

Input by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung on points we would recommend being included in the new strategy of the EU for Central Asia

In 2007 most Central Asia-experts enthusiastically welcomed the German initiative of designing an EU strategy for Central Asia. Finally the EU was granting the region more (focused) attention. In the eyes of many observers this was long overdue.

However, some of the initial enthusiasm faded over the years and gave way to doubts if the strategy really lived up to its potential. Hence, it is safe to assume that most Central Asia experts welcome the formulation of a new strategy being currently drafted. Even though the first strategy was certainly an achievement, it also suffered from a number of flaws and – as the geopolitical context changed tremendously during the years that the strategy was implemented – it is to a large degree outdated.

The major shortcoming of the initial version of the EU's strategy on Central Asia is certainly the prevailing lack of focus. The strategy was covering too many areas while sufficient financial funding was lacking and therefore only little impact could be achieved. Therefore, even though the EU has increased its presence on the ground since 2007, its visibility and impact have remained limited. In comparison to the two big actors in the region – China and Russia – the EU did not have too much to offer.

Thus one of the main lessons the EU should learn from the implementation of its previous strategy is that a focus on a limited range of topics that reflect European expertise is required. Therefore, an analysis of the needs of the region should go hand in hand with an examination of how the EU can stand out and provide an added value to the Central Asian republics. Yet, the EU should not only focus on what it can deliver to the Central Asian states, but clearly define its interests in the region.

One further aspect to be considered in the drafting process is the altered geopolitical situation and the considerable changes the region has gone through since 2007. This applies especially to the ambitious geopolitical strategies China and Russia are implementing in the region¹.

Defining priorities: Matching Central Asian needs/interests with European interests and European strengths

Regarding the European interests in Central Asia, the EU certainly has economic aspirations that are largely directed at the abundant natural resources in the region. Moreover, the latest economic reforms in Uzbekistan as well as Kazakhstan's fairly successful efforts to provide a more favourable business

¹ Indeo, Fabio: 2018 Revitalizing the EU's Central Asia Strategy. In: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2018.
<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/revitalizing-eus-central-asia-strategy-19862>
(visited on 20/07/2018)

environment² bring along economic opportunities for European states. The role Central Asia is playing in the Chinese Belt and Road initiative and the latest improvement in regional cooperation promise enhanced connectivity throughout the region. The EU – a longstanding partner for trade and modernisation in Central Asia – can largely benefit from these prospects for trade enhancement and facilitation in the region.³ It goes without saying that the different development levels of the Central Asian nations need to be taken into consideration while working on a new economic strategy for Central Asia.

As a global frontrunner in sustainable development, the EU can provide an added value to the region by offering both financially and environmentally sustainable development solutions and thereby contribute to the urgently needed economic structural change in Central Asia. Strengthening its financial tools, the EU can provide an attractive sustainable alternative to Chinese loans, which have left some recipient countries with an alarming debt and rising debt service charges potentially limiting other necessary spending.⁴ At the same time, the option of joint investment projects with China should be examined. This could open up the opportunity to bring investment standards closer to EU and global regulatory, environmental and labour standards.⁵

Central Asia faces severe environmental challenges with the almost dried out Aral Sea being only the most illustrative example. These challenges are being amplified by factors such as demographic growth, a resource-intensive development model, outdated infrastructure and the consequences of climate change. Therefore, fostering environmentally sustainable growth should remain in the focus of the EU's Central Asia strategy. The EU can offer its expertise in the fields of sustainable energy generation, energy efficiency, climate change policies, green economy, and sustainable water management. With Kazakhstan hosting the EXPO 2017 under the title "Future Energy", an interest in long-term change towards a more sustainable economic model within the region became evident. As effects of climate change and environmental degradation such as water and air pollution don't stop at borders, it is recommended to pursue a regional approach working with all Central Asian partners.

There is one aspect I would like to highlight as a key European interest in the region: stability. Indeed, during the last decade, Central Asia has – apart from the Kyrgyz revolutions – rather been characterized by stability, with hardly any armed conflicts recorded and a rather low level of terrorism. However, fragility is enhanced by deteriorating education and healthcare services, widespread

² Ranking 36th on the World Bank's „Ease of Doing Business Ranking“, Kazakhstan by far provides the most favorable business climate in Central Asia. See: Doing Business. Measuring Business Relations:

<http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreeconomies/kazakhstan>

³ Turkstra, Alberto: Central Asia in the Age of Connectivity. In: Europe Now (Council for European Studies, 2018). <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/04/central-asia-in-the-age-of-connectivity/> (visited on 23/07/2018)

⁴ IMF's Lagarde warns China on 'Silk Road' Debt. In: Deutsche Welle, 12/04/2018. <https://www.dw.com/en/imfs-lagarde-warns-china-on-silk-road-debt/a-43354360> (visited on 25/07/2018)

⁵ Ghiasy, Richard / Zhou, Jiayi: The EU: Pondering Strategic Engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative. In: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 17/05/2017. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2017/eu-pondering-strategic-engagement-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative> (visited on 25/07/2018)

poverty, corruption and human rights violations.⁶ Notwithstanding the rather restricted quantitative threat of terrorism within the region, with around 4.000 persons⁷, a high number of foreign fighters who joined Islamic State in Syria and/or Iraq have originated from Central Asia⁸. This phenomenon is connected to the region still being in the middle of an ongoing process of identity formation. While the Soviet element is losing importance, Islamic religion is of growing significance for the self-definition of the new generation. Coupled with the often low level of education, a widespread sense of marginalisation and the presence of sometimes radical Islamic movements from abroad, there is an increased risk of radicalisation in the region. Returning fighters pose a further risk both in terms of potentially planning and conducting violent attacks as well as recruiting and radicalising additional individuals.

The risk of instability is being aggravated by an unstable neighbourhood with Afghanistan bordering several Central Asian states and a number of terrorist networks active in the expanded neighbourhood. The barely controllable border region to Afghanistan not only benefits terrorist networks but is a main route for drug traffickers⁹. Furthermore, there are several regions within Central Asia where the state is not able to fully exert its monopoly on the use of force and which are being controlled by organized crime groups, local warlords or powerful clans. An additional conflict risk stems from ethnical tensions, as the Central Asian countries are home to several dozen different ethnical groups and ethnic composition has been changing since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This risk for escalation is particularly high in Kyrgyzstan, where in 2010 hundreds died in ethnic clashes between the Uzbek minority and Kyrgyz majority, and in Kazakhstan, where open conflicts between ethnic groups have so far been successfully avoided, but tensions rise due to an increasing 'Kazakhisation' in Kazakh society.

The European Union is certainly not standing out for its hard power capabilities and most probably it won't be able to compete with Russia as a security provider in the region. However, the EU does stand out in soft policy areas. With its

⁶ Bossuyt, Fabienne: The European Union's Political and Security Engagement with Central Asia: How to Move Forward. In: The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 2017. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13464-the-european-union-s-political-and-security-engagement-with-central-asia-how-to-move-forward.html> (visited on 18/07/2018)

⁷ Lynch, Thomas F./Bouffard, Michael/King, Kelsey/Vickowski, Graham: The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for US Counterterrorism Policy. In: Strategic Perspectives 21, 29/10/2016. <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/987178/the-return-of-foreign-fighters-to-central-asia-implications-for-us-counterterro/> (visited on 18/07/2018)

⁸ Looking at the example of Kyrgyzstan: According to a Kyrgyz official 850 Kyrgyz citizens joined Islamic State (IS) militants in recent years, while the total population numbers around 6 million. See: Official: 150 Kyrgyz Citizens Killed In Syria Fighting Alongside IS. In: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 28/06/2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/official-150-kyrgyz-citizens-killed-in-syria-fighting-alongside-is/29325374.html> (visited on 27/07/2018). In comparison, around 1000 persons are estimated to have joined IS in Syria and Iraq from Germany which has a total population of 82 million habitants. See: Mehr als 1000 Dschihad-Ausreisen aus Deutschland. In Deutsche Welle, 20/05/2018. <https://www.dw.com/de/mehr-als-1000-dschihad-ausreisen-aus-deutschland/a-43857705> (visited on 27/07/2018)

unique expertise, the EU should contribute to improving health services, justice and law enforcement, as well as fighting corruption. It is of crucial importance for the stability of Central Asia that states are able to provide basic services to their citizens and don't leave a vacuum for social and welfare activities of (radical) religious groups. In this regard, maintaining the separation of state and religion would be beneficial for stability.

One activity, with which the EU could most significantly contribute to the stability of the region, is support for the reform and modernisation of the Central Asian education sector - one of the most pressing issues to be addressed! A closer look at education institutions in some Central Asian countries reveals a disastrous state of affairs. Outdated infrastructure combined with a lack of financing leads to unbearable conditions in certain schools: sanitation facilities are outdoors and in sordid conditions, classrooms lack light, heating or ventilation and therefore frequently go mouldy. These conditions can seriously affect the health of schoolchildren. Furthermore, quality of teaching is often deficient as teachers are paid a low salary and few people aspire a career in teaching. On top of this, parents generally need to pay a fee for enabling their children to attend these public schools.

Our work with the EU co-funded project in Kyrgyzstan "Development of Financial Mechanisms For a Safe Educational Environment at Schools in the Kyrgyz Republic"¹⁰ showed that some local schools are in such bad condition that parents prefer to send their children to the local madrassa where they receive free education in brand-new facilities financed by Turkey, Qatar, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Thus, the inadequate public education framework leads on to children leaving school in a very young age without sufficient education. Lacking basic education, these children are especially vulnerable to radical teachings. Furthermore unemployment, which generally affects poorly educated individuals, feeds feelings of marginalisation and frustration, which are often exploited by radical preachers.¹¹ In Kyrgyzstan, the government very actively works on the improvement of the education sector and has already reached some positive results. The EU should support these efforts and encourage other Central Asian countries to create an appropriate and healthy learning environment and improve quality of teaching.

Schools are the place where extremism should be and can be prevented. In Europe, we have developed an extensive knowledge in the field of preventing and countering extremism over the past years and we should work together with our Central Asian partners to introduce these aspects into local curricula. An aspect of particular importance is religious education. If school children are provided with high quality Islamic religious instruction, they will be less susceptible for radical teachings.

Certainly, measures in the education sector are not sufficient to combat radical groups and should be complemented by security measures. But education can be a key to attenuate many of the challenges Central Asia is struggling with: By imparting universal secular values such as democracy, rule of law and human

¹⁰ <https://safe.edu.kg/>

¹¹ Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation. In: International Crisis Group, 03/10/2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/kyrgyzstan-state-fragility-and-radicalisation> (visited on 25/07/2018)

rights alongside general education and implementing anti-corruption education, much can be done to prepare the new generation for the challenges ahead.

The European involvement does of course not need to be limited on school education, but should be extended to vocational training and higher education. A European University in one of the Central Asian capitals could significantly contribute to increase the EU's popularity in the region and at the same time add to the local education standards.

Geostrategic environment

In addition to the more concrete advises, I like to add some more general observations:

The new Central Asia strategy cannot be drafted in a theoretical vacuum. Central Asia is politically, economically, and geographically closely connected to Russia and to a lesser but growing degree to China. These countries are the dominant players in the region and should be taken into consideration.

The EU should acknowledge that Russia sees Central Asia as a region with a common history and geographical proximity, which is critical to many aspects of Russian security.¹² As the European Union External Action Service stresses, "cooperative relations with Russia, the EU's largest neighbour and a key regional and global player, are [...] critical [...]"¹³. The EU and Russia certainly do not always share the same approach, however, there are common interests in the region and therefore an EU-Russia dialogue on Central Asia should be beneficial for both sides.

Furthermore, China is a player who – particularly in economic terms – gains importance in the region with its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. As mentioned above, the EU should determine whether engaging in joint projects in the framework of the BRI could be beneficial in terms of achieving the EU's objectives in Central Asia. So far, Chinese investments are not environmentally sustainable and except for improved infrastructure hardly benefit the local population. BRI barely creates jobs for the autochthonous population as workers are generally brought in from China. The EU's involvement in such projects yields the opportunity to positively influence the Chinese investment projects in the region and raise (environmental and labour) standards. Here it must be noted that the EU's commitment, unlike China's, serves a normative, value-based purpose, whereas China regards the region merely as a piece in its puzzle that is nothing but a geostrategic power game.

¹² Zevelev, Igor: Russia's Wary Watch on the East. Russia and NATO Should Put Rivalries Aside to Help Stabilize Central Asia. In: per Concordiam. Journal of European Security and Defense Issues, Volume 5, Issue 3, 2014.

http://www.marshallcenter.org/MCPUBLICWEB/mcdocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/pC_V5N3_en.pdf (visited on 25/07/2018)

¹³ European External Action Service: Central Asia, 17/05/2016.

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2068/central-asia_en (visited on 25/07/2018)

The US as a longstanding transatlantic partner, who has somehow reduced its involvement in the region but still maintains dialogue formats such as C5+1¹⁴, is also an important coordination partner for the EU; even more so as Europe and the US have many common goals in the region.

There are additional actors who are increasingly present in the region, such as India, Turkey and Iran. Amongst these, India stands out as a strategic partner of growing importance for the EU. With its "Connect Central Asia Policy", the subcontinent attempts to improve connectivity with Central Asia and to secure additional energy sources. It considers itself as a stabiliser and security provider in the region and could be an attractive economic partner for Central Asia.¹⁵ Bringing together decision makers and civil society representatives from India and Central Asia in the framework of our regional programme for Central Asia based in Tashkent, KAS has had very encouraging experiences. Considering the EU's limited (financial) capacities for its projects in Central Asia, joining forces with India could make sense in specific areas.

Regional cooperation prospects

One point of criticism with the old strategy was the EU's regional approach to Central Asia, thereby treating the region as one block – without sufficiently differentiating between the different countries. In times when regional cooperation was basically non-existent, the regional approach met with disapproval by the Central Asian states. With recent developments in the region – namely the change of leadership in Uzbekistan – prospects for intra-regional cooperation have significantly improved and initial progress to solve longstanding disputes has been made. This tendency provides the EU with an optimal starting point to increase its impact in the region. The EU is the ideal actor to provide assistance for closer coordination and cooperation processes and can make a significant difference by sharing best practices from its own experiences. Notwithstanding the improved regional cooperation within Central Asia, the differences between the Central Asian countries still need to be taken into account with the new strategy.

Recently, Central Asia – and Uzbekistan in particular – have begun to develop a strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The goal is to contribute to stability in this neighbouring country by including it into regional processes and strengthening the Afghan infrastructure. The EU should accompany these efforts benevolently but with close attention and provide support where needed.

As funds for implementing the new strategy will be limited, the impact should be maximised by setting a regional focus. Thus the EU should especially engage with countries which show progress in terms of reforms and demonstrate

¹⁴ US Officials Discuss Cooperation With Five Central Asian Countries. In: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 23/07/2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-officials-discuss-cooperation-central-asian-countries/29385498.html> (visited on 25/07/2018)

¹⁵ Chaudhary, Dipanjan Roy: India and China new players in Central Asia's 'Great Game'. In: The Economic Times, 12/07/2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-china-new-players-in-central-asias-great-game/articleshow/60905273.cms> (visited on 31/07/2018)

willingness to cooperate. Furthermore, local ownership should be created by involving the Central Asian partners into the process of revising the strategy.

The last point I would like to stress is rather of general nature. The drafting process should take into account that due to the advancing digitalisation, things are changing at a fast pace. Ten years from now, our world is due to look quite different. Technological innovations will change the nature of many spheres of life. This may also apply to certain aspects of international relations. Connectivity (transport, energy, systems) will be improved, communication will be based much more on digital solutions, conflicts will increasingly be fought on the cyber level, world markets may be much more interconnected and “work” as well as labour markets will considerably change due to the rise of artificial intelligence. If the new strategy does not keep in mind these changes, it might soon be outdated. In this regard I strongly recommend that the European Union uses its expertise in the field of digitalisation and provides advice to the Central Asian countries also for the purpose of offering an alternative to the Chinese social credit model¹⁶.

Overall, KAS congratulates the EU on its initiative of drafting a new Central Asia strategy and salutes Special Representative Peter Burian’s tireless efforts to improve ties with this strategically important region. We wish all the best for the new strategy and look forward to see the fruits of cooperation.

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¹⁶ With its social credit system China intends to use artificial intelligence to maximise surveillance of citizens. Surveillance technology connected to a ranking system shall monitor the behaviour of Chinese citizens, and rank them based on their “social credit”.