

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL POLICY

# THE EU STRATEGY ON CENTRAL ASIA

To the successful implementation of the new  
Strategy

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March 2020



The Internal dimension:  
Central Asian states as the  
receiving end of the new  
Strategy



The External dimension: “Third  
strategies” in Central Asia –  
rivals or partners of the EU?



Recommendations for the  
implementation of the new  
Strategy





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## 1

## INTRODUCTION

The newly launched European Union's (EU) Strategy on Central Asia<sup>1</sup> continues a track of cooperation that has begun in 1991.<sup>2</sup> The Strategy is expected to pick up where the previous Strategy left off, building on the existing achievements and successes, filling in the gaps, and moving on to newly emerging areas and fields of cooperation.

The European Union has been an active partner and a supportive donor for the Central Asian republics from the beginning of their independence in 1991. The EU has declared its presence and its initiatives in the region early on, almost immediately after the Central Asian republics got their independence.<sup>3</sup> The first large-scale programmatic framework of cooperation between the EU on one side and the Central Asian republics on the other side was the Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS). TACIS was the EU's initiative aimed to help the newly independent post-Soviet countries with their efforts toward economic and political reforms, implementing liberalization, free market reforms, the rule of law and democratization. TACIS was in operation from 1991 till 2006, having implemented programs and projects that were worth billions of dollars. It was a pioneering and, in a way, a daring project designed for a group of newly-established countries, which have just embarked upon exploring their paths of development. One of TACIS's outcomes for the Central Asian states was the signing of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with all five countries, although PCA with Turkmenistan has up to

the date remained pending and not ratified.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has not become a strong and closely integrated union. For the EU, it represented a group of countries with different levels and categories of interest. The EU's Eastern Neighborhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) has become a replacement of TACIS for the Eastern European states of the CIS. For the Central Asian states, Brussels launched its first EU Central Asia Strategy in 2007, the predecessor of the Strategy of 2019.

The 2007 Strategy envisioned a wide range of cooperation areas, from security to regional cooperation, human rights and the rule of law, environment and energy cooperation. Tentatively planned as a 10-year Strategy (although only replaced after 12 years), the first phase of regional cooperation effort ended with an uneven success record. The establishment of formal frameworks of dialogue and cooperation were more successful. These formal frameworks included the establishment of annual EU-Central Asia ministerial meetings, which have turned into a platform for regular updating and coordination of cooperation, and the ongoing EU-Central Asia dialogue on human rights, a forum to discuss and raise human rights issues in the region. The EU efforts to help Central Asian countries develop better border management systems have been fairly successful too. However, in more substantive areas, such as the rule of law and human rights, the wider regional cooperation among the Central Asian states, and the EU-Central Asia energy sector cooperation, no significant success is available to report.<sup>4</sup>

The key challenges for the less successful areas of the 2007 Strategy, arguably, have been due to the factors beyond to Brussels' control. These factors were the politics and relations among the Central Asian states, as well as the role of other external actors in the region, such as Russia and, later, China. The role of the United States, an actor, which traditionally complements the EU policies globally, was also significant. However, the US prioritized its efforts in Afghanistan for the most of the period concerned, and these efforts began to diminish by mid-2010s.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was completed shortly before the spread of Coronavirus crisis across the world. Some other relevant subsequent events remain outside the scope of this work, too. The launch of the „Green Central Asia“ initiative by Germany within the framework of EU-Central Asia cooperation, taking place at the end of January 2020, is a notable early step in realization of the new EU Strategy toward the region. In early February 2020 the USA adopted their renewed Strategy for Central Asia, which partly coincides with the EU Strategy and partly diverges from it. All these events, doubtlessly, are related to the theme of this paper, however their substantive consideration would necessitate a full-fledged additional paper (indeed, such a paper is in the works presently). Still, the contents of the present paper and the recommendations herein do not lose meaning or relevance due to these events.

<sup>2</sup> See the text of the new EU Strategy here: [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_the\\_eu\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_-\\_new\\_opportunities\\_for\\_a\\_stronger\\_partnership.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Notably, in 1991 the EU itself was a very recently-established international actor, still awaiting the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 that formally inaugurated the European Union.

<sup>4</sup> See EU Parliament assessment briefing by Martin Russell, "The EU's new Central Asia Strategy", January 2019: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)633162\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162_EN.pdf)

The new EU Strategy towards Central Asia builds up on the past work and reflects a critical reevaluation of what needs to be strengthened, what has to change, and what is to be salvaged from the previous document. The Strategy is an ambitious framework document outlining ten large areas of cooperation aligned along three blocks, all of which are united by a “cross-cutting priority” of promoting regional cooperation in Central Asia. Ambitious yet not unrealistic, the language of the Strategy stresses important new developments, relevant wider context and the comparative advantages that the EU brings to the partnership, while outlining a positively balanced framework of cooperation.

The following table summarizes some of the notable similarities and differences between the past and the new strategies. As the table demonstrates, the majority of the substantive areas and themes of EU engagement with Central Asia have stayed in the new Strategy. The most notable differences seem to be in the way the two texts are articulated, balanced and toned. Surely, certain changes have occurred in and around the region, some new issues have become more salient and some lost their importance as such, and the differences between the two strategies reflect such changes.

A set of new terms used in the Strategy indicates the changing context and dynamics, which have informed the new Strategy. A prominent one is the theme of connectivity, which the EU aspires to make more rule-based in Central Asia. Another one is the emphasis on a non-exclusive approach to cooperation. Non-exclusivity implies that cooperation is open to all countries of the region, relevant countries outside the region, as well as other, non-state actors. Thus, the EU states openness to joining forces with all interested in its cooperation with the Central Asian states. Complementing this approach, the Strategy features another term – syn-

ergy, and highlights an imperative that bolsters synergy: “working better together”. The third theme is resilience, a theme that is featured in other recent strategic EU documents. Resilience highlights various old and new risks facing the world in general and Central Asia in particular. In all this nuanced language, as noted in the table, the Strategy represents a solid analytical document.

This paper capitalizes on the two features of the new Strategy: the greater attention that is paid to, and recognition of a) the varied and dynamic developments among the five Central Asian countries; and, b) the presence and relevance of other external partners and projects present in the region. Arguably, these two factors can be viewed as significant impediments to a successful implementation of the 2007 EU Strategy towards the region. The new Strategy reveals a strong awareness of these factors through incorporating both considerations into its proposed themes of cooperation. This paper aims to contribute to analyzing the impact that these two factors may have had on the implementation of the EU Strategy. The paper does not only stress the definitive influence of these factors on the implementation of the EU Strategy, but it also aims to underscore the special added value that only the EU is able to bring in.

The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for both the EU, specifically for those who represent the EU and are tasked with implementation of the new Strategy, and the non-EU stakeholders, who would be engaged in the implementation of the Strategy, for example, international development organizations, local and international non-governmental institutions, states and their development agencies. Last but not the least, the governments and state agencies in the Central Asian countries, who would be the primary counterparts in the Strategy’s implementation, might find these

Table 1

**A comparative analysis of the EU Strategies on Central Asia**

Similarities	Differences	
	EU Strategy 2007	EU Strategy 2019
<b>Areas of cooperation:</b>	Stress on a new partnership	Stress on a stronger partnership
– Human rights	The structure is more comprehensive and general.	The structure is more detailed and specific.
– Democratization		
– Education	A descriptive nature of the Strategy	An analytic nature of the Strategy
– Economic development		
– Energy and transport cooperation	General description of the Strategy’s implementation tools	Specific initiatives in each subsection
– Ecology and water management issues	Afghanistan is a priority in terms of regional security threats	Consideration of new security threats (cybersecurity, etc.), including ISIS
– Regional security		
– Intercultural dialogue	The budget is incorporated into the Strategy with a basic breakdown (i.e. 70% for bilateral projects, and 30% for the promotion of regional cooperation)	A larger budget without any indication of breakdown, leaving priority areas for funding open to further determination

## 2

## THE INTERNAL DIMENSION: CENTRAL ASIAN STATES AS THE RECEIVING END OF THE NEW STRATEGY

recommendations useful too as these recommendations highlight what the EU should expect from the beneficiaries.

Five post-Soviet countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are at the receiving end of the new EU Strategy. Politically authoritarian, economically developing but not developed, landlocked, and neighboring China and Russia, for these countries, an effective cooperation with the European Union can be attractive in many ways. However, it also can be challenging in some respects, especially, when it regards politically and geopolitically sensitive matters. A successful implementation of the new Strategy requires taking local perspectives seriously and distinguishing among the varied levels and scopes of interest of each country. The following analysis focuses primarily on one of these countries, Kyrgyzstan, while touching upon others.

From among the five Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan represents an interesting and distinctive case. Kyrgyzstan has a relatively open political system with a continuous, if uneven, commitment to competitive and pluralist politics, as well as a well-declared commitment to building a parliamentary democratic regime. Kyrgyzstan is also considered an enthusiastic participant in international cooperation opportunities. In March 2019, Kyrgyzstan's president signed off an updated Strategy of Foreign Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic, a document that outlines and identifies the country's foreign policy priorities, key interests and principles of interaction with the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup>

The document does not name any country as its priority partner. In doing this, it departs from previous practice. However, the Foreign Policy Strategy does mention a number of issues relevant for the cooperation with the EU. Namely, it stresses Kyrgyzstan's commitment to developing democratic governance and parliamentarism and highlights importance of cooperating with the countries and partners, who share these objectives. On another point, the document specifically men-

tions the opportunities provided by the GSP+ trading facility, which is indicated by the EU as a priority for foreign policy efforts. Overall, the document outlines a balanced, pragmatic and multi-vectoral foreign policy as a key to building Kyrgyzstan's cooperation with other countries.

These foreign policy principles are rules as much as they are aspirations for Kyrgyzstan against the background of its complicated geopolitical situation. In this respect, it is not too different from other countries in the region. Kyrgyzstan has developed a large track record of relations with China, both bilaterally and under the framework of multilateral schemes. Kyrgyzstan's history of relations with China is only comparable to its relations with Russia, Kyrgyzstan's major conventional partner. The relations with both countries come with certain benefits, but they also bring significant and possibly increasing burden, as suggested in the following section of this paper.

In the domestic domain, Kyrgyzstan's state of affairs is characterized by several challenges and priorities that might inform its positive attitude to the cooperation with the European Union. Politically, Kyrgyzstan is a quasi-democratic country, with a weak rule of law and formal institutions of government. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan displays a clear and regularly renewed commitment to democracy, civic freedoms and competitive politics. The odds against a successful democratization process are many, including the lack of genuine interest among the ruling elites, but there is a strong push from among the Kyrgyzstani citizens and civil society to keep the country's course towards an improved democratic governance. The European Union has been a strong supporter in this respect, and there might be a possibility to strengthen this role further.

Economically, Kyrgyzstan performs less than its neighbors in the region, where the rates of GDP growth have overtaken those of Kyrgyzstan (even in Tajikistan, which usually lags behind Kyrgyzstan in economic development terms). The overall economic situation in Kyrgyzstan at the present is characterized with slow growth, weak foreign investment rates and dependence on a handful of volatile sources of national in-

<sup>5</sup> The Strategy, or 'Concept', of foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan may be found via this link: [http://president.kg/ru/sobytiya/13605\\_prezident\\_podpisal\\_ukaz\\_okoncepcii\\_vneshney\\_politiki\\_kirgizskoy\\_respubliki](http://president.kg/ru/sobytiya/13605_prezident_podpisal_ukaz_okoncepcii_vneshney_politiki_kirgizskoy_respubliki)

come, such as gold exports and labor migrant remittances, amid the lack of any new promising economic activities. Having received the GSP+ facility from the EU in 2016, Kyrgyzstan has been slow to benefit from this opportunity.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Kyrgyzstan would be particularly interested in engaging with the EU counterparts in the area of economic cooperation. EU aid is also an attraction for Kyrgyzstan for similar reasons. As one of strongly aid-dependent economies from its early independence years, the country continues to rely on external aid to support various sectors of the economy.

As an outcome of the above mentioned circumstances and partly due to their own virtue, several other areas of development are important for Kyrgyzstan: youth and education, environment and sustainability, rural development, energy and transportation. These are the areas that could contribute to ease the country's geopolitical strains, enhancing its chances of steady political development and opening new avenues for economic development. In all these areas, the country has been seeking opportunities for support and cooperation, and hitherto, the EU has been an important partner. These areas will continue to be salient for Kyrgyzstan and fuel its keenness to cooperate with the EU in longer term and on a broader specter of issues.

From among the list of the key areas of Kyrgyz-EU cooperation, some areas are also important for the other Central Asian countries, and some are not. For example, Kazakhstan is a country with a significantly higher level of national income. As such Kazakhstan is not as preoccupied about donor assistance. Uzbekistan, a major regional economic actor, struggles less in attracting trade and investment opportunities, especially, as it opens up further. Unlike Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan offers a larger market and has larger access to external markets. In addition, Uzbekistan is not as affected by international geopolitical pressures as Kyrgyzstan. Thanks to this, Uzbekistan is in a position to exercise greater agency in engaging with different partners. Tajikistan shares some of the structural difficulties that Kyrgyzstan has, but it does not demonstrate much commitment to democratic and participatory politics. Thus, Tajikistan does not seem as a partner interested in cultivating relations to those ends.

There are important differences in the positions on various issues among the Central Asia nations. The EU Strategy towards Central Asia pays good attention to the existence of such differences. It is very important to ensure that the implementation of the Strategy pays a similar amount of attention to these differences.

The existing differences among Central Asian countries should not suggest a lack of shared interests and common concerns. Environmental challenges are one of the strongest areas of convergence of interests and concerns. Each Central Asian country has a specific issue relating to environmental sustainability, where they require and seek international sup-

port. They also share security such security priorities as terrorism prevention as the top priority. Drug trafficking affects all of them equally even though it may not be perceived by them with strong sense of urgency. These shared areas of concern are exactly where the EU is able to promote a region-wide approach.

Besides having areas of shared interest, the Central Asian states have also recently shown reawakened interest in cooperation, if not yet integration. This is a particularly positive contextual development, which highlighted by the EU Strategy. There are many remaining hurdles ahead for these countries to achieve a tangible level of regional unity. However, the European Union can serve as a crucial partner for the region in overcoming those hurdles. Such partnership may involve sharing experiences, mediation, and engagement in joint regional projects.

After having discussed the internal dimensions of the receiving end of the Strategy with a focus on Kyrgyzstan, this paper will concentrate on the external dimension. Each Central Asian country has other, third-country or third-format, cooperation engagements. These engagements have a direct effect to how the new EU Strategy may operate in the region. It is obvious that the EU activities in Central Asia do not happen in isolation from the geopolitical context. The next section draws a brief critical overview of the main 'third sides' or 'third strategies' relevant to the context of EU-Central Asian cooperation.

<sup>6</sup> European Union Grants GSP+ Status to the Kyrgyz Republic // [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/news160202\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/news160202_en.pdf)

## 3

## THE EXTERNAL DIMENSION: “THIRD STRATEGIES” IN CENTRAL ASIA – RIVALS OR PARTNERS OF THE EU?

In an analysis of the beneficiary’s perspective on the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, it is important to consider a key ‘other side’ or the ‘third side’. As the EU Strategy phrases it is the presence of ‘third strategies’ of other external actors in Central Asia. How these third strategies and partnerships relate to the EU and its Strategy is crucial to providing of a realistic assessment and forecast opportunities for EU-CA cooperation. During the launch of the new Strategy in Bishkek, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini stressed that the EU did not intend to engage in a geopolitical game in Central Asia. Nevertheless, the EU cannot deny or turn a blind eye on the geopolitical interests of others in the region.

Three ‘third strategies’ are considered here as the most important and/or relevant. The first is the Belt and Road Initiative of China. The second Strategy is the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia. Finally, a Strategy that seems to be less intensive compared to the first two is the C5+1 format for dialogue between the United States and the Central Asian states.

China’s much-touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has taken the Central Asian region, like much of the world, by a whirlwind after its initial announcement by President Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan in September 2013. The BRI has certainly impressed the regional stakeholders with the multi-billions investment deals, transcontinental ambitions and, to a great extent, with the continued mystery of the initiative’s details, or lack thereof. With the ultimate geographic ambition of the BRI being Europe at its western extremity, it has earned a significant interest among majority European countries. The BRI has introduced a distinct terminology pinnacled with the concept of connectivity.

More recently, the BRI and China’s global policy have seen a dip in its popularity and trust, as international community gets more aware of Beijing’s so-called “debt-book diplomacy”. On the other hand, there are increasing concerns and criticisms over China’s ‘re-education’ policies towards ethnic and religious minorities in its Eastern province of Xinjiang. Both these concerns resonate strongly with Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan together with Tajikistan are among top 5 countries that are in debt to China. The latter concerns resonate with Kazakhstan as it might be concerned with the fate of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang.

Thus, while BRI is a difficult-to-ignore project, the Central Asian countries, located on the path of the project’s proposed routes of connectivity, have arguably grown more aware and cautious of the potential implications of their increased engagement in the project. At any rate, the governments of the Central Asian nations are likely to welcome the EU’s discourse of rules-based connectivity within this context.

The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been another powerful project created for the Central Asian region, as well as other post-Soviet states. Kazakhstan, along with Belarus, was a founding member of the EAEU. Kyrgyzstan joined the EAEU in 2015, following two years of intense public and business community debates on potential costs and benefits of the country’s joining the EAEU. Most recently, Uzbekistan has started its domestic debate on possible membership in the EAEU. Uzbek President Mirziyoyev stated that his government was considering the option of joining the Union.

Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have so far had mixed outcomes of their membership in the recently-established Economic Union. While Kazakhstan has raised concerns regarding the bias of various initiatives and policies in the EAEU towards Moscow, Kyrgyzstan has had regular concerns on the unbalanced terms of cooperation with both Moscow and Nur-Sultan. In a union of five countries (Armenia joined the EAEU as its fifth member just before Kyrgyzstan), the sheer might of Russia has predictably been a major concern. All other members combined would still pose an equivalent to only a small fraction of the Russian trade and economy.

The activation of the EAEU has coincided with a sharp decline in the relations between Russia and the Western countries, including most of the EU member states and the EU itself. The decline took place in the aftermath of the Ukrainian

and the Russia's role in the annexation of Crimea. Burdened with large-scale sanctions and political ex-communication, Russia has attempted to make the EAEU a political and an economic reserve option. However, the Russia-West crisis in relations has had a negative effect on the Central Asian states.

Entangled in a challenging start-up, the EAEU has also been a project open to cooperation with other regions and states. In particular, it has actively sought to engage such countries as Turkey, Iran and some European countries to cooperate. It has maintained a cooperation-focused rhetoric towards China and the BRI, albeit the possibility of bridging the EAEU and the BRI has remained elusive to most observers.

China and Russia, the drivers behind the BRI and the EAEU respectively, also stand behind other ventures relevant for Central Asia, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These organizations have similar limitations to the scope of their attractiveness and effectiveness for the Central Asian interests. At the regional level, the SCO does not include Turkmenistan. The CSTO does not include Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Thus, both organizations leave behind a part of the Central Asian region. After its most recent expansion that added India and Pakistan to its ranks, the SCO would require an adjustment period before embarking upon further growth. Long perceived as a club for Russia and China to balance each other, the SCO will either evolve into a much more influential forum or become a driverless disjointed club. The CSTO is strongly perceived as a Russian initiative serving primarily Russian interests more than the EAEU. This might have been the key reason why the late President Karimov pulled Uzbekistan out of the organization in 2012 for the second time. Under such circumstances, these two organizations offer both challenges and opportunities for their Central Asian members.

The United States of America is one more powerful actor, which seeks to maintain its relations with Central Asia. The C5+1 format for dialogue (the Central Asian five and the United States) is a platform for of meetings and consultations at the level of foreign ministers. The C5+1 format was an initiative of the then-Secretary of State of the United States John Kerry in 2015. Originally, it was intended to be a regular forum for the six countries to meet and develop themes of cooperation. It has so far failed to develop into an active forum. Against the background of the administration change in the United States, C5+1 may not have gotten the originally intended scope of commitment.

The United States is conventionally an actor that shares the European Union's positions on many issues and engages in similar areas of cooperation with other countries, including the Central Asian states. Were the US-CA partnerships strong and dynamic, the US and the EU could have duplicated each other's efforts in supporting various areas of development in Central Asia. There would have also been a stronger voice, in which the two could promote certain sensitive topics in the region, including democracy and human rights.

However, the C5+1, with its lack of drive and focus on 'safe topics', is indicative of the level of the US presence in and commitment to cooperation with the Central Asian partners.<sup>7</sup> The new EU Strategy displays a much stronger ambition and a larger scope of work with the region than the United States appears to commit for. It is noteworthy that both the EU and the US aim to include all five Central Asian countries to their regional policies. Both the EU and the US's approaches also share similarities in their unstructured and gradual nature of engagement in the region, without any strong institutional foundation. They both tend to rely on annual meetings, projects, and consultations.

In addition to the above-mentioned three 'third strategies', there are certainly other actors that are also relevant for the subject: Turkey, Japan, Iran, Korea, and India, to name a few. Some of these players are potentially able to turn into EU partners in Central Asia, especially Japan as it raises similar issues of interest as the EU. Thus, the context of international cooperation in and with Central Asia is not a three- or four-player game, but rather a ten-player game or more than this. Nevertheless, the above three are the more significant and game-shaping elements of the geopolitical context.

<sup>7</sup> US bilateral relations with each of the Central Asian states, to be sure, are more active and substantive.

## 4

## THE PATH(S) TO SUCCESS OF THE NEW STRATEGY

The newly launched Strategy of the European Union for cooperation with the Central Asian states represents a strong policy framework that outlines a compelling vision of how the two parties could cooperate to a mutual benefit. The Strategy is more about helping the Central Asian counterparts, supporting their reform and development agendas, and bringing the relevant European experience and instruments to those ends.<sup>8</sup>

A successful implementation of the Strategy depends on the responsiveness and commitment on the side of the beneficiaries in Central Asia. These have been discussed in the previous two sections. As the analysis shows, the interests and commitments of Kyrgyzstan and other states of the region, as well as the perspectives of the ‘third strategies’ play an important role.

Based on the overview in the previous sections, several important observations could be highlighted as relevant to making the Strategy’s implementation successful. There are certain important and specific conditions pertinent to the EU-CA nexus. If these conditions are taken into due consideration, they can strengthen the partnership.

One of these conditions is a duly emphasized **open and non-exclusive view of cooperation from the EU perspective**. For Brussels, the cooperation with Central Asia is not a zero-sum game and is not a battlefield for a prized competition.<sup>9</sup> The Strategy stresses the openness of the EU to joint efforts with both Central Asian and external actors in pursuing shared objectives, such as security, connectivity, environmental sustainability and many more. Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative, reiterated this point again during the launch of the Strategy. Mogherini emphasized that the EU was not a ‘geopolitical’ actor. Such positioning

contributes to the Central Asian states’ comfort in engaging with the EU without undermining their relations with other external partners.

Another condition is the EU’s ability to offer unique features that other partners cannot offer: a **cooperation towards developing effective mechanisms of regional cooperation and eventual integration**. As a globally recognized successful model of regional integration, the EU can offer its experience. The wealth of legal, institutional, economic and other instruments that the Union has tried over the decades can inform the nascent regional cooperation developments within Central Asia. As noted earlier, the recent years have been particularly opportune. While each country has certain differences with one or more of its neighbors, for example, the border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, they all have shown a generally positive attitude towards the idea of regional cooperation, and have welcomed the significant foreign policy thaw that has occurred with the change of leadership in Uzbekistan. The EU has strong credentials as a potential mediator and adviser for the region’s governments to navigate through their mutual differences and to sort them out.

The third aspect of the EU contribution is what often makes other external partners uncomfortable, **the ability of the EU to raise normative issues**. These issues refer to social justice, gender equality, civil and human rights, democratization and the rule of law, and other related topics. The EU raising these issues would be most eagerly greeted by many non-governmental stakeholders, civil society organizations, youth groups, and some political parties and movements. The governments in the region may not be as keen for the EU to raise these issues. Nevertheless, there might be some level of interest on their side too, especially when such cooperation can generate tangible financial support or technical assistance opportunities.

The fourth point to be considered is the sui generis nature of the EU. It is **a union of nation-states that is neither a nation, nor an international organization**. While this aspect often contributes to less visibility and recognizability of the EU among the general public in the Central Asian countries, it can also be a strong advantage. The EU is a supranational

<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the Strategy is not entirely from a donor’s perspective, and much in the document is certainly in the interests of the EU as well – from security, to connectivity and trade – thus making it possible to actually speak of cooperation for mutual gains rather than only of aid relationship.

<sup>9</sup> “The EU has a strong interest in seeing Central Asia develop as a region of rules-based cooperation and connectivity rather than of competition and rivalry” (*The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* - P.2.)

tional and therefore open, non-exclusive and non-national interest-driven international actor. Whereas other external actors are often perceived to pursue their national interests, the EU is able to speak in the name of principles, shared interests and values, from a non-zero-sum perspective.

Lastly, as noted correctly in the Strategy's introduction, **several Central Asian states are undergoing broad and promising domestic reform processes, which have already translated into positive dynamics at the regional level.** The ongoing changes are particularly conducive to a productive engagement with the European Union, should they become the underlying leitmotifs of such engagement. However, it would be essential that the dynamics are not articulated in ways that draw politically sensitive boundaries and watersheds.

## 5

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The launch of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia in July 2019 was a significant milestone in the region's external relations, which opened a new chapter of opportunities for them. The revision and renewal of the EU's policies in the region was an excellent opportunity to reenergize the contacts between the partners, to explore new avenues of cooperation and to take a stock of the challenging areas of cooperation.

A successful implementation of the new Strategy requires full awareness of the necessary building blocks for such success. This paper analyzed two large and important building blocks: the perspectives and contexts of the several countries in Central Asia, who are the primary beneficiaries of the new Strategy, and the perspectives and scopes of the 'third strategies' in the region. From among third relevant stakeholders, the most important ones are China, Russia and, in terms of congruence with EU priorities, the United States of America.

After having analyzed these issues, the paper concludes that the EU indeed represents an important and a unique partner for the Central Asian states, and for Kyrgyzstan in particular. Based on the analysis of the EU's advantages in the region, the paper recommends to approach cooperation from the point of the most operational cooperation areas. This should be done by securing a genuine commitment of the Central Asian counterparts and through an open but uncompromising disposition towards other external players and their policies in the region.

Based on these considerations and arguments, the paper proposes the following set of recommendations for a successful implementation of the EU Strategy.

- In Kyrgyzstan, it is crucial for the EU to focus on the democratization support, strengthening of parliamentarism, women's empowerment and participation in politics. In other words, the EU needs to stay strong on what is called the "normative agenda", which represents the principal values that the EU is able to share and promote.
- In all Central Asian countries, the EU will need to strengthen the focus and practical measures towards assistance in trade competitiveness and economic development, including the realization of GSP+ for Kyrgyzstan. In the view of emerging concerns for other countries' predatory loan policies and investment, the Central Asian states and businesses would benefit from honest and fair trade and investment from the European economies. The Strategy does encompass supporting such work.
- The EU should continue to expand educational, cultural and research linkages with the Central Asian stakeholders. These areas of cooperation are most likely to have a long-term impact and they do not risk turning into politically sensitive challenges. Engagements in these areas of cooperation must go beyond government projects and centrally managed institutions. This cooperation should involve educational organizations, art groups, research centers, as well as individual professionals.
- The EU should widen and strengthen its engagement with the civil society in its activities in Central Asia. In this regard, the organization of the first informal EU-CA Forum as part of the events on the occasion of the new Strategy's launch was a great start. Such activities should be continued and diversified.
- In Kyrgyzstan in particular, and in other countries too, the EU should demonstrate a clear support for the freedom of speech and mass media. In addition to providing a direct contribution to the democratization efforts and building strong citizenship, free mass media would be an effective way of communicating shared values, promoting the European experience, and providing a critical oversight of projects and developments.
- As all Central Asian countries, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, see a growing public concern for environmental problems, the EU can focus on environmental protection and sustainability. This area is particularly open to cooperation, as it is a universally shared concern with no regard to any geopolitical or political sensibilities.
- Both the EU and its partners in Central Asia should aim towards a more effective communication process in the implementation of the Strategy activities. The priorities

must be clear, the objectives and expected outcomes should be openly discussed and supported by both sides, and any lack of understanding addressed as soon as this lack is identified. Only such effective, strong and consistent communication between all counterparts would enable to deliver a successful implementation of joint efforts.

- Further related to the issue of clear communications, the EU should avoid seeming to “export” its institutions and principles into Central Asia. Both sides should cooperate to tailor the process to the Central Asian societies and governments. Local stakeholders should be able to choose what to “import” and what they consider necessary and suitable from the European experience.
- The Central Asian governments could take initiative and propose joint efforts and projects to the EU under the framework of the new EU Strategy. Such an initiative from the beneficiaries would indicate the Central Asian partners’ commitment to cooperation, and it would allow for a more robust planning and prioritization from the EU side.
- The much-welcomed declaration in the Strategy that the EU is interested in a non-exclusive approach to cooperation should not imply a self-consciously limited or small role for the EU in Central Asia. The occasional opinions that the EU should narrow down its focus during the drafting stage of the Strategy might be misleading, if they suggest a modest role for a global player and one of the three largest global economies.
- Finally, the EU should aim to secure a direct engagement in the implementation process of its projects through its delegations to the region, and drawing on EU human resources from outside, if necessary. The issue of the lack of the EU visibility on the ground is an outcome of the EU efforts being undermanned, even though Brussels has been a major donor in Central Asia.



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**BPG** (Bishkek Policy Group) is an open group of researchers, scholars and experts, who are committed to develop public debate, raise independent voice of Central Asia through dialogue and cooperation. BPG proposes inclusive approach, to connect our activities with diverse audiences – from policy makers to the general public – to build opportunities for prosperous region.

## IMPRINT

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## THE EU STRATEGY ON CENTRAL ASIA: To the successful implementation of the new Strategy



This publication analyzes the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, adopted in 2019, from the perspective of the receiving end - the countries in Central Asia. Taking into account the necessary broader scope, which is characteristic of such a strategic document, this paper discusses the innovations in the EU's approach towards the region and its comparative advantage over other actors.

On the agenda is the mission to strengthen stability in the region. Security, but also the fight against corruption and reforms that promote democracy and the rule of law are the key topics to be considered. The second is the development of the economy. The third is the intensification of political dialogue, in which Brussels emphasizes the involvement of civil society and parliaments.



The paper capitalizes on two nuances of the new Strategy: The greater attention to the varied and dynamic developments among the five Central Asian countries and the presence and relevance of other external partners and projects taking place in the region. Interested third parties, first of all, are China and Russia, and from the point of view of common priorities with the EU - the United States of America.

One of the persistent problems of Central Asia is the low level of regional cooperation between the five countries of the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan). The Strategy emphasizes the EU's willingness to join forces with both Central Asian countries and external players to achieve common goals without compromising existing relations with regional partners.



Finally, this paper provides recommendations for both the EU - those who represent it and are tasked with the implementation of the new Strategy - and the non-EU stakeholders who would be partaking in the realization of the Strategy - states and their development agencies, local and international non-governmental institutions and international development organizations. Not the least, by way of highlighting what the EU should expect from the receiving end, the recommendations also apply to the governments and the state agencies in the Central Asian countries who would be the primary counterparts.

A more active participation of the Central Asian partners in the development and implementation of the EU Strategy is required, preventing its transformation into a predominantly one-sided initiative.