



Subject:

Submission of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic to the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs` report on the European Union`s proposed new Strategy for Central Asia

Bratislava

2018, August 27th

Ten years after the adoption of the Central Asia Strategy, the five countries and the region itself have become significant partners to the European Union. Generally, the strategy has achieved its goals contributing to regional stability, boosting trade, enhancing cultural, educational and P2P relations. Today, the EU has a significant influence in Central Asia, and we are witnessing an increasing interest of CA countries in further and intensive co-operation. For large parts of the population, the EU symbolizes stability and prosperity. Maintaining active political and economic cooperation with the EU would allow CA countries to continue a balanced foreign and security policy, and diversify their trade partners, including in the energy sector.

The 13th Ministerial Meeting in Samarkand in November 2017 has confirmed an unprecedented level of cooperation between CA and EU partners and an appetite for more Europe in the region. As the preparations for the new EU Strategy for CA are ongoing, we deem important to build upon this momentum.

At the same time, CA countries` political systems would hardly meet the criteria of plurality and democracy, and human rights are often oppressed. Nevertheless, despite the dramatic events in the region during the last 10-years-long period, it has managed to avoid bloody conflicts as it happened in MENA. Since 2017, there has been a significant improvement of bilateral relations, and regional integration has got a new and strong stimulus. Today, the state of play differs in each of the five CA countries. Kazakhstan has gained an upper-middle-income-economy status and international prestige, Uzbekistan has implemented a huge range of reforms since 2017, and has contributed a lot to better bilateral relations and regional integration, Kirgizstan - despite its economic setbacks – has continued to move on its uneasy track towards democracy. By contrast - Tajikistan became the most remittance-dependent country in the world that hardly controls part of its own territory and Turkmenistan keeps sinking more and more into destructive self-isolation.

Currently we have been witnessing an “illusive stability”, a signal that an almost 25 years - long era in CA countries` development is coming to an end, a prognosis that requires new approaches to Central

Asia as an entity and one by one to each of the five countries. We are firmly convinced that today CA countries stand in varying degrees at the crossroads. The long-time maintained political system based on the authority of a single person and his entourage have almost outspent its potential and systemic reforms are needed to meet the societies` climaxing demands, especially those of the young generation of better life conditions, working opportunities, fair distribution of wealth and active participation in the decision making process. The absence of legal ways to express alternative opinion or dissatisfaction, and ongoing curtailing of freedoms and human rights applied by security services under the pretext of the fight against terrorism just fuel sympathy and support for extremism and radicalism by significant parts of the society.

Neighboring Afghanistan and Iran, homecoming of FTFs and intensive drug trafficking are considered to be additional threats to the region`s security. Climate change with direct impact on the region is another menace.

Export of fossil fuels, minerals and agricultural commodities, complemented by remittance of labor migrants in non-energy-exporting countries, are often the only source of income. The lack of capital, technology, highly trained workforce and large distance from global markets have hindered efforts to modernize and diversify economies.

Obviously, the CA countries lack capacity, experience, knowledge and resources to handle successfully this set of challenges.

In this regard, the EU assistance and contribution is welcome and can be crucial for avoiding negative scenarios that admittedly will have direct impact on the EU and its MS. Tailor made approaches to each of the five CA countries, formed in accordance with their ambition to strengthen basic universal values as the corner stone of stability and development, are necessary. Their eagerness for modern technologies and investment should be clearly conditioned by the implementation of democratic principles, human rights and freedoms. The attitude of all CA countries` ruling elites towards mentioned values and principles is ambivalent: on one hand, they understand its irreplaceable contribution to most desired stability and economic development; on the other hand, they are afraid that more democracy and political completion will lead to the loss their own power. For sake of maximum effectiveness, the EU will have to find the “eupeptic measured portion of medicine”.

The EU should intensify its values and approaches` promotion among all segments of society: from decision making bodies and politicians to business leaders to general population focusing on the young generation. In this regard, free access to information is a must. Here the EU might consider using the following tools:

- significant development of cultural, scientific, educational and P2P relations;
- moving to the active phase of experience sharing and assistance in different fields through appointing specific EU MS or regional alliances (V4, B3) for each sector;
- enhancing regional integration by creating platforms for intensive dialog between all 5 CA countries and inviting them as a block of states to join EU regional alliances` activities;

- improving CA countries inhabitants` access to alternative source of information in a locally spoken language, f. e. EURONEWS broadcasting.

As other influential regional players like Russia and China have a very limited capacity and interest to implement the mentioned values, the EU will be the main provider of indispensable assistance. Here, intensive and close co-operation with like-minded countries like USA, Canada, Japan, South Korea and others will be an undoubted advantage.

The EU has to change its tactic from “teaching and preaching” towards dialog, focused on explaining the benefits the whole society would gain.

Sustainable development of CA countries that highlights investments in the environment, including water management and exploring possibilities for renewable energy and energy efficiency, is one of the EU`s main goals. They might need to explore new ways to social reconciliation, to increase competitiveness, accelerate transition to a knowledge-based economy and find niches in international trade. Improving connectivity among CA countries and the EU through transport links has a potential to boost regional cooperation and thus long-term economic development of the whole region. The EU expertise in energy efficiency and modern green technologies may serve as an example for CA countries.

Drivers for stability as fighting corruption, strengthening good governance and rule of law are the imperative preconditions of improving business and investment climate and enhancing the CA countries` international prestige. Active implementation of these values will consequently lead to stability, economic growth and modernization. That would help to secure the region will not become another fons et origo of tension, conflicts and illegal migrants. The EU should consider carefully the participation of EaP forerunners (f. e. Georgia) in the transformation experience sharing process. A shared history, mental proximity and geopolitical closeness could elevate effectiveness, and at the same time cement the partnership between the EU and EaP while working together on a common project, and enhance the latter`s international prestige and self-confidence by turning them from “students” into “undergraduates”.

The EU expertise in reform may prove instrumental for the CA countries in their efforts to modernize public sector. Implementation of twinning projects shall be envisaged especially for capacity building, also for effectiveness and efficiency of public administration.

The EU policy should aim at turning CA countries into “an island of stability, prosperity and co-operation” in the region consisting of hot spots as Afghanistan and Iran, and empowering their ability to cope effectively and independently with actual challenges like radicalism, terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration and foreign influence.

More regional integration will empower the CA countries` tolerance to local or global threats. V4 and B3 countries` experience might be a rewarding source of inspiration.

Education that meets the needs of the labor market is a tool that helps preventing youth radicalization. Development of an academic and think-tank community network specialized in the EU-CA relations, RoL and the SSR is essential for knowledge development on both sides of the Strategy. Support for European Studies in Central Asia would be an encouraging mechanism for such interaction.

Besides its environmental meaning, the EU's assistance in water management will improve bilateral relations between neighboring countries, increase security, and decrease interethnic tensions.

The new Strategy needs to respond to new geopolitical realities and challenges, address specific needs of the countries concerned, and to target the ever-growing opportunities in the region. While confirming a comprehensive approach, the new Strategy needs to be flexible in its nature and focused on a selective list of priorities.

Michal Slivovič, M. A

Director

Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia Department
Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic