CENTRAL ASIA

The EU recognises the strategic importance of Central Asia, which links the huge Asian continent with Europe. In 2019, the EU updated its Central Asia strategy to focus on resilience (covering areas such as human rights, border security and the environment), prosperity (with a strong emphasis on connectivity) and regional cooperation. Parliament highlights the importance of human rights, good governance and social development, underlining the role of parliamentary diplomacy. Parliament strongly supports democracy and the rule of law with concrete initiatives such as democratisation in Central Asia. In the light of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, Central Asia has become crucial for security and stability. While Tajikistan has expressed reservations, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have recently begun engagement cooperation with the Taliban.

LEGAL BASIS

— Title V of the Treaty on European Union (TEU): ‘external action’;
— Articles 206-207 (trade) and Articles 216-219 (international agreements) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU);
— Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) covering bilateral relations, with the exception of Turkmenistan for which an interim trade agreement is in place. The new Enhanced PCA (EPCA) with Kazakhstan fully entered into force on 1 March 2020. The EPCA with Kyrgyzstan was initialled in July 2019 and negotiations with Uzbekistan are underway. Tajikistan has also expressed an interest in an EPCA.

THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES AND EU-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

For years, relations between Central Asian countries were generally poor, owing to border and resource disputes. Nevertheless, the situation has changed rapidly following the change of leadership in Uzbekistan in 2016, opening up new possibilities for regional cooperation. The first Central Asian leaders’ summit on regional cooperation since the 1990s was held in Astana in March 2018 and a second summit took place in November 2019 in Tashkent. Renewable energy sources are another focus of attention in view of the enormous potential for regional cooperation and investment. The regional economy strongly declined in 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, but is expanding in 2021 with expected growth of 3.9%.
All the Central Asian countries follow multi-vector foreign policies, seeking to balance ties with Russia, China, the EU and the US in particular. Relations with Turkey and Iran are also important. Turkmenistan has been largely closed to the outside world, and its 'permanent neutrality' status is even recognised by the UN. EU trade, mainly in mineral resources, is noteworthy with Kazakhstan, and is on the rise with Uzbekistan, not least following the adoption of the EU-Uzbekistan Textiles Protocol, to which Parliament consented in 2016. The EU has also welcomed the accession of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

In 2016, Parliament supported the EU’s Central Asia strategy, calling for it to be more focused. The EU Central Asia strategy was endorsed by the Council in June 2019. The scope of the EU’s relations is linked to the readiness of individual Central Asian countries to undertake reforms and strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as to modernise and diversify the economy, including by supporting the private sector and SMEs, in particular, in a free market economy.

The importance of a regional approach and regional cooperation has also been stressed at the EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meetings. The 16th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting took place on 17 November 2020. Participants reaffirmed their commitment to the 2019 Central Asia strategy and discussed the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. In July 2020, the EU, along with the World Health Organisation (WHO), announced the Central Asia COVID-19 Crisis Response Programme (CACCR) to supply EUR 3 million in support to Central Asian countries. The solidarity package is aimed at building the long-term resilience of the national health systems.

Parliament’s activities with Central Asia are conducted mainly by the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), the Committee on International Trade (INTA), the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE), the Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) and the Delegation for Relations with Central Asia (D-CAS), as well as through the Parliamentary Cooperation Committees (PCCs) and the Delegation for relations with Afghanistan (D-AF), among other bodies. PCCs with the majority of Central Asian countries meet every year. MEPs oversee the implementation of the agreements and focus on human rights issues, the political situation, economic and development cooperation, and electoral processes.

EU-Central Asia high-level political and security dialogues have taken place regularly since 2013. A high-level political and security dialogue involving the EU, Central Asian countries and Afghanistan was held on 28 May 2019 in Brussels. This dialogue led to discussions around the EU Central Asia Strategy as well as the promotion of EU-Asia connectivity.

There are EU Delegations in all Central Asian countries, since the Delegation to Turkmenistan was opened in July 2019. The EU Delegation to Mongolia was opened in 2017.

Central Asian countries received EUR 1.02 billion in funding for 2014-2020 from the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which included both bilateral assistance
and regional programmes (EUR 360 million). Horizon Europe is the EU’s new key funding programme for research and innovation, with a budget of EUR 95.5 billion worldwide available over a period of seven years (2021 to 2027).

In 2020, two-way trade in goods amounted to EUR 22.3 billion with a EUR 4.1 billion trade surplus in favour of Central Asia. The assistance focuses on education, regional security, sustainable management of natural resources and socio-economic development. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are no longer eligible for the bilateral parts of the DCI since they have gained upper-middle-income-country status, but they continue to have access to the regional programmes. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) operates in all the states except for Turkmenistan, where civil society organisations are too few in number, too poorly organised and too strictly controlled.

The EU has been upgrading the older Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the Central Asian partners.

The 10th meeting of the EU-Central Asia Working Group on Environment and Climate Change (WGECC) took place on 4 and 5 October 2021. The EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum was held in Almaty on 6 October 2021, centring on the theme ‘Building a Better Future: Involvement in Sustainable Post-COVID Recovery’.

Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the situation in Afghanistan has become not only a global issue but also the leading concern of Central Asian governments. The entire Central Asian region has become a crucial area for containing religious extremism and terror networks, together with drug trafficking within its borders. Individual Central Asian republics (and notably Tajikistan) remain reluctant to pursue any substantial engagement with the Taliban in spite of the fact that the Taliban appear to have simultaneously launched a diplomatic offensive aimed at reassuring Central Asian neighbours.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan could result in Central Asian countries becoming a destination for large numbers of Afghan refugees and therefore potential recipients of additional EU support, both financial and political.

A. Kazakhstan

On Kazakhstan, Parliament gave its consent to the EPCA in 2017, stressing the importance of the ‘more for more’ principle to stimulate political and socio-economic reforms.

President Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 after three decades in power, but as ‘Supreme Leader’ maintains significant influence and formal powers under the new President Tokayev. Kazakhstan held parliamentary elections in January 2021 to elect the 107-seat Mazhilis. The ruling Nur-Otan party retained its majority while the opposition party All-National Social Democratic Party (OSDP) boycotted the election claiming fraud by the political elite.

Kazakhstan has recorded high economic growth in the past, becoming an upper-middle-income country in 2006. This economic progress is challenged by the heavy impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and by its growing political and economic dependence on China. In April 2021, Kazakhstan announced its own COVID-19
vaccine, QazVac, and prepared to increase productivity to make it available to all citizens. GDP growth is expected to decline, reflecting the internal economic results and the slowdown in Russia and China. The year 2022 will mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Kazakhstan-China diplomatic relations, while Kazakhs have recently protested against China’s increasing influence and economic power. In January 2021, Kazakhstan abolished the death penalty after ratifying the UN’s Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in so doing became the 88th signatory to the covenant. The EEAS lauded the step in a statement. In 2020, Kazakhstan joined the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a multilateral treaty which is included in the International Bill of Human Rights.

The EU and Kazakhstan Cooperation Council took place on 10 May 2021 in Brussels to strengthen bilateral cooperation under the EPCA and discuss the developments of Central Asia.

The 18th EU-Kazakhstan PCC met on 11 October 2021 in Brussels to discuss cooperation and the implementation of the EPCA, recent developments in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover and their impact, the need to proceed to EU visa facilitation for Kazakh nationals, and the situation of human rights.

Parliament has not observed elections in Kazakhstan since 2005. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/OIDHR) election observation mission in Kazakhstan found shortcomings in the January 2021 parliamentary elections. These included a lack of genuine opposition to Nur-Otan as well as non-compliance with OSCE/ODIHR recommendations relating to fundamental freedoms, impartiality of election administration and eligibility, among others. The European External Action Service (EEAS) also noted that while Kazakhstan had undergone important political reforms, the elections were a missed opportunity to show their effective implementation.

Parliament’s resolution of 11 February 2021 on the alarming human rights situation in Kazakhstan called for respect for the legal framework for holding elections. Parliament underlined the OSCE recommendations guaranteeing fundamental freedoms, ending the arbitrary detention of human rights activists and members of political opposition movements, ensuring that the rights of the LGBTI community are respected, and ensuring the safety of Kazakhs and other ethnic minority groups. Moreover, it called for possible individual sanctions against Kazakhstan officials directly responsible for human rights abuses.

B. Kyrgyzstan

An EPCA with Kyrgyzstan was initialled in July 2019. The EU is one of the main sponsors of sustainable development and reforms in Kyrgyzstan. Between 2014 and 2020, the EU allocated EUR 174 million in grant-based development assistance directed at three main sectors and support measures: the rule of law, integrated rural development and education. Additionally, the EU also supports democratic transition and democratic elections via a rule-of-law programme. The EU has also committed EUR 20 million towards stabilisation and democratisation support.

The OSCE/ODIHR observed parliamentary elections in 2015 and presidential elections in 2017. Parliamentary elections were held in Kyrgyzstan on 4 October 2020 and
were subsequently invalidated following mass protests against irregularities and vote buying. Kyrgyzstan’s President, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, resigned on 15 October 2020. The country held presidential elections on 10 January 2021 and Sadyr Japarov took office as the country’s sixth president. The EU noted low voter turnout, the lack of a level playing field for candidates, violations regarding campaigning procedures and an abuse of administrative resources, as reported by the OSCE/OIDHR. The EU also called on the president to commit to the universal obligations on fundamental freedoms and human rights. It urged for the constitution to be respected and also called for parliamentary elections to be conducted in cooperation with the OSCE/OIDHR. Kyrgyzstan’s President set the date for the next parliamentary elections for 28 November 2021.

In a referendum held on 11 April 2021, voters approved a new constitution that will reduce the size of the parliament by 25% to 90 seats and that hands the president the power to appoint judges and leaders of law enforcement bodies. It also replaces the present law allowing the president one term in office in favour of re-election for a second term. The EU issued a statement on the constitutional reform in Kyrgyzstan on 22 April 2021, expressing its regret at the lack of inclusive dialogue involving civil society. However, the EU insisted that it would continue its support in advancing the reform agenda.

On 1 June 2021, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Peter Burian, arrived in the Kyrgyz Republic to hold bilateral meetings with President Japarov and other relevant leaders, to discuss bilateral cooperation, the state of play as regards human rights issues and challenges in the implementation of the EU strategy for Central Asia, among other issues.

The 18th EU-Kyrgyz Republic Cooperation Council of 4 June 2021 discussed the strengthening of the rule of law, progress in judiciary and electoral reforms, good governance, cooperation with civil society and human rights. The 11th EU-Kyrgyz Republic annual Human Rights Dialogue took place on 6 September 2021 in Brussels. The EU expressed its concern about the COVID-19 restrictions resulting in an increase in gender-based violence, restrictions on independent media and controversial legislative initiatives. Kyrgyzstan hosted the first EU-Central Asia Economic Forum on 5 November 2021 in Bishkek.

On Kyrgyzstan, Parliament expressed concern at the LGBTI ‘propaganda’ draft laws in 2015. In January 2019, it issued recommendations for the negotiation of a new bilateral agreement. Following clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in April 2021, Chair of Parliament’s AFET committee David McAllister and D-CAS Chair Fulvio Martusciello issued a statement on 3 May 2021 welcoming the ceasefire and called on both sides to hold diplomatic discussions instead of engaging in military clashes.

C. Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan became the ninth beneficiary country when it joined the EU’s sustainable development and good governance (GSP+) arrangement in April 2021. By joining this scheme, Uzbekistan will receive additional economic benefits due to the cancellation of tariffs for two thirds of the product lines covered by the GSP+. The instrument is expected to boost the country’s exports and help attract foreign investment. In
Uzbekistan is expected to implement 27 core international conventions on good governance, human and labour rights, and environmental and climate protection.

Under Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took office in 2016, internal changes, such as the release of a number of political prisoners, reflect some positive developments. In February 2021, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a law to move presidential elections to October 2021. The OSCE/ODIHR reiterated its recommendations regarding party financing, expediting vote-counting and cutting state resources for electoral campaigns. There are concerns in the run-up to the October 2021 elections that there will be no genuine opposition. Uzbek state authorities have denied the registration of a new party, Haqiqat va Taraqqiyo (Truth and Progress Social Democratic Party) on the grounds that many signatures collected by the opposition politician Khidirnazar Allaqulov were invalid.

On 11 May 2021, an Uzbek court sentenced blogger Otabek Sattoriy to 6 years’ imprisonment on libel and extortion charges. Sattoriy’s videos often criticised top government officials in his province of Termez, and highlighted corruption cases. Rights and journalist advocacy groups have called the sentencing an attempt by the leadership to frighten the press ahead of elections.

Uzbekistan has recently begun engagement cooperation with the Taliban. On 16 October 2021, Uzbekistan’s Deputy Prime Minister met with Taliban delegates in the Uzbek border town of Termez to discuss trade issues and economic interaction, ensuring border security and cooperation in energy, transportation and international cargo, as well as the railway project connecting Termez to the Pakistani city of Peshawar via Afghanistan’s Mazar and Kabul.

Parliament approved the EU-Uzbekistan Textile Protocol in December 2016 following an effective commitment by the country, in close cooperation with the International Labour Organization, to eradicate the use of child labour during the annual cotton harvest. In March 2019, it issued recommendations for the negotiation of the Enhanced PCA.

In its recommendation of 26 March 2019 on the new comprehensive agreement between the EU and Uzbekistan, Parliament asked to be allowed proper scrutiny of the negotiating process.

Parliament was invited to observe legislative elections in Uzbekistan for the first time in December 2019, but these elections were only monitored by the OSCE/ODIHR. Parliament refused to observe the elections on the grounds that they were neither free nor fair, pointing to the fact that members of the Uzbek Parliament came from pro-regime parties only.

However, Parliament accepted the invitation to monitor the 24 October 2021 presidential election even though the five candidates accepted and registered by the Central Election Commission (CEC) were allegedly pro-government, while two credible opposition candidates from the Liberal Democratic Party and the Truth and Progress Social Democratic Party had been denied registration.
D. Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan remains a repressive country under the authoritarian rule of President Berdymukhamedov. Recent developments show that democratic development has not progressed and the human rights situation has not improved. In 2021, Turkmenistan introduced some constitutional reforms, including the creation of an Upper House. However, the role of the Turkmen Parliament is still extremely limited.

EU-Turkmenistan relations are governed by the 2010 Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters, as Parliament has not ratified the PCA signed in 1998. The EU has reaffirmed that the rule of law and respect for human rights are essential elements of the EU-Turkmenistan relationship.

The 13th annual EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue took place on 6 July 2021. Discussions centred on Turkmenistan’s fulfilment of its international legal obligations, in particular respect for human rights, socio-economic issues and cooperation on multilateral platforms. Parliament has consistently expressed concerns about Turkmenistan’s poor human rights record and, accordingly, has blocked the entry into force of the PCA so far. In March 2019, it set out recommendations to be addressed before it would consider giving its consent. Parliament has never been invited to observe elections in Turkmenistan. The 6th EU-Turkmenistan Interparliamentary Meeting is set to be held in December 2021.

E. Tajikistan

EU-Tajikistan relations are at present governed by a PCA that has been in force since 2010 and the country has expressed an interest in opening negotiations on a new bilateral agreement. The EU is looking to initiate EPCA negotiations with the Central Asian country soon. The Ninth meeting of the EU-Tajikistan Cooperation Council was held on 19 February 2021, at which the optimistic development of bilateral relations between the two parties was assessed and political and socio-economic developments in Tajikistan were considered. Along with discussions on the impact of COVID-19, the EU also encouraged Tajikistan to improve its record as regards fundamental freedoms and respect for human rights. Discussions also covered political, judicial and economic reforms, the rule of law, trade, investment and energy relations, as well as international issues. The EU welcomed Tajikistan’s interest in becoming a GSP+ beneficiary.

Officials from the EU and Tajikistan have been meeting to discuss an enhanced dialogue on human rights, which was signed in 2008. The 12th Human Rights Dialogue took place in November 2020. While the EU lauded the positive discussions between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the EU on penitentiary reform, concerns were expressed regarding torture in detention facilities and the EU stressed the need also to rehabilitate victims.

In the EEAS statement of 30 April 2021, the EU expressed concern about the clashes at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. The statement lauded the ceasefire agreement reached by the two countries on 29 April 2021 and offered assistance to maintain stability and prosperity in the region, which is a key goal of the Central Asia strategy.

Parliament consented to the conclusion of the PCA Agreement in 2009, but called for improvements in human rights, corruption, health and education. In a 2016 resolution,
Parliament expressed concerns about the deterioration of human rights, notably as regards prisoners of conscience.

The OSCE/ODIHR observed parliamentary elections in March 2020, with Tajikistan holding presidential elections in October 2020. For the fifth time, Emomali Rahmon of the People’s Democratic Party was re-elected with 90% of the vote.

F. Mongolia

Mongolia, though not covered by the EU’s Central Asian strategy, is classified by Parliament as part of the region within the framework of its standing delegations. Mongolia shares many cultural, historic and economic aspects with the former USSR republics of Central Asia. During the last three decades, Mongolia has distinguished itself as an ‘oasis of democracy’ with solid economic growth, even though developments in 2019 have raised concerns about democratic erosion. In 2017, Parliament gave its consent to the EU-Mongolia PCA.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mongolia still held its regular parliamentary elections and saw Ukhnaa Khürelsükh elected President. As the new, amended constitution requires the President not to be affiliated to a political party, on 25 June 2021, Ukhnaa was replaced as leader of the Mongolian People’s Party (MPP) by incumbent Mongolian Prime Minister Luvsannamsrai Oyun-Erdene. Mongolian politics is currently dominated by the consolidation of the MPP party with a supermajority in the Mongolian Parliament and presidential control, and can be called a single-party regime.

The EU-Mongolia third Joint Committee meeting was held on 3 December 2020 under the new EU-Mongolia PCA to discuss the severe socio-economic impact of COVID-19. Both sides agreed to boost people-to-people initiatives post-COVID-19 and discussed climate change and the need for a green, sustainable economy.

In May 2021, under the framework of the EU-funded ‘Support for Mongolian Economic Diversification through SME Access to Finance’ programme, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) launched the initiative ‘COVID-19 Crisis Response – Provision of Emergency Legal Advice to SMEs in Mongolia’, with a view to strengthening SMEs and mitigating the impact of COVID-19, as well as creating a better business environment. On 21 June 2021, the first Mongolia-EU dialogue on sanitary- and phytosanitary-related issues was held to exchange views on the requirements for exporting products of animal and plant origin to the EU market.

Parliament’s statements on Mongolia have largely been related to economic issues, but also to the country’s development and humanitarian needs, linked to extreme weather conditions. A Parliament delegation observed Mongolia’s 2017 presidential elections and 2016 parliamentary elections and noted that the country is developing a solid democracy. The 14th EU-Mongolia Interparliamentary Meeting scheduled in Ulaanbaatar was postponed owing to the COVID-19 restrictions. The last meeting was held in December 2019 in Brussels.

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