

Europe and Kazakhstan – Partnerships and Prospects

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By **Dr. Benita Ferrero-Waldner**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Austria (2000 – 04); European Union Commissioner for External Relations (2004 – 09); Chair of the Advisory Council of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs (2014 -)

In 1991, as the USSR broke up, the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan found itself in a new and challenging world. President Nursultan Nazarbayev had to deal with insecurity caused by both economic and political collapse and unfamiliar concepts such as the free market, globalisation and democratisation. For the rest of the world, the CIS states were relatively unknown, and to improve its standing in the global arena, the newly independent state of Kazakhstan started looking for new partnerships, notably with the countries of Europe.

My country, Austria, has always sought to cultivate strong links with Central Asia, and I have taken a great personal interest in the region since my first visit in 1999 ahead of Austria's chairmanship of the OSCE, during which we focused on the region in particular. I was struck then, as I still am today, by the industry and ambition of the Central Asian states, and of Kazakhstan in particular. These qualities have seen the country rise from a very challenging start to become the confident player on the world stage that we see today.

Central Asia as a whole has advanced in leaps and bounds since the fall of the Soviet Union. Each year, the five nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are making greater contributions to global dialogue on issues of critical importance to the countries of Europe. For almost every major sphere of international policy – from energy security to the environment, combatting people and drug trafficking, and counterterrorism – there is a strong alliance between Kazakhstan and Europe, and the potential for further collaboration is enormous.

From the early days of its Independence Kazakhstan has adopted a multidimensional foreign policy, and recently set out a “2050 Strategy” which aims to make the country one of the 30 most competitive nations in the world by the mid-point of the century. Partnerships with the countries of Europe and the European Union have been explicitly identified by the

government as a fundamental part of Kazakhstan's trajectory from a middle-income to a high-income country, with a Western-style accountable government.

Considered as a whole, the European Union is Kazakhstan's largest foreign trade partner, accounting for 50% in of its total external trade, and the largest investor in Kazakhstan, with a 60% share in its FDI. As for Kazakhstan, it exports 60% of its oil to Europe, making it Europe's third largest provider of hydrocarbons among non-OPEC countries. In 2015 Kazakhstan and the European Union signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement - the strongest possible framework of bilateral cooperation between non-neighbour states, which assesses 29 potential areas of cooperation.

The partnership is set to grow further, as witnessed by Kazakhstan's joining the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 2014, the first Central Asian country to do so. Kazakhstan's landmark election as a non-permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council in 2016 will have greatly strengthened the country's standing in Europe; as will its accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2015, a development which was strongly advocated by the European Union throughout nearly two decades of negotiation.

A new EU strategy for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian Countries was announced in 2015, emphasizing areas for economic and social development. Since then, European leaders have lauded the improvement in business conditions in Kazakhstan and pushed for further investment and trade in the country. An improved visa regime has been mooted, as has further cooperation in education.

A major priority for both Kazakhstan and Europe has been establishing a partnership in the energy field. Kazakhstan's vast energy resources are deemed to have played an important role in the development of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) project, set to bring vast quantities of gas from the Caspian Basin to Europe. European countries are also aware of the great potential for the production of green energy in Kazakhstan, a territory well-suited for solar and wind energy production. "Future Energy" is the theme of EXPO 2017, which concluded recently in Astana - a great opportunity to promote and enhance the production of green energy in Kazakhstan and beyond, thanks in part to the participation of European companies and governments, and the exchange of technologies.

Cooperation in international and domestic security is another key component in the Europe-Kazakhstan partnership. Kazakhstan has been fully supportive of EU regional programmes aimed at coordinating efforts in the field of counterterrorism, counternarcotics and border management. The country's pioneering policy of nuclear disarmament, and the concrete steps it has taken to prevent nuclear proliferation worldwide, have continued to receive the EU's full backing since the early 1990's. And the country is increasing its support to nearby Afghanistan by improving security capabilities through training, promoting economic development and funding the education of its brightest young men and women in Kazakh universities.

In recent years, Astana has played host to major anti-extremism conferences as well as talks with Syrian opposition representatives, in an attempt to help resolve the conflict currently taking place in the Middle East. This follows the important role that Astana played in bringing Iran to the negotiating table with the West concerning its own nuclear ambitions. Kazakhstan's harmonious society, in which citizens of many different faiths and backgrounds

live in peace and tolerance, makes it an ideal mediator in matters of combating extremism, and an important ally to Europe in these troubled times.

As a European diplomat who has followed the rise of Central Asia since the fall of the USSR with great interest, the mutual benefits of an ongoing partnership between Kazakhstan and the countries of Europe seem self-evident. The last few years have seen significant steps towards increased collaboration on both sides, and in a wide range of areas. From a European perspective, it is now crucial to build on the momentum for engagement with Kazakhstan afforded by these positive recent developments, and keep strengthening a fruitful partnership based on common interests and shared values. I look forward to seeing what prospects the future holds in this respect.