



*Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

9.05.2023

MISSION REPORT

following the 16th EU-Republic of Uzbekistan Parliamentary Cooperation
Committee (PCC), 3-5 April 2023

Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-
Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with
Turkmenistan and Mongolia

Members of the mission:

Thierry Mariani

Ryszard Czarnecki

Javier Moreno Sánchez

Karsten Lucke

(ID) (Leader of the mission)

(ECR)

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(S&D)

Introduction

The Delegation for the relations with Central Asia (DCAS) paid a visit to Tashkent and Nukus (Republic of Karakalpakstan) from Monday, 3 April to Wednesday, 5 April 2023, with preparatory meetings at Secretariat level on Sunday, 2 April, to hold the 16th EU-Republic of Uzbekistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) and a number of meetings with a variety of interlocutors from different sectors of the Uzbek institutions and society: government, academics, civil rights organizations, business sector.

Since DCAS Chair had to cancel his participation at the eve of the start of the official programme, based on protocol order (full membership and seniority as Member of the Delegation, plus attendance to previous Delegation's meetings), MEP Thierry Mariani was selected by the Delegation as acting Chair.

Before the departure of the mission, on 20 March in Brussels, Dietmar Krissler, Head of Division Central Asia, EEAS, and the Uzbek Ambassador to the EU, H.E. Dilyor Khakimov, briefed the EP Delegation in a preparatory meeting. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the last mission by the DCAS to Uzbekistan took place in 2018, while the Uzbek Parliament visited Brussels in January 2022.

Context

The Delegation took place at a very sensitive time for Uzbekistan, for the bilateral relations with the European Union and for the overall global situation.

The country was approaching Constitutional Referendum, although the public debate seemed rather limited; the killing of at least 21 protesters in Nukus by the security forces and the situation in Karakalpakstan was still an important issue. The conclusion of the negotiations in June 2022 of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with the European Union and the forthcoming signing are opening a new playground of cooperation. The consolidation, although increasingly in disregard with any basic humanitarian and civil rights standard, of the Taliban power, has made Uzbekistan a privileged, if not controversial, interlocutor of Kabul.

Eventually, the Russian aggression on Ukraine and the subsequent polarization of international relations have put Uzbekistan like other Central Asian countries, in a delicate geo-strategic position. Tashkent is trying to reach a difficult balance between cultural and historical ties and economic dependence with Moscow, the attempt to take a neutral position and the interest to maintain, if not reinforce, the relations with the West - which in Uzbekistan is mainly associated, for its consistent presence, with the European Union.

Meetings

In only two working days in the capital, the Delegation managed to have an intense and high-level dialogue with the Lower Chamber of the Oliy Majlis - a full PCC and a separate meetings with the Deputy Speaker and the Deputy-Chairman of the Senate, and to meet the Minister for Trade and Investment, and the Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Water Management, Culture and Tourism, and Reduction of Poverty and Employment.

The European Parliament Delegation had one crowded session with academics and students of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, and with representatives of several civil society and human rights organisations. Moreover, the Delegation also met a leading government Think Tank in charge of shaping the main reforms of the country and the EU-Uzbekistan Association for Economic Cooperation.

On the third day, the Delegation paid a field visit to Karakalpakstan, with meetings of local authorities in Nukus (but not with local activists) and visit of the famous and somehow crucial Savitsky Museum, a milestone in the Central Asian heritage. In Muynak, the Delegation had the possibility to meet with the Mayor and to observe the magnitude of the environmental disaster of the former Aral Sea.

The full programme is attached at the end of this report (see *Annex I*).

Bilateral relations and economy

The status of play between the EU and Uzbekistan looks very positive, although with several “buts”. The conclusion of the negotiations of the Enhanced Partnership Economic Agreement represents an important step in upgrading the mutually available instruments for political dialogue and economic interaction. However its signing is still delayed for translations and legal check and is expected to take place by the end of 2023, which implies that it will be ratified and then implemented in a matter of a couple of years. The Minister for Investment and Trade could rightly flag that Uzbekistan has ratified all GSP+ required Conventions, and the Minister for Poverty Reduction and Employment stressed the eradication of forced and child labour, but a number of social rights, not to say political ones, are still missing. Mutual trade boomed over 50% in 2022, but such an excellent result could also be the influenced by circumventing sanctions. The internal reforms to pave the ground for a better foreign investment climate are very promising - as presented by the Centre for Strategic Development, yet Uzbekistan is still the only Central Asia country, with Turkmenistan, which is not the WTO member, although the application for membership is considered as a priority in Tashkent. Whatever will be emphasis in pushing its application in Geneva in to upgrade its role in the global market, Uzbekistan, anyway, has to face a situation in which 80% of economy is still directly state-controlled, with a long process to reverse such a scenario.

Therefore, the overall scenario is a moving and plural one, with a dialogue with the EU on raw

materials and a strong development of tourism (French, Spanish and Italians, with the EU visitors scoring third after Russians and Turkish).

The Savitsky Museum in Nukus is a perfect example of the Uzbek care in providing high standard cultural offer, not only in the historical architectural heritage but also in a specific and somehow extraordinary story of the XX Century avant-guard. Uzbekistan also enjoys a strong cultural cooperation (with four Jean Monnet projects, around 15 Erasmus Mundi fellowships per year, participation in Horizon Programme and a vast range of policies of cooperation (agriculture, public health, support to disabled groups, etc.), as pointed out also by several local MPs during the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. Visa facilitation should also be considered as a priority by the EU, with Uzbekistan having implemented a no-visa policy for the EU nationals and Uzbek migrants so far not directed to Europe but rather to Kazakhstan and Russia, for geographical and linguistic reasons.

At the University for World Economy and Diplomacy, the EP Delegation had, first, a meeting with leading teachers and then a lively discussion with students. In both, MEPs could assess the degree of interest in part of the Uzbek society in improving quality of connections with the European Union, considered as the cornerstone of innovation, fight against climate change and of a more open society.

Human Rights and possible reforms

Uzbekistan has neglected the request to allow and independent and international investigation on the violence that took place in Nukus in 2022. Trials were partially held also online, so to promote some transparency. However, the Government Commission, which calls itself "independent", has not yet released a report on its work. More than 60 people have already been sentenced to terms of up to 16 years in prison while relatives of those killed during the protests and after torture are not allowed to visit the graves. So far, no member of security forces has been punished for the officially 21 victims and several more injured. On the other side, the government somehow seems to have learned the lesson and has drop all attempts to revise the status of autonomy and constitutional right to secession of the Republic of Karakalpakstan.

Both what happened in Nukus and the way the authorities then handle the crisis, illustrate the contradictions of the status of human rights and rule of law in Uzbekistan: violence and harassment persist, as well as lack of independence of the judiciary, but also a prudent roadmap to improve trust in the society and public accountability. The constitutional referendum also mirrors such a situation, with many proposed changes in a welcome direction, but no opening to possible criticism to the power and establishment of a pluralistic democracy. Equally, the composition of the parliament is articulated in different parties, and the debate in the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee was frank and with expression of different individual angles, yet no criticism is ever expressed, no voice raises in a different way than the mainstream. Similar to the Parliament is the situation of the media.

Quite vocal in the meeting with the European Parliament, civil society organizations underlined the

persistent corruption in tribunals, the lack of consistency in punishing domestic and sexual abuses and on inadequacy of judges - with low salary and poor training, lack of gender balance in their ranks, political appointments. Registration of some NGOs, for instance, has been refused for more than twenty times, always on grounds of formalities.

Among others, priority reforms are a new judiciary environment and reference and implementation of international standards as laid down in international conventions. However, while space for NGOs and human rights defenders is limited, Uzbekistan also managed to achieve positive results in fighting against child labour and forced labour, in improving submission of cases online, in having next legislative changes - in criminal code, media and information code, NGO code, and the Referendum - may give a better direction to Uzbekistan, a country very young and with a more assertive new generation. This is an effort that needs to be constantly supported by the European Union, and where the monitoring of the status of GSP+ may play an important role.

Russia, Ukraine and sanctions

The Russian aggression on Ukraine is not a popular topic of public discussion in Uzbekistan. Not much can be found in the media, nor the political debate is very vocal. While the European Parliament's Delegation presented few times the official EU position, the Uzbek side - both in the PCC and in meeting with the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs - has taken note but not engaged in any substantial discussion. In return, the Uzbek interlocutors have reiterated its traditional friendship with both Russia and Ukraine, its profound regret for the situation, its neutrality in the conflict. The position is therefore ambivalent: Uzbekistan abstained in the UN, but issued a statement that Tashkent will not recognize any Russian annexation - probably also to avoid any legitimization of secession from Karakalpakstan. According to human rights activists, the society is somehow split, with the youth, more connected to alternative narratives, critical about the invasion, and the old generation and most of the political establishment quietly supporting Moscow. Interestingly, and perhaps revealing, the Oliy Majlis has friendship groups with Russia and with Belarus but not with Ukraine. At the start of the invasion, the EU Delegation was prevented to fly the Ukrainian flag, although later the restriction was lifted. EU officials, anyway, do not wear yellow and blue pins.

It is a delicate balance: Uzbekistan strongly depends on Russia for its trade and for migrants' remittances, which amount to 23% of GDP. Uzbekistan fears the possible instability of Russia, and even more the collapse of its economy, which would provoke the return of many migrants and the disruption of a significant component of its trade. An additional reason of concern is that Uzbek with dual nationality could be sent to the front.

In any case, the war has not a negative impact on the economy, on the contrary. Being part of the Eurasian Economic Union comprising Russia and Belarus, Uzbekistan does not support sanctions as a way of resolving differences, but equally does not seek to assist in the circumvention of the sanctions. However, like in Uzbekistan, something is going wrong on the

sanction side. Trade with the EU is booming as well as transactions with Russia. In Tashkent, there are many rumours about sanctioned products imported from Europe and re-exported to Russia, including chemicals used to make bombs. Transactions are now paid in roubles and not anymore in USD with China or India. The EU Special Envoy on Sanctions, David O’Sullivan, certainly needs to look into the files of this country, and the European Parliament should monitor and consider the overall approach of Uzbekistan, including its compliance in preventing circumventing of sanctions, in the full picture of the bilateral relations.

Afghanistan

“We do not choose our neighbours, still they are our neighbours” has been the Uzbek mantra on Taliban, a popular topic raised in several meetings, notably during the PCC and at both the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Water Management. Uzbekistan has opted for a constructive and pragmatic approach, contrary to its neighbour Tajikistan. it sells electricity to Afghanistan (regularly paid although with some delay), runs the only railway of the country connecting Termez to Mazar, hosts a vocational centre for Afghans (with the EU support), welcomes tens of thousands of refugees and serves as logistical and financial hub to the Taliban, who are frequent visitors to Tashkent (for instance for car services). The two sides are now cooperating in the possible construction of one of the most important infrastructural projects of the whole Central Asia: a railway from Mazar to Herat, Kandahar, Kabul and Peshawar, for which the Uzbek interlocutors have reiterated the interest in EU partnership - technical and financial.

However, such a pragmatic approach still does not play a persuasive role on the Kabul leadership. So far, Uzbek officials have not been admitted to Kandahar and Taliban are not receptive to the requests to allow female education and a more moderate interpretation of the sharia. In 2022, for the first time, the Uzbek Government issued a critical statement on the Taliban, related to the ban of female education.

Even more serious for Tashkent, the Kabul regime is unilaterally constructing an irrigation channel diverting water from the Amu Darya river to Afghanistan, this being is a matter of concern since it could reduce the water capacity of the already poor river of about 30%. In spite of such an engagement, eventually the main positive outcome for Uzbekistan seems to be the better overall security provided by the Taliban - a moderate but substantial achievement for Uzbekistan in its work on progress to find a balanced *modus operandi* with its traditional trouble-maker neighbour. Afghanistan should not become a threat and so far it is not a safe haven for international terrorism, and is to be considered as full part of Central Asia and of its regional policy and operational instruments.

Water, environment and the Aral Sea

As pointed out by EU diplomats, Uzbekistan is now a very different country compared to the Karimov’s era, and regional cooperation is a priority. Although Afghanistan remains a divisive issue

with Tajikistan, in few years Uzbekistan became one of the propulsive factor of better cooperation. As an example, both EU diplomats and local interlocutors underlined the dialogue and the agreements on border demarcation with the neighbouring countries as fruitful achievements.

Borders matter also for the crucial issue of water, with 80% of water are coming from outside and only 20% originating in Uzbekistan itself. Using 90% of available water for the local agriculture Uzbekistan just aggravates the limited available resources - only 1.500 m³ per capita compared to world average of 24.600 m³.

The legacy of the Soviet Union and of the immediate years following the collapse of the USSR is crystalized in the death of the Aral Sea, that the EP Delegation could assess in its visit to Muynak. The Uzbek authorities are realistic about the irreversibility of the situation in the former Aral Sea, and, also with EU support, actions are limited to reinstallation of trees and vegetation in what has become a vast and poisoned desert. Very impressive was also the view of the agonizing Amu Darya river, till recently a powerful water distribution tool in Central Asia.

In such gloomy picture, strong regional cooperation is a matter of essence. Dialogue with Tajikistan has now improved, since Uzbekistan has stopped opposing the construction of the Rogum dam. The European Union is perceived as the main existing and perspective partner in addressing climate and environmental challenges, due to its consolidated policy of privileging regional approach, its best practices and innovative technologies on water management and renewable energy, its advanced legislation. This is a field where the EU could have few competitors, also compared to Turkey and China, not to mention other regional players, and such a role should further be exploited also by the European Parliament in its bilateral relations.

The role and a follow-up of the European Parliament

The signing of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) is expected to take place by the end of 2023, and will be followed by the vote of the European Parliament. The implementation of the GSP+ correlated conventions requires adequate monitoring, and the European Parliament has to fully play its role on this. Due to its active role in Afghanistan, the European Parliament needs also to focus on Uzbek role in the country, notably assessing the political and economic viability of planned railway construction and to the possible role of Uzbekistan in channelling political messages and humanitarian and development activities to the Taliban.

Moreover, two crucial issues demand proper attention by the European Parliament: 1) The evolution of the situation of human rights in Uzbekistan, in Karakalpakstan as elsewhere, also following the outcome, quite predictable, of the constitutional referendum. Issues such as some more independence of the judiciary and fight against corruption are also part of this required scrutiny and dialogue with the civic society has to be continued and increased. 2) Uzbekistan

benefits of a custom union with Russia and, as it is the case for other Central Asian countries, is a potentially perfect place to circumvent sanctions on Russia. Notably in view of protracted conflict in Ukraine, this need to be a priority area of further scrutiny for the EU, including the European Parliament.

List of Annexes

1. List of participants
2. Final programme of the visit
3. Agenda of the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee
4. List of attending Civic Society Organizations

European Parliament

2019-2024



*Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

16th European Union - Republic of Uzbekistan

Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC)

Tashkent and Nukus

Uzbekistan

3-5 April 2023

List of participants

DCAS Members

| | | |
|---|-----|---------|
| Mr Thierry MARIANI, Member | ID | France |
| Mr Ryszard CZARNECKI, Member | ECR | Poland |
| Mr Javier MORENO SÁNCHEZ, Substitute Member | S&D | Spain |
| Mr Karsten LUCKE, Substitute Member | S&D | Germany |

Secretariat

1 Head of Unit

1 AST

Political advisors

2 Political Advisors

Interpreters

4 Interpreters



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Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

European Union - Republic of Uzbekistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC)

16th meeting

3-5 April 2023

Tashkent and Nukus (Uzbekistan)

FINAL PROGRAMME

Monday 03/04/2023

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| 10:00 | Transfer from Hotel to the EUDEL |
| 10:30-11:30 | Meeting with the EU Delegation to Uzbekistan and a briefing by the EU Ambassador Ms Charlotte ADRIAEN |
| 11:30-12:30 | Meeting with the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) |
| 13:00-14:00 | Lunch |
| 14:30-17:30 | 16th European Union - Republic of Uzbekistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) |
| 17:30-18:15 | Meeting with the First Deputy Chairman Legislative Chamber of Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Speaker of the Commission of Constitutional reforms Mr Akmal SAIDOV |
| 19:00 | Official Dinner on behalf of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan |

Tuesday, 04/04/2023

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| 10:00 | Departure to the University of World Economy and Diplomacy |
| 10.15-11.15 | Meeting with the Vice-Rector on Educational Affairs, Mr Durbek AMANOV, Ms Gulnoza ISMAILOVA, Vice-Rector for Science and Innovation and other teachers and students at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy |
| 11:15 | Departure to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| 11:30-12:00 | Meeting with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs |
| 12:30-13:45 | Working Lunch on behalf of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan |
| 13:45 | Departure to the Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade |
| 14:00-14:30 | Meeting with the Leadership of the Ministry of Industry, Investment and Trade |
| 14:30 | Departure to the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Employment |
| 14:45-15:15 | Meeting with the Leadership of the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Employment |
| 15 :15 | Departure to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism |
| 15:30-16:00 | Meeting with the Leadership of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism |
| 16:00 | Departure to the Ministry of Water Management |
| 16:30-17:00 | Meeting with the Leadership of the Ministry of Water Management |
| 17:00 | Departure to the Development Strategy Centre |
| 17:30-18:30 | Meeting with leadership of the "Development Strategy" centre |
| 19.30 | Official dinner hosted by DCAS Delegation, Mr Thierry MARIANI, Head of Delegation |
| 21:30 | Evening tea meeting with Uzbekistan's business leaders organised by the EU-Uzbekistan Association for Economic Cooperation |

Wednesday 05/04/2023

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| 07:15 | Internal flight from Tashkent to Nukus |
| 08:55 | Arrival in Nukus |
| 08:55 | Arrival, departure to Jokargy Kenes of the Republic of Karakalpakstan |
| 09:00-10:00 | Meeting with Mr. Amanbay ORYNBAYEV, the Chairman of the Jokargy Kenes (Parliament) of the Republic of Karakalpakstan |
| 10:05 | Departure to the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan |
| 10:15-11:00 | Meeting with Mr. Daryabay KAYPOV, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan on agriculture and water issues and the Leadership of the Committee on Ecology and Environmental protection of the Karakalpakstan Republic |
| 11:00-14:00 | Departure to Muynak city |
| 14:00-15:00 | Working lunch hosted by the Mayor of Muynak city |
| 15:00-16:30 | Visit to former shore of the Aral Sea and to the museum of the Aral Sea environmental disaster |
| 16:30-19:30 | Departure to Nukus city |
| 19:30-20:45 | Visit to the Savitsky Museum |
| 20:45-21:45 | Working Dinner on behalf of the Jokargy Kenes of the Republic of Karakalpakstan |
| 22:30 | Departure to Tashkent |
| 23:50 | Arrival in Tashkent |



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AGENDA

16th European Union - Republic of Uzbekistan

Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC)

Monday, 3 April 2023

Tashkent

1. Opening of the working session, opening speeches:

- **Mrs Dilorom FAYZIEVA – Chairwoman of the Committee of Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis on International Affairs and Inter-Parliamentary Relations/Co-Chair of the 16th EU- Republic of Uzbekistan PCC**
- **Mr Thierry MARIANI, Co-Chair of the 16th EU- Republic of Uzbekistan PCC, Head of the Delegation of the European Parliament**

2. Adoption of the agenda

3. Adoption of the draft minutes of the 15th meeting of the EU-Republic of Uzbekistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) held in Brussels (European Union) in 2022

4. State of play of the EU-Republic of Uzbekistan cooperation and developments in the European Union and Republic of Uzbekistan, with focus on:

- **Impact of the war in Ukraine and related sanctions;**
- **Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) and EU/Uzbek trade and economic relations, market access and related technical cooperation;**
- **Economic and social reforms, their implementation and investment climate;**

5. Developments in the EU and Republic of Uzbekistan regional policy of Central Asia, with focus on:

- **Situation in Afghanistan;**
- **Connectivity, transport and infrastructure projects;**
- **Environmental policy and water resources management;**

6. Human rights, Rule of Law and social policy, including the empowerment of civil society and fundamental freedoms

7. Date and place of the next meeting

Annex 4

Meeting with the invited Uzbek NGOs

Monday, 3 April 2023

Tashkent

1. **Dilfuza Kurolova** - human rights lawyer
2. **Bobur Bekmurodov** - Chairman of nationwide movement “Yuksalish”, member of Oliy Majlis
3. **Shankhodzhaev Kamoliddin** - Chairman of the National Association of Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations
4. **Abdurakhmon Tashanov** - Head of “Ezgulik” Agency, human rights defender
5. **Shukhrat Ganiev** - human rights defender
6. **Nozima Davletova** - Director of Mass media foundation
7. **Obid Khakimov** - Director if the Center for Economic Research and Reforms under the Presidential Administration
8. **Liliana Sin** - Ecological Party of Uzbekistan (2019), expert on the activities of civil society institutions and environmental problems in the Central Asian region.
9. **Olga Ilmuradova** – Director of NGO “Barqaror Hayot”, dealing with returnees from conflict areas, high risk youth, displaced Afghan citizens