

EU is Kazakhstan's primary trade partner, its largest export market, and its third import partner - Federica Mogherini



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BRUSSELS. KAZINFORM - Federica Mogherini, current High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission in the Juncker Commission since 1 November 2014, has given an exclusive interview to Kazinform International News Agency.

- How do you assess the role of Kazakhstan in the Central Asia, and how important the region is for the European Union?

- Regional integration in today's world is vital; prosperity and cross-border cooperation go hand in hand. So, the clear role of Kazakhstan in both regional integration and in regional policy formulation is crucial. Last December in Astana, where I chaired the 11th EU-Central Asia Ministerial meeting, I discussed with your leaders a number of the country's foreign policy initiatives: we focused in particular on Afghanistan, and the Kazakh contribution to the regional security architecture and to the Iran nuclear talks. Kazakhstan is also the strongest economy in Central Asia: President Nazarbayev has initiated a very relevant reform programme to address and overcome the situation caused by the falling oil price, including through the structural changes to the economy.

Central Asia is the gateway between Europe, Russia and China: the importance of the region is impossible to overstate. The EU Strategy for Central Asia, which was reviewed in June 2015, calls for the establishment and development of a strong, durable and stable relationship with all Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan is the EU's first trade partner and it has become the first of our Central Asian partners to conclude a new generation Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU: it can now lead the

way for similar developments in the region. We share the same interest in making your region more stable, more democratic and more prosperous. The recent visit of President Nazarbayev in Brussels was an important opportunity to reconfirm our strong partnership and identify new areas of interaction and cooperation between the European Union and Kazakhstan.

- The new Agreement covers 29 areas of cooperation. What kind of improvements would it bring specifically in the economic sphere?

- Even before we signed the new EU-Kazakhstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement last December, the EU was already Kazakhstan's primary trade partner, its largest export market, and its third import partner. I am confident the new Agreement will further strengthen the positive trend of bilateral trade and investment cooperation. The Agreement will also enhance cooperation in many other areas, such as our economic and financial cooperation, energy, transport, the protection of the environment, culture and research. But also, crucially, the rule of law: because a strong and reliable legal system is a must to attract firms and investments. I am looking forward to the early ratification of the Agreement by Kazakhstan, so we can all reap its benefits. The Agreement has the potential to help consumers, who will be guaranteed better protection. It will foster new business opportunities, in particular for small and medium enterprises, and we know how important this is for creating new jobs. It will facilitate a more efficient use of energy and investments on renewable energies. It can contribute to a more reliable business environment, and development in rural areas.

- Does the Agreement enlarge the scope of the political dialogue?

- Indeed. In these three months since the Agreement was signed we have already started a new dialogue on regional stability and our shared interests, in particular on conflict prevention, crisis management, the fight against weapons of mass destruction and against terrorism. I asked Kazakhstan and its neighbours to actively contribute to the conference on Afghanistan we will host in Brussels: we need to prepare the conference's political platform in the best possible way, especially on how to involve Afghanistan in a closer regional cooperation. But we will go beyond traditional security, towards a broader concept of human security: we have agreed to cooperate on migration, combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism, and the fight against drugs, organised crime and corruption. The new Agreement also covers bilateral cooperation in the areas of justice, freedom and security, which is a completely new development in our relationship. It is important that our Joint Communique has recognised democratisation, the respect for human rights and the rule of law to be fundamental for the socio-economic development and also for the business climate and investments. Our political dialogue can benefit other fields of our cooperation, too.

- Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan as a firm supporter of

integration processes in Eurasia, puts forward the idea of creation in the future of a free trade zone between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union. How do you assess this initiative?

- The decision on if and how to proceed along the path of integration is in the hands of the EU Member States. It should in any case be synchronised with the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements, which remains the most critical issue. But I definitely agree that our two Unions cannot be perceived as rival projects: we must move beyond a mentality of spheres of influence, the idea of competing blocs is totally out-dated. In the medium and long-term, an alliance of regional alliances is the only way forward in today's world of global challenges.

- Having this Agreement signed, can we talk about the liberalization in the future of the visa regime between EU and Kazakhstan?

- Negotiations for visa facilitation are a different matter and were not linked to the signing of the Agreement. The visa-waiver process is very complex: formal negotiations will have to be launched with the support of the EU Member States and with a proper mandate. But the Agreement we have signed has certainly laid the foundations for a constructive dialogue, based on much greater trust among us. At this stage we are ready to provide EU expertise, to continue to discuss with the Kazakh authorities, and to reflect at the European level on any proposals.

- Thank you for the interview.