

Policy Brief: Conflict Risk and Democracy in Europe & Central Asia (2021–2023)

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Executive Summary

This policy brief analyzes conflict risks in 11 countries across Europe and Central Asia from 2021 to 2023, focusing on the interplay between peaceful and violent protests, population exposure, and democracy scores. Drawing from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and democracy indices, it uncovers critical trends in protest dynamics and their implications for governance.

Key Findings: Violent protests have surged in frequency, particularly in Central Asia, correlating with lower democracy scores and higher civilian impact. European nations exhibit greater stability, yet still face significant unrest in urban centers. Population exposure amplifies conflict risks, challenging governance structures.

Recommendations: Strengthen democratic institutions, deploy targeted conflict mitigation, leverage data-driven governance, and enhance regional cooperation to foster stability.

Background

This analysis examines data from ACLED and democracy indices across Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. It tracks protest frequency, civilian exposure, and governance quality to assess conflict risks and inform policy responses over the 2021–2023 period.

Key Findings

- Rising Violent Protests:** Violent protests increased markedly, especially in Central Asia. Kazakhstan reported 226 fatalities in 2022 amid violent unrest, tied to a democracy score of 0.379.
- Democracy and Conflict Link:** Lower democracy scores correlate with higher violent protest rates. Tajikistan, with a score of 0.210, saw violent protests dominate (76.9% in 2021), while Germany (0.873) had only 17.3% violent protests.
- Regional Disparities:** Central Asian authoritarian regimes face more volatile protest dynamics than European democracies. Kyrgyzstan's violent protests hit 22.1% in 2021 (score: 0.457), while France peaked at 23.2% (score: 0.749).
- Population Exposure Risks:** High exposure in urban areas, like France (21.8% violent protests in 2023), heightens social unrest risks, straining governance capacity.

Policy Recommendations

- Bolster Democratic Institutions:** Enhance electoral integrity and civil liberties to address protest triggers. Central Asian nations should adopt EU-supported governance reforms.

2. **Targeted Conflict Mitigation:** Launch community-based programs to reduce unrest, focusing on dialogue in high-risk zones.
3. **Data-Driven Governance:** Use ACLED data for early-warning systems to preempt violent escalations.
4. **Regional Collaboration:** Promote EU-led initiatives for knowledge-sharing and conflict prevention in Central Asia.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals a profound connection between governance quality, protest dynamics, and population exposure in shaping conflict risks across Europe and Central Asia. Violent protests, more prevalent in authoritarian states, signal underlying democratic deficits, while urban exposure amplifies instability. These findings challenge policymakers to rethink stability strategies beyond suppression, prioritizing democratic resilience and proactive engagement.

Strengthening governance is not merely a political choice but a strategic imperative. In Central Asia, where authoritarianism fuels unrest, democratic reforms could break cycles of violence. In Europe, managing urban protest exposure demands innovative, data-informed approaches. Regional cooperation offers a path forward, uniting diverse nations in a shared pursuit of stability. Ignoring these insights risks deeper unrest—action today can redefine tomorrow’s peace.

Data Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Democracy Indices

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