Connectivity in Central Asia
Reconnecting the Silk Road

SUMMARY

Despite being strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Central Asia has long been poorly connected: remote, landlocked, cut off from the main population centres of Europe and Asia by empty steppes and rugged mountains. As well as physical barriers, regulatory obstacles and political repression often inhibit the free flow of people, goods, services and ideas. However, in 2013 China announced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), one of whose aims is to revive the historic Silk Road trade route connecting Europe to the Far East via Central Asia. Uzbekistan’s more open foreign policy since 2016 also favours improved connectivity.

The Belt and Road Initiative has provided impetus for a major transport infrastructure upgrade. Central Asian countries are also dismantling barriers to trade and travel. Many problems still remain – the poor state of physical infrastructure, limited digital connectivity, and regulatory obstacles. Progress has been uneven. In Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, improved connectivity is driving increased trade and investment, while Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are lagging behind.

Given the importance of connectivity for Central Asia, it is key to the EU’s relations with the region. The EU is making a difference, for example, by supporting educational exchanges and helping to dismantle trade barriers, but its role has not attracted the same attention as China's BRI. The EU’s 2018 Connecting Europe and Asia strategy aims to redress the balance by setting out the values that underpin its own vision of sustainable, rules-based connectivity. For the strategy, connectivity is about more than infrastructure, and includes tackling non-physical (e.g. regulatory) barriers to movement. The EU has also expressed concerns about some aspects of the BRI, seen as prioritising China's interests over those of partner countries. However, given Beijing’s growing influence, the EU needs to co-exist not only with China but also Russia, which is also a major connectivity player in the region through its Eurasian Economic Union.

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What does connectivity mean?

Connectivity is about more than transport infrastructure. EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini, defines it as ‘the physical and non-physical infrastructure through which goods, services, ideas and people can flow unhindered’. It is as much about non-material (‘soft’) aspects (customs procedures; legislative frameworks; technical standards, etc.) as about ‘hard’ physical infrastructure, such as new railways and energy pipelines. In a globalised economy, countries are connected by transport, energy and digital networks, as well as people-to-people contacts, all of which are increasingly essential for economic prosperity and sustainable development.

Central Asian countries are among the least connected in the world

Central Asia is situated at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, on the traditional Silk Road trading road, midway between Europe and the emerging economies of east, south and southeast Asia. In spite of this strategic location, Central Asian countries are poorly connected, both to one another and to the rest of the world.

Several factors help to explain poor connectivity:

- **Geography:** all five countries are landlocked (Uzbekistan is even doubly landlocked, in that all its neighbours also lack access to the sea). The region has a harsh climate and population centres are separated from one another by huge distances. High mountains to the east and political instability to the south (Afghanistan) are barriers to movement. Central Asia is remote from both European and Far Eastern markets.

- **History:** in the Soviet period, Central Asia was sealed from the rest of the world by a hermetic border. Inherited transport and energy infrastructure reflects Soviet rather than modern needs (connections between peripheral republics and Moscow, rather than from one republic to another or to neighbouring countries).

- **Politics:** although the region is gradually opening up, isolationist authoritarian regimes have tended to view the rest of the world with suspicion. Protectionist economic policies have created high barriers to foreign trade and investment. Political repression has discouraged travel and internet access.

New developments are bringing Central Asia out of isolation

**China’s Belt and Road Initiative**

Economic developments favour the expansion of Europe-Asia overland trade routes, many of them inevitably passing through Central Asia. EU-China trade is booming (trade in goods has increased by 87% over the past 10 years), and although shipping is the cheapest and therefore the dominant transport mode, there is a growing category of medium-value goods (for example, electronic devices or car parts) for which shipping is too slow and air freight too expensive. All this has driven interest in Central Asian connectivity.

In September 2013, Chinese President, Xi Jinping, announced a Silk Road Economic Belt while on a visit to Kazakhstan, aimed at reviving historic trade routes through Central Asia. Since then, the project has been re-branded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and expanded to six overland ‘belts’ and one maritime ‘road’ encompassing over 70 partner countries; Central Asia is still a key part of the project, with two of the six overland routes passing through the region.

Of these, the **New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor** has had the most impact so far. In the past, the small number of Chinese exports transported by rail used to reach Europe via the Trans-Siberian railway. In 2011, trains began using a much more direct route via Kazakhstan, but this option did not really take off until 2015, after infrastructure investments by China and transit countries brought the journey time down to less than two weeks, three times faster than by sea. For a container of goods, whose value may reach hundreds of thousands of dollars, rail freight costs of a few thousand dollars
are small and easily outweighed by the economic benefit of faster delivery times. The number of such trains is growing exponentially – by 73% from 2017 to 2018, bringing the number up to over 6,000 trains per year. Over 2% of goods traded between EU and China are now transported by rail, up four times since 2007.

A second corridor links western China to Iran and Turkey. China has not yet defined the exact route envisaged for this corridor, but the new rail link from Inner Mongolia to Iran, launched in 2018, transits through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, suggesting that the more direct route via Uzbekistan is not sufficiently developed.

Figure 1: Major international rail routes in Central Asia, 2019

Central Asia is becoming increasingly important as a transit region for Europe-China traffic. Belt and Road Initiative corridors based on OBOReurope.

Other connectivity initiatives in Central Asia

China is not the only international player with ambitious connectivity plans for Central Asia. Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) aims to create a Eurasian single market. Although this is still a work in progress, rail freight from China is already benefiting as it only has to pass through one set of customs controls at the Kazakh border before entering the EU in Poland.

A Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway, in operation since 2014, is one of the main achievements of the India-led International North-South Corridor, launched in 2002. The new route gives landlocked Central Asia access to Iran’s Persian Gulf seaports.

Two years before China, the United States launched its own New Silk Road. The initiative never really got off the ground, but some of the projects that it was intended to support (such as TAPI and CASA-1000, see below) have nevertheless made progress.
According to OECD data (which do not include China), the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and Japan were respectively the first, fourth and second largest donors of official development assistance to the region in 2016; a large part of this aid went to the renewal of transport and energy infrastructure (for example, a Japanese grant for the modernisation of Dushanbe International Airport).

Since 2015, Kazakhstan, which sees itself as the 'buckle' in China's Eurasian belt, has responded to the BRI with its own US$9 billion Nurly Zhol ('Bright Path') investment programme. Under the latter, Kazakhstan is building or upgrading 7,000 km of roads and 4,000 km of railways.

In 1993, the EU launched the Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA) programme, envisaging a new corridor connecting Europe to Central Asia across the Black Sea, the southern Caucasus, and the Caspian Sea. TRACECA, which provides EU technical assistance for numerous infrastructure projects, has lost momentum in recent years. However, Turkey's Middle Corridor Initiative is now reviving interest in this route.

For more on the EU's current role in Central Asian connectivity, see the final section of this briefing.

Uzbekistan is opening up to the world

Under former President, Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan had a closed economy and difficult relations with most of its neighbours. Given that Uzbekistan is the region's most populous country, strategically located between the remaining four states, efforts to build intra-regional links made little sense without its participation – something that Tashkent's isolationist policy made difficult.

This picture is now changing, thanks to ambitious reforms launched since 2016 by Karimov's successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Among other things, these have made the Uzbek currency convertible, reopened border crossing points, abolished travel restrictions for Uzbek nationals and lowered customs duties on imports. Two regional summits of Central Asian leaders in 2018 – the first in nearly a decade – and Mirziyoyev's intensive programme of international visits symbolise the country's new willingness to engage with the world. The emergence from isolation of Central Asia's most populous nation is a major boost for regional connectivity. There are numerous new bus routes, trains and flights (for example, direct flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe resumed in 2017 after a 25-year interruption).

Connectivity challenges in Central Asia

Although the developments described in the previous section have created a new and favourable momentum, barriers to connectivity remain in many areas.

Transport infrastructure: a mixed picture

Chinese investments linked to the Belt and Road Initiative have brought major improvements along the main transport corridors through Central Asia. On the Chinese-Kazakh border, a new logistics hub at Khorgos and a smaller facility at Dostyk transfer container freight from Chinese standard-gauge trains to the broad gauge used in ex-Soviet countries in just two hours, thus eliminating one of the main bottlenecks on the overland rail route connecting China and Europe. Although the Khorgos hub is currently under-used, if the number of Chinese containers transiting Kazakhstan continues doubling every year, it will not be long before it reaches full capacity.

Chinese companies were also heavily involved in a new railway, including a 19-kilometre tunnel, connecting the populous Fergana Valley (which is shared between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan); previously, the region was only accessible from Tashkent via a more circuitous route passing through Tajikistan. Eventually, this could form part of a longer railway from Uzbekistan to the Chinese city of Kashgar via Kyrgyzstan, but the prohibitive cost of the project and disagreements over the route and the gauge may prevent it from ever getting off the ground. In the meantime,
since February 2018 the three countries have been connected by a new highway. Chinese funding is also helping to build new roads in neighbouring Tajikistan.

As well as the two corridors prioritised by the BRI, several other routes offer promise for connections between Central Asia and neighbouring countries. A recently upgraded railway links Turkey to the Caspian Sea. In line with Ankara's Middle Corridor Initiative, cargo can be shipped from there to Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's new container ports of Aktau and Turkmenbashi. For trans-Caspian shipping, Aktau is a gateway not only to Kazakhstan, but – thanks to the country's improved rail network – also to China. To the south, Uzbekistan has agreed with Afghanistan to build a new railway from the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif to Herat in western Afghanistan; from Herat, a further (as yet unbuilt) extension to Iran could eventually give Uzbek exports a much more direct route to Iranian seaports.

Although investments have brought major improvements along the main transport corridors, the state of secondary networks is less positive. In Kazakhstan, the challenge of maintaining roads over huge distances in a harsh climate means that even after the completion of massive Nurly Zhol investments, one-fifth of the road network will still be in poor condition.

Transport connectivity is particularly difficult in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, due both to underinvestment and the two countries' mountainous terrain. As most overland routes to Tajikistan pass through Uzbekistan, until the recent improvement in relations, Tashkent used to periodically block road access to its neighbour. Rail links are non-existent in most regions and roads are often in poor condition; for example, in Kyrgyzstan, only 38% of roads are surfaced.

Energy infrastructure

![Figure 2: Gas pipelines in Central Asia, 2019](image)

Most Central Asian gas is currently exported to China, but future pipelines could connect to Europe and South Asia (based on BBC News).

After independence, Central Asia inherited oil and gas pipelines that were geared to Moscow's needs, forcing hydrocarbon exports from the three main energy producers (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) to transit via Russia. Long before the BRI, Beijing became a major
energy player in Central Asia by building three **gas pipelines** from China to the region, of which the first became operational in 2009; these have greatly reduced dependence on Russian gas pipelines. However, for Turkmenistan this has simply meant transferring dependence to China, the only remaining purchaser since Russia and Iran stopped buying Turkmen gas (in 2016 and 2017 respectively; Moscow is now **considering** resuming its purchases). Deep in economic **crisis**, Ashgabat desperately needs to boost its gas revenues and find new markets. Two pipeline routes are promising in this respect. The first is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, potentially connecting to energy-hungry South Asia. After lengthy delays due to worries over the security situation in Afghanistan, the Turkmen authorities finally announced the launch of construction in 2015. However, there is little **evidence** that much progress has been made since then.

A second option is a trans-Caspian pipeline connecting with the Southern Gas Corridor, currently under construction between Azerbaijan and southeast Europe. Such a route would also serve European interests by diversifying gas suppliers and reducing dependence on Russia. The August 2018 Caspian Sea **Convention** removed some of the legal barriers by clarifying the status of the Caspian and giving littoral states the right to construct pipelines under their own territorial waters. However, it also gives neighbours – such as Russia, which is hardly likely to welcome competition from Turkmen gas on European markets – the right to object on environmental grounds. In any case, a bigger obstacle is that cash-strapped Turkmenistan can hardly afford such a major project.

A regional **electricity grid** is vital in order to match supply and demand. Mountainous Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan rely overwhelmingly on **hydroelectricity**, and generate more power in the spring and summer, when water is released from hydroelectric dams to meet the irrigation needs of downstream agriculture during the growing season; however, demand for energy is greatest during the winter. It therefore makes sense for them to sell surplus power during the summer to the three remaining countries, which generate most of their electricity from coal, oil and gas, and buy from them during the winter.

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union intra-Central Asian electricity trade **plummeted** (by 92% between 1990 and 2016), resulting in repeated and sometimes **catastrophic** winter blackouts in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while pushing up fossil fuel consumption during the summer in the rest of Central Asia. Since 2016, improved relations between the latter two countries and neighbouring Uzbekistan, as well as new technical systems aimed at more effectively coordinating cross-border supply and demand, are helping to revive the grid.

Central Asian countries also have an interest in connecting their grids to countries outside the region. Led by the World Bank, the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (**CASA-1000**) aims to construct a power line from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, enabling them to boost export revenues by selling surplus hydropower (for example from Tajikistan’s new **Roghun Dam**, expected to double the country’s generating capacity) to Afghanistan and Pakistan.
Digital connections

Except for Kazakhstan, Central Asian countries have poor digital connectivity. In Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, just one-fifth of the population uses the internet – the level which most European countries reached in the mid-1990s – and access to fixed-line broadband is almost non-existent. For mobile data, 3G or better connections are widespread in most of Kazakhstan (available 70% of the time, compared to 85% in Belgium), but in other parts of Central Asia coverage is much patchier.

Low internet penetration reflects high costs, which are prohibitive for many users, especially taking into account the fact that average incomes are lower than in Europe. Expensive though it is, the internet is also excruciatingly slow. This has partly to do with poor infrastructure, but also with political repression. For example, to facilitate surveillance, Tajikistan reportedly routes all telephone and internet traffic via a single government controlled computer, and it also regularly blocks access to a wide range of sites, bringing the network at times to a halt.

In most of Central Asia, the situation is gradually improving. Internet penetration is expanding rapidly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, the share of the internet users in the population grew by a mere 4% and 2% respectively from 2016 to 2017; if this very slow rate of progression continues, the two countries will need several decades to reach the level where the more advanced European countries are now. Speeds are also gradually accelerating, though not in Turkmenistan, which now has the second slowest internet in the world.

Except for Kazakhstan, Central Asian countries are likely to benefit from improved connectivity, there are worrying geopolitical implications: Beijing will potentially gain access to critical digital infrastructure, at the same time as edging out Western competition. Such concerns are reflected in the conclusions of the March 2019 European Council, which call for ‘a concerted approach to the security of 5G networks’.
Thanks to hydrocarbon exports, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan both have large trade surpluses, but for the other three countries the balance is negative, particularly for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which import far more than they export. Regional trade is less than one-tenth of Central Asia’s total foreign trade, whereas the equivalent figure for EU countries is two-thirds. Low levels of regional trade have partly to do with the lack of complementarity between Central Asian economies: as all five countries are essentially commodity producers, they have limited need for one another’s exports. However, trade barriers are also a problem. According to the World Bank’s 2019 Ease of Doing Business index, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are among the most difficult places in the world for cross-border trade (ranked 102nd, 148th and 165th respectively out of 190 countries). For example, exporters to Kazakhstan need an average of five days to prepare documentation and four to get through customs, at a total cost of nearly US$700.

Conditions for trade are now rapidly improving, thanks not only to new transport infrastructure enabling exports to reach foreign markets more quickly, but also to the dismantling of tariff and non-tariff barriers. Three Central Asian countries (except for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) already belong to the WTO; Uzbekistan, which has cut tariffs, plans to become the fourth, and also hopes to join the EU’s GSP+ scheme, which would give its exports preferential access to EU markets (Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian GSP+ participant at present). There are efforts to streamline customs procedures: in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Eurasian Economic Union’s ‘single window’, adopted in January 2018, will enable customs documents to be submitted electronically; as a result, goods should have to spend no longer than four hours passing through customs (however, the World Bank Ease of Doing Business figures mentioned in the previous paragraph, which represent the situation as of May 2018, suggest that the benefits of this innovation are only slowly being delivered). Though not an EAEU member, Uzbekistan is aligning its customs code with that of the trading bloc. Meanwhile, Central Asian countries are concluding bilateral agreements with trade partners to facilitate trade. For example, Uzbekistan has managed to boost its fruit and vegetable exports to Russia thanks to a ‘green corridor’ harmonising veterinary and phytosanitary requirements. For its agrifood exports, Kazakhstan has already agreed, or is negotiating, similar arrangements with a range of countries, including China, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Despite such improvements, recent data suggest that for most Central Asian countries and most products, trade remains flat: for the 12 months ending in November 2018, Kazakhstan’s exports (excluding oil and gas) grew by just 3%, while Kyrgyzstan’s declined by 2%. However, there are
several bright spots. Benefiting from trade facilitation measures and new rail connections, Kazakh agrifood exports surged by 28%. Uzbekistan’s cross-border trade with its neighbours is booming (in 2017, up by 31%, 59% and 82% with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively). Capitalising on the potential of its agrifood sector, Uzbekistan is investing US$245 million in two agro-logistics centres processing fruit and vegetables. By contrast, there is little evidence of growth in Kyrgyzstan’s and Tajikistan’s non-commodity exports, but improved connectivity offers considerable future potential for these two countries also.

Infrastructure projects and trade facilitation measures are part of a wider drive by Central Asian countries to attract investment enabling them to modernise and diversify their economies; this also includes industrial parks with preferential conditions for foreign investors such as Uzbekistan’s Navoi free economic zone and Kazakhstan’s Kostanai, as well as reforms improving the business environment; thanks to the latter, since 2014 Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have climbed 70 and 22 places respectively in the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business ranking.

People-to-people contacts

Many Central Asians travel to work, especially to Russia, which as of September 2018 had 2.7 million officially registered labour migrants from the region – nearly all from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, low levels of regional trade and the lack of institutional cooperation limit professional travel. Inward travel is largely driven by tourism.

Like trade, people-to-people contacts have also been held back by the barriers separating Central Asian countries from one another and the rest of the world. Tensions between neighbouring countries and periodic closures of crossing points have made cross-border travel difficult. Until very recently, Uzbek nationals needed to apply for an expensive exit visa to travel outside former Soviet Union countries. Turkmenistan already scrapped its own exit visa system in 2004, but its citizens are still often prevented from leaving the country.

Figure 5: Central Asians travelling to Europe

The vast majority of Central Asians travelling to Europe come from KZ. For KG and UZ, the numbers travelling to Europe are small but steadily growing. In addition, the share of multiple-entry visas has risen for all five countries, suggesting that Central Asian travellers are increasingly likely to make repeated visits.

Here too, recent developments are removing many of those barriers. In keeping with its more conciliatory foreign policy, Uzbekistan has reopened many of its border crossing points, abolished exit visas for Uzbek nationals, exempted nationals of over 50 countries (including all EU Member States) from entry visa requirements, and resumed direct flights to Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. With the exception of Turkmenistan, the remaining Central Asian countries have also lifted or simplified visa requirements for most travellers. Schengen visa statistics (see Figure 5) suggest that not only are more Central Asians travelling to EU countries but also that a growing number apply for multi-entry visas, a fact that suggests that many have long-term interests in Europe.
Higher education is increasingly becoming a channel for people-to-people contacts, with many Central Asian students taking degree courses at foreign universities. In 2017, according to Unesco student mobility data, 200,000 Central Asians studied abroad. Nearly half of these (90,000) came from Kazakhstan, over three times as many as in 2006. The destination of choice for Kazakh students (and Central Asian countries in general) was Russia. These data do not include China, but separate figures suggest that China came second, with 14,000 Kazakhstani students in 2017.

The EU and Central Asian connectivity

The EU’s answer to the Belt and Road Initiative

Transport and energy links were already identified as a priority in the EU’s 2007 Central Asia strategy. Since then, little progress has been made on the more ambitious connectivity proposals included in the strategy, such as developing a Caspian-Black Sea pipeline, creating an ‘e-silk highway’ or integrating Central Asian energy markets. This is not to say that EU actions (see boxed text below) have not helped to promote connectivity in the broader sense. However, China’s big-ticket projects such as a 19-kilometre railway tunnel in Uzbekistan and the Khorgos logistics hub have captured more media attention, creating the impression that Beijing has side-lined the EU as a Central Asian connectivity player.

In September 2018, the EU published its connecting Europe and Asia strategy. Inevitably, analysts have seen this as an attempt to regain the initiative by setting out an alternative vision of connectivity. According to the strategy, investments must be environmentally, socially, economically and fiscally sustainable: reducing carbon emissions and avoiding pollution; transparent and based on public consultation; promoting economic development; and not burdening partner countries with unmanageable debts.

At the same time, the EU’s approach is a comprehensive one. The European internal market enables the free movement of people, goods and services not only (or even mainly) by building trans-European infrastructure but also by dismantling non-physical (e.g. regulatory) barriers and promoting cooperation in a broad range of areas. Admittedly, there is little chance of a Central Asian free-trade area or single market; Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan’s membership of the Eurasian Economic Union bars them from such arrangements with non-EAEU countries, except as part of wider agreements that extend to all EAEU member states. Nevertheless, the internal market is a model that inspires EU efforts to promote at least partial regional integration. The emphasis on a rules-
based approach that ensures a level playing field for companies participating in connectivity projects (for example, through transparent procurement procedures for government infrastructure projects), regardless of their country of origin, is another aspect that recalls the internal market.

Although the EU’s 2018 connecting Europe and Asia strategy does not explicitly mention the Belt and Road Initiative, its principles can be seen as an answer to some of the criticisms levelled against Beijing. According to these, BRI infrastructure projects are financed and implemented by Chinese – typically state-owned – companies, with little concern for transparency or fair competition; one estimate suggests that 89% of BRI contractors are from China. Some BRI partner countries are left with crippling debts: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan already owe 40% and 50% respectively of their foreign debt to China, and are both considered to be at risk of debt distress.

The EU has expressed reservations about China’s Belt and Road Initiative. For example, at the March 2019 European Council meeting, Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, warned against the BRI as a vehicle for China (described by the European Commission as a ‘systemic rival’) to pursue its national interests, and criticised Italy for its decision to participate bilaterally. At the summit, EU leaders concluded that China needed to ensure fair competition and equal market access.

On the other hand, non-engagement is not an option for the EU, given Beijing’s growing influence in Central Asia. For the countries of the region, the EU’s and China’s very different approaches both offer potential benefits. As a keen participant in Eurasian connectivity initiatives, Kazakhstan has called for closer coordination between the three major players: the EU, China and the EAEU. Since 2015, the EU’s consistent position has been that it will only engage with the EAEU if Russia implements its commitments under the Minsk Agreements; this insistence, as well as concerns about China, preclude Astana’s proposed trilateral platform.

Nevertheless, there is scope for limited engagement, at least with the BRI. Interconnections between China’s New Eurasian Land Bridge and the EU’s trans-European transport network (TEN-T) core network corridors are one possible area for cooperation. At present, there are problems; reportedly, trans-Asia trains are often held up for days or even weeks at the Małaszewicze Polish-Belarussian border crossing point due to inefficient management and poor infrastructure. In 2015, the two sides launched an EU-China connectivity platform to facilitate coordination. A forthcoming study envisaged by the platform on rail corridors between China and Europe is expected to look at bottlenecks, such as Małaszewicze, and consider joint solutions.

What is the EU doing to promote Central Asian connectivity?

From 2014 to 2020, the EU allocated €1.1 billion for Central Asia from its Development Cooperation Instrument. This grant funding is supplemented by loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which to date have invested €11.3 billion in the region. EU grants and loans support projects in areas, such as rural development, education, renewable energy and entrepreneurship, some of which are relevant to connectivity.

- Given that EU money is limited and spread across a wide range of priorities, the EU does not generally fund major infrastructure projects in the region. The main exception to this rule is the World-Bank-led CASA-1000 power line, which as mentioned above will enable Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to export hydroelectricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan; the EIB and the EBRD are contributing US$170 million.

- Erasmus+ promotes people-to-people contacts through educational exchanges (€115 million allocated to Central Asia for 2014-2020). In 2017, 815 Central Asian university students and staff spent up to a year in Europe, mostly from Kazakhstan, while 277 Europeans travelled to Central Asia. Although these numbers are very small, there can often be a multiplier effect, for example, when university teachers return to their home institutions. In addition, Erasmus+ supports Europe-Central Asia higher education cooperation through capacity-building projects, which among other things help Central Asian universities develop curricula for new courses.
European Parliament position: in its resolution of April 2016 on the EU-Central Asia strategy, the Parliament emphasises the importance of upgrading transport, energy and digital infrastructure. Connecting Central Asian countries to each other and to international markets and corridors is a priority. Erasmus+ educational exchanges are helping to bring Europe and Central Asia closer together. It is important to find synergies between EU projects and China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

- Poor internet connections prevent Central Asian universities, research centres and hospitals from sharing data, a major handicap for joint research and other cooperation. To remedy this problem, the EU’s CAREN project provides them with a high-performance broadband internet network; at present, it links institutions in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with one another and (via the pan-European GÉANT network) their EU counterparts.

- One of the aims of the border management in Central Asia programme (€5 million for 2015-2018) is to facilitate trade by helping customs authorities to streamline procedures and share information with each other.

Priorities and programmes for the next seven-year period (2021-2027) will be partly based on the EU’s forthcoming Central Asia strategy, which updates the 2007 strategy and is expected to come out in mid-2019. Given that connectivity is becoming an increasingly important issue for the region, it is likely to be emphasised in the new strategy.