

DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES  
POLICY DEPARTMENT



# Implementation and review of the European Union - Central Asia Strategy:

## Recommendations for EU action

AFET



## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

# Implementation and review of the European Union-Central Asia Strategy: Recommendations for EU action

### ABSTRACT

The 2007 European Union (EU) Strategy for Central Asia was reviewed for the fourth time in 2015. Over the last eight years, the EU has successfully established several institutionalised mechanisms for strengthening relations and working with Central Asian governments, including an increased presence on the ground. Despite this, the EU's engagement in Central Asia is one of limited to no impact. The region has become more unstable; forecast gas deliveries from the region to Europe have so far not materialised; trade is minimal with the exception of EU-Kazakhstan links, democracy is seen by the Central Asian regimes as a threat to their survival; corruption severely undermines economic development and siphons off much of the development aid; and the human rights situation has been backsliding.

The EU should not and cannot compete with Russia and China in the region. The EU would do best to focus on a few key areas where it can achieve concrete results. Besides broader economic and some security cooperation, the EU should focus on education in supporting the region's development while further emphasizing human rights and strengthening political and financial support to civil society.

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# 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The 2007 European Union (EU) Strategy for Central Asia was reviewed for the fourth time in 2015. The review concluded that the Strategy remains valid and that ‘the European Union remains committed to its strategic objectives in Central Asia and as elaborated by the Central Asia strategy, with due regard to evolving conditions and building on the achievements of the last eight years’.<sup>2</sup> Over the last eight years, the EU has successfully established several institutionalised mechanisms for strengthening relations and working with Central Asian governments, including an increased presence on the ground. Despite this, the EU’s engagement in Central Asia is one of limited to no impact. The region has become more unstable; forecast gas deliveries from the region to Europe have so far not materialised; trade is minimal with the exception of EU-Kazakhstan links, democracy is seen by the Central Asian regimes as a threat to their survival; corruption severely undermines economic development and siphons off much of the development aid; and the human rights situation has been backsliding.

While some global and regional actors have laid out a broad policy vision for Central Asia – ‘New Silk Road’ by the United States (US), ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ by China – the EU devised a detailed strategy in 2007 outlining seven priorities ranging from democracy promotion to education and from security to energy and trade interests.<sup>3</sup> The EU’s Central Asia Strategy is more than a policy expression in which just a few objectives are outlined, but less than an extensive and detailed strategy that would ideally be accompanied by an action plan and measurable benchmarks. As the latter seems unlikely to come about (although the European Parliament in its draft report on the implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy calls for better definition of priorities and objectives accompanied by benchmarks and indicators<sup>4</sup>) and the EU is unlikely to adopt a simpler document or statement, the Strategy is probably here to stay as a point of reference for EU policies.

The recent review process can still be regarded as an improvement compared to earlier editions. Latvia as EU President in the first half of 2015 took the lead, resulting in an increasingly political approach to the Strategy as opposed to the earlier reviews that were rather bureaucratic and EU-internal by nature. Also Latvia’s hands-on approach included several consultations with experts while there was overall more attention to the process (including a joint non-paper by Latvia and Germany and a non-paper by Kazakhstan). Still, all this did not result in an amended Strategy for Central Asia nor did it incorporate sufficient views from Central Asia’s civil societies. This brief looks at the main ingredients of the Strategy that need to be revised or strengthened and makes several recommendations for a more focused EU approach to Central Asia.

<sup>1</sup> This briefing builds on an earlier EUCAM policy brief: Jos Boonstra, ‘Reviewing the EU’s approach to Central Asia’, *EUCAM Policy Brief*, No. 34, February 2015, [http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx\\_icticontent/EUCAM-PB-34-Reviewing-EU-policies-in-Central-Asia-EN\\_01.pdf](http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-PB-34-Reviewing-EU-policies-in-Central-Asia-EN_01.pdf). The briefing is also based on the body of EUCAM research and monitoring of the EU Strategy for Central Asia since 2008 ([www.eucentralasia.eu](http://www.eucentralasia.eu)). The main conclusions of the brief were presented in the European Parliament at an AFET meeting on 9 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, Brussels, 22 June 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/22-fac-central-asia-conclusions/>

<sup>3</sup> The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, Brussels, 31 May 2007, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%2010113%202007%20INIT>

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament draft report on implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament, 7 October 2015, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+COMPARL+PE-567.841+01+DOC+PDF+V0//EN&language=EN>

## 2 Strategic engagement with Central Asia

The EU's Central Asia Strategy is ambitious, given that member state activities indicate only a minimal interest in the region. It is an area that is not a geopolitical priority for Europe. The EU will need to carefully balance limited interests and resources with a few achievable long-term objectives. In 2012, the EU's review of its Central Asia Strategy was heavily focused on the impact of Afghanistan on Central Asia. Today, the situation in Afghanistan is less central to European policy-makers than the impact of the crisis in Ukraine and EU-Russia relations on Central Asia. While these all imply important developments that need to be assessed, the EU should concentrate on long-term priorities – rather than focusing on contemporaneous geopolitical issues alone.

Russian influence on its neighbours will remain substantial. The fact that the five Central Asian republics are nowadays still regarded by many 'outsiders', including the EU, as one coherent region based on Soviet borders gives Russia an advantage in approaching the region while leaning on a Soviet heritage (Russian language, contacts nurtured and mechanisms that survived). However, the priority for Russia and the EU is currently Eastern Europe, not Central Asia which remains on the periphery of the divisions between Moscow and the EU. Russian-inspired initiatives to limit the space for civil society, to criminalise LGBT communities and to curtail political pluralism has further taken root in all Central Asian countries. The alternative the EU can offer to these countries is help in reforms based on democracy, rule of law and good governance. Accepting cooperation with the EU that includes a reform agenda would likely bring long term benefits to Central Asian countries and societies, which are also keen on an alternative to Russia's policies (and China's economic influence). But in the current political context it is very unlikely that Central Asian leaders will embrace the EU normative reform agenda.

Abolishing the position of an EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia in March 2014 was a mistake (regardless of the budgetary and institutional considerations underlying the decision). EUSRs have been the face of Europe in Central Asia and have had a positive impact on the otherwise limited visibility of the EU in the region. EU foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, has remedied this shortcoming by reviving this EUSR position and appointing Peter Burian as the new EUSR for Central Asia.

After the 2012 review, the EU sought to institutionalise a 'High-Level Security Dialogue', but the first meeting in Brussels in June 2013 fell far short of that stated ambition. Some Central Asian governments sent only ambassador-level officials. A second gathering planned for May 2014 in Tajikistan was cancelled owing to a lack of Central Asian interest. The main reason for the EU embarking on this initiative was to address Central Asian security challenges while offering the opportunity to partners to outline their concerns over Afghanistan's future. The EU had another go at this mechanism in March 2015 in Tajikistan where a broad range of security matters and cooperation was discussed at deputy foreign ministry level while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan only sent 'representatives'. For the next gathering that is foreseen to be held in Brussels in the first half of 2016, the European External Action Service (EEAS) – which is responsible for continuing this process – could consider involving member states at a high level to attract Central Asian attention. Also a 'high-level security dialogue' will need to be followed through on a lower practical bureaucratic and possibly civil society level, possibly through concrete and concise joint projects.

One subject that should be considered for this Dialogue agenda is the fact that many young people from Central Asia and Europe have left for Syria to join the Islamic State (IS). While Europe and Central Asia have very different domestic settings, the motivations of people from both regions fighting for IS have some parallels. The danger that fighters returning from Syria to Central Asia and Europe could commit terrorist acts at home is a threat that both regions face, as the recent attacks in Paris have sadly demonstrated. Another area that the EU and Central Asian partners could focus on is conflict prevention mechanisms to see off potential problems in the future (a series of border incidents between Kyrgyzstan

and Tajikistan took place last year while tensions over hydroelectric power between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain worrisome).

Although the EU has little influence in Central Asia, adherence to democratic principles should be the centrepiece of engagement. These countries will only become more reliable partners when they develop and respect the rule of law and democratic governance. For the EU, democracy should be a *sine qua non*. Central Asian regimes see democracy as a threat to their existence and are more comfortable with Russia's model of authoritarian governance. The EU should use a pragmatic combination of aid, conditionality and political engagement in seeking change in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kazakhstan and the latter's wish to play a leading international role should also be conditioned to encourage Astana to reverse recent democratic backsliding. In the closed dictatorships of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan the EU lacks leverage, but Brussels should condition engagement with these regimes on concrete deliverables on their part.

Human rights should remain a major focus for the EU in Central Asia. The Human Rights Dialogues created by the EU have modest added value mainly as a complementary tool of 'persuasion' (in addition to the UN mechanisms) and with respect to improving the situation of specific (prosecuted) human rights activists. Meanwhile, the 'Civil Society Seminars' still have some potential to establish a 'healthy' dialogue between civil society actors, the government and European actors in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. So far, they have resulted for instance in a modest contribution on anti-torture legislation in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The only civil society seminar with Uzbekistan in 2008 did not live up to its expectations on either side, and has not been repeated. In Turkmenistan, as in Uzbekistan, lack of independent civil society and governments' repressive policies make such a dialogue redundant. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has played a substantial role in providing funding to human rights organisations in the region, together with the Non-State Actors and Local Authorities (NSA/LA) mechanism. However, most funding has gone to experienced organisations that know the game of meeting bureaucratic requirements in obtaining EU funding. This has largely left young and less experienced civil society actors in the cold. Support for a new generation of human rights defenders should be among the many priorities on human rights in the region.

The EU (preferably through a EUSR) should regularly exchange information and discuss development cooperation in Central Asia with other powers, such as the US, China, Turkey, Japan and Russia – although the scope for dialogue with Moscow will depend on the evolution of broader EU-Russia relations. On the ground in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan donor coordination is especially important; it will be vital to involve China in this.

Beijing has pledged \$40 billion to a fund for a Silk Road Economic Belt (largely aimed at linking China via Central Asia to Europe) and a Maritime Silk Road (directed at China's littoral neighbours to the south). These donations will partly benefit Central Asia – primarily aimed at infrastructure development – and dwarf EU assistance (€1 billion over the coming 7 years) or any Russian engagement. EU-Chinese cooperation on Central Asian development, for instance by combining European know-how and Chinese funding, would seem logical. Still, prospects for this to happen seem bleak, since, for example, European firms will find it difficult to buy into Chinese commercial operations in Central Asia. China might have some interest in European rule of law activities and anti-corruption programmes as Chinese investment and business in Central Asia are negatively impacted by lawlessness and corruption.

The options for concrete cooperation in infrastructure and energy projects (outside regional and UN organisations) will remain limited, not only between China and the EU, but even between the US and the EU. For the EU and China, the *modus operandi* is too different to find a match. In the case of EU-US cooperation these actors do not regard Central Asia as a priority which limits the will for concrete cooperation.



### 3 Bilateral relations

The EU's main focus in Central Asia should be on bilateral relations, rather than regional approaches (which as an integrated bloc, the EU tends to adopt). The Central Asian states have become more diversified and expect to build their own bilateral relations with Europe. Engagement and assistance to each country will need to be further tailored to ensure that cooperation is in the best interest of both parties. This should also include an increased effort by the EU to engage with Central Asia's marginalised civil society organisations through for example, funding projects, supporting networks, and spurring debates and consultations.

Kazakhstan is the top priority for most EU member states in Central Asia. Half of foreign investment in Kazakhstan is of European origin and about 40 per cent of Kazakh exports go to Europe. Last year the EU and Kazakhstan concluded negotiations on an EPCA, embodying Astana's special relations with Brussels. Pending the European Parliaments' ratification, attention is warranted on the country's lack of democratic reform, poor human rights record reinforced by adopting repressive legislation (amendments to the Criminal and Administrative codes), criminalising the work of independent civil society and limiting media and political pluralism. Kazakhstan's fear of being locked into the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) gives the EU some leverage, which could be taken up by the European Parliament or member states to persuade Kazakhstan to adopt some concrete reforms.

If tensions between the EU and Russia arise in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is the most likely political 'battleground'. Its recent membership of the EEU places the country more firmly in Russia's orbit: somewhat of a peculiarity as one of Moscow's loyal allies in the region, it is also the most democratic country having, for instance, organised free and fair elections in October 2015. But the recent democratic gains are fragile and under threat. The Parliament of Kyrgyzstan has been considering a Russian-inspired 'Foreign Agents' law and a law against LGBT 'propaganda'. Whereas in EU eyes Kyrgyzstan was foremost an opportunity for democratisation, the immediate future seems more geared towards Kyrgyz geopolitical choices between powerful neighbours and Western actors. The EU (and other democracy supporters) will be severely challenged in obtaining results from Bishkek. Lingering ethnic tensions following the 2010 violence between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations in the south of the country remain a matter that needs monitoring.

Tajikistan also plans to join the EEU but is unstable and vulnerable to influences from Russia and China (and to a lesser extent Iran). For the EU, getting development assistance right – by being tough on the conditions for giving aid, including checks on implementation – will be essential as corruption is rife (and impeding economic development) and EU border management assistance programmes are hampered by the country's elites that are involved in the lucrative opiates trade.

Turkmenistan is the only republic in Central Asia where the EU does not yet have a fully-fledged Delegation. The reason for this seems to be budgetary, which is strange as energy remains officially a priority for the EU in Central Asia, and Turkmenistan is the only new opportunity for gas imports (opportunities in Kazakhstan's oil industry are already being exploited by Europe). However, it might be explained by the fact that gas imports from Turkmenistan are not expected any time soon. Currently Turkmenistan exports most of its gas to China, in the absence of any progress in building a Trans-Caspian pipeline to Azerbaijan and from there a connection across the Caucasus and Turkey to the EU. As only a few EU member states are represented in Ashgabat, it would make sense for the EU to have a Delegation in order to engage and monitor developments in this geo-politically challenged country, bordering Afghanistan and Iran as well as the Caspian Sea. Meanwhile the conclusion of a bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU is also pending as a result of the European Parliament's concerns over human rights in Turkmenistan. A EU Delegation might help the EU better monitor the extremely troublesome human rights situation on the ground.



EU relations with Uzbekistan have not really developed since the lifting of all sanctions in 2009 and the establishment of a Delegation in Tashkent in 2011. The regime is difficult to work with, while European trade and other interests are very limited. This non-aligned and most populous Central Asian country is, however, crucial for regional stability. It is of interest to the EU to keep channels of communication open and to assess local developments. New EU development funding is currently fully geared towards rural development. Although the sector needs support, the EU will need to explain what it expects to achieve through this support, given Uzbekistan's poor reform record and ongoing forced labour in the cotton fields.

## 4 The EU's regional approach

EU regional cooperation initiatives will need to be carefully focused and more flexible. As regional lines become ever more blurred (to what extent is Central Asia still a unified region?) and the current five 'Stans' are not eager to be rounded up by the EU in joint formats, the focus should be on cooperation with two, three or more countries that are willing and able to work on a particular area. This could also involve other countries in the wider region such as Afghanistan, Azerbaijan or Mongolia.

The EU's three regional programmes – rule of law, water and environment, and education – for Central Asia should be evaluated in-depth. If useful, they should be expanded, if not, they should be scrapped. The rule of law is an odd subject to take up in a regional format with Central Asian governments, but is at least possible to address, whereas local regimes are not open to discuss democracy as such. Still, rule of law reforms in Central Asia remain superficial at best and lack practical follow-through. All in all, these reforms do not arrive from a regional understanding or action. The initiative's platform has though created a useful database of European rule of law projects in Central Asia. It is very doubtful, however, whether the broader initiative (run by France and Germany) will actually coordinate, foster and track meaningful reform.

The same can be said about the water and environment initiative led by Italy and Romania. This is a subject important to all Central Asian republics. However, sensitivities and tensions between the countries of the region make progress difficult. Moreover, most international donor programmes increasingly seek a national rather than a regional approach; the former will likely bear more practical results at this stage. There seems to be an understanding that these regional water management problems can only be tackled if the involved countries have their own 'house' better in order. This does not mean that regional talks are not useful but that concrete progress in support should start bottom-up.

Over the last eight years, no member state has been willing to take on the education initiative. This was disappointing, as it is this sector that deserves most attention – though not necessarily on a regional basis. Latvia with the help of Poland now plans to remedy this by taking over the coordination of the initiative. If the EU wants to contribute to the development of Central Asia, to become more visible, act strategically over the long-term, and counter Russian influence, it should invest heavily in higher education (and where funds allow, also in technical vocational and secondary education). However, such an investment (largely consisting of Central Asian students having the opportunity to study in Europe) will only be useful if programmes are able to tackle or circumvent the risk of brain-drain and unequal access (of the elites only) to higher education.

The Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) is the EU’s flagship security programme in the region. The programme’s implementation is being transferred from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to a group of EU member states (Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Portugal). The parallel EU Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) has already been transferred from UNDP to GIZ, the German development agency. This is a positive development as the EU’s Central Asia policy will need more member state involvement. There is now also an opportunity to think through EU border management support, hence the minimal allocation of only €5 million for BOMCA’s ninth phase over the coming three years. The EU will need to decide if the programme will focus on border areas between the five Central Asian republics (some republics barely participate) or on the ‘external’ Tajikistan-Afghanistan border where many other donors are also active (while being affected by Tajikistan’s unwillingness to undergo wholesale reform of border security). Central Asian recipients have always sought support in the form of equipment while the EU prefers border guard training. Next steps could involve a stronger focus on migration issues and border monitoring.

## 5 Development assistance

From 2007 to 2013 the EU’s development assistance to Central Asia amounted to roughly €750 million – of which one-third was allocated to regional programmes and two-thirds to bilateral initiatives. From 2014 to 2020, the EU plans to spend about €1 billion in Central Asia. The EU has learned from the first seven year-cycle of Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) spending (paralleling the political Strategy), in which it spread its modest funds over a long list of priorities and areas. In the new cycle, the main recipients will have three sectors: Kyrgyzstan – rule of law, education and rural development; and Tajikistan: health, education and rural development. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will have one each: rural development and education, respectively. Kazakhstan no longer receives bilateral aid as it is considered an upper middle-income country, while aid to Turkmenistan will likely be phased out in 2017 when the country is set to reach upper middle-income status.

It is not exactly clear what the rationale is behind the increase in pledged allocations to Central Asia over the current cycle even though it makes sense that fewer countries should receive funds for a smaller number of concrete initiatives. Meanwhile the increase does not seem to address greater support for civil society.

The region is not a priority for the EU and earlier development aid has been heavily affected by recipients’ unwillingness to engage in democratic reform and tackle endemic corruption. Meanwhile the practice of sectoral budget support in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has continued, even though this is avoided by most other international donors. The EU, however, continues the practice – with increased funding – which has advantages but also serious risks. Over the coming years, monitoring of its implementation will be essential for the EU’s development approach to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Central Asia watchers also wonder about the steep rise in allocations to Uzbekistan (€168 million from 2014 to 2020). Uzbekistan had received little under the former funding cycle, and is mentioned by the few active donors as extremely difficult to work with. Nonetheless, the EU has more than doubled the budget for Uzbekistan without any justification that increased funds will have a significant impact. A hands-on approach and close monitoring are warranted to ensure that support to Uzbekistan’s rural sector has the desired effect.

## 6 A way forward – recommendations

The EU should focus on a few key areas where it can obtain concrete results. In its June 2015 Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, the Council ends by saying that ‘in view of the growing differentiation in the region and in order to address the important areas highlighted in these Conclusions, the Council encourages the EEAS and the Commission to come forward with proposals for the effective implementation of the Strategy in accordance with the needs for a renewed partnership with the region’. This could be interpreted as an opening to a (re)new(ed) policy statement, approach or even strategy for the region. Regardless of its shape, the following seven elements could serve as input for such a new partnership:

### 1. *Acknowledge the EU's role and limitations in the region*

Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia is unrivalled. Meanwhile the EU is on a par with the US (though it is more influential economically and less focused on security) and surpasses in influence other smaller players such as Turkey, Iran, Japan and India. The EU's leverage in Central Asia is, however, modest. Central Asian leaderships boast close relations with Brussels and European power centres as counterweights to Beijing and Moscow. These relations also help to legitimize repressive policies at home as ties with democratic European leaders and the EU structures help the regimes bolster their sovereignty and independence towards the outside world but also makes it possible to present themselves as equal and respected democratic partners internally to their own populations. Relations with important countries are often reported nationally with some pomp and circumstance stressing the importance of a particular Central Asian state for the EU or the US. Hence the EU will need to assess and set conditions with great care in its political engagement with the Central Asian regimes. As the region is not of great interest to Europe (with the exception of modest trade and investment relations with Kazakhstan) the EU should seek to have an impact in a few specific areas, notably in (economic) development and in promoting democracy and human rights; and less so in the fields of energy and hard security.

### 2. *Focus on bilateral relations and review regional initiatives*

As the EU already acknowledges, it prefers to adopt a ‘bilateral’ approach as it seeks to forge deeper ties with the countries of the region. As long as regional cooperation is not a home-grown phenomenon, the EU can do little to rally unwilling countries around subjects they either view differently or are not interested in. Consequently, current regional initiatives should be further evaluated and adapted or scrapped as necessary. Regional cooperation should also become more flexible working with just a few Central Asian partners or adding neighbouring countries to joint projects. Clearly the EU is increasingly focussing on bilateral relations with partners in seeking concrete benefits. This goes likely at the expense of regional initiatives for which the EU is famous in promoting as it is itself built on ongoing integration. The EU should continue and be ready to facilitate dialogue or perform a mediating role on sensitive regional topics (such as water management) as it is still regarded as a fairly neutral actor with great experience. Nonetheless a maturing EU external policy is more likely to seek bilateral ties as a basis for engagement.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is a development that was taken up in the Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia but also in the review of the European neighbourhood, Brussels, 18 November 2015, [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118\\_joint-communication\\_review-of-the-enp\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf)

### 3. *Get member states further involved*

Over the last eight years most EU member states have left relations with Central Asia to EU structures via the Strategy. Kazakhstan is the exception because national economic interests prevail there and member states have installed their own embassies. The EU could use increased member state support to strengthen capacity as well as leverage. An increased member state involvement will help create knowledge and interest in Central Asia by member states in turn hopefully leading to a boost of activities with the region. This would not come down to an intergovernmental management of EU aid and activities but to a division of labour under a joint EU flag – it is not about the allocation of resources and decision of what direction to take but about the actual implementation of EU programmes that the EU alone does not have the capacity for on the ground. Several member states have been involved in regional initiatives in recent years and this should be encouraged. Member states should increasingly lead and coordinate national or regional projects on behalf of the EU (just as the EU represents member states with few embassies in Central Asian republics). Germany initiated the EU Strategy in 2007, some member states have stepped up in recent years (Finland and Latvia come to mind) but now other states also need to take on aspects of EU development assistance and interest in the region. Europe as a whole through EU member states and partners (Switzerland, Norway, etc.) need to be visible in Central Asia, not just EU institutions that of course represent Europe to a large degree.

### 4. *Security and conflict prevention*

The Strategy is largely based on the idea of security and stability through engagement. The EU lacks a hard security posture in Central Asia. In case of crisis it is highly unlikely that member states will agree to act via the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP); interest in the region is too low for that and geopolitically the EU or any other actor will not easily step into a volatile region that is located in-between Russia and China. The EU's contribution lies in soft security and diplomacy: the EUSR position is important for the EU to play a diplomatic security role – this for instance helped the EU to react to the ethnic violence in the South of Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Brussels will need to further fine-tune and possibly expand its soft security input. One way to achieve this is through the institutionalised Security Dialogues that will require more high-level participation from both sides or a more structured working agenda at a lower level (ideally both). Another would be concrete projects: a new BOMCA programme incorporating lessons learned from past experiences; and projects that focus on conflict prevention. The latter, in particular, could prove essential as the region's security and stability threats are mounting (potential violent leadership changes; negative consequences of labour migration; poverty; ethnic, religious and social tensions; terrorism and tensions between neighbouring countries over territory or resources). Here the EU could team-up with international NGOs and possibly with the UN in Turkmenistan and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

### 5. *Support democratisation where possible and support civil society where needed*

Promoting democracy is difficult in Central Asia as the regimes view democracy as a threat. Possibly with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, there is little that the EU can do to support democratisation directly through working with governments as they resist reform and there is a risk that those funds would be siphoned off by corrupt bureaucracies. Consequently support for democracy should focus on the grassroots. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the EU ideally would deliver increased support through flexible funding mechanisms, including small grants, emergency support, and training schemes. For Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan where there are hardly any independent NGOs the support should target individual activists, lawyers, or exiled groups. However, the EU needs to decide whether it is capable of dispersing and monitoring many small grants directly to civil society organisations with limited absorption capacity or channel funds through other actors (international organisations or EU member states). Increased funding for Central Asia's weak civil society is desperately needed as the pressures on NGO workers and activists is mounting and international donors seem to be leaving the region. The fact

that the European Endowment for Democracy is expanding its efforts in Central Asia is good news and should be supported.

6. *Human rights as a bottom-line and at the core of the relationship*

Speaking out in defence of human rights should not contradict promoting trade interests and strategic gains. If Central Asian countries improve respect for human rights and the rule of law they will be more stable and trustworthy partners to do business with. While the EU should uphold human rights everywhere, it is crucial to do so in Central Asia where it has little to lose and where human rights have regressed over recent years. The EU is aware of the need to stay focused on deepening the Human Rights Dialogues. These need not be stand-alone events but could be connected to other policy areas (such as energy and security) – the EU will need to make more work (in the case of Central Asia at least) of the recently reviewed EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy that stresses the importance of human rights and democracy in all EU internal and external policies.<sup>6</sup> The EU should further combine the Dialogues with occasional civil society seminars and an increase in funding for human rights-related projects in all five countries. Lastly the EU should not shy away from curtailing relations or more drastic measures in case of severe or mass human rights violations.

7. *Invest in the future of the region and Europe-Central Asia relations: Education*

If the EU really seeks to have a lasting impact on the region it should invest in education. This could be the centrepiece of EU-Central Asia cooperation and the EU's development aid involvement in the region. However, the current regional education initiative and Erasmus programme are not enough. Central Asia's educational system has largely collapsed. The exceptions to this are the small number of new well-funded higher education facilities in Kazakhstan and foreign-funded and private universities in the region. The quality of higher education in Central Asia pales in comparison with other post-Soviet regions of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The post-Soviet heritage and poor state of the education systems will require tailor-made approaches in each of the countries of the region. Meanwhile a focus on education through student exchanges and study grants will help to foster people-to-people contacts between Europe and Central Asia. Over the long-run this could also offer an alternative view to that of Russia in the region's external outlook. If the EU is able to focus its efforts on education, it should also look to investing in basic education and capacity building in vocational education. A major challenge will be combatting the pervasive corruption in the educational systems in Central Asia.

8. *Continued and more stable oversight by the European Parliament*

The European Parliament should stand firm on its positions and resolutions concerning Central Asian republics. The conditions set out by the Parliament in 2009 in relation to the ratification of the PCA with Turkmenistan should stay in place until they are fulfilled. Equal attention needs to be devoted to the Central Asian countries – those that are strategically important (Kazakhstan and the EPCA, eventually pending the Parliament's approval) as well as those that are important from a security or development strand (Tajikistan). The Members of the European Parliament that are part of the delegation for Central Asia will ideally follow up on the Parliament's resolutions during Parliamentary Cooperation Committee meetings with the respective Central Asian countries. This has not always been the case in the past which in turn can undermine the European Parliament's position as well as create a weak perception among Central Asian governments. The resolutions of the Parliament should not remain stand alone papers, and should increasingly be taken up with the Parliament's hierarchy and especially with the EEAS and European Commission.

<sup>6</sup> Council conclusions on the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019 Brussels, 20 July 2015, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10897-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

## 7 Conclusion

The EU is unlikely to make radical changes to its Strategy for Central Asia as the document is still regarded as a useful catalogue of relations with the region. Member states are unlikely to push for an overhaul of policy as their interests there are limited, and concerns closer to home take precedence. Moreover the EU Strategy for Central Asia is severely affected by a lack of European leverage in its dealings with Central Asian states and the latter's lack of interest and capacity. This situation is recognised in the Council Conclusions of June 2015 where it is noted that 'the depth of relations will also depend on the ambitions and needs of individual Central Asian countries to take forward our bilateral relationships'.<sup>7</sup> The EU, despite the Strategy and its pledge of over €1 billion to the region, finds itself in an often seemingly powerless position to influence events in the region. In this sense the priority for the EU should be to focus on a few areas where it could have a meaningful impact. These should be: bilateral partnerships and increased links with civil societies; strengthening the defence of human rights; modest security cooperation and conflict prevention projects; and a more simplified and effective development policy with a heavy emphasis on education.

<sup>7</sup> Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, Brussels, 22 June 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/22-fac-central-asia-conclusions/>



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