

Strategy of the European Union in Central Asia

In June 2007, the European Union published its strategy for Central Asia. The strategy was a logical extension of the growing interest of the EU to the countries of the region since the beginning of the 2000s. This interest was caused by several factors.

Firstly, leading European countries were involved in the conflict in Afghanistan. This increased an importance of Central Asia for them.

Secondly, in 2004, the EU expanded substantially eastward and became geographically closer to Central Asia. Central Asia was no longer a remote region, but was considered as a “neighbor of the neighbors” of the EU

Third, some Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) experienced serious internal shocks in the mid-2000s, which increased attention of external players to the sustainability of the region.

And finally, against the backdrop of gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine, the EU has been eagerly searching for new suppliers of energy resources, especially natural gas, and the Caspian basin countries have been viewed as potential exporters of hydrocarbons.

As a result, all these factors contributed to the fact that the European Union adopted a separate strategy for the region - a concept document that outlined the main goals, directions and mechanisms of European policy in Central Asia.

A little more than ten years have passed since the strategy adoption, a time sufficient for summing up the results and determining benchmarks for future cooperation.

In general, implementation of the strategy has achieved mixed results.

On the one hand, we see that after adoption of the strategy, the EU has noticeably stepped up its activities in the region. In particular, if previously the EU had only one regional office (in Kazakhstan), then after the strategy was adopted, separate offices were opened in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In addition, new formats of cooperation were proposed, for example, in security, energy, and human rights.

We are also seeing increase in official visits by representatives of the European Union. A special role is played by the EU Special Representative in Central Asia.

Also, we can note an increase in donor assistance to countries in the region amounting to EUR 750 million in 2007-2013, and should be over EUR 1 billion in 2014-2020.

Despite all these positive moments, most European and Central Asian observers tend to be more skeptical about implementation of the strategy. Skepticism concerns the document itself, its goals and implementation. Such skepticism is partly the result of overestimated expectations from the strategy and from the EU as a whole.

It should be understood that with all the EU's interest in the region, Central Asia is not a priority for Brussels. In view of this, criticism of the EU strategy and policies should also be down-to-earth and proceed from the real state of EU-CA cooperation.

In general, when developing the document, Brussels needs to consider **experience of implementing the previous strategy** in order to build on realistic assessment of its interests and competitive advantages in Central Asia, where serious changes are taking place.

Strategy 2007: Critical Overview

Adoption of the Central Asia Strategy in 2007 was an important step towards expansion of geopolitical presence of the EU in the region, which was first officially declared as a region of EU strategic interests.

The document was a conceptual vision of the EU policy in Central Asia for the medium term and, unlike previous documents, fixed a region-wide approach.

At the same time, the Strategy had certain shortcomings, which were clearly showed up in the implementation process including the following:

First, the style of the document leaves a lot of questions. The document has **very little specifics**. The adopted strategy is more like a declaration of intent, which indicates a large number of grandiose and unattainable tasks, and does not detail how the EU intends to achieve its goals.

Second, the strategy lists seven main areas of the EU's policy in the region. But it is rather difficult to understand **which of them is of paramount importance for the EU**, and what is a secondary issue, since it is very difficult to find logic in the order of listing these seven areas for cooperation.

Given that the EU does not have sufficient resources in the region, focusing on such number of directions seems ineffective. It would be more appropriate to concentrate on a smaller range of issues.

Third, many projects of the European Union have been developed by European experts/organizations, carried out by European experts/organizations, and are evaluated by European experts/organizations, which does not always produce the desired result.

Fourth, the Strategy **did not provide the role of the Central Asian countries themselves** in achieving their goals. Many Central Asian observers who participated in discussion of the draft strategy note that most of their proposals were ignored by the European Union. As a result, the strategy looks more like a one-sided document.

Fifth, the strategy did not envisage **the role of other external players**, primarily Russia and China. These countries can significantly limit the EU's activities in the region, especially in such areas as security or cooperation in the energy sector.

In addition, the EU cooperation with other international structures, including the OSCE, the SCO, the EEA and the Turkic Council, could provide an additional effect in implementation of the Strategy. However, the EU did not take into account the benefits and advantages of such interaction.

Sixth, the Strategy reveals **the difference in assessments of significance of certain problems and issues between the EU and the countries of the region.**

For example, the environmental component. The way it is positioned in the EU Strategy does not coincide with the vision of these issues for the countries of Central Asia. Of course, the countries of the region (primarily Kazakhstan) have an understanding of the need to develop the so-called "green economy". But this is not such an acute problem for the countries of Central Asia, because:

- there are quite large stocks of own traditional energy carriers;
- there are a significant number of other issues of economic development that are of higher priority for Central Asia (industrialization, development of transport infrastructure, etc.).

In general, the 2007 Strategy had too many abstract provisions and desire to encompass all five Central Asian countries with common contours, despite their different specifics and potential.

Finally, the lack of clear mechanisms and tools for implementing the strategy led to the fact that, as a result, the EU was never able to achieve its stated goals either within economic cooperation or in promotion of "European values" in the region.

New Strategy

Development of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia provides a chance to learn from previous experience and work on mistakes. For this, the EU needs to assess properly the main challenges in Central Asia and focus on improving implementation mechanisms of the Strategy.

***First.* The goals of the new strategy should correspond to the real state of affairs, rather than pursue abstract tasks.**

The EU should focus its attention on fewer areas for cooperation and vertically deepen into each of the chosen spheres, rather than horizontally expand the boundaries of cooperation.

The choice of areas should be based on the extent to which the countries of the region are willing to cooperate with the EU. Thus, the EU will be able to allocate more resources to those areas where real results can be expected.

***Second.* It is important to attach greater importance to the transformational processes taking place in the region.**

At the present stage, the countries of Central Asia, primarily Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are sufficiently strengthened from the political and economic point of view, which causes their deep integration into the global economic system. In this regard, the new Strategy should provide formation of new tools of interaction to strengthen economic ties with the region.

***Third.* The EU should objectively assess its interests and opportunities in Central Asia.**

The EU can play an important role in the area where it is particularly strong - in modernization. All the states of the region face the need to implement large-scale reform programs in the economy, public administration, etc.

And in Central Asia, unique opportunities are opening up for European diplomacy and development programs.

Economic diversification, investment, contribution to development of human capital, establishment of a digital economy - there is a huge potential for mutually beneficial cooperation in all these sectors.

Finally, special attention should be paid to supporting small and medium-sized businesses, as well as venture projects related to the high-tech area.

***Fourth.* It is important for the EU not to allow geopolitization of cooperation with Central Asian countries.**

Central Asia is part of the most important regional processes in the space from the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus to western China, and from the Middle East and Afghanistan to Russia.

Taking into account the multi-vector policy in foreign policy of all Central Asian countries, the EU should avoid the logic of competition, considering Central Asia as an arena of cooperation.

Fifth. Regional cooperation should become more flexible.

The EU should strengthen the mechanisms of work and involvement of all countries of Central Asia in joint projects. In the region, Brussels is viewed as a neutral player with a rich experience of integration. Therefore, it is the EU that could promote development of mediation and regional dialogue on sensitive regional issues such as ecology and migration.

Sixth. An essential issue in relations between Europe and the countries of Central Asia is security and joint struggle against the threats of terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime.

Between 2007 and 2017, the situation in this area has also changed significantly. The main center of instability moved from Afghanistan to Syria. Both the European Union and Central Asia are in a zone of direct terrorist threat.

In turn, given that the EU does not have a military infrastructure in the region, Brussels should focus on development of soft security instruments.

One of the ways is **to institutionalize the EU-CA dialogue on security**. For this, it is necessary to establish a special structure with a high level of participation on both sides and with a clearly defined agenda.

In addition, it is here where the EU can join efforts with international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

Seventh. An important area of intersection of interests of the EU and Central Asia is transport and infrastructure.

Potential for cooperation in this area is enormous. Central Asia is becoming an important transit-transport corridor between China, South Asia and Europe. Potential of the region is reinforced by China's investments within the One Belt and One Road Initiative, under which Central Asia plays the role of one of the key trade corridors between the EU and the PRC.

In this regard, the EU Strategy should strengthen emphasis on development and expansion of regional transport infrastructure and **highlight transport as a separate chapter**.

Development of transport infrastructure in the region will help to unlock economic potential of Central Asia, and will also bring trade relations with the EU to a new level.

In general, the new Strategy should adequately take into account the new geostrategic situation in Central Asia, which has radically changed since adoption of the first strategy in 2007.

Given these points, the EU could formulate more clearly its policy in Central Asia, including with account of the most important issues for the countries of the region, as well as other regional players. All this will make it possible to implement a truly effective strategy for the next decade.