

Uzbekistan-2017: what has been changed in a year?

The first year under the new leadership has ended in Uzbekistan. During this time massive economic reforms and dynamic changes launched in the country. Uzbekistan started attracting the attention of international political and business circles, leading foreign mass media, such as Forbes, The Wall Street Journal , Bloomberg and etc. Now the content and results of the ongoing reforms in Uzbekistan is in the spotlight of international media platforms and Tashkent has become the main news-maker in Central Asia.

At the same time the Uzbek society's attitude to the processes in the country changed dramatically, their engagement to the reforms became very important as never before. Moreover every day public discussions in TV channels on social and political processes covering the whole country, which are also becoming the generator of ideas, affecting the development of the country.

Moreover under the leadership of Sh.Mirziyoyev large scale reforms began in economic sphere as well. According to Sodiq Safoev, first deputy chairman of the country's Senate, "the importance of maintaining high economic growth and increasing competitiveness of the Uzbek economy "has become the top priority for the national leadership". From the first days of his presidency Shavkat Mirziyoyev began the policy of making the national economy more attractive for foreign investors by improving the investment climate in the country.

The Uzbek Government started the liberalization of economy by improving fiscal, trade, tax, investment policy, that was much welcomed by international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, EBRD, ADB. One of the important steps in this sphere was starting the full convertibility of national currency in September of this year. Modernization of society and liberalization of economy have become a new normality in Uzbekistan. Estimating these reforms international experts argue that "Tashkent has been self-imposed isolationist and now are about opening up to their neighbors and to the world".

Today the government of Uzbekistan is working with foreign consulting companies, investment banks and other international financial institutions for the sake of realizing vast economic and social reforms.

The important document regulating all these reforms and serving as a roadmap to them is the Strategy of Actions on further development of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021 which was initiated by the president of the country.

The Strategy identifies five priority directions for the development of the country: improving state and public construction; ensuring the rule of law and further reforming the judicial and legal system; development and liberalization of the economy; development of the social sphere; ensuring security, interethnic harmony and religious tolerance, implementing a balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy.

Special attention in the Strategy paid to strengthening the independence and sovereignty of the state, increasing the role of the country as a full-fledged member of international relations, entering into the number of developed democratic states, creating a belt of security, stability and prosperity around Uzbekistan.

In this regard, Helena Fraser, UN Resident Coordinator in Uzbekistan, noted that the Strategy and new foreign policy approach implemented on its basis on strengthening ties with neighboring countries is the guarantee of future prosperity and stable development of not only Uzbekistan, but also of all the Central Asia. Moreover, according to international experts the adoption and implementation of the Strategy of Actions means a new pillar in the development of sovereign Uzbekistan.

Dwelling on the essence and content of the Strategy we should take into consideration of its main features.

First, the adoption of the Strategy means the recognition of the existence of the serious challenges and problems in the modern Uzbek society, with which the state should deal with immediately. In this case, it should be noted that responding the challenges begins with their direct acknowledgement of them. The new leadership of Uzbekistan made an important step by launching vast and historical reforms in the framework of the Strategy of Actions.

Second, for the first time such a comprehensive program was adopted through the direct dialogue between the Government and the people. Before its adoption the draft version of the Strategy was published in Mass Media and Internet and every citizen had an opportunity to express his opinion, share his views and put his amendments. In this regard we should admit that the Uzbek people, including the representatives of expert community, private sector, businessmen, NGOs, and even foreign experts, had become the co-authors of the Strategy. Through this the people got the real chance to participate in decision making process and it was a real nationwide discussion.

Third, the Strategy is not just a document it is the Roadmap for real actions and concrete measures. This is not a populist declaration of intentions or PR campaign. That is why today we are observing positive and dynamic changes in Uzbekistan. Numerous visits to Uzbekistan's regions are allowing the population a degree of interaction with the President. Frequent changes in the government and regional levels, also appointment of young ministers who are prone to reforms confirms the serious attention of Uzbek leadership towards modernization.

Fourthly, Uzbekistan is the largest state in Central Asia in terms of demography. The population of Uzbekistan is almost the half of the inhabitant of the region. Since the Independence the Uzbek population increased by 50 % (from 20 million till 32.5 million). In a word, now every second inhabitant of the region is a citizen of the Republic of Uzbekistan. So, the half of the population of Central Asia has entered a principally new stage of development.

In this regard, the implementation of the Strategy would positively affect not only Uzbekistan, but also the whole Central Asia region. Uzbekistan borders with all states of the region, including Afghanistan. Active regional policy of Uzbekistan and openness to the whole world had created a new political reality in Central Asia.

In his UN's General Assembly Address in September, 2017 Sh.Mirziyoyev, describing the core directions of Uzbekistan's modern foreign policy, confirmed that the region of Central Asia is a main priority and named it to be "a conscious choice". He stated that "a peaceful and economically prosperous Central Asia is our most important goal and key task". Moreover, President emphasizing the intensification of the interstate contacts initiated organizing the summit of heads of Central Asian states. As he mentioned, "holding the regular consultation meetings" of presidents would promote consolidation of the trend towards rapprochement with neighbors.

Confirming above mentioned notions, from the first days of his presidency Sh.Mirziyoyev took decisive and concrete steps aimed at developing mutually beneficial relations with neighbors, establishing trustful contacts with all the leaders of the Central Asian states.

In his historical Speech in December, 2017 at the Parliament President Shavkat Mirziyoyev underlined that, over the past period in the sphere of foreign policy, Uzbekistan achieved significant results in the development of friendly and mutually beneficial relations with foreign countries, primarily with neighboring countries.

Moreover, Tashkent started to implement the principle of "The main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is Central Asia". As a result, an absolutely new political atmosphere has been created in the region, ties based on mutual trust and good-neighborliness has been strengthening.

Relations based on the strategic cooperation were established with Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. A

number of important documents were signed in order to further deepen the strategic partnership with Kazakhstan, economic agreements were signed for 2 billion dollars. Cooperation with Tajikistan is also strengthening. The air links opened between Tashkent and Dushanbe. In this sense, the signing of the Treaty on the State Border with Kyrgyzstan was a serious step in ensuring security and stability in Central Asia.

During a very short of time, the volume of trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan increased by 70%, with Tajikistan 85% , Kazakhstan 30%. Important and mutually beneficial agreements have been concluded with the neighboring Afghanistan, practical work has begun on new economic, infrastructural and social projects.

Catherine Putz, analyst on Central Asian issues at “The Diplomat”, wrote that repairing bilateral relationships is just one piece of this puzzle, a second is Tashkent’s emerging embrace of multilateral cooperation. The balanced foreign policy of Uzbekistan towards non regional actors and foreign powers is a crucial factor of preserving geopolitical balance, geopolitical pluralism in Central Asia. During his inaugural speech, the President of Uzbekistan confirmed that Uzbekistan will not be a part of any military block, will not let any foreign military base on its ground, will not take part in any military operations abroad.

There were held 21 high-level visits of the President in 2017. Uzbek leader met with leaders and representatives of more than 60 states and international organizations. As a result, more than 400 agreements have been concluded, and trade and investment contracts have been signed in total for almost 60 billion US dollars. In order to timely implement the adopted documents, 40 “road maps” have been developed, which are carried out jointly with our foreign partners.

In this case, over the past 12 month the President of Uzbekistan paid official visits to strategic partners of the Republic, including Russia, China, USA, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and etc. Only in this year 12 meetings of intergovernmental commissions on trade, economic, investment and technology cooperation, 130 visits of economic delegations of Uzbekistan to foreign countries, 267 visits of foreign business delegations to the republic were held.

Uzbekistan started developing cooperation with such international structures as the UN, the OIC, the SCO, the CIS at a new level. Cooperation with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has been restored, and partnerships have been established with European Investment Bank. The interaction with international financial institutions like WB, IMF, ADB, IDB are acquiring a dynamic character. These positive changes in the country are increasing the attractiveness of Uzbekistan in the international arena.

Summarizing all it should be noted that these dramatic changes in Uzbekistan have created reliable foundation for mutually beneficial cooperation between Tashkent and its regional and international partners. The Uzbek leadership has confirmed its innovative and effective internal and foreign policy, which is important not only for Uzbekistan, but also for its foreign partners interested in a stable and prosperous Central Asia.

Botir Tursunov, Deputy Director of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Rustam Khuramov, leading research fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan