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Key Challenges for Effective European Union Action towards Central Asia

by Jakob Lempp and Jan Niklas Rolf

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Union's policies towards Central Asia cover different policy areas, including development cooperation, security, energy, environmental issues, human rights, the rule of law, cultural exchange, and many others. Although the revised EU Central Asia Strategy of 2019 and several (enhanced) Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with individual Central Asian countries have identified common interests and overall goals, the day-to-day business of managing the relations between the EU and Central Asia remains a polyphonic choir. This policy brief aims to describe the goals and instruments of the EU within this framework. It identifies key challenges in the relationship between the EU and the Central Asian states and, based on this, gives recommendations on how to achieve a more visible, cohesive and effective EU Central Asia policy.

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Introduction

*Central Asia is perhaps one of the few global locales where it is the EU that needs to learn to adapt rather than the regional partners of the EU.*¹

Fifteen years after the adoption of the first EU Central Asia Strategy, its impact remains fairly limited. Independent observers² and policy makers³ tend to agree that EU engagement in Central Asia has been high on dialogue but low on delivery. The European Parliamentary Research Service, for example, notes that the “EU’s most obvious success has been the development of closer diplomatic relations with the region. However, in many areas (human rights; anti-corruption; economic diversification) there has been little change for the better. As these depend on factors that are largely outside the EU’s control, the disappointing lack of results can hardly be blamed on the strategy.”⁴

That the weak results are largely due to external factors is, in fact, a widely held notion. While some identify a limited “absorptive capacity” of the Central Asian states,⁵ others point to the Central Asian regimes’ resistance to democratic change.⁶ In a region that is neither capable nor

willing to transform, the conventional wisdom goes, the EU is destined to fail.

When the EU’s failure to develop resonance and leave a mark is (partly) attributed to the Union itself, it is mostly in regard to its policies, which have been criticized for not being sufficiently funded, focused (in terms of priority fields), or differentiated (in terms of target countries).⁷ With its second Central Asia Strategy, the EU has sought to rectify this, increasing its budget, reducing the seven priority fields to three, and replacing its regional approach with a more bilateral approach.⁸ While EU *policy*, thus, has been subject to substantial critique (and some change), its *polity* and *politics* have not been scrutinized in a similar manner. This policy brief seeks to fill that gap by paying special attention to the EU structures and processes that stand in the way of a more effective implementation of its Central Asia strategies.

¹ Emilian Kavalksi, *Central Asia and the Rise of Normative Powers: Contextualizing the Security Governance of the European Union, China, and India* (Bloomsbury: London, 2012), 84.

² See the various working papers, policy briefs and commentaries by the European Union Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) project established in 2008 to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia. For instance, Michael Emerson et al., *Into EurAsia: Monitoring the EU’s Central Asia Strategy. Report of the EUCAM Project* (Centre for European Policy Studies; Madrid, 2010); Neil Melvin, “The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy”, EUCAM Policy Brief 28 (EUCAM: Brussels, 2012); Jos Boonstra, “Reviewing the EU’s Approach to Central Asia”, EUCAM Policy Brief 34 (EUCAM: Brussels, 2015). For a synopsis of reviews, see Andrew Campbell, Jan van der Lingen, Aline Medow and Julian Plottka, “Synopsis of Reviews of The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership”, IEP Policy Papers on Eastern Europe and Central Asia 02/15 (2015).

³ See, for example, European Parliament, “Draft Report on the State of Implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia” (2011): <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>; European Parliament, “Report on Implementation and Review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy” (2016): https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2016-0051_EN.html; European Parliament, “The EU’s New Central Asia Strategy”, Briefing by the European Parliamentary Research Service (2019): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/lt/document/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)633162](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/lt/document/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fabienne Bossuyt, “The EU’s and China’s Development Assistance towards Central Asia: Low Versus Contested Impact”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no. 5-6 (2019), 606-631; European Parliament, “Draft Report”.
⁶ Katharina Hoffmann, “The EU in Central Asia: Successful Good Governance Promotion?” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2010), 87-103; Georgiy Voloshin, *The European Union’s Normative Power in Central Asia: Promoting Values and Defending Interests* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2014); Agnieszka Konopelko, “The European Union Policy Towards the Post-Soviet Countries of Central Asia”, in: Mehmet Huseyin Bilgin, Hakan Dani, Ender Demir and Ugur Can (eds.) *Business Challenges in the Changing Economic Landscape - Vol. 1*, (Springer: Basel, 2016), 423-435.

⁷ Sebastien Peyrouse, “A Donor Without Influence: The EU in Central Asia”, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 478 (2017); Fabienne Bossuyt, “The European Union’s Political and Security Engagement with Central Asia: How to Move Forward”, *The Central Asia - Caucasus Analyst*, 6 September 2017 (2017); Dániel Harangozó, “New Partners, Old Dilemmas: The EU and Central Asia”, in: Zoltán Gálik and Anna Molnár (eds.) *Regional and Bilateral Relations of the European Union* (Dialóg Campus: Budapest, 2019), 137-148.

⁸ Ana-Maria Anghelescu, “Drawing Lessons of Past Cooperation between EU and Central Asia for the Implementation of 2019 Strategy”, OSCE Academy Policy Brief 58 (2020); Emilbek Dzhuraev and Nargiza Muratalieva, *The EU Strategy on Central Asia* (Bishkek, 2020).

Objectives and Tools of EU Central Asia Policy

Shortly after the independence of the Central Asian states, the European Union concentrated on providing support in the areas of energy, nuclear safety, infrastructure and agriculture.⁹ It was not until the late 1990s that cooperation between the EU and Central Asian states became institutionalized through a series of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with Kazakhstan (1999), Kyrgyzstan (1999), Uzbekistan (1999) and Tajikistan (2010) as well as the creation of the office of the EU Central Asia Representative (2005).¹⁰ Today, European Central Asia policy covers many policy areas, from the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, to climate, energy and security, trade, FDI and ODA. In 2007, the first EU Central Asia Strategy (“The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership”) attempted to create a comprehensive document in which all these aspects were bundled.¹¹ In 2019, a revised EU Central Asia Strategy (“The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”) was defined.¹² It identifies three overarching goals: (1) Promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and addressing common security challenges and climate commitments (“Partnering for Resilience”), (2) promoting an open investment environment (“Partnering for Prosperity”), and (3) intensifying the dialogue between the EU and Central Asian countries (“Working Better Together”). The EU aims to reach these goals with a cornucopia of different instruments:

- The most important bilateral instrument for implementing the goals defined in the 2019 EU Central Asia Strategy are the above-mentioned PCAs. The content of the second generation of the corresponding agreements is to be significantly expanded in order to do justice to the increased scope of policy areas (“enhanced PCAs”). A corresponding agreement has been in force with Kazakhstan since 2015; negotiations are currently underway with Kyrgyz-

stan and Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan has also expressed interest in a new edition of the existing PCA.

- At the political level, annual ministerial meetings are held between the five Central Asian foreign ministers and the High Representative of the EU. These are prepared by the European External Action Service (EEAS) through a series of lower-level meetings.
- Civil society actors meet in the EU Central Asia Civil Society Forum, which has been held since 2019. Organized by the EU Special Representative together with EEAS and the European Commission (DG INTPA, formerly DG DEVCO), it aims to establish a dialogue between the different actors on how to better use relevant EU programs and strengthen the visibility of the Union within Central Asia.
- In 2020, the EU Central Asia Economic Forum was established as a platform for the exchange of information on economic issues and the facilitation of interregional economic cooperation. The forum, which is held at the level of the Deputy Prime Ministers of the Central Asian states and a Vice President of the European Commission, has to deal with the fundamental difficulty that for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), there are quite different framework conditions for European-Central Asian economic cooperation than for the remaining states.
- The aim of the EU human rights dialogues with the Central Asian states is to discuss possibilities for cooperation in this area, but also to express concerns about the human rights situation in Central Asia and to offer assistance to improve that situation. The structured dialogues are accompanied by human rights seminars, which the European

⁹ See Harangozó, “New Partners, Old Dilemmas”.

¹⁰ The PCA with Turkmenistan, signed in 1998, has not yet been ratified in the European Parliament.

¹¹ Council of the European Union, “The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership” (2007): <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/>

¹² European Commission, “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” (2019): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019JC0009>. For an overview of the 2019 Strategy as well as a comparison with the 2007 Strategy, see Dzhuhaev and Muratalieva, *The EU Strategy*.

Commission holds in varying intensity in the region.

- Finally, there is a large number of EU programs and projects in the various policy areas. While some of these are only eligible to specific Central Asian states (e.g. IBPP, IfS), others cover the whole region (e.g. CADAP, BOMCA). Still others are designed for Europe's larger eastern neighbourhood (e.g. INOGATE, TRACECA) or the global south (e.g. DCI, EIDHR), putting Central Asian states in competition with other post-Soviet and developing countries.

Key challenges

The implementation of the above-mentioned goals through these instruments is characterized by a series of key challenges, the handling of which will be indispensable for successful cooperation:

- *Institutional complexity*: Whereas the EU often sees Central Asia as a single actor (where, in fact, the region is not remotely as unified as the EU), the Central Asian countries tend to perceive the EU as many actors.¹³ Even Central Asian elites have difficulty understanding what the EU is and what it does.¹⁴ The already complicated architecture and decision-making procedures of the EU gain further complexity through the various actors that are involved in EU Central Asia policy. With EU institutions and member states having their very own "pet projects," there is a plethora of programs and projects in the region. Emerson et al. count 303 projects for the European Commission and 87 projects for Germany alone that were underway or planned in 2008.¹⁵ To make

things even more complicated, many of these programs and projects are partly co-financed and partly set up in cooperation with external partners and are usually implemented by third parties. This not only increases coordination and transaction costs, but also creates a complex web that is extremely hard for Central Asian actors to penetrate.

- *Policy incoherence*: Although the Central Asia strategies of 2007 and 2019 attempt to define overarching strategic goals and provide guidelines for setting priorities, there remains incoherence within and between EU institutions. Within the Council of the EU, for example, there was substantial disagreement over how to respond to the 2005 Andijon massacre in Uzbekistan that left hundreds of people dead. Against the will of several EU member states that operated military bases in Uzbekistan to support their mission in bordering Afghanistan, the Council imposed an arms embargo against the Central Asian state. After the continued pressure of the German government, who was eager not to alienate its Uzbek allies, the embargo was lifted in 2009, even though the grounds on which it had been imposed in the first place – refusal of an independent inquiry and internal repression – remained evidently unchanged.¹⁶ Another example is the PCA with Turkmenistan that was negotiated by the European Commission and eventually ratified by all member states, but that is blocked by the European Parliament because of Ashgabat's failure to meet certain political standards. In addition to intra-institutional friction there is thus also inter-institutional faction that prevents cohesive EU action towards Central Asia.
- *Asymmetric interdependence*: While EU officials often deplore the lack of commitment on the part of their Central Asian

¹³ Zhanibek Arynov, "Changing Perceptions of the European Union in Central Asia" *L'Europe en formation* 385 (2018), 61–73.

¹⁴ Sébastien Peyrouse, "How Does Central Asia View the EU?" EUCAM Working Paper No. 18 (EUCAM: Brussels, 2014).

¹⁵ Michael Emerson et al., *Into EurAsia*, 62.

¹⁶ Sukhrobjon Ismailov and Balazs Jarabik, "The EU and Uzbekistan: Short-Term Interests Versus Long-Term Engagement", EUCAM Policy Brief No. 8 (EUCAM: Brussels, 2012); Giselle Bosse, "EU Normative Performance: A Critical Theory Perspective on the EU's Response to the Massacre in Andijon, Uzbekistan", *East European Politics* 33, no. 1 (2017), 56–71.

partners, with reforms being implemented only half-heartedly, the EU has not been very committed itself. Despite the assertion of Valdis Dombrovskis, Vice-President of the European Commission, that the “European Union attaches great importance to cooperation with Central Asia,”¹⁷ other world regions play a much more prominent role in EU foreign relations. This is particularly the case after the withdrawal of the US and various EU member states from Afghanistan, which had sparked much of the EU’s interest in the region in the first place. While Kazakhstan is an important supplier of energy resources for Europe, the region as a whole only plays a subordinate role for the European economy. For Central Asia, on the other hand, the EU has become the most important donor, investor, and trading partner.¹⁸ This being said, economic ties to Russia remain strong, especially for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, who are part of the Russian-dominated EAEU. It is little wonder, then, that the economic sanctions that the EU imposed on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine are also being felt in Central Asia. Whether the EU’s urgent need to become independent of Russian coal, oil and gas will lead to a greater dependence on fossil fuels from Central Asia and, thus, create a more symmetric interdependence between the EU and Central Asia, remains to be seen.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations may serve as a basis for discussion for decision-makers, both within the European Union and in Central Asia:

- *Reduce institutional complexity and enhance visibility of the EU in Central Asia:* While the revised EU Central Asia Strategy aimed at a more holistic approach, what it actually did
- *Increase (and possibly formalize) the coordination of EU institutions and align the foreign policies of EU member states with the EU Central Asia Strategy:* In order to deliver a coherent message to Central Asia, EU institutions need to better coordinate. As the existing, mostly informal, coordination mechanisms have not led to greater coherence, there is a need for further institutionalization. For example, formalized bi-monthly meetings of all institutional stakeholders from EEAS and the respective Commission Directorates-General, as well as, in certain cases, the European Parliament, and the EU Special Representative for Central Asia would increase awareness and mutual understanding of the respective challenges in the handling of current issues. Even if the EU speaks with one voice, however, there remains the danger that its

¹⁷ European Commission, “News about Valdis Dombrovskis” (2020): https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/dombrovskis/announcements/eu-central-asia-speech-evp-dombrovskis-eu-central-asia-dialogue-partnership-prosperity_en.

¹⁸ Sebastian Mayer, “Walking Alone, Walking Together? OSCE-EU Relations in Central Asia,” OSCE Academy Policy Brief 62 (2020), 2; Jacopo Maria Pepe, “Die EU in Zentralasien”, in: Jakob Lempp, Sebastian Mayer and Alexander Brand (eds.) *Die politischen Systeme Zentralasiens* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2020), 263.

¹⁹ Galiya Khassenkhanova, “EU Launches Three New Programmes in Central Asia”, *The Astana Times*, 3 December 2019: <https://astanatimes.com/2019/12/eu-launches-three-new-programmes-in-central-asia/>

message will be counteracted by member states who have strong competencies in foreign and security policy and whose interests, in particular with regard to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), seem to be diverging. It is therefore advisable to also involve individual member states in the consultation process while at the same time committing them to the basic principles of the overall EU Central Asia Strategy.

- *Adopt a more pragmatic approach towards Turkmenistan and encourage the Turkmen government to meet the standards of the European Parliament to ratify the respective PCA:* In its desperate search for alternative energy suppliers the EU can ill afford to bypass Central Asia, and Turkmenistan, which is home to some of the world's largest gas fields, in particular.²⁰ The ratification of the PCA with Turkmenistan by the European Parliament, however, is still pending. In a resolution on 12 March 2019, the EP concluded that it would give consent only if standards for democracy, the rule of law, and good governance were met. Efforts need to be intensified to convince the government of Turkmenistan of the necessity of meeting these standards, while the EU should apply its "principled pragmatism" approach, as outlined in its Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy, to Turkmenistan.²¹ The replacement of "democratisation" and "modernization" with the less politicised (and patronizing) concepts of "resilience" and "prosperity" in the revised EU Central Asia Strategy is a first step in that direction.

²⁰ Vanessa Boas, "Energy and Human Rights: Two Irreconcilable Foreign Policy Goals? The Case of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline in EU-Turkmen Relations", IAI Working Paper 12/07 (2012); Hilmar Rempel et al., "Die Rohstoffe Zentralasiens: Vorkommen und Versorgungspotential für Europa" *Osteuropa* 8-9 (2007), 433-447.

²¹ For a discussion of the "principled pragmatism" approach, see Neil Winn und Stefan Gänzle, „Die Globale Strategie für die Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik der Europäischen Union – Zentralasien und der Südkaukasus: vom normativen Ansatz zum „prinzipiengeleiteten Pragmatismus“ *Integration* 40, no. 4 (2017), 308-318; Katrin Böttger und Julian Plottka, „Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen EU-Zentralasienstrategie: Stand, Entwicklung und Perspektiven der europäischen Zentralasienpolitik“ *Zentralasien-Analysen* 111 (2017).