

POLICY BRIEF



Drawing Lessons of Past Cooperation between EU and Central Asia for the Implementation of 2019 Strategy

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Executive Summary

In June 2019, the European Union presented a new ‘Strategy for Cooperation with Central Asia,’ a document which was elaborated following a process of consultation between the EU Member States, EU institutions and the Central Asian countries. Cooperation between the EU and Central Asia started immediately after independence, but it reached political maturity with the adoption of the 2007 Strategy for a New Partnership. The implementation of this Strategy showed the limited capacity of the EU to address local needs and challenges, while also dealing with its own internal crises and heavy foreign policy architecture. The 2019 Strategy aims at enhancing the political role of the European Union in Central Asia by better focusing on the priorities and correlating them with other strategic frameworks in the foreign policy area. However, in order to fully use the opportunities offered by the relative opening of the Central Asian countries to regional cooperation and the continued enhancement of political relations with the EU, Brussels needs to adapt flexible instruments of implementation for the Strategy.

Introduction

The evolution of international relations in the past decades has placed at the centre the multilateral cooperation of states and other relevant actors of the system. With this background, the European Union worked towards enhancing its foreign policy instruments in order to better project its role as a united actor at the global level. However, these efforts were met with the challenges inherent in the European institutional structure, as well as with the Member States’ interests in preserving their national foreign policies.

In June 2019, the European Union renewed the strategic framework of its cooperation with Central Asia, by launching a document aiming at evaluating the “new opportunities for a stronger partnership.” The new framework proposed by Brussels is the result of a consultation process not only at the level of the EU and its Member States, but also with the Central Asian representatives of governments and civil society.

Through this policy brief, I intend to analyse the implementation of the previous Strategy, while evaluating the goals set up by the European Union in the 2019 Strategy for Central Asia against the commitment for consolidating its global role.

What Brought the EU in Central Asia

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU started developing bilateral relations with the newly independent states. However, the relations remained at a significantly lower level of engagement compared to the ones fostered with the Central and Eastern European countries, which were on the track for joining the EU. The main reasons for this partial disengagement were the geographical isolation of Central Asia in relation to then-EU15, which in turn explained the relatively little knowledge of the region and of the potential areas where cooperation might bring benefits to both sides.

Even though the 1990s seemed like a period when the world reached the *end of history*, the following years proved the contrary, especially in regards to EU-Russia relations. Thus, we can analyse the limited political engagement with Central Asia in the first years as a sign of caution on the European side, because of its limited resources for advancing its normative political agenda in a relatively unknown region still under the heavy legacy of its Soviet past. Moreover, in the 1990s, the Central Asian states were going through processes of state and nation building, which were conducted mainly by the same political elites that ruled the republics during the Soviet times. These local developments created the premises for enhancing the agency of the new states as partners for economic and political exchanges, but also limited their perspectives in transition, since the leaders were socialised in a centralised system which now was opening up to new ways of gaining power.

In a Communication by the European Commission in 1995, the EU focused mainly on the economic potential of Central Asia, both as a market for the European goods and as a supplier of energy resources. In this view, even when it addresses the objectives of consolidating democratic institutions or the reduction of conflict, the document references mostly trade and investments, as part of a strategy to pursue economic reform.¹ The Communication set up exploring the possibility of creating a general framework for Central Asia, considering the common challenges they faced, but the emphasis on economics showed the discrepancies and the limited scope the EU could support at that point.² The signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with most of the Central Asian states provided a framework for bilateral cooperation, which focused considerably on development aid and technical assistance, thus consolidating the role of the European Union as a donor with a specific normative agenda, but not as much as a politically engaged actor. In fact, the agenda for democracy promotion and human rights was based on the idea of procedural diffusion, which emphasised the appeal of democratic principles in the partner societies that in turn lead to democratic reforms.³

The Strategy Paper 2002-2006 and the Indicative Programme for 2002-2004 for Central Asia stress the need of the EU to focus its assistance on sectors of interest for the partner countries, thus promoting stability and security in the region, as well as sustainable economic development and poverty reduction. The main instruments proposed for this goal were a regional programme which aimed at facilitating the cooperation between the Central Asian countries in the fields of interest for the EU, such as transport, energy, management of natural resources and environment, justice and home affairs. Moreover, the EU proposed a regional programme implemented according to national needs in terms of trade and border management, while also setting up a piloting scheme for alleviating poverty in specific areas.⁴ Although limited in terms of impact and full understanding of the challenges to regional cooperation, this document provides the

¹ European Commission, *Communication From The Commission - Towards A European Union Strategy For Relations With The Independent States Of Central Asia*, COM/95/206 FINAL (10 October 1995), 8-10.

² J. Plottka, *One Size Fits None: Is There A Regional Approach To Central Asia?* (Centre international de formation européenne, 2015), 128.

³ G. Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia: Promoting Values and Defending Interests*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21.

⁴ European Commission, *Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia*, (30 October 2002), 5.

first coherent political attempt of the European Union to create a regional framework towards Central Asia in terms of specific goals for the development aid compared to the bilateral approach used previously.

The budgetary allocations for Central Asia between 1991 and 2006 show that the European Union was focused less on developing need-based political relations with every country, but rather on creating a pattern applicable to the entire region, without pursuing ambitious political objectives. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with four of the five Central Asian states, signed in the wake of their independence,⁵ show little differentiation, which in turn proved the low priority of the region in the European agenda, in the context of the enlargement, as well as Brussels' limited capacity to implement its actions on multiple fronts at the same time.

The 2007 Strategic Ambitions of the EU - the New Faced with the Old

The European presence in Central Asia has always been led by Germany, which established its presence in the region right after the independence of the five states and has promoted active engagement not only at a political level, but also at a societal level through technical assistance and capacity-building projects. The initiative to adopt a specific Strategy for Central Asia was part of the New Ostpolitik promoted by Berlin in the context of the successive EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, as well as in the framework of its EU Council Presidency in the first semester of 2007.

The process by which the 2007 Strategy was designed responded to the drive of Germany to make the EU more relevant in Central Asia, especially since their national goals converged with the European ones on issues of good governance, democracy promotion, rule of law, human rights and energy security. During the preparation process, an EU troika travelled to Astana and held joint consultations with the foreign ministers of the Central Asian states, which was not only the first bi-regional forum, but also the first joint meeting of the five representatives.⁶

The Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia was adopted by the end of Germany's term, following an elaboration process met with reluctance on the side of the Central Asian states, as the document did not take into account the specific needs of the partner countries. The analyses show that the EU continued to pursue a policy of conditionality, well-versed in the process of enlargement, even though its drive for safeguarding energy and security interests was as strong as the desire for foreign investments on the side of the five post-Soviet states⁷ and the leverage of the enlargement policy was absent.

The Strategy underwent two major reviews, the first one in 2012, generated by the

⁵ The European Union signed in 1996 Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, but the one with Turkmenistan was not ratified. The PCA with Tajikistan was signed in 2004, a delay caused by the 1992-1997 Civil War.

⁶ S. Kurpas and H. Riecke, *The 2007 German EU Presidency: A Midterm Report* (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, 2007), 49.

⁷ Kurpas and Riecke, *The 2007 German EU Presidency*, 48-49.

announcement of a withdrawal of the American forces from Afghanistan, which led to a higher engagement of the EU on the security agenda, through the establishment of the High Level Security Dialogue and the strengthening of cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan, while emphasising the focus on counter-terrorism and a specific project in the energy field (Trans-Caspian Pipeline System). While noting the limited expansion of the economic presence of the EU in the region, the review pointed out the need for an increased coordination between the European and national resources, both in order to achieve a more targeted assistance and for the sake of political coordination.⁸

The second review was adopted in 2015 and acknowledges the limited success of regional integration efforts, stressing the need for flexibility according to the individual interests of the partner states, a key characteristic of all the foreign policy strategic documents of the EU during that period. The increase of the budgetary allocation by 56% has to be also viewed in connection with an appeal to an increased coordination among initiatives at various levels of the European partners and the observation of the limited commitment to democratic reforms in the region.⁹

During the implementation of the 2007 Strategy, the European Commission adopted three Indicative Programmes which operationalised the assistance granted to Central Asia from the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which succeeded TACIS.¹⁰ The common characteristic of these Programmes is the priority given in terms of allocations to bilateral projects (two thirds) compared to regional projects (one third) and the fact that Kazakhstan was no longer eligible for bilateral assistance, due to its own significant resources.

The overview of the 2007 Strategy and its subsequent reviews show a marked evolution from the previous Strategy papers, which were operational and focusing mostly on how regional goals can be implemented in bilateral frameworks. The general characteristic of the 2007 Strategy, maintained also in the review process, was its broadness, the European Union bringing together numerous objectives under its main goal of engaging Central Asia more consistently. Considering the experience of bilateral cooperation during the years of independence, as well as the successful process of enlargement, the EU focused on policies with a significant normative dimension, which necessitated not only adequate financing for development, but also a shift in the policy making mentality of the Central Asian states.

Cracks in the Design - Reasons for a Limited Success of the 2007 Strategy

The language of the entire Strategy of 2007 stresses cooperation on various political issues with Central Asia as a unified region, while marginally mentioning the adaptation

⁸ Council of the European Union, *Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia – Implementation Review and outline for Future Orientations*, Brussels, (20 June 2012) 11455/12.

⁹ General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia*, Brussels (22 June 2015) COEST195/ 10191/15.

¹⁰ TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) was a foreign aid and technical assistance programme developed and implemented by the European Commission to assist the CIS countries (as well as Mongolia) in their transition to market-oriented economies. TACIS was replaced in 2007 by other instruments, Central Asian countries coming under the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI).

of the broader goals to the needs of each country of the region. However, the framing of the Strategy is indicative of the EU understanding of Central Asia as a mirror region, with the potential to further integrate following the European model. At that time, in spite of some broad, common political goals of the Central Asian countries, each one had different challenges to cope with at the national level, as well as particular methods of dealing with those challenges. As a result, the interest of the EU in removing trade barriers and enhancing human rights dialogue was based more on the projection of its own agenda and less on actual priorities of the governments. The ambitious political goals promoted by the EU in the Strategy show little experience in promoting political agendas in this specific region and an optimistic approach based on the limited success stories of the development projects implemented until then. All these draw mostly on the European experience of enlargement and a certain mind-set of the policy-makers in Brussels, which linked cooperation with leverage.

The energy interests of the EU in Central Asia are a case in point both for illustrating the underlying priorities of Brussels' involvement in the region and for the idealistic approach of the Strategy. By aiming at converging the energy markets of the Central Asian states, the EU seemed to not fully grasp the geopolitical entanglements of the energy resources in the region, as well as the contentious cooperation of the partner countries on any matter, not only energy. Moreover, the intent to mirror the energy cooperation in the EU shows an overconfidence in its own success in this matter, especially considering the vulnerability of the European energy market to external suppliers.

Another aspect which casts doubt upon the EU's capacity to determine real change in Central Asia has been the human rights dimension. According to several analysts,¹¹ the impact of the European normative agenda on the situation on the ground has been limited. This was determined by the EU's leniency towards the Central Asian governments' request to maintain the human rights dialogues behind closed doors, as well as its very demanding criteria for granting funding in this field which did not contribute to the capacity building of local NGOs, all of which was happening in a context of limited leverage of Brussels on the political agenda of these countries. Moreover, due to the restrictive character of the Central Asian states in relation to the non-governmental activity, researchers cast doubts on the EU support even for local NGOs which oftentimes are linked to the national political elites.¹²

The launch of the 2007 Strategy contributed to a more sustained presence of the EU in the region, with the opening of two new Delegations in Kyrgyzstan (2009) and Uzbekistan (2011), as well as the upgrade of the Delegation in Tajikistan (2009) and Turkmenistan (2018)¹³ and more political meetings between the national representatives of the Central Asian states and EU officials. Additionally, the Strategy increased the

¹¹ Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia*, 50; J. Boonstra, Reviewing the EU's approach to Central Asia, EUCAM Policy Brief, no. 34 (2015), 2; S. Peyrouse, *A Donor without Influence: The European Union in Central Asia*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, no. 478 (2017), 3; O.A. Spaiser, *The European Union's Influence in Central Asia: Geopolitical Challenges and Responses*, (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books), 76.

¹² Spaiser, *The European Union's Influence in Central Asia*, 75.

¹³ The upgrade of the Liaison Office in Ashgabat to a fully-fledged Delegation was operationalised in December 2018 when the Head of EU Delegation in Turkey presented the copies of accreditation letters to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. In September 2019, Diego Ruiz Alonso was announced as Head of the

budgetary allocations for the region to a total amount of €2.1 billion, which allowed for the diversification of activities and access to different financial instruments of the EU, such as Erasmus or EIDHR. However, this increase has to be critically assessed, since the allocations are much lower than the ones for the post-communist countries of the Eastern Partnership.¹⁴ Moreover, the Strategy opened up the possibility of other Member States to get involved in Central Asia by participating in the initiatives developed under this framework and which would otherwise require too many national resources for bilateral cooperation. For example, the Central and Eastern European states were more involved in the European Education Initiative (Poland, Latvia, Romania), as well as in the Water Initiative (Hungary, Romania) by sending national experts and even coordinating some activities implemented in these frameworks.

Even though the two reviews were aimed at adjusting the language and framing of the 2007 Strategy, the entire institutional and operational set-up of the European Union's foreign policy for the region prevented the emergence of Brussels as a credible political actor in Central Asia. For the national governments of Central Asian countries, the European strategy was normatively attractive as an instrument for legitimising their commitment to democracy and thus maintaining their eligibility for further funding, but nonetheless the EU has not managed to rise to the challenge posed by the nexus of multiple foreign actors active in the region. Despite its efforts to establish itself as a different partner, aiming at normative diffusion through its soft power, the practical challenges faced by the countries in the region and the limited knowledge of the local nuances, coupled with its own heavy foreign policy architecture have settled the European presence to more than a regular donor, but less than a relevant political partner.

Which are the New Opportunities Identified in the New EU Strategy for Central Asia?

In June 2019, the European Commission presented a new Strategy for Central Asia, one which was developed after a year-long process of consultation with stakeholders both within the European Union and from Central Asia. In this way, the EU aimed not only at imposing a top-bottom agenda of cooperation with the partner region, but to create the much-needed legitimacy and commitment of the local governments towards the goals proposed in the document.

The new Strategy builds on an entirely new and redefined strategic framework for the foreign policy of the European Union, which started with the reshuffling of the approach towards the global role of the EU (*Shared vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*,¹⁵ June 2016) and continued with the adoption of new regional strategies for structuring relations with Latin

EU Delegation in Ashgabat. In a similar way, the Delegation in Tajikistan was opened in 2008 when the EU Ambassador in Kazakhstan was accredited also in Tajikistan, but a dedicated Ambassador for the relations between Brussels and Dushanbe was appointed in 2009.

¹⁴ Spaiser, *The European Union's Influence in Central Asia*, 73.

¹⁵ Commonly referred as the EU Global Strategy (EUGS).

America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia (May–June 2019). At the same time, the EU adapted its Development Policy to the new 2030 Development Agenda by adopting a *New Development Consensus* (2017), which calls for a more coordinated approach between programs at different levels of the EU.

With the new Global Strategy, the EU formalised the concept of resilience, which became the catch-phrase for the adaptation capacity of the partner countries facing internal and external crises instead of the more politicised concepts of democratisation and modernisation. Meanwhile, the Strategy for Asia emphasises the connectivity between the two continents, not only in terms of hard infrastructural projects, but also in terms of regional and sub-regional cooperation projects and individuals' contacts as a counterbalance framework to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Building up on these new frameworks, the new Strategy for Central Asia stresses the link between connectivity and resilience, the former becoming a means to ensuring the latter.

The new Strategy proposes three key priorities—resilience, prosperity and improvement of political dialogue, including by opening it up to civil society—while maintaining as a transversal focus the regional cooperation. Despite keeping the general orientation towards multiple fields of interest for the EU, the new Strategy shows a certain improvement of the policy-making in Brussels. In 2007, the EU proposed 7 priority fields, which encompassed a total of over 40 goals of cooperation, whereas in the 2019 Strategy, the EU advances 3 main priorities, operationalised through 10 specific objectives and a little over 40 deliverables. If we compare the two documents only from this numeric point of view, we can observe a more focused approach, oriented towards pragmatic aims, which responds better to the realities on the ground.

In terms of the actions proposed by the EU in order to enhance the partnership, a closer analysis shows that they are not entirely new, being present also in the 2007 Strategy. However, the framing changed from a subtle patronising approach to one of equal partners – a result of the consultations held with the Central Asian authorities, which do not want to be perceived as passive receivers of European assistance. Despite the limited success of the EU to establish itself as a viable political actor in Central Asia during the implementation of the previous Strategy, the 2019 document optimistically draws upon the modest signs of regional cooperation promoted by the still promising Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev, hinting at the opportunities that the EU can have in such a context. This is especially relevant with regards to local efforts for enhancing regional cooperation, promoted through the two presidential summits, which respond also to the European priority of supporting regional integration in different programs and projects. The new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, already provisionally applied with Kazakhstan, initialled with Kyrgyzstan and under negotiations with Uzbekistan, also show a commitment of the European Union to upgrade cooperation with the region, by better incorporating the individual national needs in its policy frameworks, while preserving the general focus of the Strategy.

Despite a rise in geopolitical movements in Central Asia, from the expansion of Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union to the significant development of various infrastructure projects under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, the EU remains focused on a

normative agenda. While it may be a slowing factor in promoting a more active agenda, the normative power of the EU represents its unique selling point in this multiple-actor game. The 2019 Strategy maintains as a high priority the security interests, linking border management, migration and prevention of violent extremism and terrorism. By framing the agenda in this way, the EU preserves its status as a civilian power, acknowledging its limited capacity to mobilise the Member States to support an agenda more focused on hard security.

The underlying characteristic of the new strategic document proposed by the Commission is a stronger cooperation on policies at all levels and across topics. As a significant amount of the assistance offered to the Central Asian governments through the 2007 Strategy translated into budgetary assistance which generally responded to a rather national policy agenda, the new Strategy places a stronger emphasis on people-to-people contacts in administration focusing on sharing best practices and experiences at the broader policy level, which favours the transfer of norms.

Conclusion

The novelty of the European Union as a regional integration project, beyond a regular intergovernmental organisation and less than a confederate state, raises the expectations of policy coherence. Although the foreign policy framework developed by the European institutions is in accordance with a certain mandate agreed by the Member States, we can notice a struggle by Brussels to develop a voice as a distinct, unitary actor. It is a struggle because of the difficult institutional architecture of its foreign policy and its entanglements with the policy for aid and development. It is in this context that the European Union launched a series of new regional strategies in order to reassert its presence across the world in various points of interest.

The 2019 Strategy for Central Asia illustrates the attempt of the European Commission, through the European External Action Service, to better understand the needs of the regional partners and to translate them into more coherent strategic policy options. Slightly departing from a patronising approach of a bloc of developed countries, the EU proposed a framework which is more pragmatic than the 2007 document. Nevertheless, as shown by the implementation of the previous Strategy, the political rhetoric is insufficient to strengthen the European political presence in Central Asia, therefore the EU should address several pressing needs when designing the operationalisation instruments.

Recommendations

- *The need for coherence.* The adoption of the strategic framework is just the first step in strengthening the EU presence in Central Asia. Thus, the EU should work on delivering a coherent operationalisation of the Strategy by avoiding overlapping actions and pursuit of political options which contradict its stated normative goals. In order to do so, the EU should focus more on strengthening the links between its agendas on foreign policy and development aid.
- *The need for engagement and unity.* The EU should encourage more Member States to become active in its specific projects. Nevertheless, although a more active involvement of the Member States is welcomed, the EU should focus on delivering a unitary European message and action in Central Asia. In doing so, the EU and Member States should address political objectives through specifically defined channels, which involve all European stakeholders, thus strengthening the leverage of the message.
- *The need for flexibility and accountability.* The implementation of the projects under the 2007 Strategy showed the rigid structure of EU funding and raised questions about the accountability of the parties involved. In designing the implementation mechanisms for the 2019 Strategy, the EU should respond to the need for flexible and responsible funding and reporting, including taking into consideration the creation of an office for an EU Development Agency, as the states providing development aid have created.
- *The need for local capacity-building.* Strongly related to the previous point, the EU should support the capacity building of the local actors, both from the civil society and public administration. Under the 2007 Strategy, most of the projects were implemented by foreign civil society organisations and consultancy companies. However, the necessity to strengthen the local agency public and private sectors, as well as the sustainable development of civil society should be addressed through allowing reporting in local languages and imposing a higher participation of local partners.

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