The EU recognises the strategic importance of the Central Asia region, linking Europe and Asia. In 2019, the EU updated its Central Asia strategy to focus on resilience (covering areas such as human rights, border security, environment), prosperity (with a strong accent on connectivity), as well as regional cooperation. Parliament has highlighted the importance of human rights, good governance and social development.

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 is being applied provisionally pending ratification by all EU Member States. The EPCA with Kyrgyzstan was initialled in July 2019 and negotiations with Uzbekistan are underway. Tajikistan has expressed interest in an enhanced agreement too.

SITUATION IN THE REGION

Central Asia is not a homogeneous region in terms of politics or economics. While Turkmenistan remains one of the most authoritarian states in the world with an appalling human rights record, Kyrgyzstan stands out for its more advanced democracy. However, recent developments in Kyrgyzstan show that democratic development and the human rights situation are vulnerable. To different extents, the political situation in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is characterised by authoritarian rule, serious human rights shortcomings and the lack of independent media and judiciary.

Under the new 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 Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 after three decades in power, but maintains significant influence as well as formal powers under the new President Tokayev.

Kazakhstan has recorded the highest economic growth in the past, becoming an upper-middle-income country in 2006. On the contrary, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with their challenging geography, continue to be the region's poorest countries with
significant dependence on remittances, chiefly from Russia, and on foreign investment and lending, in particular from China.

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 summit meeting on regional cooperation between Central Asian leaders since the 1990s was held in Astana in March 2018 and a second summit took place in November 2019 in Tashkent. A common matter of concern is the risk of expanding Islamic extremism and returning fighters from Syria and Iraq. The region also continues to be adversely affected by the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

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 though 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 WTO. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Mongolia, though not part of the Central Asia as generally understood and not covered by the EU Central Asia strategy, is classified by Parliament as part of the region in its structure of standing delegations. During the last three decades, it has distinguished itself as an 'oasis of democracy', with solid economic growth, although developments in 2019 have raised concerns of democratic erosion.

EU-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

The EU has been upgrading the older Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the Central Asian partners. It signed a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kazakhstan in December 2015, to which the European Parliament gave its consent in December 2017. The agreement has been applied provisionally since May 2016, pending ratification by the EU's national parliaments. An EPCA with Kyrgyzstan was initialled in July 2019, while negotiations with Uzbekistan were launched in November 2018. Both countries had concluded PCAs with the EU that have been in force since 1999. Tajikistan, whose PCA has been in force since 2010, has expressed interest in opening negotiations on a new bilateral agreement. Mongolia's PCA with the EU entered into force in November 2017. EU relations with Turkmenistan are governed by the 2010 Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters, as the European Parliament made ratification of the PCA signed in 1998 contingent on the existence of a system to check progress on human rights.

The new EU Central Asia Strategy was endorsed by the Council in June 2019. The earlier version of the strategy from 2007 has been updated to focus on resilience (covering areas such as human rights, border security, environment), prosperity (with a strong accent on connectivity), as well as regional cooperation. It also puts a greater emphasis on Central Asia-Afghanistan relations. The importance of a
regional approach and of regional cooperation is also stressed by the EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meetings, the last one (15th) having taken place in July 2019 in Bishkek. Kazakhstan is an important source of oil imports to the EU (about 8%) and Turkmenistan has significant potential for future supplies of natural gas, in particular if the planned Trans-Caspian Pipeline is built. With regard to neighbouring Afghanistan and related security challenges, the EU assists the Central Asian partners in border security management and fight against drug trafficking. An EU-Central Asia high-level political and security dialogue takes place regularly since 2013. There are EU Delegations in all countries in Central Asia, since the one to Turkmenistan was opened in July 2019. The EU Delegation to Mongolia was opened in 2017.

The Central Asian states receive funding from the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI): EUR 1 028 million for 2014-2020 (up from EUR 750 million for 2007-2013), which includes both bilateral assistance and regional programmes (EUR 360 million). The assistance focuses on education, regional security, sustainable management of natural resources and socio-economic development. Kazakhstan 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 ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

A. Positions adopted (resolutions)

— In 2016, Parliament supported the EU’s Central Asia Strategy, but called for it to be more focused.

— On Kazakhstan, Parliament gave its consent to the enhanced PCA in 2017. It has also stressed the importance of the ‘more for more’ principle in order to stimulate political and socio-economic reforms. In March 2019, Parliament expressed concern about the human rights situation in Kazakhstan.


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

— Parliament's statements on Mongolia have largely related to economic issues, but also address the country’s development and humanitarian needs linked to extreme weather conditions. In 2017, Parliament gave its consent to the EU-Mongolia PCA.

B. Inter-parliamentary cooperation

In addition to the work of its competent committees on foreign affairs, international trade, and development, Parliament has a standing delegation for the relations with Central Asian countries and Mongolia (DCAS). Parliamentary Cooperation Committees (PCCs) with the majority of Central Asian countries meet every year. MEPs oversee the implementation of the agreements and focus on human rights issues, political situation, economic and development cooperation, and electoral processes. Following the entry into force of the PCA with Mongolia, Parliament is requesting the establishment of a PCC, which would leave Turkmenistan as the only country without such a body. Inter-parliamentary meetings with Turkmenistan take place nevertheless.

C. Election observation and democracy promotion

Owing to the differing levels of political development and the variable levels of democratic progress in Central Asia, Parliament has not consistently observed elections in the region.

— In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR) observed parliamentary elections in both countries in 2015 and presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan in 2017. As customary in the OSCE area, European Parliament delegations were embedded in the OSCE ODIHR missions. The missions drew negative conclusions about Tajikistan, but their findings about Kyrgyzstan were more encouraging.

— Parliament hasn't observed elections in Kazakhstan since 2005. The OSCE ODIHR has consistently found significant shortcomings.

— A European Parliament delegation observed Mongolia's 2017 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections and noted that the country is developing a solid democracy.

— Parliament has never been invited to observe elections in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan.

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