

European Union enlargement brings it geographically closer to Central Asia, which increases the significance of inter-regional relations, stability and security throughout Eurasia. From the first days of independence, Central Asian states made strengthening ties to Europe a foreign policy priority. Especially after signing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the EU, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in particular brimmed with enthusiasm for closer cooperation.

Toward a true Eurasia?

EU strategy in Central Asia: a view from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan¹

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Eager individuals, but a not so eager union

The foundation of EU-Central Asian cooperation, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA),² was signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1995 and four years later entered into force for a decade. It did not apply to Tajikistan, whose PCA negotiations were delayed by civil war, or Turkmenistan, whose cooperation was based on a separate bilateral Interim Agreement. The PCA is the legal framework for bilateral and inter-regional cooperation in a number of spheres (trade, investment, human rights, constitutional reform and regional affairs), and is significant for Central Asia owing to the EU's key role in the world economy, its experience in sustainable economic development and social justice, and its population's educational level and cultural richness.

But this enthusiasm was not shared by senior level EU officials. Dialogue was usually limited to Cooperation Council annual meetings, though even then EU representation was often less than stellar.³ High level Central Asian authorities, however, were always present, which indicated how significant they felt cooperation with Europe was. Kazakhstan even opened a representative's office in Brussels and signed cooperation and technical assistance agreements and created an environment for their implementation.

The EU's passive approach contrasted with the active foreign policy of the individual states of Germany, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy and Great Britain, which were successful in developing bilateral relations with their Central Asian counterparts and today seem to operate in the context of EU strategy. But will they sacrifice their national interests in the region in order to pursue EU interests? Different national interests translates into different Member State perceptions, positions and approaches to solving global issues. Thus we cannot speak of a clear EU political position, as European debate over the Iraq War sharply revealed. The basic reason for this 'weakness' is the EU's complicated organisational and heterogeneous structure.⁴

Turning point: 9/11 and a new strategy

EU foreign policy toward Central Asia improved after 11 September 2001, when the EU realised it could not ignore regional security threats. Inter-regional cooperation increased. As a result, on 30 October 2002, the European Commission released the 'Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia'. The Strategy Paper identified EU-Central Asia cooperation objectives based on PCA agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The core objectives were to promote stability, security, sustainable economic development and poverty reduction. The new agenda, however, did not include developing new EU policy implementation

tools. Instead, the Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) was adopted. TACIS provided a broad framework for developing European Commission policy documents, including Strategy Papers to highlight major priorities; 'Indicative Programmes' that determined cooperation objectives and costs; and Annual Action Programmes that specified projects and TACIS aid. The 'Indicative Program 2002-2004' entailed regional cooperation and support programmes implemented nationally, and a 'Pilot Poverty Reduction Scheme' that targeted the most vulnerable populations. This three-track approach aimed to promote security and conflict prevention, eliminate political and social tension, and improve the trade and investment climate. Annual TACIS project implementation allocations were increased from €25 million to €50 million during 2002-2004. Given rampant corruption in post-Soviet states, direct assistance was emphasised: consulting, training, courses, grant allocations and educational programs.

Central Asian officials praised the Strategy Paper but lamented the complexity of European institutions. European scholars criticised TACIS for its overly bureaucratic procedures, centralisation and insufficient attention to local conditions. Examining regional perceptions of EU policy in Central Asia can shed light on how to improve efficiency and cooperation.

Donor rather than equal partner: the EU in Kyrgyzstan

Senior EU officials called Kyrgyzstan 'an island of democracy' during its first years of independence. However, although the EU has supported its democracy and economic development, Kyrgyzstan has not cultivated an absolute political and economic orientation toward the EU, especially given opposition calls to join the union of Russia-Belarus.

The PCA and Strategy Papers form a sufficient foundation for more productive and dynamic cooperation. But as of the 2005 Tulip Revolution that overthrew President Askar Akayev, goals have not been reached and security and stability remain an urgent problem. One reason for this, according to Kyrgyz analyst Joomart Ormonbekov, is that TACIS projects are not well adapted to local circumstances. The needs and capacities of states do not always coincide, thus projects should be designed and coordinated jointly by EU and Kyrgyzstan representatives. This would help coordinate all aspects of project implementation and avoid what has often occurred in Kyrgyzstan: duplication of project areas and objectives.

Moreover, Ormonbekov believes that Kyrgyzstan has demonstrated an irresponsible attitude. Rather than developing its own strategies, it has contented itself with receiving EU aid. If the aid disappears, the sustainability of reforms will be at risk.⁵ EU-Central Asian cooperation should not be a one-way street: regional countries must

strive to develop their own strategies, which will contribute to regional development.

An international 'Marshall Plan' for Central Asia? The EU in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's more developed infrastructure makes it economically attractive to the EU. However, Tashkent's regime and politics of isolation provide no hope of political or economic dialogue. Despite this, between 1992 and 2005 TACIS implemented 188 projects funded by €150 million; most targeted agriculture, public health, technical education and training and small business enterprise.⁶ TACIS was the most frequently used mechanism in bilateral relations with the EU, for as long as TACIS aid addresses development, and not internal political issues, local authorities encourage it. Uzbek political scientist Shafkat Arifkhanov, in his recent book on security and regional integration, sees TACIS and other programmes as part of the broader EU policy of strengthening its position relative to Russia and China, the external actors most involved in Central Asia. He considers a constructive, sustainable dialogue with the EU as positive for Uzbekistan's development, but that the success of EU policies depends on its perception of democracy in Central Asia, which 'does not fit standards of the West'.⁷

Uzbek scholars consider TACIS inefficient. Dr Farkhod Tolipov, a political scientist in Uzbekistan, believes the region must develop a 'Central Asia first' strategy to unify their foreign policy and to 'answer' the EU's regional strategy, which would foster cooperation at an equal level. Moreover, Dr Tolipov states that the independence, modernisation and democratisation of newly independent states require larger scale international support, suggesting an international 'Marshall Plan for Central Asian states' to undertake regional cooperation efforts from which the international community can benefit.⁸

Evolution from observer to participant: the EU in Kazakhstan

The period of 2000-2007 is viewed as a new stage in EU-Kazakhstan cooperation. Dr Saniya Nurdavletova believes the EU is changing its role from 'observer' to 'participant' in Kazakhstan's development.⁹ In a March 2004 speech, Chris Patten, a former EU representative on External Relations, cited new priorities in Kazakhstan, such as economic cooperation, working against terrorism and reducing poverty, which the EU's new strategy is supposed to help achieve.¹⁰ Technical assistance is the main means of economic cooperation; provided through TACIS, it addresses all major economic and social sectors and is the gateway to European experience and knowledge. Key projects realised in Kazakhstan are in the fields of tax reform, agriculture, energy, public administration and education.

Owing to higher rates of economic development and a better social situation, TACIS aid to Kazakhstan was the lowest among

regional states. Despite this, Dr Nurdavletova concludes that TACIS created a stable investment climate for economic modernisation. According to TACIS, between 1993 and 2005 Kazakhstan received approximately €200 million, or half the total sum of international assistance provided to finance entrepreneurship, privatisation reforms and human resource investment.¹¹ The French scholar Catherine Poujol, at a regional conference in Hudjend, Tajikistan, said that while the EU provides more assistance to Central Asia than any other international power, this fact is not always known by the population, which perceives America as the main provider of democratisation and development assistance owing to its stronger informational support and probably because the UN's special agencies (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF) are usually associated with America. Thus the EU's efforts do not receive due recognition.

Kazakhstan realises that Central Asia is crucial to the EU's effort to diversify its energy suppliers. Both parties want to expand Kazakh energy transportation routes. The EU also wants to defend the interests of European companies in Kazakhstan's oil and gas industry. Kazakhstan, though it can secure alternative economic cooperation from Russia, China and Japan, according to its multi-vector foreign policy, remains eager to develop relations with European companies in order to tap their investment potential.

Central Asia to EU: Cooperate better among yourselves and you'll cooperate better with us

Because the EU is a confederation of equal and sovereign states, Central Asian countries are forced to build a two-level system of relations: one with the EU, another with each individual Member State. Dr Nurdavletova believes these two levels complement each other in a positive way, but that contradicts that the lack of a unified EU policy in Central Asia prevents efficient implementation of Strategy Paper goals and stifles the development of bilateral relations.

On 30 July 2007 in Berlin, the EU declared a new Strategy for Central Asia for the period of 2007 to 2013, when a new instrument will replace TACIS. For Central Asia, this augurs further interaction, investment, exchange of knowledge and experience, individual and institutional contacts and, consequently, development. For Europe, it means playing an important role in setting the international agenda, maintaining stability and promoting its geopolitical interests.

The European Council will evaluate the Central Asia strategy for the first time in June 2008 and every two years thereafter. This will serve to improve the efficiency of strategies and fill the gap pointed out by Dr Alexander Warkotsch, Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Würzburg, who believes inefficiency is caused by a lack of oversight.¹² Moreover, the EU intends to open Commis-

sion Delegations in all five Central Asian states. It is hoped that these delegations work more closely with local experts and officials, incorporate the latter's propositions and views in project implementation and foster more dynamic cooperation. Joint programmes in European studies and Central Asian studies for both regions would also contribute to bilateral relations.

European integration continues at the same time as Central Asian regionalisation (improving intra-regional cooperation in order to function as a coherent actor), thus transformations in bilateral relations are unavoidable. The consequences are unpredictable, thus all Member States should accept the most recent EU Strategy Paper as a guide to their individual bilateral relations with third countries and strive for closer cooperation among themselves. Only then will the EU gain an advantage over Russia, China, Japan and America, who are feverishly competing to gain a foothold in Central Asia.

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Notes

- This article is a revision of a paper presented at the ICCEES Regional European Congress 'Transcending Europe's Borders: EU and Its Neighbours', Berlin, 2-4 August 2007.
- For PCAs, see www.europa.eu.int.
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- Op. cit., Nurdavletova, S., 14.
- Op. cit., Warkotsch, A., 509.