



## CENTRAL ASIA

The EU's 2007 Central Asia strategy was last reviewed in 2015. It aims to achieve stability and prosperity, while promoting open societies, the rule of law, democratisation, and cooperation on energy security and diversification. Parliament has highlighted the importance of human rights, good governance and social development. Levels of development and democratisation in the region vary greatly and the EU tailors its approach accordingly. A proposal for a new strategy is expected by mid-2019.

### LEGAL BASIS

- Title V of the Treaty on European Union (TEU): 'external action';
- Articles 206-207 (trade) and Articles 216-219 (international agreements) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU);
- Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) covering bilateral relations, with the exception of Turkmenistan for which an interim trade agreement is in place. The new Enhanced PCA with Kazakhstan is being applied provisionally pending ratification by all the EU Member States. Negotiations on Enhanced PCAs with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are underway.

### SITUATION IN THE REGION

Central Asia is not a homogeneous region in terms of politics or economics. Mongolia in particular, though classified by Parliament as part of the region, is an 'outlier' in terms of history, geography and politics.

Kazakhstan and Mongolia have recorded the highest economic growth rates in the past and are seeking closer relations with the EU.

Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan stand out politically for their more advanced democracies. However, recent developments in Kyrgyzstan are rather ambiguous and show that democratic development and the human rights situation are vulnerable. To different extents, the other republics – notably Turkmenistan, one of the most authoritarian states in the world – are blighted by serious human rights shortcomings, while the judiciary's lack of independence is a major issue. Under the new Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took office in 2016, internal changes, such as the release of several political prisoners, reflect some positive developments. In Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 after three decades in power. It remains to be seen whether and how this will change the situation in Kazakhstan.



Until recently, relations between Central Asian countries were generally poor, owing to border and resource disputes. Nevertheless, the situation has changed rapidly following the change of leadership in Uzbekistan in 2016, opening up new possibilities for regional cooperation. The first summit meeting on regional cooperation between Central Asian leaders since the 1990s was held in Astana in March 2018. A second summit is expected to take place in 2019 in Uzbekistan. A common matter of concern is the risk of expanding Islamic extremist movements and returning fighters from Syria and Iraq. The region also continues to be adversely affected by the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

All the Central Asian countries follow multi-vector foreign policies, seeking to balance ties with Russia, China, the EU and the US in particular. Relations with Turkey and Iran are also important. Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality is even recognised by the UN. EU trade, mainly in energy, is noteworthy with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and is on the rise with Uzbekistan, not least following the adoption of the EU-Uzbekistan Textiles Protocol to which Parliament consented in December 2016. The EU has also welcomed Kyrgyzstan's, Tajikistan's and Kazakhstan's membership of the WTO.

Kazakhstan is a founder member of the Customs Union with Russia and Belarus. In May 2014, these three countries established the Eurasian Economic Union, which was also joined by Armenia and came into effect on 1 January 2015. Kyrgyzstan joined in May 2015.

## **AGREEMENTS IN FORCE AND UNDER NEGOTIATION**

The EU signed a new Enhanced PCA with Kazakhstan in December 2015, to which the European Parliament gave its consent in December 2017. The agreement has been applied provisionally since May 2016, pending ratification by the EU's national parliaments. Negotiations with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on an Enhanced PCA were launched in December 2017 and November 2018 respectively. Both countries concluded PCAs with the EU that have been in force since 1999. Tajikistan, whose PCA has been in force since 2010, expressed interest in opening negotiations on a new bilateral agreement in November 2018. Mongolia's PCA with the EU entered into force in November 2017. EU relations with Turkmenistan are governed by the 2010 Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters, as the European Parliament made ratification of the PCA signed in 1998 contingent on the existence of a system to check progress on human rights.

The EU's [2007 Central Asia Strategy](#), last reviewed in 2015, aims to achieve stability and prosperity, while promoting open societies, the rule of law, democratisation, and more cooperative relations on energy security and diversification. As requested by the Council in its [conclusions](#) of June 2017, a deep revision of the Central Asia Strategy, in line with the 2016 EU Global Strategy, is to be proposed by the High Representative and the Commission in 2019. The EU Special Representative for Central Asia has been holding consultations with local actors.

Oil and gas exports from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan may prove important for the EU in the future. A significant issue for the EU was the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan at the end of 2014 — although a



few thousand US and NATO troops remain in the country. An EU-Central Asia high-level security sector dialogue was launched in 2013. There are EU Delegations in all countries in Central Asia, except Turkmenistan, where the EU plans to open a fully-fledged Delegation in 2019. It has recently opened a Delegation in Mongolia.

The Central Asian states receive funding from the [Development Cooperation Instrument](#) (DCI): EUR 1 028 million for 2014-2020 (up from EUR 750 million for 2007-2013), which includes both bilateral assistance and regional programmes (EUR 360 million). The assistance focuses on education, regional security, sustainable management of natural resources and socio-economic development. Kazakhstan is no longer eligible for the bilateral parts of the DCI since it gained upper-middle-income-country status in 2014, but it continues to have access to the regional programmes. Turkmenistan is likely to acquire this status in the future. The [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#) (EIDHR) operates in all the states except for Turkmenistan, where civil society organisations are too few in number, too poorly organised and too strictly controlled.

## THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

### A. Positions adopted (resolutions)

- In [April 2016](#), Parliament supported the EU's Central Asia Strategy, but called for it to be more focused.
- On Kazakhstan, Parliament gave its consent to the enhanced PCA in 2017, and welcomed the country's WTO accession in 2015. It has also said that it will apply the 'more for more' principle for political and socio-economic reforms. In [March 2019](#), Parliament expressed concern about the human rights situation in Kazakhstan.
- Parliament adopted a resolution in 2010 in solidarity with Kyrgyzstan following violent unrest in the country's southern region. In [2015](#), it expressed concern at the NGO registers drawn up by Kyrgyzstan and its LGBTI 'propaganda' draft laws. In [January 2019](#), it issued recommendations for the negotiation of a new bilateral agreement.
- On Tajikistan, Parliament consented to the conclusion of the PCA Agreement in 2009, but called for improvements in human rights, corruption, health and education. In a [2016](#) resolution, Parliament expressed concerns about the deterioration of human rights in Tajikistan, notably as regards prisoners of conscience.
- Parliament has consistently expressed concerns about Turkmenistan's poor human rights record and, accordingly, has blocked the entry into force of the PCA so far. In [March 2019](#), it set out recommendations to be addressed before it would consider giving its consent.
- Parliament approved the EU-Uzbekistan Textile Protocol in December 2016 following an effective commitment by the country, in close cooperation with the ILO, to eradicate the use of child labour during the annual cotton harvest. In [March 2019](#), it issued recommendations for the negotiation of the Enhanced PCA.



- Parliament's statements on Mongolia have largely related to economic issues, but also address the country's development and humanitarian needs linked to extreme weather conditions. In [2017](#), Parliament gave its consent to the EU-Mongolia PCA.

#### **B. Inter-parliamentary cooperation**

Parliamentary Cooperation Committees (PCCs) with the majority of Central Asian countries meet every year. MEPs oversee the implementation of the agreements and focus on human rights issues, political violence, economic and development cooperation, and electoral processes. Following the entry into force of the PCA with Mongolia, Parliament is requesting the establishment of a PCC, which would leave Turkmenistan as the only country without such a body. Inter-parliamentary meetings with Turkmenistan take place nevertheless.

#### **C. Election observation and democracy promotion**

Owing to the differing levels of political development and the extremely variable levels of democratic progress in Central Asia, Parliament has not consistently observed elections in the region.

- In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR), including European Parliament delegations, observed parliamentary elections in both countries in 2015 and presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan in 2017. It drew negative conclusions about Tajikistan, but its findings about Kyrgyzstan were more encouraging.
- Kazakhstan has sporadically invited Parliament to observe its elections. The OSCE ODIHR has consistently found significant shortcomings.
- A European Parliament delegation observed Mongolia's June-July 2017 presidential elections and noted that the country is developing a solid democracy.
- Parliament has never been invited to observe an election in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan.

[Fernando Garcés de los Fayos / Michal Jiráček](#)  
05/2019

