

Projecting soft power as an imperative for the EU in Central Asia

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There is a thirst for Europe in Central Asia and much more should be done to answer this interest under existing and new inter-cultural programs, writes Nargis Kassenova.

An ideal new EU Strategy for Central Asia would be forward-looking and goal-oriented, and adequately respond to current challenges. The main challenge for the EU is the growing competition for the 'hearts and minds' of Central Asia's people, and the main goal is maintaining and promoting European soft power in the region.

The cultural milieu in Central Asia is changing as the role of Russian language and culture is receding.

Traditionally, it was Russian influence that set the basis for Europe's entry into the region. In the nineteenth century, Kazakh poet and philosopher Abai called on his compatriots to learn Russian, claiming that it would open their eyes to the world and global culture, indirectly making reference to Europe (Abai Kunanbaev, 'Book of Words'). The Soviet period and its costly modernisation implied familiarity with European cultural codes. To be an educated citizen meant to know about Greek mythology, famous Roman quotes, and European history and geography; to read European literature; and to watch European movies. Since independence, Soviet culture and its European foundations have been slowly disappearing. Over the past years, Russia as a channel of 'Europeanness' was cluttered due to politically-driven anti-Western sentiment (Europe as Gayropa, among other things), fuelled by the Russian media.

Thus, the challenge for Europe and Central Asia is to maintain civilisational proximity.

Europeans and Central Asians need to foster new connections and ways of relating to each other, bypassing the weakening Russian connection. In this sense, more should be done in the current EU strategy's 'building bridges: inter-cultural dialogue' priority area, which focuses on the promotion of tolerance and respect for religious freedom. This is the least developed section of the 2007 document. The high competitiveness of European cultural products gives the EU an advantage to promote dialogue. The EU also embodies a rich set of values and practices, such as the social welfare state and an environmentally-conscious citizenship, which are highly relevant for the region's development. Simply encouraging Central Asian governments to adopt policies is not enough; real change can only be achieved through a change in attitudes and a reshaping of identities. More Europe-related information and European cultural products should be available in local languages.

Closely related to this is the area of youth and education, which were rightly classified as a priority by the EU. A lot has been done, for example through the Erasmus programme, but there is still much potential. There is a need to establish more effective platforms for bringing Europe, European ideas and discourses to Central Asia, such as dual degrees between European and Central Asian universities, European Studies programmes and institutes, and possibly even a College of Europe or a European University in the region.

Last but not least, to promote its soft power the EU needs to deal with the region's current political circumstances. Central Asia's authoritarian regimes have been consolidating, while space for civil society has been shrinking. The rise of the 'Rest' (particularly China) and the weakening of the West, aggravated by the new United States presidency under Donald Trump, have contributed to worsen the human rights environment. The EU, with its normative foreign policy, feels lonelier. However, it is of crucial importance that it continues to prioritise and monitor the human rights situation in Central Asia, and that it keeps governments accountable to their international obligations.

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