seen to be in competition, if not contradiction, with each other. This is particularly true with regard to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Russia, which is perceived in Europe and the US as a Eurasian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its opponent in the post-Soviet space. Another regional arrangement that partly overlaps with the CSTO in terms of membership, but has different security functions, is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), dominated by China and Russia. This multilateral arrangement is at times labeled as the Eurasian analog of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Finally, while not being a security actor in the traditional sense, the newly established Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) parallels the functions of the European

¹ “Towards a Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian Security Community: From Vision to Reality”, p. 11.

Union (EU) in terms of its intent to provide security through economic integration and is broadly recognized as a Russian-led rival of the EU in the shared neighborhood.

All these organizations are – in one way or another – engaged in promoting security in the post-Soviet space. Yet their understandings of security vary, as do their instruments and areas of involvement. Differences in approaches to security lead to the formulation of diverging, non-compatible response strategies by the European/Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian actors, which in the end hinder international security cooperation, especially in times of crisis such as we see today in Ukraine. Moreover, while the above organizations present themselves as security-providing actors, being explicit or implicit rivals they are actually seen as potential sources of insecurity by the parties that directly or indirectly participate in the conflict. Against this background, this paper focuses on the question of **how the Ukraine crisis has shifted perceptions of security challenges² and attitudes toward (multilateral) security actors in the post-Soviet space.**

Two former Soviet states stand central to this study: Belarus and Kazakhstan. The two countries are not directly involved in the Ukraine crisis. Yet they are affected by its consequences. Being part of the Eurasian Economic Union, Belarus and Kazakhstan are regarded as Russia's closest allies and experience the indirect effects of the western sanctions against Russia. Simultaneously, both states compete for the status of international mediator by providing (in the case of Minsk) or hoping to provide (in the case of Astana) a neutral ground for negotiations over the crisis resolution. Furthermore, Belarus and Kazakhstan evince relative similarities in terms of their unchanging political regimes, absence of open interethnic conflict in the presence of a large Russian-speaking minority, and membership in or affiliation with regional security structures such as the CSTO and SCO.³ At the same time, Belarus and Kazakhstan feature certain differences, including availability of indigenous energy resources; and geopolitical positions, i.e., proximity to Europe and Afghanistan respectively. All of these factors influence perceptions of security issues in the two countries.

The paper unfolds as follows. The next section examines the shift in perceptions of security in Belarus and Kazakhstan after the Euromaidan revolution and the escalation of the crisis with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the 'hybrid war' in eastern Ukraine. The third section turns to the regional organizations and their perceived ability to provide security in the post-Soviet countries. The final section offers an outlook and policy recommendations concerning possible inter-organizational cooperation with a view to moving back on track with the idea of establishing a common security community in the long run. The analysis concentrates on the official governments' positions and response strategies by Minsk and Astana. In addition, the study draws on the opinions of leading security experts (those who presently shape security discourses in the two countries) and young analysts (mainly students of Political Science, International Relations and Regional Studies, who are expected to shape security discourses in the future).⁴

² This paper uses a comprehensive approach to understanding security that incorporates various dimensions, including political, military, economic, environmental, social, cultural, and non-traditional (protection from non-traditional threats, such as cyber-terrorism) security aspects.

³ In the case of the SCO, Kazakhstan is a full-fledged member, while Belarus is a dialogue partner.

⁴ Numerous in-depth expert interviews and five focus groups (FGs) with students from Belarus and Kazakhstan were conducted in late 2014-early 2015. The focus groups were combined with standardized surveys of 30 FG participants from each country (60 in total). In preparation for the focus groups, two test FGs were conducted in advance in Kazakhstan. The author wishes to thank all interviewees and focus group participants as well as

Shifting Security Perceptions in Belarus and Kazakhstan

While experts in Belarus and Kazakhstan have varying views on what constitutes major security challenges in the two countries, they share the opinion that the Ukraine crisis has had a substantial impact on security perceptions and policies pursued by Minsk and Astana. Here, the Euromaidan revolution and the Russian actions vis-à-vis Ukraine in Crimea and in the eastern part of the country need to be viewed separately, as – although interconnected – they have had different security implications. **In the context of Belarus and Kazakhstan, a Euromaidan-like scenario poses a threat, first and foremost, to the stability of the political regimes and their leaderships, which have remained in power for more than twenty years. Whereas Russia’s undeclared war on Ukraine is a greater object of concern for both the regimes and the countries’ societies, as it has changed the rules of the game accepted by all former Soviet states after the dissolution of the USSR.**

The swift annexation of Crimea justified by Russian President Vladimir Putin by the need to protect ethnic Russians and Moscow’s support to pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine have prompted fears of similar developments in Belarus and Kazakhstan. Both countries have sizable Russian, or to be more precise, Russian-speaking minorities. Kazakhstan finds itself in a particularly vulnerable place. Ethnic Russians and other Slavic groups – which clearly differentiate themselves from ethnic Kazakhs – account for about one-quarter of its population.⁵ The majority of Russian-speakers are concentrated in the northern and eastern regions of Kazakhstan, where they comprise up to 50 per cent of inhabitants.⁶ While being in general well-integrated in the Kazakhstani society, many of them are concerned with the gradual 'Kazakhization' of public life and bear pro-Russian sentiments. In addition, in the 1990s Kazakhstan experienced separatist attempts to seize an area in the east and annex it to the Russian Federation with tacit support from Moscow.⁷ Against this background, the political rhetoric in Russia questioning Kazakhstan’s statehood and territorial integrity is viewed with increasing suspicion and rejection in Astana.⁸

The presence of the Russian minority in Belarus is largely seen as less problematic, as Russians constitute only about 8 per cent of the population.⁹ Yet this picture is distorted, if one considers the far greater number of Russian-speakers. Up to 40 per cent of ethnic Belarusians identify Russian as their native language (trend increasing).¹⁰ Until recently, this trend has not prompted concerns in

organizers of the focus groups at the European Humanities University, Belarusian State University, KIMEP University, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, German-Kazakh University, Kazakh-American Free University, and East Kazakhstan State University for their cooperation.

⁵ B. Pannier and Y. Karabek, “A Tale of Russian Separatism in Kazakhstan”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 August 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-kazakhstan-russian-separatism/25479571.html>.

⁶ S. Brletich, “The Crimea Model: Will Russia Annex the Northern Region of Kazakhstan?”, *Modern Diplomacy*, 2014, http://www.modern diplomacy.eu/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=420:the-crimea-model-will-russia-annex-the-northern-region-of-kazakhstan&Itemid=480.

⁷ B. Pannier and Y. Karabek, *op.cit.*

⁸ See Vladimir Putin’s comments at the Seliger 2014 National Youth Forum, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/22864>, remarks by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of Russia’s Liberal Democratic Party, at a public gathering in February 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-zhirinovskiy/25275475.html>, and comments in social media by Russian opposition politician Eduard Limonov earlier in February 2014, http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/mid-rk-gotovit-notu-rossii-predlozheniya-limonova-zahvate-250762.

⁹ Belarus Censuses: Population Declines, National Identity Strengthens, *BelarusDigest*, 10 October 2012, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/population-and-identity-trends-two-decades-belarusian-independence-11605>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Lukashenko's pro-Russian regime, which has been more cautious of Belarusian nationalist sentiments than of Russian cultural influences. That changed after the Ukraine crisis. Particularly worrisome for Minsk are the geopolitical preferences of Belarusian citizens, of whom 70 per cent do not exclude the possibility of joining Russia in a common state, if it brings economic benefits.¹¹ Placed against 63 per cent of Crimeans who supported the idea of joining Russia as far back as 2009¹², this figure suggests that the 'Crimea model' could have chances for success if applied to Belarus.

In view of these developments, both Minsk and Astana have initiated certain measures to minimize the possibility of a Ukraine scenario. As early as April 2014, new amendments to the Kazakh Criminal Code were proposed to include anti-separatist clauses and introduce harsher penalties (of up to 10 years of imprisonment) merely for calling for changes to the territorial integrity of the country. Reforming Interior Troops into Kazakhstan's National Guard has been also associated by some experts with Astana's response strategy to the Euromaidan and the events in eastern Ukraine.¹³ Similarly, in Belarus new Martial Law legislation came into force in early 2015, broadening the scope of military threats and for the first time including threats to the constitutional order of Belarus. Furthermore, a new Belarusian Military Doctrine, approved by President Lukashenko in January 2016, mentioned 'hybrid warfare' and 'colour revolutions' as threats to the country's security. When discussing the Doctrine and defense plans for the next five years at the Security Council of Belarus in late 2014, Lukashenko emphasized the importance of the 'Eastern dimension' and threats to the Belarusian economy, hinting at Moscow's pressure.

In government rhetoric in Kazakhstan and Belarus, Russia remains a close ally and the main partner, but in inner political circles it is increasingly seen as an 'unpredictable big neighbor' and a potential source of instability. The major priorities of the leaderships in this context are building up domestic security and maintaining a careful balance between Russia and the West. The former is sought by reforming security-related legislation and by smart minority and language policies – both intended to send a signal toward Moscow that Belarus and Kazakhstan have strong state structures and peaceful multi-ethnic environments. The balance between Russia and the West is being achieved in both countries by relying on what are called 'policies of positive neutrality'. Namely, cautious support for Moscow by de facto recognizing Crimea as part of Russia and avoiding official references to Russia's involvement in the east of Ukraine; combined with continuing close economic relations with Kyiv and supporting international efforts to resolve the conflict, including the results of the Minsk talks.

The adjustments in governments' policies are reflected in changing public discourses and experts' views on security in Belarus and Kazakhstan, featuring recurring references to the events in Ukraine. An opinion poll conducted in Kazakhstan in August-September 2014 among national security experts by Strategiya, the Almaty-based Institute for Social and Political Research, revealed an increased prioritization of political-military challenges to the country's security. As compared to 2010, external

¹¹ See results of an opinion poll conducted by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies: D. Melyantsou and A. Artsiomenka, "Geopolitical Preferences of Belarusians: A Too Pragmatic Nation?", BISS, 2013, Russian Version available at: http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_SA07_2013ru.pdf.

¹² A study by the Razumkov Centre, a Kyiv-based think tank, cited in N. Shapovalova and B. Jarabik, "Crimea: Next Flashpoint in the European Neighbourhood", FRIDE Policy Brief No. 14, July 2009, http://fride.org/descarga/pb14_crimea-flash_point_eng_jul09.pdf.

¹³ A. Jarosiewicz, "Kazakhstan's attitude towards integration with Russia: less love, more fear", OSW Commentary No. 137, 23 May 2014.

threats to Kazakhstan's security have moved from fifth to second position in the overall list of security threats identified by experts.¹⁴ The external threats are associated with the possibility of a 'crisis spill-over', 'externally imposed frozen conflicts' and spread of the 'Donbass syndrome' to the territory of Kazakhstan. A particularly worrisome scenario involves a combination of these developments with political destabilization in the absence of a clear strategy of power transfer from President Nazarbayev, who has been ruling the country for the last twenty-six years. In this context, domestic sources of insecurity, either related to the succession and potential inter-elite conflicts or to the overall increase in the socio-economic divide in the country, both of which may lead to public upheaval, remain a priority for leading experts and young analysts.

Belarusian experts are less worried about the succession in the country, but are warning of Moscow's intention to increase its military presence through deploying an airbase in Belarus. The airbase would not shift the military balance in the region, as Russia already has two technical facilities and few aircrafts stationed on the territory of Belarus, which are used in joint air-defence exercises.¹⁵ Yet opening the new fully operational airbase would change Minsk's position vis-à-vis Moscow – from an ally to a ground for defence operations, signifying the end of the military value of Belarus for the Russian leadership and the loss of its strategic advantage.¹⁶ In addition, Belarusian experts are concerned about possible attempts by Kremlin to destabilize the political situation in Belarus, especially in times of elections. The protest rallies that followed the presidential election in 2010 and involved violent attacks on the government building in Minsk are associated by some experts with Russia's clandestine attempts to put pressure on President Lukashenko. Moscow's insistence on opening the airbase and Lukashenko's cautious resistance suggested that a scenario similar to the 2010 events could be repeated during the presidential elections in October 2015. Yet this did not happen, despite such predictions.

In general, most experts agree that the Ukraine crisis has contributed to societal consolidation in the two countries and boosted support for current leaderships, which are seen as symbols of political stability. The likelihood of the Euromaidan model in Belarus and Kazakhstan is dismissed by the majority of security experts and young analysts. This is attributed to 'political passivity' and a fear of widespread instability among the populations. The latter was particularly emphasized by students involved in focus groups in both Kazakhstan and Belarus. To quote one Kazakhstani participant, "Even if not everyone is satisfied with things as they are in the country, no one wants to have an open war. Everybody saw what the protest led to in Ukraine and no one in Kazakhstan wants to have people dying and their houses destroyed." Another participant commented: "Stability is the major asset of Kazakhstan. Look at Kyrgyzstan [referring to the revolts of 2005 and 2010 and the 2010 interethnic crisis in southern Kyrgyzstan]; revolutions have not provided stability or welfare to the people there. And neither has the Euromaidan in Ukraine". Similarly, Belarusian focus group participants underlined the 'peaceful character of the Belarusian nation': "Ukraine is our neighbor and everybody followed the events there very closely. Many young people in Belarus sympathized with the Euromaidan movement at the beginning. But after the protests became violent, no one supported them anymore." Yet another quote: "The memories of war [referring to the Great Patriotic War, as

¹⁴ The results can be found at: <http://www.ofstrategy.kz/index.php/ru/>.

¹⁵ C. Biggers, "Russian Airbase in Belarus Remains in Limbo", *Bellingcat*, 27 December 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/12/27/russian-airbase-belarus-remains-limbo/>.

¹⁶ S. Bohdan, "Russian Airbase in Belarus: A Long Story with No End in Sight?", *BelarusDigest*, 24 September 2015, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/russian-airbase-belarus-long-story-no-end-sight-23334>.

part of the World War II] are still very recent in Belarus – through the stories of parents and grandparents. And peace is very valued. The war in Eastern Ukraine has shown that peace can end very fast. Who would want something like this here?” While these are individual opinions, they reflect the prevalent perceptions of and attitudes towards events in Ukraine among young well-educated people in both Kazakhstan and Belarus. Characteristic is the alleged causal link between protest and violence and the general perception that the war in eastern Ukraine is the result of the Euromaidan movement (and not Russia’s actions). This view is more often expressed by students of state (public) universities and less so by those of private, more western-oriented institutions of higher education.

The possibility of the Crimea model is not categorically excluded, but is seen as unlikely under current circumstances in Kazakhstan and Belarus. The highly politicized question of the Russian speaking minorities and Moscow’s often-proclaimed intention to support them in the former Soviet countries provoked heated public debates immediately after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the ‘hybrid war’ in eastern Ukraine. But one year later, more moderate views prevailed among experts, rejecting the possibility of analogous events in the two countries. Similarly, among young focus group participants in Belarus and Kazakhstan, the opinion that Russia may get involved in a conflict with its neighbors to ‘return historically Russian territories’, justified by the need to protect ethnic Russians, is rather marginal. What further unites Belarusian and Kazakhstani experts and young analysts alike is their conviction that, in case a crisis with the involvement of Russia still happens, the countries would have to rely on their own capabilities and cannot expect international actors to seriously support their sovereignty and territorial integrity. That said, the next section discusses the roles of regional organizations as seen in Belarus and Kazakhstan in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

Regional Organizations as Security Providers, Impotent Actors or Sources of Insecurity?

The six organizations mentioned above – the OSCE, NATO, EU, SCO, CSTO and EEU – are in one way or another shaping security in both Belarus and Kazakhstan. Yet their approaches to security vary, as do perceptions of their abilities to perform as security actors in the former Soviet countries.

OSCE

The OSCE is a comprehensive security organization that addresses politico-military, economic, environmental, and human security issues. Incorporating all post-Soviet states, the organization provides a platform for dialogue, is involved in monitoring activities, and implements specific programs. The weaknesses of the OSCE, rooted in its membership structure and consensus-based decision-making procedures, have been widely recognized by the international expert community. Nevertheless, with the unfolding of the Ukraine crisis the organization has been offered an opportunity to re-establish itself in its initially intended role as an institution for resolving conflicts in Europe.

In Kazakhstan, the OSCE has a Program Office in Astana that is engaged in a number of projects on various aspects of security, from arms control, border management, and the fight against terrorism to economic and environmental issues and the promotion of human rights and the rule of law. The organization featured at the top of the Kazakh government’s agenda in 2010 when Kazakhstan

assumed the OSCE chairmanship-in-office. The latter was regarded by many experts as Astana's instrument of nation-branding outside the country while boosting the regime's legitimacy domestically. Yet as the government moved on to new image-shaping projects (such as bidding for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council and holding EXPO 2017 in Astana), the OSCE has largely disappeared from the public and political discourse.

Against this background, Kazakhstani security experts and young analysts interviewed for this study have been rather skeptical of the organization as a serious security actor. Its role as a 'tool of diplomacy' and an 'umbrella' for the Minsk talks is generally acknowledged and appreciated, yet its structural weaknesses and inability to provide feasible solutions in crisis situations are considered more salient. To quote one of the interviewees, "the OSCE is no more than a warming blanket to cover oneself, when international relations risk freezing". In the Central Asian security context, it is presently perceived as a nominal structure with no particular function. Nevertheless, according to a poll conducted by *Strategiya* among Kazakhstani experts in 2013, 40 per cent considered membership in the OSCE beneficial for Kazakhstan in the short to medium term.¹⁷ Although there has been no follow-up poll within the last 1.5 years, experts estimate a comparable number for 2015.

Belarusian security experts provide similar assessments of the OSCE as a largely insignificant actor. Yet no one questions Belarus' membership in the organization and its perception as an 'additional dialogue platform with the West' is rather positive. In the government circles the OSCE is less appreciated. It is mainly seen as an election monitoring actor – in reference to the ODIHR¹⁸ activities – producing critical reports and thus fostering the regime's negative image abroad. Against this background, the OSCE Office in Minsk was closed in 2011 after its mandate expired. Belarusian authorities have not managed to (re)establish constructive relations with the OSCE since then, as they do not see the institution as a 'means of image-boosting', as does the Kazakhstani government. While re-opening an OSCE office in Minsk is not excluded by some experts, the presence of such an office on the ground is associated with the necessity to deal with state weakness and conflict. To quote one of the interviewees, "in Belarus the situation is very stable and there are no conditions for [re]opening the office". This viewpoint remains widespread among experts and government officials after the Ukraine crisis and the Minsk talks have not changed it.

NATO

NATO is a traditional defense alliance that concentrates predominantly on politico-military challenges to the security of its member states. Unlike the OSCE, it does not include former Soviet countries apart from the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. It cooperates with Kazakhstan and Belarus mainly through partnership programs and intergovernmental dialogue. Both countries participate, for instance, in the NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program.

As concerns establishing constructive relations with the North Atlantic Alliance, Kazakhstan is a definite frontrunner. It implements the Individual Partnership Action Plan and takes part in the Partnership Action Plan-Defense Institution Building, which involves reforming national defense structures in order to bring them closer to NATO standards. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has created a peacekeeping battalion, *Kazbat*, intended for joint military exercises with NATO allies – 'Steppe Eagle' – that aim at fostering the interoperability of troops, enabling *Kazbat* to be deployable as part

¹⁷ Results of an unpublished expert opinion poll conducted by *Strategiya* in 2013.

¹⁸ OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

of NATO or UN operations.¹⁹ In official political discourse, the North Atlantic Alliance is presented as a partner in modernizing the country's security sector. Similarly, the majority of the experts interviewed consider NATO's assistance helpful, for instance as concerns drafting a new defense doctrine or finding solutions for 'specific tactical concerns'. Yet joining NATO is not an option for Kazakhstan, partly due to the awareness of what reaction such a move could cause on the part of Russia, which regards NATO as its major foe. According to experts, continued cooperation with NATO without a membership aspiration is an important element of Astana's 'multi-vector' foreign policy approach that seeks to strike a balance between major players on the international scene.

Belarus also cooperates with NATO – although in a more limited fashion – in the framework of the PfP program. It has created a specialized squadron that is expected to become interoperable with the allies and holds annual meetings with NATO heads of units organized by the Belarusian State University in Minsk. Members of the Belarusian military participate in training and language courses held in NATO countries. However, unlike in Kazakhstan, Belarusian authorities are not keen on spreading information about this cooperation among the general public. The official political discourse maintains the image of NATO as an opponent and even a potential source of threat. Thus, discussing the country's defense plans in late 2014, Lukashenko emphasized that the expansion of NATO forces on Belarus' western borders was one of the main concerns for the country's security.²⁰ Among the expert community, this is assessed as 'Lukashenko's way' of sending a signal to Moscow that it remains the main strategic partner for Minsk. The behind-closed-doors cooperation with NATO will nevertheless continue as a balancing act 'between the Eastern and the Western front'.

EU

The European Union is not a security organization *per se* and its security engagement is less visible and less consistent than that of the OSCE or NATO. Nevertheless, with the 2003 European Security Strategy and the related 2008 Implementation Report, the EU has repeatedly stated its intention "to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world".²¹ As an external actor in post-Soviet countries, the EU has largely focused on the human dimension of security, including the promotion of good governance and human rights, by providing technical and financial aid. In the framework of its Common Foreign and Security Policy, it has deployed civilian missions only twice to post-Soviet states – to document conflict development and settlement in Georgia and now to assist security sector reform in Ukraine.

In Kazakhstan, the EU is hardly perceived as a security actor. The understanding of EU's structures and functions remains limited, even among the young analysts interviewed. In the Kazakhstani expert community, the Union is mainly seen as an important trade partner and possibly a source of modernization reforms. The democratization and human rights agenda of the EU is what makes it special among external actors for many Kazakhstani experts. Further, there is an understanding that Kazakhstan (and Central Asia as a whole) is 'a periphery for the EU' and "European interests in the region are dominated by own concerns, mainly with energy security". As politico-military aspects of

¹⁹ J. Boonstra, E. Marat and V. Axyonova, "Security Sector Reform in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: What Role for Europe?", EUCAM Working Paper No. 14, May 2013, p. 16.

²⁰ The news report can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcjhnLTnKwY>.

²¹ A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>.

security are currently prioritized in Kazakhstan, the *Border Management in Central Asia* program, funded by the EU, is the closest to security involvement of everything associated with the Union. Yet the program is not always ascribed to the EU, as up until recently it has been implemented by the UNDP.

In Belarus, the EU is primarily perceived as an alternative attraction pole, as opposed to Russia's integration projects. It is further associated with international sanctions imposed on Belarus.²² These evoke varying assessments among Belarusian experts and young analysts – depending on whether they maintain a pro-government position or not – but are generally seen as 'harmless'. The EU's potential to act as a security provider in Belarus or elsewhere in the post-Soviet space is viewed with skepticism, whereas experts emphasize the ongoing economic crisis in Europe and the organization's structural faults, such as slow and ineffective decision-making procedures in the sphere of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The EU is thus regarded as 'a factor rather than an actor' in Belarusian foreign affairs.

SCO

Among the Eurasian regional arrangements, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is the one that mirrors the OSCE in terms of the spectrum of security-related issues it intends to address. Yet the context in which the SCO was established and its initial functions differ considerably. Created in 2001, the SCO is rooted in earlier attempts by Central Asian states to settle their border issues, especially with China, and Beijing's ambitions to advance its influence and positive image in the region, with Russia coming on board as an important regional actor that could not be ignored.²³ Presently, the SCO intends to strengthen confidence-building and cooperation among its member states in a range of areas, while its security agenda is centered on combatting the "Three Evils": terrorism, separatism and extremism.

With a rather weak secretariat and considerable domination by China (and Russia), the SCO is not perceived as a security-providing actor in Kazakhstan. Rather it is seen as a forum for exchange among the leaderships of the participating states, in which Beijing and Moscow have a greater say. Kazakhstan's participation in this arrangement is transactional and hardly shapes Astana's foreign policy preferences. Nevertheless, possible investment projects arising from this multilateral arrangement centered on China's economic potential are seen as promising, while the anti-separatist agenda of the organization fits well with Astana's current concerns over a potential rise of separatist influences in the north of the country. While all experts interviewed pointed at Beijing's decisive role in the SCO, some were convinced that the organization "bears the potential of developing real power that cannot and should not be dismissed". 45 per cent of experts think that participating in this arrangement is beneficial for Kazakhstan.²⁴

In Belarus, the SCO has hardly any relevance, as the country is not a full-fledged member, but an observer (or what is called a 'dialogue partner') in the organization. SCO thus barely features in the political or public discourse and is not ascribed any security-related influence among the expert community. Rather, the role of China as an economic giant with investment interests in Belarus is

²² The EU sanctions have been largely suspended since October 2015.

²³ S. Aris, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization", Mapping Multilateralism in Transition No. 2, International Peace Institute, December 2013.

²⁴ Results of an unpublished expert opinion poll conducted by Strategiya in 2013.

emphasized by experts and young analysts, who see in it a possibility for limiting the dependence of Belarusian economy on Russia.

CSTO

Different from the SCO and the OSCE, the CSTO somewhat resembles NATO in the sense that it mandates the mutual defense of its member states in case of an external attack. Based on the Collective Security Treaty initiated by Moscow in 1992, the organization clearly emphasizes the political-military dimension of security and provides for a consultation mechanism to ensure collective protection of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of its members.

With the provision of common defense clauses and joint military exercises, particularly in the context of the creation of the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces for the Central Asia Region, the CSTO is seen as a security-relevant framework in Kazakhstan. However, Russian domination of the organization's structures (the Moscow-based secretariat is staffed largely by Russian nationals) undermines the CSTO's image as an egalitarian arrangement and a security-providing actor among the Kazakhstani expert community. "Russia doesn't bother to consult with its allies when it comes to a real crisis", one of the experts said in an interview, referring to the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict. Moreover, experts repeatedly emphasized the organization's inability to act quickly on demand, pointing at the CSTO's non-involvement in Kyrgyzstan's 2010 crisis when inter-ethnic violence erupted in the south of the country. In this context, some experts argue that "supporting CSTO means supporting a mythical security structure that does not really exist". Nevertheless, in 2013 75 per cent of Kazakhstani security experts considered participation in the CSTO beneficial for Kazakhstan in the short run.²⁵ According to estimates, this number was not much affected by the Ukraine crisis, nor was Kazakhstan's official stance on the membership in the CSTO.²⁶

In Belarus, the CSTO arrangements are seen as less relevant than in Kazakhstan, because the political-military cooperation between Belarus and Russia takes place mainly in the framework of bilateral agreements as part of the Union State. The CSTO is thus seen as 'reserved for the southern dimension' of Russia's policies towards its 'near abroad', meaning that the organization's activities focus on the Central Asian states and Armenia, which are characterized as more prone to conflict. At the same time, some Belarusian experts speculate that the CSTO may become a source of insecurity for Belarus due to the cooperative defense clause, in case Russia 'gets itself involved' in a conflict with NATO or a third state. Along this line of argument, following the start of the 'hybrid war' in the east of Ukraine, pro-right and pro-EU Belarusian opposition blocs called for an immediate withdrawal from CSTO membership in order to 'guarantee security of the country'. This call was not taken seriously by the majority of experts interviewed or by the authorities in Minsk.²⁷

EEU

²⁵ Results of an unpublished expert opinion poll conducted by *Strategiya* in 2013.

²⁶ "Укреплять доверие и сотрудничество", *Казахстанская правда*, 05.07.2014 / „Supporting mutual trust and cooperation“, *Kazakhstanskaya pravda*, 5 July 2014.

²⁷ А.В. Тихомиров, "Подходы основных акторов к развитию ОДКБ после 2014 г. (Россия, Беларусь, Казахстан)", в Е.Ф. Довгань, А.В. Русакович (ред.), *ОДКБ и планирование на случай чрезвычайных обстоятельств после 2014 года* / A.V. Tihomirov, „Main actors' approaches towards the development of the CSTO after 2014 (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan)“, in E.F. Dovgan & A.V. Rusakovich (eds.), *The CSTO and the Planning for Emergency Situations after 2014*, The Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2015.

Finally, the EEU is a very young integration arrangement (formally established in January 2015) that does not have an explicit security agenda. Nonetheless it is supposed to contribute to the economic security of its member states and has the potential to develop its competences in the political dimension of security in the long run.

Being full-fledged members, both Kazakhstan and Belarus maintain that the EEU is nothing more than an economic integration project. Kazakhstan is very articulate in this sense, sending a clear signal to Moscow that the latter's aspirations for more would encounter resistance in Astana. With western sanctions in force and an economic crisis in Russia, critics of the EEU have become more vocal in Kazakhstan and Belarus, picturing the Union as a potential threat to the countries' economies. Nevertheless, this has little impact on public attitudes towards the EEU. According to a poll by the Eurasian Development Bank, for example, 65 per cent of Belarusians and 73 per cent of Kazakhstanis still expressed support for Eurasian integration in 2014. A comparison between figures from 2012 and 2014 shows a drop in approval in Kazakhstan (7 per cent), whereas in Belarus the figure actually rose by 5 per cent.²⁸

Among Kazakhstani experts, 50 per cent share the opinion that participation in the EEU is beneficial for the country in the short to medium run,²⁹ while some Belarusian experts regard the EEU as a possible instrument for Minsk to downplay Russia's influence in a multilateral setting, as the organization's decision-making requires consensus. To quote one of the interviewees, "the EEU format may help the government to get its way with Russia, as Minsk can agree its position with Astana first and then they can jointly try to push Kremlin in the direction they need". Yet another expert argues that the multilateral arrangement is less profitable for Minsk than bilateral Belarus-Russia relations in the framework of the Union State, as the latter gives Belarus a 'special status' vis-à-vis Moscow. Continuing this line of argument, the expert suggests that "Ukraine's membership in the EEU would have been unfavorable for Minsk, as in this case Belarus would have lost its position as Russia's only ally at its western front". This suggests that experts actually view the EEU as a (geo)political project, even if they argue that "it is solely about economic cooperation". At the same time, neither Kazakhstani nor Belarusian experts grant the EEU with a potential to boost economic security of the two countries in the nearest future.

In general, the experts interviewed see the regional organizations as weak security players. These perceptions are largely shared by young analysts, who participated in focus groups and the related surveys conducted for this study. The students rarely argued that any of the above institutions could pose a real threat to their country or, to the contrary, guarantee its security. When they were asked to list external actors that they considered influential in their countries, Russia was clearly the frontrunner (all 30 students surveyed in Kazakhstan and 27 out of 30 Belarusian students listed Russia among the most important external actors). The EU featured quite well in Belarus (23 out of 30 students thought its influence was significant), and surprisingly enough it was characterized as important by 13 Kazakhstani participants. This is a relatively high number considering the geographical distance and the limited involvement of the EU in the Central Asian region. Yet, this can be explained by the fact that the students largely regarded the EU as an important economic partner and a source of foreign investment that could positively influence Kazakhstan's economic security. By

²⁸ Cited in V. Smok, "Belarus and the EEU: Caught between a Rock and a Hard Place", *OpenDemocracy*, 14 May 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/vadzim-smok/belarus-and-eeu-caught-between-rock-and-hard-place>.

²⁹ Results of an unpublished expert opinion poll conducted by *Strategiya* in 2013.

comparison, the OSCE was not named once among the influential actors in the two countries. The tables below bring together the results of the surveys.

Multilateral actors considered influential by young analysts in Kazakhstan and Belarus (out of 30 for each country)

	OSCE	NATO	EU	SCO	CSTO	EEU
BEL	0	1	23	0	1	1
KAZ	0	8	13	9	6	3

Unilateral actors considered influential by young analysts in Kazakhstan and Belarus (out of 30 for each country)

	Russia	China	USA
BEL	27	6	5
KAZ	30	19	14

Looking Ahead

To sum up, the crisis in Ukraine has had a substantial impact on the perceptions of security in government circles and expert communities in both Kazakhstan and Belarus. The most significant in this context is the shift in political attitudes towards Russia. This shift has prompted response strategies on the part of Minsk and Astana that so far have not gone beyond cautious measures in fostering domestic security and balancing between Moscow and the West. Yet what is more important here is that – as the result of the crisis – Russia is now increasingly viewed as a potential source of instability or even as a latent threat by its closest allies. What is more, none of the regional organizations that are active in the post-Soviet space, and which are supposed to provide security solutions in a range of areas, are seen as serious security actors – whether in the context of the Ukraine crisis or the national policies of Belarus and Kazakhstan. Instead, the organizations are either seen as largely incapable entities, or – especially in the case of the Russian-dominated institutions – are viewed with growing suspicion and uncertainty.

The gap between the intentions to provide security and the perceived inability to do so creates a major challenge for the regional organizations and an almost insurmountable obstacle to the idea of creating an inclusive Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community. Nevertheless, a way forward and out of the present environment of uncertainty may be found in the realm where it is least expected – via an inter-institutional dialogue between the Euro-Atlantic and the Eurasian structures. While many North American and European stakeholders remain skeptical of multilateral cooperation with organizations dominated by Russia (or China), preferring bilateral formats, inter-institutional contacts between the OSCE and CSTO, as well as with the SCO, have increased over the recent years. The CSTO leadership emphasizes their openness to a dialogue with NATO. And the EU is studying possibilities of engaging more with China-led initiatives, including the SCO, in the Central Asian region. The security agendas of all the organizations (with the exception of the EEU) share a counter-terrorism component. Meanwhile, the OSCE, EU and CSTO are all involved in border-management programs in several post-Soviet countries and therefore are destined to interact to ensure coordination.

This pragmatic cooperation in specific sectors is one of the few areas that have not been affected by the Ukraine crisis. It remains beneficial for all participating stakeholders for the simple reason that uncoordinated engagement in the same or similar sectors can be costly for individual actors. In

addition, it can lead to effort duplication. One can expect that sectoral cooperation will continue regardless of how the situation in and around Ukraine develops further. Yet without political will and support at the higher levels in the organizational hierarchy, sectoral cooperation can shrink despite its benefits. It is therefore necessary to build on the prior attempts to maintain the inter-organizational dialogue, including at the Secretary General level. Obviously, establishing a dialogue between NATO and CSTO would not be possible in the present state of affairs. Yet the relatively regular previous dialogue between the OSCE and the CSTO at different levels and some ad hoc dialogue attempts between the OSCE and the SCO would be worth pursuing. In the next step, possibilities of initiating consultations between the EU on the one part and the EEU and the SCO on the other could also be considered. The latter two organizations are increasing their influence in the post-Soviet space, and ignoring them would be a mistake.

At present, of course, it is not the organizations per se but the main powers behind them (Russia and China) who are the primary drivers and beneficiaries of this influence. The weakness of organizational structures and domination of single actors (Moscow or Beijing) especially in these Eurasian arrangements are among the main criticisms of the regional security institutions. Boosting inter-organizational dialogue may create synergies that could strengthen the organizations' head offices. This in turn could help mitigate the influence of Russia in the Eurasian arrangements in the long run. In addition, coordination of efforts on specific issues where there is a thematic overlap could with time improve the capacities of regional organizations as security providers. For instance, countering terrorism and transnational crime is equally in the center of attention of the OSCE, NATO, EU, CSTO and SCO; whereas the EU and the SCO share an interest in larger infrastructure projects that are expected to advance economic security in the wider region. Inter-institutional cooperation in these areas could broaden the organizations' shared security agendas and provide a foundation for moving towards collective crisis prevention and response mechanisms in the long run.