



How does Central Asia view the EU?

Sébastien Peyrouse (ed.)

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Abstract

Much has been written about European policies and views regarding Central Asia. But how do Central Asians see the EU? This paper offers insights into how politicians, business leaders, scholars and civil society experts from Central Asia view the EU and its approach to the region.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
1. An overview of Central Asia's perception of the EU	5
2. National views	7
2.1 Kazakhstan – Aitolkyn Kourmanova	7
2.2 Kyrgyzstan – Emilbek Juraev	7
2.3 Uzbekistan – Farkhod Tolipov and Guli Yuldasheva	9
2.4 Tajikistan – Muzaffar Olimov	10
2.5 Turkmenistan – Sebastien Peyrouse	11
Conclusion	12

Introduction

In 2007, the European Union (EU) established its Strategy for Central Asia, with an ambitious agenda. Whereas much has been written on European views concerning Central Asia and the EU's capacity to meet its objectives in the region, there is little information on how Central Asians perceive the EU. This could lead to a mismatch between EU objectives and planning on the one side, and local needs and demands on the other. This problem is partly acknowledged in the 2010 EU progress report and the 2012 review of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, both of which argue that the EU's visibility and the understanding of the EU in Central Asia remain limited.

This raises the question of how Central Asia views the EU. What do Central Asians know about European policies and practices in the region? For what reasons is the EU praised? And for what reasons is it criticised? The objective of this paper is not to provide a quantitative study of Central Asian public opinion, but to offer an insight into how the EU is regarded in Central Asia. It also aims to identify ways in which local feedback could be gathered so as to feed into EU policy formulation. Taking into account the difficulty – in some cases the impossibility – of undertaking valid quantitative sociological surveys in the region, this paper is based on a qualitative survey of the opinions of Central Asia's 'elites' – defined here as politicians, business leaders, scholars, journalists, dissidents, and civil society experts. For each country, one or two local scholars present their conclusions deriving from interviews with these elites. Given the associated risks for local scholars, the chapter on Turkmenistan was drafted by the editor of this paper on the basis of interviews with several Turkmen experts.

1. An overview of Central Asia's perception of the EU

Information about public opinion in Central Asia is very limited. There are very few survey institutes active in the region and the ones that do operate have scarce financial and human resources. There are no independent institutes in Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan, and in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan those that exist sometimes face substantial hurdles. In addition, the majority of the Central Asian populations are not much informed about international developments and tend to have only a vague picture of the intricate net of external policies and actors. Results of the few consultations that do take place are thus very general. According to basic surveys carried out in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Russia is considered as the most positive and influential actor in these countries. In terms of influence, China comes second in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and Iran occupies this position in Tajikistan, whereas Europe and the United States (U.S.) only come in third and fourth place, respectively. In terms of cultural appeal, however, the 'West' is largely ahead of China. Getting beyond this general level proves difficult in large-scale surveys (i.e. those involving several hundreds or

thousands of people surveyed).¹

Thus, the opinion of the countries' elites might paint a more accurate picture. Their views can be gauged in a more qualitative as opposed to quantitative way (focus groups or detailed questionnaires). Elites tend to have more diverse opinions in terms of foreign policy, a greater knowledge of external actors, including the EU, and sometimes the possibility to travel abroad. This focus, however, has significant biases: precisely because of their greater awareness of Europe – and other international partners – results may reflect specific preferences linked to personal and group interests.

Moreover, Central Asian opinions regarding Europe vary from country to country. Indeed, Kazakhstan stands out insofar as both its political authorities and its broader elites identify more with Europe than do their counterparts in the other countries of the region. The 'Path to Europe' programme, launched by President Nursultan Nazarbayev at the time of Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE chairmanship, responds to a broadly consensual perception among the elites of the country being at the 'crossroads' between Russia, Europe and Asia. Kyrgyzstan also stands out for having the largest contrast in local opinions: while some elites see Europe as an important and useful ally, others are largely disappointed with the EU's weak capacity compared to Russia, China or the U.S. In the other three countries, elite perceptions of Europe are more complex. Criticisms related to Europe and Russia's colonial pasts are more widespread, fewer travel opportunities make Europe an unknown and alien place, and perceptions of cultural differences based on these countries' Islamic culture do not make Europe an obvious partner. Paradoxically, the two countries with the most Russophile elites – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – are also the most oriented toward Europe, while the three countries that have fewer cultural linkages with Russia – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – seem to be more distant from Europe.

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¹ Regular surveys are organised for instance by the Sange Research Centre and the Institute for Comparative Social Research Studies in Kazakhstan and the Analytical Centre Sharq and the Zerkalo Centre for Sociological Research in Tajikistan.

Central Asian elites seem to see the 'West' (*zapad* in Russian) as one entity. It includes Europe and the United States and is regarded as one way of life, not only with a uniform set of principles and political philosophy, but also with one set of contemporary geopolitical interests. At the same time, regarding perceptions of Europe there is a broad gap between the low visibility of the EU and the higher recognition of individual European states. Examples of this phenomenon include the prominence of German classical music and philosophy, French literature and philosophy, Italian design and British economic dynamism. European states have continued to cultivate these 'brands', which seem to strengthen European culture while limiting the visibility of European unity. The Soviet tradition weighs heavily here, insofar as the Soviet Union sought to downplay the relevance of pan-European bodies and instead nurture bilateral relations with individual European states. Contemporary Russia continues to pursue this policy. With the exception of the Kazakh government, the Central Asian governments – for whom multilateralism holds little appeal – are also trying to promote bilateralism. These governments prefer to establish stable and personalised relations with European national leaders rather than build ties with the EU. The Turkmen authorities, for instance, are more eager to negotiate with European companies, over which they can gain leverage, than they are to work with EU structures whose goals and modes of operation they do not understand.

Largely absent from the Central Asian arena in the 1990s, the EU only started to gain visibility with the establishment of its Central Asia Strategy in 2007. The majority of the region's elites welcomed a unified European approach. However, they do not envisage the EU assuming a dominant position among the region's external partners. Marked by a geopolitical culture that places a large emphasis on geography, Central Asians are convinced that distance works to the EU's disadvantage, and that the Union therefore cannot compete with other international actors that border the region: Russia, China, and to a lesser extent, Iran. Further, Central Asian elites are sceptical toward what they see as an EU caught up in issues within its own political and economic constellation. This is compounded by the economic and financial crisis: the feeling that Europe will withdraw into its domestic problems and fade from the international scene seems dominant in Central Asia today.

Furthermore, doubts and criticisms over the EU's objectives abound. First, the EU is criticised for having multiple narratives and vague objectives. While Russia, China, and the U.S. are seen as having clear energy and security interests, the EU is perceived as pursuing several ill-defined security and energy interests, in addition to development aid objectives and democratic values discourses. Still, the few surveys conducted among local experts, principally Kazakh and Kyrgyz, show that they consider economic matters, in particular energy, to be a priority for the EU,² while regional security and democracy promotion are considered to be

at the bottom of the EU's putative interest ladder. This perception partly contradicts the objectives of the EU Central Asia Strategy, where energy is only one focus among others including security, education, development, and democracy and human rights. Is this due to a lack of communication by the EU or flawed analysis within Central Asia?

While Central Asian elites support the European view of the post-Soviet space and view connections with the European continent as a major axis of development, they do not buy into the EU's belief in a nexus between the rule of law and democratisation and long-term security. Instead, they prefer to blame potential instabilities on Islamism or political dissidence. The EU's values drive is not only viewed with scepticism by authoritarians, but also by parts of academia, as well as experts and journalists that sometimes see democratisation as alien to Central Asia. At the same time, the EU's failure to promote values in Central Asia also receives cautious criticism from civil society activists and political opposition members, who are disappointed with Europe's lack of influence and sometimes hesitant policies in this regard.

Water management is the one area in which practically all the Central Asian experts interviewed agreed that the EU could make a difference. Rural development and migration management are also areas in which they hope that the EU will help and where the Union could have a niche, as these areas are seemingly of less interest to Russia, China or the U.S. The promotion of small and medium-size enterprises is also welcomed.

Finally, Central Asian civil society activists, and also academics and journalists, criticise the EU for allocating too few resources to too many areas, for setting unrealistic objectives, and for its excessive bureaucracy and complex procedures. Even though the EU's intentions might be deemed to be positive, its implementation is often criticised. Criticism focuses especially on EU project funding. Central Asians hear about large allocations but have the feeling that only a small part of the funding actually reaches them, while many – often European – consultancy firms are active with little knowledge of the region and do not undertake appropriate follow-up. Central Asians consulted for this study feel that local companies could benefit from a transfer of technology and know-how through cooperation with European firms, but do not see substantial engagement so far. Several experts also find it difficult to gain access to European officials when responding to tender bids and to get in contact with decision-makers. Since they are directly affected by the complexity of EU administration, it is mainly civil society representatives, especially NGO activists, rather than think tank experts or academic researchers that are particularly sensitive to and most critical of these issues. This also contributes to discouraging elites from investing in projects linked to, or sponsored by, the EU, and to their preferring, out of pragmatism, collaborations with Russia, China or the United States.

² See for instance A. Burkhanov, 'Problemy i perspektivy politiki evropeiskogo soiuza v Tsentral'noi Azii glazami kazakhstanskikh ekspertov' [Problems and Perspectives of EU policies in Central Asia seen by Kazakhstani experts], *Kazakhstan v Global'nykh Processakh*, no. 1 (11), 2007, pp. 92-100.

2. National views

2.1. Kazakhstan (*Aitolkyn Kourmanova*)

The EU has both pragmatic and ideological interests in Kazakhstan. On the one hand, the EU is interested in promoting democracy and improving the country's human rights record, and is often a leading voice in pointing to the regime's tightening. On the other hand, both its economic interests, mainly energy, and its member states' diverging positions, serve as a barrier for the EU being perceived as having a clear and concise strategy in Kazakhstan. The incumbent regime understands this weakness and uses it for speculation and bargaining. For example, Italy and France have intensified economic cooperation with Kazakhstan, despite scandals culminating in the detention of Mukhtar Ablyazov, one of Nazarbayev's main opponents. This casts a shadow on the image of the EU as a protector of democratic values and human rights norms. In fact, some Kazakh NGOs are frustrated because their regular appeals to European (and other) institutions regarding human rights violations in Kazakhstan, including major crackdowns on the opposition and free media over the past years, seem to have little effect on the regime. Whereas Kazakh NGOs and human rights defenders appreciate the adoption of European Parliament resolutions expressing concern over the country's general human rights situation as well as individual cases, the overall mood is one of disappointment given the limited effect of the EU's human rights policy on the behaviour of the Kazakh government.

The EU is perceived as having substantial economic leverage, but barely any political clout compared to Moscow, Washington or Beijing. The Chinese pragmatic approach, which is not accompanied by any democracy-building objectives, seems much more effective and as such may serve as a model for some European countries if they want to seal lucrative contracts with the Kazakh government. Although the EU has invested considerable funds in Kazakhstan over the last twenty years (Kazakhstan no longer qualifies for bilateral development aid as it now ranks as a middle-income country; however it will continue to participate in EU-financed regional projects; and at the same time assistance to civil society organisations through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and Non-State Actors and Local Authorities will continue), most eyes are now set on individual member states and companies that are the most active in investment and trade.

However, the EU is still a powerful representative of democratic values. The EU's record in solving disputes between states, and in building integrated economies and political and bureaucratic institutions while preserving diversity, remains attractive for some Kazakh politicians. Meanwhile, some local scholars have put forward the idea that the EU could play a modernising role in the region: a concept in which European values blend with Muslim identity (on the lines on the Turkish model) and which is supported by energy routes to Europe, is increasingly popular among new generations of the elite.

In some Kazakh civil society circles, the EU is regarded as a highly complicated structure that lacks the flexibility

to adapt bureaucratic procedures when necessary. This is said to result in a rather rigid implementation of its 2007 Strategy for Central Asia. The priority areas established in the Strategy are perceived differently among the various Kazakh stakeholders. For the Kazakh government, for instance, energy and transport were considered the most active spheres for cooperation, as the EU has proposed several ambitious projects and is carrying out the major transport projects TRACECA and INOGATE. The Kazakh government is also keen to discuss broader security issues with Europe in the hope that the latter will understand the region's vulnerability. Civil society, on the other hand, is more interested in projects and financial support delivered through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the broader Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). Projects with a direct, practical impact such as within water management, health and education have overall been better received than democratisation projects that are seen as long-term and often ineffective.

The EU's visibility in the region is slightly increasing through the work of EU delegations and relevant EU member state embassies that help to promote European culture and standards, as well as broader global values. The EU is most visible among the NGO community and within the younger generations, who tend to have better access to information than the population-at-large. Struggling human rights NGOs see the EU as a kind of last resort that they can turn to in the hope that statements can be issued and concrete matters brought to the attention of the Kazakh authorities.

At the same time, the EU is less visible within the economic and business communities. Kazakh entrepreneurs, who represent an expanding and powerful community, would be keen to have access to EU grants, but most funding is seen as coming from other (often non-European) donors.

However, the EU plays a meaningful role through technical assistance, research and knowledge projects. One good example is the CAREC project on environment, of which the EU is a major donor and promoter along with several other countries and organisations.

In Kazakhstan, the EU is increasingly perceived as a single actor in foreign policy, but this perception is still incipient: member states still have varying approaches and priorities, ranging from a focus on energy to a focus on development and human rights. Germany is perceived as the most pragmatic partner, with great potential for developing bilateral economic relations while also delivering development aid focused on the rule of law. This combined approach might be the most effective way to approach Europe-Kazakhstan relations.

2.2. Kyrgyzstan (*Emilbek Juraev*)

The EU delegation in Kyrgyzstan is one of the most active, generous and broadly-oriented donors supporting democratic development in the country. But this support is not well-known among the general public, for whom the continued strong presence of Russia and the growing role of China are primary points of concern, both positive and negative. Among the Kyrgyz elites, the EU is seen positively

– and less controversially than the United States – as an alternative in the case of being ‘jammed’ between Moscow and Beijing. In nationalist circles, there is a more negative image of the EU as having taken a pro-Uzbek stance during the 2010 violence.

The EU has allocated substantial amounts of assistance to Kyrgyzstan. It is one of the most generous donors, despite being considered inflexible and too bureaucratic when it comes to grant applications, reviews, and reporting. The recipients of European funding are the government of Kyrgyzstan, its various substructures, local administrations; and civil society organisations in all areas of social life – both local and foreign-based non-governmental organisations.

Despite its wide-ranging activities and support areas, the EU is less recognised by the general population in comparison to other donors and cooperation partners. In a February 2012 public opinion poll,³ when asked ‘which three countries are the most influential for Kyrgyzstan’s politics?’, only 4 per cent mentioned the EU (presented as a country for the purposes of the poll), while 87 per cent mentioned Russia, 37 per cent Kazakhstan, 36 per cent the U.S., and 20 per cent China. In response to a follow-up question on ‘which of the mentioned countries has a positive and which has a negative influence on democratic development in Kyrgyzstan’, 55 per cent mentioned the EU as a positive actor.⁴

Among governmental agencies, political and business elites, and especially the NGOs who often work with EU grants, there is of course a much greater awareness of the EU and also a relatively more positive perception. But even among these groups, the EU is not included in the list of Kyrgyzstan’s most important partners. There are a number of possible reasons for the relative lack of awareness of the EU and its activities among citizens.

First, there is the less familiar nature of the EU as an entity. To most ordinary citizens, the fact that the EU is neither a typical country nor clearly an organisation like the United Nations (UN) or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) makes it harder to understand what it is and what it does. While business circles have a clearer idea of Europe, they focus more on member states. Moreover, the weakness of the Kyrgyz economy limits the prospects for bilateral relations.

Second, the diffusion of the EU brand among other donors and implementing organisations of European origin distorts the picture. The EU is often equated to or associated with more familiar and ‘concrete’ European entities, such as the German and French development agencies, GIZ and ACTED, respectively. These agencies are physically present in cities and communities, implementing their projects directly with local partners.

Third, the fact that the EU is mostly a donor and not an implementing agency in Kyrgyzstan affects its visibility. The EU is not seen in the field carrying out and directly participating in projects: it is absent at the point where EU projects and money meet the ultimate beneficiaries – the citizens in towns and villages. Even if all due credit is given to the funder, the prevailing portion of recognition is ultimately granted to the implementers.

Fourth, the EU has few staff in Kyrgyzstan and the delegation plays a diplomatic-political role as well as acting as a grant-making organisation. This results in a confusing and mixed picture for many Kyrgyz. Insofar as the EU as a political entity needs to be represented in its own right, the Delegation is expected to carry out the role of an embassy, speaking and being present in the name of the European Union. At the same time, the EU Delegation office is much more of a development and grant-administering organisation than any other national embassy in town. In the case of other embassies and delegations, the developmental and grant-administering roles are generally delegated to development and cooperation agencies, such as GIZ (Germany), USAID (US), and JICA (Japan).

Upgrading the EU office from a representation to a delegation in 2009 was a welcome step in improving the EU’s visibility in Kyrgyzstan, as it essentially granted the office the status of an embassy. This automatically elevated the mission’s status in the eyes of both Brussels and Bishkek. However, many beneficiaries are not aware of this improvement. Greater efforts by the mission, focusing on broad public awareness about the EU and Europe in general, would not only help raise the EU’s visibility, but also promote the ideas of democracy, human rights and better governance in illustrative ways: important areas where the European experience – with far fewer political liabilities than the American equivalent – could be useful to promote.

Two related points worth considering are increasing the size of the delegation in order to enhance EU visibility in projects, and the organisational separation the activities of grant management and development assistance from political and public representation activities, so as to allow more concentration by relevant staff on a specific functions, and to make clear to Kyrgyzstani beneficiaries who does what within the delegation. These objectives may not be easy to accomplish.

It will be still more difficult to address the diffusion of the EU brand among other donors and the fact that the EU funds but does not implement projects: the EU as such cannot become an implementing agency of its own development assistance. However, a positive step would be to work more closely with the actual implementing and grant-receiving organisations. Additionally, the latter should make their acknowledgement of the European Union’s contributions more effective.

³ Kyrgyzstan national opinion poll, 4-27 February 2012, The International Republican Institute (IRI), Bishkek office (April 2012), p 42, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2012%20April%2011%20Survey%20of%20Kyrgyzstan%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20February%204-27%2C%202012.pdf>

⁴ There are various interpretations of these results, including the way questions are posed: to note, 94 percent out of 1310 respondents thought Russia was a positive factor for democracy in Kyrgyzstan, and 63 percent out of 536 thought the United States was a negative factor. Thus, reference to these data should be viewed only as an indication.

2.3. Uzbekistan (*Farkhod Tolipov and Guli Yuldasheva*)

Farkhod Tolipov

The EU strategy toward Central Asia has been largely determined by normative and soft power policies. The European agenda in the region also comprises cooperation in spheres such as trade, investment, information and communication technologies, education, as well as democratic reforms, good governance and human rights protections. However, especially in relation to Uzbekistan, the EU's normative agenda has been balanced against security-oriented priorities. Uzbek elites find themselves in a complex situation, whereby they welcome external actors that can provide a counterweight to Russia and China, but at the same time they criticise the EU's (and the U.S.'s) underlying democratic agenda.

Although many European states established diplomatic relations with Uzbekistan as early as 1992, cooperation within the EU framework itself started only in 1996 with the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between both partners during a visit of Uzbek President Islam Karimov to Italy. The EU-Uzbekistan bilateral dialogue framework has now acquired an institutional base and includes several joint bodies: the Cooperation Council, the Cooperation Committee, the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, the Subcommittee on Trade and Investments, and the Subcommittee on Justice, Home Affairs, Human Rights and Related Issues.

Despite a 'good start' in the 1990s, EU-Uzbekistan relations were put to the test in the first decade of the 2000s when Uzbek law enforcement forces cracked down on the Andijan protests in May 2005, killing hundreds of civilians during a so-called counter-terrorist operation. The United States and European institutions condemned the Uzbek government for 'indiscriminate use of force' and demanded an international investigation. However, Uzbekistan rejected the demand on grounds of national sovereignty, and the EU imposed sanctions. After a few years sanctions were softened and in 2009 they were ended altogether, foremost on the initiative of Germany.

In January 2011, President Karimov visited the EU and NATO's headquarters in Brussels and met with EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso, EU Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger and NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Trade and investment, democracy, and cargo transit from Afghanistan to Europe through Uzbek territory were among the topics discussed. The visit was important – especially in symbolic terms – as several official documents were signed (the Agreement on the Establishment of the EU Delegation in Uzbekistan, the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the field of Energy, and the Memorandum on Intent on Implementation of the DCI Indicative Programme), but also created tensions over democracy and human rights.

Despite criticisms from Uzbek human rights organisations, the visit showed the population that the period of frozen EU-Uzbekistan relations was over. The EU seemed to have 'forgiven' Uzbekistan for Andijan and the president had

restored his international legitimacy. For the Uzbek elites, the fact that relations were restored without Uzbekistan meeting EU demands contributed to a weakening of the EU's image.

Trade and investment are the main priority for Uzbekistan in its cooperation with European countries. The EU is Uzbekistan's second partner in terms of foreign trade. However, Uzbekistan's economic policy, in particular the strong protectionist measures that have curbed trade, has greatly limited contacts between the Uzbek and European business elites over the past ten years. In this respect, business forums held in Tashkent are becoming platforms for showcasing both the country's investment potential and overall positive trends within bilateral cooperation. EU-Uzbekistan relations received a new impetus with the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which aims to transfer non-lethal cargo from Europe to Afghanistan and vice-versa as the ISAF mission draws to a close. Since February 2012 the defence ministers of Latvia, the UK, Germany, Poland, Italy and other European countries have visited Tashkent to coordinate the withdrawal of their troops via the NDN.

From an Uzbek perspective, relations with the EU cannot be considered separately from relations with organisations such as the OSCE and NATO, which are also seen as representing European interests. After the 2005 Andijan events, relations with these two organisations decreased in importance; the status of the OSCE Centre in Tashkent was reduced to the OSCE Project Coordinator. Opening a new page of cooperation with these institutions would be mutually beneficial. The OSCE notion of comprehensive security and NATO's views on the management of armed forces both link national and international security to human rights and democratisation and are both essential to the future of the region. These values-oriented activities can simultaneously be challenging for non-democratic states like Uzbekistan and advantageous for Central Asian peoples.

The promotion of European values in Central Asia and the maintenance of a pro-European orientation in Uzbekistan will largely depend on a pro-active stance by the EU and its member states. EU-Uzbekistan relations seem to be experiencing a reboot: both sides are interested in building more sustainable relations that go beyond purely strategic goals. To develop a long-term presence in Uzbekistan, Europe should also play the card of its cultural attraction. Hundreds of Uzbek students and scholars hope for more opportunities to access European higher education and research possibilities.

Guli Yuldasheva

The EU is one of the most influential global actors, with a large potential to contribute to the development and overall security of Central Asia. First, Europe can play a unique role in helping to restore and strengthen Central Asian states' identity and culture. Europe could help local governments to find a balance between the modernising and conservative layers of the population, to provide favourable conditions for the development of all-round education and, hence, to favour changes in political culture and a subsequent comprehensive transformation and modernisation of society. Second, in spite of the ongoing global economic crisis, the

EU still has substantial resources in comparison to other Eurasian actors with which to sponsor high-tech innovation, education and infrastructure in Central Asia, and to inject scientific-intellectual and financial capital into the region.

Based on many years of experience in the region, the European political and expert circles now have more accurate knowledge of the region, strengthened by their close cooperation with local analytical circles. However, there are still many cultural misunderstandings that are especially visible in democratisation projects initiated by the EU in Central Asia. European efforts to reinforce human rights, the rule of law and democracy are a long-term task that depends mostly on changes in education and political culture. Rural areas remain the last element of Uzbek society to benefit from European cooperation, and poverty challenges the development of the country as well as changes in political culture. Improving education without being able to offer better living standards in rural areas will only increase internal migration. Future EU-Uzbekistan cooperation should thus focus on the country's rural areas.

Europe can also further develop a regional Central Asia policy, focused on water-energy disputes, relations with Afghanistan, a constructive position toward Iran and good neighbourhood relations with Russia. The EU could not only effectively balance the presence of other competing actors – Russia, China, Turkey and Iran – but also seek to efficiently integrate them into joint regional endeavours. However, current rivalries in and around Central Asia among Russia, China and the United States, as well as the fragmented nature of the region itself – due to water and ethno-national problems – both hamper effective cooperation between the EU and the region. Moreover, the priority given by the EU to both its energy interests and its human rights values – highlighted by the significance of energy-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and the application of sanctions against Uzbekistan – has had negative effects on the EU's capacity to bring Central Asian states together.

There is broad consensus in Uzbekistan – in governmental circles, the expert community and civil society – concerning the positive role played by Europe in general, although different groups highlight different sectors of cooperation. Uzbekistan believes that cooperation through the multinational organisations active in the region (EurAsEc, SCO, CSTO and NATO) is more problematic than bilateral cooperation with EU member states. Around 80 per cent of all programmes with EU participation include a bilateral element from an EU member state. As a whole, according to data provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, 841 Uzbek enterprises use European capital and 266 leading European companies have been accredited in the country. Germany and France are the most active. EU-Uzbekistan trade has been growing steadily, and increased by about 20 per cent in 2010-2011, reaching \$2367 million. The number of Uzbek students and academics studying and/ or doing research in EU states is also on the rise, as are parliamentary contacts, cooperation within the legal and security spheres, and governmental visits. EU assistance is particularly visible in sectors such as higher education, the health and social system, and security through the BOMCA-CADAP programmes.

2.4. Tajikistan (Muzaffar Olimov)

As a result of the Tajik civil war in the 1990s, EU-Tajikistan cooperation was launched much later than similar cooperation with other Central Asian countries. However, the participation of the OSCE in the settlement of the Tajik civil war, its role in post-conflict reconstruction and, most importantly, the increase of EU assistance to Tajikistan since the inauguration of the 2007 EU Central Asia strategy have built a solid background to European activities in the country. Tajik elites perceived the European strategy with enthusiasm, hoping that it would help the country diversify its foreign policy and international economic ties, as well as benefit from increased foreign investment and technical and humanitarian aid. It was the first time that Tajikistan was clearly identified as a priority country in Central Asia, primarily due to its proximity to Afghanistan.

The Tajik population and elites appreciate European educational and cultural programmes, the high level of competence of the majority of European experts, and the EU's role in public financial management and private sector development in agriculture, among other factors. However, data from population surveys conducted by the Sharq analytical centre reveal that the image of Europe is chaotic, fragmented and contradictory. Tajik public opinion tends to develop four narratives about Europe: 'Europe is progress in the global human sense'; 'The EU is a territory inhabited by people with a culture that is strange, alien and difficult to understand. Europeans are the eternal enemies of the East'; 'Europe is a territory connected to the spread of Islam'; 'The EU is Tajikistan's donor'. Tajik public opinion highly appreciates Europe's scientific and technological development, but is rather suspicious of European culture and would not mind if Europe became increasingly Islamic. These contradictory statements and communication gaps are usually rooted in the lack of information available about Europe.

The region's main external actors – Russia, China, EU and the U.S. – each have their own niches in Tajikistan and are not engaged in strong competition with each other. Russia remains a major military and political partner of Tajikistan, a host country for Tajik migrant workers and a major economic partner; China is a massive neighbour, a leading economic partner of and donor to Tajikistan; the U.S. provides security by being present in Afghanistan; and the EU provides aid to state and economic reforms as well as poverty alleviation. In foreign relations, Tajikistan has a clear pro-Russian and pro-Iranian orientation, and Europe is more absent from everyday debates, rather than being seen as positive or negative. Contrary to the other Central Asian countries, Sharq survey data shows that in Tajikistan there is a more positive attitude toward the EU and European institutions rather than to individual countries. This is likely because the EU has always been a donor, financial or technological, while the relations with individual countries, such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany, have a more complex history.

Difficulties within the EU-Tajikistan relationship are often rooted in deep institutional disparities. Tajikistan has very weak and underdeveloped state institutions, low levels of administrative competence, and poor education of public

servants, all of which create hurdles when implementing EU projects.

All Tajik experts interviewed for this study underscored the need to better disseminate information about the EU and its member states, its institutions and its culture. Lack of information is one of the main obstacles to cooperation. For example, there is very little understanding in Tajikistan of how the EU is managed. One senior Tajik official argued that 'No one understands what "Brussels" is. The EU has a great bureaucracy and a project has to pass many levels of hierarchy to be implemented. There is a lot of work with consultants who charge huge expenses. Consultants help us understand what is happening, but there is no help in practical terms'.

The EU's agenda in Tajikistan includes promoting political and economic transformations in the region. However, the Tajik elites view cooperation with the EU and its member states only from an economic and political point of view: as an opportunity to balance relations with powerful Russia and China, and generally as one element of external relations in a rapidly changing world. At the same time, the Tajik elites understand that Europe is a challenging partner that will represent a danger to authoritarian rule if its influence is widened through greater engagement, such as through the exchange of experiences, and access to education and languages. Therefore, Tajik print and electronic media rarely report about Europe, and often articles are written through the prism of a 'clash of civilisations'. Moreover, Europe is often criticised for projecting its own logic onto Tajikistan. For instance, the European experience in terms of integration is seen by the Tajik elites and public opinion as irrelevant to the Central Asian neighbourhood: Tajik relations with Uzbekistan are very tense and neighbouring Afghanistan is very instable.

Civil society has a different attitude toward the EU. Intellectual communities, still shaped by the Soviet legacy, consider Europe through the prism of high culture and NGOs highly appreciate European experience and technology, but broadly European values remain alien to most Tajiks. It is generally considered that the most successful and prominent examples of the EU's contribution to Tajikistan's sustainable socio-economic and political development as well as its security include macro-financial and technical assistance, in addition to programmes such as BOMCA/CADAP, Tempus and Erasmus Mundus.

Meanwhile, in the field of trade, the destinations of the main Tajik export commodities – aluminium and cotton – have changed. In 2000, the major importers of Tajik aluminium were the European Union and Russia; in 2010, China and Turkey. As for cotton exports, a switch was made from Switzerland, Latvia and the Slovak Republic to Turkey, Iran and Pakistan.

Currently, EU-Tajikistan cooperation is complicated by several contradictory factors. On the one hand, the EU's Central Asia Strategy increased the Tajiki population's sympathy toward the EU. On the other hand, there remains a difference in values. European institutions tend to bind their projects to the promotion of human rights, democratisation and gender equality, which often causes misunderstanding

and rejection among Tajiks. Divergence in values is even more acute in relation to Islam: the religious controversies in Europe; outbreaks of Islamophobia within Europe; the tense situation between U.S. soldiers and the Afghan population in Afghanistan; and sanctions against Iran all contribute to negative feelings toward Europe and the values it promotes.

2.5. Turkmenistan (Sébastien Peyrouse)

Despite the presence of the embassies of several EU member states as well as the offices of different European companies, the EU remains largely unrecognised among a large part of the Turkmen population. Those who are aware tend to have a rather positive image of Europe thanks to the activities organised by the cultural centres of the main embassies: Germany, the UK, France and Italy. In the capital, Europe is also associated with luxury products on sale in some shops, but which are inaccessible to the majority of the population. Europe is perceived as a region with a high standard of living, and is coveted for this reason; a number of Turkmens, in particular the youth, dream of obtaining a visa to work or emigrate to the West.

However, Europe, and even less the EU, is scarcely visible in day-to-day life beyond the presence of large companies, whose logos adorn the walls of building sites, such as Bouygues in the case of France. This Europe is specialised in very specific areas, mainly hydrocarbons and construction, whereas day-to-day economic contacts pertaining to the shuttle trade are forged with Iran first and foremost, and then with Turkey, China and the Gulf countries, as well as with Russia.

Acquiring knowledge of Europe remains a challenge: students who go to the cultural centres of the embassies are obliged to justify their visits; and those desiring to leave for Europe for study purposes not only need obtain a Schengen visa but also an exit visa from the Turkmen authorities. Forging relations with European organisations and receiving their support, for example in the form of grants or stipends, is difficult given the complex character of the Brussels bureaucracy and suspicion among the Turkmen authorities toward these initiatives.

The population is so heavily monitored that many Turkmen citizens prefer simply to have no interaction with expatriates or foreign institutions. The degree of self-censorship is very high, even among the youth, and fear of reprisals against family members impedes any decisions deemed risky.

Even the educated, and the governmental, bureaucratic and business elites are largely unaware of the EU and how cooperation could be forged. There is barely any free civil society in Turkmenistan. Some dissidents in Europe and the United States have a good sense of the EU as an institution and actor. But for the most part, the EU is perceived as a very bureaucratic and remote organisation, whose contacts are exclusively with the Turkmen state and which takes no interest in the daily lives of Turkmens.

For some elite representatives, the EU is perceived as a set of states with contradictory policies, which possess essentially economic interests, and which seek to control

the country's gas riches. Turkmenistan is indeed often considered by Brussels as a potentially important gas partner, but the agreement on gas deliveries between Turkmenistan and the EU remains very modest (10 bcm) and, moreover, Ashgabat has never officially ratified the agreement. EU-Turkmen cooperation on energy is therefore still awaiting an overall agenda capable of converting declarations of intent into policy outcomes. In private, some Turkmen elites admit their hope that EU relations with Turkmenistan will improve in order for Turkmenistan's regime to open up. But they also argue that the EU should not prioritise energy cooperation.

The prospects for increased cooperation seem limited, even if the number of young Turkmens allowed to go abroad, in particular to Russia, has begun to increase since Gurbanguluy Berdymukhammedov's coming to power. There also exists a small privileged Turkmen diaspora that is often invited to go abroad for various sorts of training and meetings, but it remains a minority and it is either linked to official circles or has emigrated with no plans of returning to the country. The cultural visibility of the embassies must therefore remain one of the drivers of European visibility. It would also be positive if European countries were to play a bigger role as cultural mediators by teaching more local citizens about European realities via study visits or internships, and by aiming to develop interactions between expatriates and locals.

Conclusion

The majority of Central Asian elites share many common views about the EU: they feel that the EU is barely visible in Central Asia; that it is unknown to the population; that it has complex bureaucratic procedures; and that it has ambitions greater than its actual leverage. Ruling elites believe the EU lacks pragmatism in comparison to Chinese and Russian cooperation and influence.

However, the elites' vision of the EU varies perceptibly among the republics. First, it varies in terms of knowledge: there is less awareness in the most authoritarian republics, namely Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as in Tajikistan. It is in Kazakhstan where both the elite and public opinion have the most detailed view of the EU, while Kyrgyz elites also show a reasonable understanding of the EU. Second, it varies in terms of interpretation: debates on the European construction as a model, either for Central Asian or Eurasian integration, have progressed furthest in Kazakhstan, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan see the EU essentially as an aid donor.

The EU progress reports on the implementation of its Central Asia strategy acknowledge the need to develop a real EU communication strategy for Central Asia, but do not include concrete proposals beyond the opening of delegations in all five countries (Turkmenistan lacks a delegation for the time being) and high level visits by EU officials and member states' representatives. But this is highly insufficient. The EU Special Representative (EUSR) had a positive impact in representing the EU in Central Asia and personalising relations with leaders, officials and other stakeholders but due to internal reasons the EU decided in March 2014 not to renew this position. This is likely to further diminish EU

visibility in the region as a proposed special envoy that is part of the EU External Action Service is unlikely to have the same political clout enjoyed by the EUSR with Central Asian leaders.

Access to European institutions and programmes could be facilitated in order to make the EU more visible and comprehensible outside of the restricted elite circles that are already familiar with it. Positive steps might include: EU familiarisation programmes as well as simplified procedures for civil society grants; tighter control over programme implementation; and a more even distribution of revenue allocations among expatriates and locals to diminish the feeling that Europeans are simply out there to make money from the aid offered to recipient countries.

Rather than promoting joint initiatives with Central Asia, the EU agenda is perceived as one-sided. Local experts would like to be treated more like self-reliant partners than mere recipients of EU guidance and assistance, and to have their opinions, visions and priorities valued within the European narrative. Local demand-driven European programmes and the provision of improved feedback mechanisms once projects are granted and implemented could improve local perceptions of EU efficiency.

The mismatch of agendas also needs to be addressed: education, water management, rural development and migration management, as well as certain security issues are key for the EU 'brand' in Central Asia and could become niches of excellence for the Union where it is not in competition with either Russia, China or the U.S. The EU brand needs to be clearly promoted, niches identified, and specific human resources allocated.

The Central Asian elites would like the EU to clarify its hierarchy of interests in the region that they see as contradictory in that energy, security and values agendas seem to compete. The Central Asian impression that the EU's 'grand narrative' on democratisation can be easily side-stepped in exchange for an energy relationship damages Europe's image in the region. The EU is not only criticised by civil society activists, but local governments also scorn it as a power that is weak and 'easily bought'. The non-ruling elites consider they are not sufficiently involved in EU actions in the region and that the EU is 'privatised' by the incumbent political elites. The EU needs to learn how to 'brand' itself in terms of visibility, but also in terms of defining its niches of excellence in the region.

To conclude on a positive note, the EU can increasingly play to its strengths. European culture is admired by political and civil society elites in Central Asia. Moreover, the EU offers an important alternative to the overwhelming influence of China and Russia. The EU is also seen as an actor with fewer stakes and interests in the region in comparison to China, Russia and the U.S., often turning the Union into an impartial player that can foster regional cooperation and understanding. But for the EU to increasingly engage in Central Asia it will need to strengthen its visibility. This can perhaps best be achieved by more transparent development assistance and a policy focused on those areas in which the EU most excels and for which it is most admired: culture, education and regional cooperation.



Established in 2008 as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. Specifically, the programme aims to:

- Scrutinise European policies towards Central Asia, paying specific attention to security, development and the promotion of democratic values within the context of Central Asia's position in world politics;
- Enhance knowledge of Europe's engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research and by raising awareness among European policy-makers and civil society representatives, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from European countries and Central Asian states and provide a forum to debate on European-Central Asian relations.

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