



CENTRAL ASIA

The EU's Central Asia strategy, which was last reviewed in 2015, celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. 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 these countries vary greatly and the EU tailors its approach accordingly.

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 PCA with Mongolia and a new Enhanced PCA with Kazakhstan are in the process of being ratified by the EU Member State parliaments and of receiving Parliament’s consent.

SITUATION IN THE REGION

Central Asia is not a homogeneous region in terms of politics or economics. Moreover, while Mongolia is classified by Parliament as part of the region, the country is in a number of ways an ‘outlier’ in terms of history, geography and politics.

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

Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan stand out politically for their more advanced democracies. However, the situation in Kyrgyzstan is deteriorating, due to the changes to the constitution in 2016 and increasing harassment of the opposition. 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 a lack of independence of judiciaries is a major issue. Until recently, their relations with one another were generally poor, owing to border and resource disputes. Nevertheless, since the new Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in late 2016, there have been encouraging signals as regards regional cooperation. The first summit meeting on regional cooperation between Central Asian leaders since the 1990s took place in Astana on 15 March 2018. All countries are facing the risk of expanding Islamic extremist movements.

All the Central Asian countries follow multi-vector foreign policies, seeking to balance ties with Russia, China and the West. Turkmenistan’s permanent neutrality is even recognised by the UN. 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 and Tajikistan'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 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, which has been in force provisionally since 1 May 2016. The European Parliament gave its consent to the agreement on 12 December 2017. The 1998 PCA with Turkmenistan may receive Parliament's consent, provided that a system to check progress on human rights is established. Mongolia signed a PCA with the EU in May 2013, and its ratification by all EU Member States was completed in 2017.

The EU's [2007 Central Asia Strategy](#) was reviewed in 2012, 2015 and [June 2017](#). The strategy provides basic guidelines on future interactions with the region and builds upon previous EU agreements, assistance programmes and initiatives. It aims to achieve stability and prosperity, while promoting open societies, the rule of law, democratisation, and more cooperative relations on energy security and diversification. At the request of the Council of the EU, a deep revision of the EU Central Asia Strategy, in line with the 2016 EU Global Strategy, will be proposed by the European External Action Service at the end of 2019. The EU has a Special Representative for Central Asia, who has been holding consultations with local actors in 2018. Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's hydrocarbons 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. The EU 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 has recently 'graduated' from the bilateral parts of the DCI, while continuing to access the regional programmes. Turkmenistan is likely to 'graduate' in the future. The [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#) (EIDHR) operates in all the states except for Uzbekistan and 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)

Parliament supported the EU's Central Asia Strategy, but called for it to be more focused in its [resolution of 13 April 2016](#).

— On Kazakhstan, Parliament supported the enhanced PCA, and welcomed the country's WTO accession in 2015. It has also said it will apply the 'more for more' principle for political and socio-economic reforms.

- Parliament passed 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.
- On Tajikistan, Parliament consented to the conclusion of the PCA Agreement in 2009, but called for improvements in human rights, corruption, health and education.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 April 2016, Mongolia hosted the ninth Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting.

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 under the umbrella of inter-parliamentary meetings.

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](#)
06/2018