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## The EU Strategy towards the Central Asia Region. Policy Assessment and Some Recommendations for the Future

**Abstract:** *The EU Strategy adopted in 2007 was the first basic document which established a medium-term policy line in the relationship between Europe and Central Asia, for the first time perceived as a group of five Central Asia countries which were former Soviet republics. Despite many deficiencies in the Strategy and some setbacks on the part of the EU in the course of its implementation, the document has become an important reference point for numerous policies and actions taken vis-à-vis these five Central Asia countries. In security terms, Europe perceives Central Asia as a border area separating Europe from the 'area of instability', and that philosophy greatly determined the set of policies formulated and applied in relations with the Central Asia countries. Most of them are still countries on the path to development, relying to a certain extent on foreign development and humanitarian aid, including European aid. At the same time, Europe has realised that this region is a potential source of strategic natural resources, including energy, which coincides with the EU's search for greater diversity of energy sources and routes of its delivery, taking into consideration the current risks, challenges and limitations linked to Russia's return to an assertive policy of power, conflicts with its neighbours (Ukraine), trade wars etc. The objective of this article is to outline the EU's policies, concepts and approaches towards the Central Asia region and their modification and adjustment to the current international dynamism and changing situation in the region itself, as well as to identify the global factors which eventually affect the relationship between Europe and the region. Additionally, some recommendations and suggestions with regard to a future EU Strategy are proposed, based on lessons learnt and analysis of the international environment.*

**Keywords:** EU-Central Asia dialogue, global security, energy, development policy

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## **Introduction: Dynamic Changes in the International Environment**

The region of Central Asia, consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, is a region of strategic importance for a number of key global players. The rivalries among Russia, China, the United States, Iran, India, and Pakistan, not to mention the ever-changing pattern of relations among the five former Soviet republics and Afghanistan make the region's importance abundantly clear. Central Asia's strategic importance for Washington, Moscow and Beijing varies depending on each nation's perception of its strategic interests. Washington focuses primarily on Central Asia as an important theatre in the war on terrorism. Additionally, it is viewed as a theatre where America might counter a revived Russia or China, or blunt any extension of Iranian influence. Moscow and Beijing view the region as a vital area for defending critical domestic interests. This asymmetry of interests is a major factor affecting the competition among states for influence in the region. Indeed, US interests derive mainly from Central Asia's proximity to Russia, China and Iran. The US engagement in Afghanistan has led to the increased interest in the region on the part of Washington, although now the disengagement of the US military presence under ISAF puts the future American focus on the region into question in terms of security. However, access to energy is also a primary driver of US policy in the region. The US is advocating an 'open door' policy for companies seeking energy exploration, refining and marketing, with some unquestioned success in this field (e.g. Chevron's position in the Tengiz oil field in Kazakhstan). This policy is closely linked to safeguarding the independence, sovereignty and development of countries of the region, in opposition to Moscow's attempts to monopolize the energy sector in Central Asia, and includes promoting diversification and development of multiple pipelines and links to foreign consumers and producers of energy, bypassing Russia and Iran.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian Federation, with its ever growing ambitions of historical vindication, even revenge, still regards the former Soviet republics as a zone of its one-sided influence and treats any approximation of Western structures, like the EU or NATO, as a direct and fundamental threat to its security and national interests. A new Russia-led integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union, which also engages partners from the Central Asia region, can be viewed as an 'innovative' instrument to bring together 'the old team' under the unquestioned supremacy of Russia. Beginning

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<sup>1</sup> S. Blank, *The Strategic Importance of Central Asia: An American View*, "Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly", Vol. 38(1)/Spring 2008.

with Vladimir Putin's third presidential term Russia began implementing its new approach towards Central Asia States. Russia's increased interest reflects its desire to assert a presence in areas in which Moscow had little involvement during President Putin's previous terms in office. Especially in the last two years Russia has shown a marked interest in restoring its previous dominance over Central Asia. It should be noted in this regard that the Russian political leadership has always thought of Central Asia as a sphere of Russian dominance, a perception which has been encoded in Russian geopolitical doctrine since the beginning of the independence of the Central Asia states. So today Russia's top priority is to persuade as many countries as possible to join the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>2</sup>

Last but not least, we have to consider the steadily growing role of the principal Asian power, China, which operates mainly through economic tools. In order to keep up with its expanding industry China is turning to Central Asia with ambitious gas line projects and considers countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to be key factors in its energy security nexus. Over the past decade China has aggressively developed its energy co-operation with Central Asia, which has an abundance of oil and natural gas deposits, as well as relative political stability. Through its energy relationship with Central Asia China not only diversifies its access to new energy sources but also gains greater flexibility in playing regional geopolitics, which advances its broader national interests.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, in recent years Iran has extended its economic and cultural presence in the region. Most commentators believe that any increased Iranian influence on the region will come about gradually and be impacted by the progress of its rapprochement efforts with the United States. The Iranian state presents itself as a pragmatic partner, willing to put aside the ideological differences it has with Afghanistan and its Central Asia neighbours – for example on Israel or the secular nature of the regimes – in order to promote regional co-operation. While it seems likely that Iran will not miss any opportunity to impose itself further on the regional stage, nevertheless it is improbable that the situation will change quickly. Tehran and the region's states remain fully aware of the fragility of any such development.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> M.B. Assanbayev, *Russia's Policy of Integration in Central Asia*, "The Washington Review of Turkish & Eurasian Affairs", October 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *China and Central Asia: A Significant New Energy Nexus* in: "The European Financial Review", 30.04.2013.

<sup>4</sup> S. Peyrouse, *Iran's Growing Role in Central Asia? Geopolitical, Economic and Political Profit and Loss Account*, "Aljazeera Center for Studies", 06.04.2014, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2014/04/2014416940377354.html> (unless indicated otherwise all the quoted websites were last visited on 30.12.2014).

Also Turkey, a country without the economic weight or global reach of China, India or Brazil, is nonetheless gaining an increasing presence in conflict-affected regions of the world, including in Central Asia. This presence is manifested in commercial ties, official and non-governmental aid, security co-operation, and diplomatic efforts to mediate between conflict actors. Despite the fact that Ankara's attention to the Central Asia region has waned since the early 1990s, given the ethno-linguistic Turkic ties the Central Asia states still occupy a special place in Turkish foreign policy.<sup>5</sup>

Given these various interests, Central Asia has inevitably become a region wherein all the main global powers operate, which became even more evident in the context of the declining ISAF presence in Afghanistan. Taking into account the complex issues of international drug trafficking and rising fundamentalism and religious extremism, both of which easily find grounds in the region, Central Asia poses a great challenge to the entire world, including the EU.

The majority of the population in the region lives in rural areas where the incidence of poverty remains high. The different pace of development and level of transitional reforms in the region complicates the inter-country relations and cohesion, and the energy-water nexus in Central Asia remains a sensitive issue between the Central Asia countries. In addition, the region itself is not coherent and there are vast disparities in the development index in the five countries. Kazakhstan – the leading country in most rankings throughout the region with a GDP per capita amounting to 12,843 USD per capita, ranks 50<sup>th</sup> (out of 144) in the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) 2014–15, while the poorest country in the region – Kyrgyzstan – ranks 108<sup>th</sup> in the GCI with a GDP per capita of 1,280 USD, i.e. ten times less!<sup>6</sup>

The outstanding position of Kazakhstan, which aims to belong to the 30 most advanced economies in the world by 2050, against the background of its regional partners is also evidenced by the interesting fact that it is engaged in a public debate over the issue whether to abandon its present name of Kazakhstan, which sounds too much like the other Central Asia countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), and to adopt the country's original and historical name 'Kazakely', which apparently will not be confused with any of the '...stans'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> T.Wheeler, *Turkey's role and interests in Central Asia*, Saferworld, October 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The Global Competitiveness Report 2014–2015, "World Economic Forum", pp. 230, 238.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g. <http://www.kn.kz/ru/news/view/id/47028/>.

Above all, however, one cannot lose sight of the undisputed potential of the region, which includes rich natural resources, vast investment opportunities provided by rapidly growing economies, as well as its strategic geographical location at the cross-roads of East-West (including the famous ‘Silk Road’) and North-South routes which are so enormously important in the transport of oil and gas, coal, strategic minerals and commodities to and from Europe, China, the Persian Gulf, Iran, Russia etc.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of this article is to make an attempt to assess, against the above-outlined background, how successful (or unsuccessful) EU policy towards the Central Asia region has been so far, and what lessons can be learned and incorporated into further EU approaches to this specific region. This requires identifying the associated new risks, challenges and opportunities.

### **1. The Legal framework – EU Strategy and Principal Areas of Co-operation**

EU Policy towards Central Asia has become a full-fledged part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union since the early 2000s. In order to fully assess the role of the European Union in this region this article examines the main strategic instruments, like the EU Security Strategy adopted in 2003, the bilateral agreements between the European Community and the countries of Central Asia, the numerous assistance schemes of the EU Member States and the EU institutions, and finally, the European Union–Central Asia Strategy adopted in 2007, which was meant to provide a framework which would combine all these instruments into a clear, coherent model and enable them to operate in synergy.

Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together. It lies at a strategically important intersection between the two continents. The Central Asia states of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have undergone considerable evolution in terms of their political and economic transformations since obtaining independence. They have established statehood and safeguarded multi-ethnic understandings and inter-religious communication. By joining the OSCE, they subscribe to the Organisation’s values, standards and commitments, and by signing the United Nations Millennium Declaration they set ambitious goals for themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> See generally: E.C. Chow and L.E. Hendrix, *Central Asia’s Pipelines: Field of Dreams and Reality*, “The National Bureau of Asian Research NBR Special Report”, No. 23/September 2010.

The EU's most comprehensive strategic document in this field was adopted in June 2007: the European Union–Central Asia Strategy for a New Partnership. It marked an upturn in the relations between the EU and Central Asia, although it should be noted that the EU has been engaged with the five Central Asia countries from the very moment they gained their independence in the early 1990s.

By 2007 these relations had developed significantly and revealed closeness of values and of economic and security interests. By that time the EU Member States recognised that their bilateral relations would benefit from a coordinated, more focused common approach to the countries of Central Asia. Hence the EU–Central Asia Strategy was adopted with a view to provide the necessary and appropriate blend of interests and values. It also took into account the specificities of the Central Asia countries and developed individual approaches toward each of them, albeit without shunting aside regional co-operation. As a next step, action-oriented initiatives were developed in the priority areas identified by the Strategy, such as: common security threats, rule of law, education, environment and water. Again, they combined both regional and bilateral approaches.<sup>9</sup>

As set forth in the document, in order to address issues of particular importance the EU intended, within the framework of the Strategy, to:<sup>10</sup>

- establish a regular regional political dialogue at the Foreign Ministerial level;
- start a 'European Education Initiative' and support Central Asia countries in the development of an 'e-silk-highway';
- start an 'EU Rule of Law Initiative';
- establish a regular, result-oriented 'Human Rights Dialogue' with each of the Central Asia states;
- conduct a regular energy dialogue with the Central Asia states.

The Strategy identified its primary priorities, which embraced first and foremost security (including energy security issues) and stability, with a strong link to the promotion and embedding of European values, including the rule of law, respect for human rights etc. Among the reasons for putting those topics high on the agenda was the fact that strategic, political and economic developments, as well as increasing trans-regional challenges in Central Asia, impact directly and/or indirectly on EU interests. Also, it was broadly acknowledged in the EU that the significant energy resources in Central Asia could help diversify trade partners as

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<sup>9</sup> 'The European Union and Central Asia: The New Partnership in Action', European Commission, Brussels, June 2009, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

well as supply routes in order to meet the EU's energy security and supply needs.

The new added value introduced by the Strategy was its balanced bilateral and regional approach. Some observers note that actually the 2007 Strategy applied, for the first time in history of relations between the EU and the Central Asia region, a coordinated, regional approach, which in fact supplemented the bilateral method of co-operation with the individual countries in place until that time.<sup>11</sup> The regional approach was seen as suitable for tackling common regional challenges such as organised crime, human-, drugs- and arms-trafficking, terrorism and non-proliferation issues, inter-cultural dialogue, energy, environmental pollution, water management, migration, as well as border management and transport infrastructure. The regional dimension allowed the EU to enter into a dialogue with regional organisations in Central Asia and to establish regular ad hoc contacts, i.e. with EURASEC, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO)<sup>12</sup>, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)<sup>13</sup>, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)<sup>14</sup>, the Central Asia Regional Economic Co-operation (CAREC)<sup>15</sup> and the Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors (CARICC).<sup>16</sup>

The point of departure for the construction of the EU's overall policy towards Central Asia was acknowledgement of the fact that the development of a stable political framework and of functioning economic structures is dependent on respect for the rule of law, human rights, good governance, and the development of those transparent, democratic political structures which are broadly called 'European values'. Therefore, it was a distinct ambition on the European side to step up support for the protection of human rights and for the creation and development of an independent judiciary, thus making a sustainable contribution to the establishment of structures based on the rule of law and international human rights standards, using the format of human rights dialogues with individual countries. This dialogue on human rights was intended to be strengthened by supporting practical steps aimed at meeting human

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<sup>11</sup> *Strategiya Evropeyskogo Soyuzha v Tsentralnoy Azii na 2007–2013: predvaritelnye itogi*, Almaty 2013, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.sectsco.org/EN123/>.

<sup>13</sup> [www.s-cica.org/page.php?page\\_id=7&](http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?page_id=7&).

<sup>14</sup> [www.odkb-csto.org/](http://www.odkb-csto.org/).

<sup>15</sup> [www.carecprogram.org/](http://www.carecprogram.org/).

<sup>16</sup> <http://caricc.org/index.php/en/>.

rights objectives at the national level, in particular through financial and technical co-operation and specific projects funded under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. Additionally, the EU developed the Rule of Law Initiative,<sup>17</sup> which addressed the specific priorities identified by each country and supported the Central Asia states in core legal reforms, including reform of the judiciary, and in drawing up effective legislation, for example in the fields of administrative and commercial law.

Another important area of closer links established under the umbrella of the Strategy is collaboration in the sector of youth and education. The European Education Initiative for Central Asia is dedicated to the goal of opening up the potential of the younger generation in the economic and social development of the region. Under the European Education Initiative the EU and Member States provide support in the fields of primary school education, secondary school education, vocational education and training, higher education co-operation and academic and student exchanges, for instance, under the Erasmus Mundus facility and TEMPUS, as well as bilaterally. Part of the Initiative includes granting scholarships for students from Central Asia countries to European universities. It also covers activities performed by the European Training Foundation in the field of vocational education and training in Central Asia.

Furthermore, the EU offered support to Central Asia states in linking with the EU e-network through the development of an 'e-silk-highway', and promoted long distance learning with a view to linking Central Asia to global Internet-based communication networks in order to enable Central Asia students, teachers, academics, and scientists to participate in modern forms of life-long learning (CAREN).<sup>18</sup>

As far as trade is concerned, four of the five Central Asia countries benefit from favourable access to the EU's market through the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (Kazakhstan, as an upper middle income level economy, ceased to be eligible to benefit from this scheme in January 2014).

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<sup>17</sup> [www.eeas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/docs/factsheet\\_law\\_en.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/factsheet_law_en.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Launched in January 2009, the Central Asia Research and Education Network (CAREN) project aimed to: establish and operate a high-capacity regional research and education (R&E) network in Central Asia based on broadband Internet (with minimum link capacities of 34 Mbps); improve intra-regional connectivity across Central Asia by replacing existing low-capacity satellite connections with terrestrial fiber; support one million users at over 200 universities and research institutes; seek synergies with user communities in neighboring regions, i.e. Asia-Pacific (TEIN3 <http://www.tein3.net/>) and the South Caucasus (BSI <http://www.blacksea-net.org/>); and act as a catalyst for the development of sustainable national research networking in the former Soviet republics.



EU trade with Central Asia has grown and the EU is now the main trading partner of the region, accounting for about a third of its overall external trade, although the share of trade with Central Asia in total turnover of the EU's trade remains low.<sup>19</sup>

**Table 1. EU–Central Asia – Trade in goods 2011–2013 (in € billions)**

Year	EU imports	EU exports	Balance
2011	23.9	8.8	-15.1
2012	25.7	10.1	-15.6
2013	24.9	10.6	-14.3

Source: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/central-asia/>.

The ambition of the EU in the area of trade is to support deeper integration of Central Asia into the world trade and economic system, in particular through the WTO accession process. The EU also seeks to support economic diversification with a view to promoting sustainable development by improving local skills and potential (science and technology, innovation, tourism, promotion of SMEs, development of basic infrastructure) and to support substantial reforms of the region's financial systems, especially in the banking and micro-credit sector. Furthermore, a regulatory approximation to the EC *acquis* is also a goal to be achieved, as this would allow better practical access to the EU market for Central Asia products and would help the countries of the region to work out strategies to improve their individual credit ratings in order to qualify for future lending programs, etc.

The trade agenda between the EU and Central Asia is strongly inter-linked with the transport and energy sector, which seem to be at the very core of Europe's long-standing interest in the region.<sup>20</sup> As remarked in the Strategy, the EU and Central Asia share a paramount interest in enhancing energy security, an important aspect of global security. It would be true to say that they share a common interest in diversifying export routes, demand and supply structures, and energy sources. Gas deliveries from the region are of special importance to the EU.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Central Asia exports to the EU remain concentrated in a few commodities, especially crude oil, gas, metals and cotton fiber. EU exports are dominated by machinery and transport equipment and other manufactured goods. Such products account for more than half of EU exports to the region.

<sup>20</sup> The European Union and Central Asia..., op.cit., p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

Besides oil, gas and electricity, water management also plays an important role in the energy co-operation with Central Asia.<sup>22</sup> Hydro-power production and distribution are crucial to promoting stability and prosperity in Central Asia and beyond, including Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In its Strategy the EU obliged itself to support the exploration of new oil, gas and hydro-power resources and the upgrading of the existing energy infrastructure, as well as to support the development of additional pipeline routes and energy transportation networks, especially a new Caspian Sea – Black Sea – EU energy transport corridor.<sup>23</sup>

Through more investment in the energy field, the EU intends to promote the creation of an integrated Central Asia energy market. Coordinated actions in this regard are likely to enhance energy security by addressing the issues of energy exports/imports, supply diversification, energy transit, energy demand etc. Energy supply, including electricity, is an especially crucial and sensitive issue to countries like Kyrgyzstan, which periodically (mostly in the winter) suffer from considerable shortages and blackouts, as just recently happened in Winter 2014–2015.<sup>24</sup>

A major regional challenge is fair access to water resources, while most environmental issues in Central Asia are related to the allocation, use and protection of the quality of water resources. The regional specificity is its interconnection through cross-boundary rivers, lakes and seas. Therefore the EU Strategy applies a regional approach to protection of these resources. There is a need to have an integrated water management policy (upstream and downstream solidarity).

An EU-Central Asia dialogue on the environment was launched in Spring 2006 to provide the basis for joint co-operation efforts. The dialogue covered environmental issues related to the extraction and transport of energy resources as well as vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. The region is also covered by the EU Water Initiative (EUWI-EECCA) for safe water supply, sanitation and integrated water resources management. Under this instrument the parties cooperate in the areas of transboundary river basin management, integrated management of surface and underground trans-boundary water resources, including the introduction of techniques for more efficient water use (irrigation and other techniques), production of hydropower etc. A special institution was established to encourage increased environmental awareness and

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<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/docs/Central-Asia-Atlas/Energy-Resources-Enormous-Development-Potential.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> The European Union and Central Asia..., op.cit., p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> See: <http://kabar.kg/eng/economics/full/10743>.

the development of an environmental civil society, including via co-operation with the Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia (CAREC).<sup>25</sup>

One of most challenging areas of common interest for the EU and Central Asia countries is border control and migration management. This is linked to the ever growing importance of the fight against criminal activity, particularly the international drug trade, but also illegal migration and risks linked to rising extremism and religious fundamentalism etc. The borders with Afghanistan are of special importance here. The purpose of the envisaged EU action in this regard is to strengthen Afghanistan's co-operation with its neighbours. BOMCA (Border Management Program in Central Asia)<sup>26</sup> was put in place as one of the main instruments in this area. Another challenge is to ensure better synergy and coordination between other programs and actors active in this field in the region, including the OSCE and other border projects from Member States and third countries. EU support in this area is focused on the introduction of the basic principles of integrated border management in border guard and other relevant services, as well as in work on specific border crossing points in the region. The program provides organisational assistance to support the transformation of border guards from a conscript-based to a professional service, to support the transition from a purely military system to a more police-style law enforcement agency, and to support efforts to strengthen control mechanisms. Attention is also given to facilitating trade through the improvement of local customs services and to updating the legal framework in accordance with international law in the field of combating organised crime (e.g. the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and its Protocols), with a focus on preventing and countering illegal migration, trafficking in human beings, and trafficking in drugs and precursors. Efforts are also being made to improve the institutional capacity of law enforcement agencies and to strengthen regional co-operation in fighting trans-national organised crime.

Furthermore, the EU has supported the installation of the regional anti-drug centre (CARICC) in Almaty and intensified co-operation with UNODC, also with a view to tracking the chemical precursors of heroin production. In particular, assistance was provided primarily to Central Asia countries sharing borders in the Fergana Valley in promoting projects designed to bring stability, prosperity and sustainable development to that region.

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<sup>25</sup> [www.carecnet.org/](http://www.carecnet.org/).

<sup>26</sup> See: [http://www.kz.undp.org/content/kazakhstan/en/home/operations/projects/democratic\\_governance/border-management-programme-in-central-asia-bomca-phase-8/](http://www.kz.undp.org/content/kazakhstan/en/home/operations/projects/democratic_governance/border-management-programme-in-central-asia-bomca-phase-8/).

## **2. Evaluation of the Strategy – A European View**

The EU Strategy and its implementation have been regularly evaluated every two years by means of successive progress reports. In June 2008, the first Joint Progress Report of the Council and the European Commission to the European Council on the implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy was published.<sup>27</sup> It noted that good progress had been made already one year following the launch of the Strategy. Since the publication of the report, strategy implementation has intensified further. Examples include:

- increased EU engagement with Central Asia through regular high level political dialogue, including meetings of the foreign ministers of EU and Central Asia;
- structured human rights' dialogues with all five Central Asia states, with several rounds already having taken place with each country;
- advanced implementation of the education initiative, inter alia by increasing the number of scholarship exchanges and providing additional support for capacity-building in education sectors, a published compendium on study opportunities in the EU, information days about study in the EU held in all countries, and the establishment of a Central Asia Research and Education Network (CAREN);
- successful launch of the implementation of the Rule of Law initiative at a Ministerial meeting in Brussels on 27 November 2008; follow-up events, including regional seminars on judicial training and penal law, have been held in subsequent years, with the most recent, fourth, Ministerial meeting being held on October 15th 2014 in Astana.

Furthermore, environmental programs were expanded and National Water Policy Dialogue was launched in Central Asia for the first time, beginning in Kyrgyzstan in 2008, to promote water management (similar dialogues were subsequently launched in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). Important projects were launched to promote business development and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), i.e. the Central Asia Invest Program. The mandate of the European Investment Bank (EIB) was extended to Central Asia; EIB activities focus on the environment and energy sectors.

Additionally, energy dialogues expanded and feasibility studies on trans-Caspian energy corridor options were concluded. Co-operation and dialogue on renewable energy and the Kyoto Protocol also intensified and

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCgQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fecas.europa.eu%2Fcentral\\_asia%2Fdocs%2F20120628\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf&ei=qIFQVMr3C6X8ygPWvoGwBg&usq=AFQjCNEQQIbD1S9abwzpJWQl0S4JXbtaXQ&bvm=bv.78597519,d.bGQ](http://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCgQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fecas.europa.eu%2Fcentral_asia%2Fdocs%2F20120628_progress_report_en.pdf&ei=qIFQVMr3C6X8ygPWvoGwBg&usq=AFQjCNEQQIbD1S9abwzpJWQl0S4JXbtaXQ&bvm=bv.78597519,d.bGQ).

were supported by assistance programs. Both BOMCA and CADAP programs were evaluated as successful.

The EU assistance to the region under the Strategy amounted to 750 M€ for the years 2007–2013 under the Development Co-operation Instrument (DCI). This assistance was complemented by resources under thematic programs and represented one of the leading assistance programs in the region.

A recent EU document relating to the Strategy's provisions was approved by the Council on 25 June 2012.<sup>28</sup> The Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia with an Implementation Review and outline for Future Orientations also included some recommendations for the future. The Report confirmed that all six main priority areas of the strategy remain equally important and attempted to highlight the most successful areas of co-operation, as well as to indicate directions where enhanced future efforts should be made. Among the success stories was the early EU response and contribution to overcome the crisis in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2010, through both political engagement and financial assistance.

At the same time it was noted that the region was increasingly faced with challenges linked to developments in Afghanistan, and that security issues had come to fore in relations with the EU. In order to enhance its ability to jointly tackle these challenges, the EU proposed to strengthen co-operation in the security area, including through a regular High Level EU-Central Asia Security Dialogue, as part of the regional political dialogue. Security-related matters include strengthening co-operation on counter-terrorism, co-operation on Afghanistan, co-operation on border management, migration and asylum, and combating organised crime, including drug and human trafficking.

An entire thematic package was devoted to consolidating energy co-operation, promoting diversification of energy supply and export routes, and the integration of energy markets, including the still non-achieved agreement between the EU, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan featuring a legal framework for the Trans-Caspian Pipeline project as a contribution to support the opening of a Southern Gas Corridor.

It's true that the message from Brussels on the continuation of the 2007 Strategy was not clear enough and many in the region were not sure whether the Strategy had discontinued in 2013, when the EU programming

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<sup>28</sup> [http://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fecas.europa.eu%2Fcentral\\_asia%2Fdocs%2F20120628\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf&ei=3YZQVPeDDYm9ygOj2YD4Dg&usg=AFQjCNEQQiBd1S9abwzpJWQl0S4JXbtaXQ&bvm=bv.78597519,d.bGQ](http://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fecas.europa.eu%2Fcentral_asia%2Fdocs%2F20120628_progress_report_en.pdf&ei=3YZQVPeDDYm9ygOj2YD4Dg&usg=AFQjCNEQQiBd1S9abwzpJWQl0S4JXbtaXQ&bvm=bv.78597519,d.bGQ)

framework had expired. There were also expectations that a new comprehensive framework for the EU – Central Asia relationship should or would be developed.<sup>29</sup> Actually, the EU's most recent position is that the 2007 Strategy is still in force, at least until 2020, and successive progress reports continue to update it on a regular basis. However it is evident that this strategic paper, as dated in 2007, needs to be revised and brought up to date in consideration of recent risks, challenges and opportunities.

The Central Asia region was apparently not at the centre of attention in either the Greek or Italian EU Presidencies in 2014. Encouraging signals in this regard stem, however, from the new Latvian EU Presidency. As can be seen from the concept paper on Latvia's EU Presidency,<sup>30</sup> the region of Central Asia has been defined as a priority of its Presidency. The upcoming Latvian Presidency describes EU interests as those related to its security and post-2014 scenario, and the potential risks of Afghanistan's spill-over negatively impacting stability in Central Asia. The issue of potential risks produced by the phasing out of the ISAF operation in Afghanistan pose a special cause of concern of the governments of the adjacent countries. There are many signals of rising fundamentalist sentiments among the Muslim populations in the region, in particular in poorest and most underdeveloped areas, which are specifically exposed to extremist religious ideas and slogans. This concern is partly reflected in the reported figures of rising numbers of volunteers from Kazakhstan,<sup>31</sup> Kyrgyzstan,<sup>32</sup> Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who are taking part in armed conflicts under the flag of the Islamic state, e.g. in Syria or Iraq. Furthermore, it is repeatedly reported that the Islamic state is going to extend its zone of influence also into the Central Asia region, where purportedly Turkmenistan will be on the frontline during 2015–2016. This process coincides with a growing flow of extremists from Afghanistan to Turkmenistan through the practically non-existent state border, combined with the rising popularity of underground radical Islamic schools in that

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<sup>29</sup> See, e.g. the title itself: 'The European Union's Strategy for Central Asia in 2007–2013: Preliminary Results', Almaty 2013, by A.E. Chebotarev and M.Sh. Gubaidullina.

<sup>30</sup> *Central Asia – A priority of Latvia's EU Presidency, Food for thought paper*, 01.09.2014, Riga, non-published, on file with the Author.

<sup>31</sup> See: <http://www.kazkhabar.com/en/?page=article&id=2958>.

<sup>32</sup> Some Kyrgyz families are going *en masse* to Syria to join the insurgency, and Kyrgyz authorities intend to put an end to the exodus. As estimated in October 2014 by the State National Security Committee (GKNB), at least 150 Kyrgyz are fighting in Syria. Almost 90% of them come from the southern oblasts, where the population traditionally has been more devout than in the north. See: <http://www.eurasiareview.com/29112014-kyrgyzstan-government-trying-keep-families-fighting-syria/>.

country.<sup>33</sup> Also, local researchers warn that it is likely that tensions, social unrest or conflicts linked to possible destabilisation in countries like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, associated with the highly-challenging question of the succession of presidential power, could prepare the groundwork for an Islamic state in the region of Central Asia, which would even more probable if, as expected, the Taliban return to power in neighbouring Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, some researchers view the issue of ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan as a chance for the countries of the region, like Kazakhstan, to play a significant role in strengthening East-West co-operation on Afghanistan, which could also positively affect the strained relations between Moscow and the West. In this context it will be interesting to see how Astana exploits its unique position.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond questions of security, the Latvian Presidency also presents the region of Central Asia as a bridge between Europe and East Asia and as an energy-rich region which can secure and diversify Europe's energy supplies. It notes that the Central Asia partners wish to receive more attention and engagement from the EU side, and Latvia is planning to devote its efforts to addressing their expectations. Among main tasks of the EU Presidency under the framework of the EU-Central Asia Strategy and the EU development assistance programs for Central Asia will be stepping up EU visibility in the Central Asia region and reviewing the EU-Central Asia Strategy in 2015.

The Latvian Presidency is going to focus on three key areas in its implementation of the EU Strategy: security (as described above), education, and sustainable development. Education is of strategic importance for the economic and social development of the region, bearing in mind that half of its 67 million population is under the age of 30 and directly affected by the degraded quality of education. The Education Platform is meant to serve as the best framework for EU-Central Asia co-operation and promoting policy dialogue on education, combined with continued support under the extended Erasmus+ Programme. With respect to the sustainable development agenda, co-operation in the energy sector will be given priority, as well as advancing the Trans-Caspian Pipeline System project and furthering dialogue on Eurasian land corridors.

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<sup>33</sup> See: L. Bagerov, *Turkmenistan: proklyatyte bogatstva*, "Central Asia Monitor, No. 52(524), 26.12.2014, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> See: the analysis by D. Saptayev, Director of the Risk Assessment Group in Kazakhstan, <http://camonitor.com/13775-islamskoe-gosudarstvo-mozhet-stat-ugrozoy-i-dlya-kazahstana.html>.

<sup>35</sup> M. de Haas, *Kazakhstan has to navigate between big brothers*, 07.10.2014, <http://www.clingendael.nl/topics/authors/278/>.

With further regard to the EU Strategy, the Latvian Presidency also suggests reviewing broader cross-regional developments which influence EU-Central Asia relations, including:

- security and the post ISAF scenario, given its close proximity to neighbouring Afghanistan;
- the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the Central Asia (worries concerning potential Russian actions in its ‘near abroad’, i.e. that ‘frozen’ conflicts may be activated at any moment (e.g. Russian-speaking minorities in Kazakhstan, Uzbek enclaves in Kyrgyzstan);
- Russia’s reassertion of influence in Central Asia, establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (e.g. the impact of EU economic sanctions on Russia and Russia’s response sanctions on the economy of Kazakhstan as an EEU member state);
- China’s consolidated economic influence in Central Asia, China’s vision of the Silk Road economic belt, which involves the Central Asia region;
- Turkey’s and Iran’s increasing efforts to project influence in Central Asia.

Against this background, it is proposed that the impact of these geopolitical developments on the Central Asia region should be evaluated with a view to determining how the EU could maintain its presence and increase its profile in the region, given the number of influential players on the ground.

Secondly, the EU should confront the up-to-date challenges within the Central Asia region itself, in particular:

- a lack of co-operation and dialogue among the Central Asia countries, which is needed to cope with the potential Afghanistan spill-over and in seeking energy supply solutions;
- A high risk of conflict over water distribution between upstream and downstream countries in the region; the World Bank’s final report on the Rogun Hydropower project may cause Uzbekistan to slide further in the direction of isolationism,<sup>36</sup> and tensions between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over Karambata HPP have a negative impact in other areas of relations between these neighbours.

Thirdly, the Latvian Presidency wants the Strategy to be adjusted to the EU’s current policies and activities. For example, there is a need to ensure coherence between the above mentioned Strategy and the EU Strategy for development assistance to Central Asia or the new Multiannual Programmes for development assistance for the Central Asia (2014-2020),

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/rogun-assessment-studies>.



which increased EU financial support,<sup>37</sup> made the EU assistance more focused, and adopted a genuine regional approach as recommended by the Court of Auditors.<sup>38</sup> Also, further synergies between EU policies and actions in Central Asia and Afghanistan should be identified while taking into account the EU's comprehensive approach.

With regard to the priority areas of the EU Strategy, the Latvian Presidency insists that human rights should occupy a prominent position and that a more creative approach is needed. Given the fact that the Central Asia countries have very different perceptions of European values, the EU will have most success promoting its values both directly and indirectly, e.g. through education, fostering co-operation between municipal governments, etc.

### **3. The Central Asia's Perspective of the EU Strategy: Policy Assessment and Lessons Learnt**

Any attempt to assess the positive and negative results of the Strategy is not an easy task, bearing in mind the differing opinions on the part on both the EU and the Central Asia countries themselves. On the EU side, an overall positive picture was reflected in the above-mentioned progress reports. In contrast, while experts from the Central Asia states are optimistic inasmuch as the Strategy covered all Central Asia states for the first time, they have nevertheless expressed some criticism of the Strategy itself and its results as of 2013.<sup>39</sup>

Experts from the region underscore that, inter alia, the unreasonably high expectations regarding the Strategy's results created a controversial background, which favoured mutual criticism. There is general agreement that the Strategy's main achievement is ending the perception of the region by Europe as 'peripheral', along with the novelty that the Strategy was applied using a differentiated approach to the region, taking into account specificity of each of the five states while imposing a single framework on all of them.

However, critics underline that the EU demand – 'Be united!' – addressed to the Central Asia countries ignores the factual circumstances

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<sup>37</sup> The total budget under the Development Co-operation Instruments for Central Asia 2014–2020 is EUR 1 billion, as compared to EUR 750 million in 2007–2014, [http://ec.europa.eu/europaid/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europaid/index_en.htm).

<sup>38</sup> European Court of Auditors, 'EU Development Assistance to Central Asia', Special Report No. 13/2013.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g. A.E. Chebotarev and M.Sh. Gubaidullina, *The European Union's Strategy for Central Asia in 2007–2013: Preliminary Results*, Almaty 2013.

surrounding their creation as nation states in the 1990s and the disintegration of the post-Soviet area, which in fact was the greatest achievement of that time in Central Asia.

In terms of geopolitics and mutual interests it is stressed that the EU's level of activity in Central Asia is lower than that of other actors with direct interests in this region, thus making the 'European Realpolitik' weaker than the more flexible and pragmatic Realpolitik of Russia, China or Turkey, particularly in terms of promoting business, security, defence and military co-operation. It is asserted that since there are several centres of power in Eurasia to which Central Asia gravitates – above all Russia and China – It is considered expedient to make significant adjustments to the EU Strategy in order to strengthen the interaction of these actors with the European Union as well as with Central Asia.

Regional experts<sup>40</sup> claim that Central Asia's vast geographical context should be incorporated by introducing a 'Eurasian vector', i.e. transcontinental co-operation with Central Asia, into European politics. This would allow the Central Asia region to constitute a bridge of co-operation between the European Union and SCO, the EU and India, the EU and CICA, etc. In such a case, EU-Central Asia transcontinental co-operation with external or adjacent countries would allegedly cover several important areas, such as a broad dialogue of Central Asia with the CIS countries and regions which also became Central Asia neighbours as a result of the 'Eastern Partnership', i.e. the Caspian Region, the Black Sea Region, the Trans-Caucasus Region, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. Furthermore, it is claimed by failing to develop co-operation with the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), which includes the majority of Central Asia states and two of the region's major geopolitical actors (China and Russia), the EU limits its own range of security.

Also, the divergent degree of interest demonstrated on the part of the various EU member states *vis-à-vis* the Central Asia region is largely viewed as a setback. While the political role of Germany in the region was broadly welcomed and recognised, other member states like France, the UK or Italy were perceived as rather focused on energy issues and the Central European states, while the Netherlands were seen as mostly concentrated on the human rights issues. The negligible interest in the region

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<sup>40</sup> See, e.g. the opinions expressed by Kazakhstani experts Rasul Jumaly, Nargiz Kasenova, Sanat Kushkumbaev, Murat Laumulin, and Askar Nursha; Kyrgyz experts Shheradil Baktygulov and Dmitry Orlov; Tadjik experts Gusel Maitdinova and Muzzafer Olimov; experts from Turkmenistan Maral Meredova and Nina Startseva; and Uzbek experts Vladimir Paramonov and Bakhtyor Ergashev in: *Strategiya Evropeyskogo Soyuza v Tsentralnoy Azji na 2007–2013: predvaritelnye itogi*, Almaty 2013, pp. 114–157.

shown by most other EU member states did not contribute to strengthening the overall position of Central Asia in the EU external dimension.

As far as the regionalism of Central Asia is concerned, many Central Asian experts indicate that the 2007 Strategy actually failed to advance the regional integration of the Central Asia states. The greatest limitation was the lack of a full-fledged dialogue among Central Asia states in a penta-lateral format. The region's countries have not yet realised the advantages of regional unification and integration in a manner similar to the EU. In this respect it is indicated that special emphasis should be given to the EU's plans for co-operation with Kazakhstan, which is the region's key country and which has its own objective of strengthening ties with the EU, as documented in its Road to Europe strategic program in 2008.<sup>41</sup> This has also been evidenced most recently by the accelerated process leading to an eventual conclusion of a new, enhanced PCA agreement between the EU and Kazakhstan.<sup>42</sup>

Some local observers<sup>43</sup> claim that the Strategy has been held hostage for a long time to the EU's sectoral interests, above all its energy-related interests. It is pointed out that, on the one hand, the EU was engaged in an active dialogue with Russia in an attempt to persuade it to sign the European Energy Charter, while on the other hand it was building relations with the Central Asia states based on a policy of diversifying energy transportation routes by bypassing Russia. Furthermore, the variance in the political and economic interests of the 28 EU member states in relation to Central Asia prevented any unique and universal agreement on the implementation of individual areas of the 2007 Strategy.

In assessing Brussels' Central Asia policy, many criticise the slow decision-making process of the European Commission and EU institutions with respect to various projects related to Central Asia. The slow pace of implementation of the EU assistance package was also pointed out in the EU Court of Auditors' special report.<sup>44</sup> The reason for this is, in part, because the EU defines its strategic interests rather broadly, which sometimes may lead to a lack of focus, while the so-called activity instruments are a diverse and extensive set of normative goals and technical tools.

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<sup>41</sup> [http://www.kazakhembus.com/archived\\_article/special-issue-no-14](http://www.kazakhembus.com/archived_article/special-issue-no-14).

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/09/kazakhstan-eu-close-completing-talks-new-partnership-co-operation-agreement/>.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g. A. Nursha, in: *Strategya...*, op.cit., p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> Implementation was slow overall, though with some significant variations. The regional programs did not achieve a genuine regional dimension; a significant share consisted merely of 'multi-country' facilities available to each partner country individually. See: European Court of Auditors, 'EU Development Assistance to Central Asia', op.cit., p. 35.

A linked drawback consists in the EU's slow response to Central Asia states' actual problems, which is causing the EU's presence in the region to be viewed quite differently than the expectations Brussels had with respect to the visibility of its actions. As examples, critics point out that the EU has not proposed any effective 'recipes' to maintain stability in countries like Kyrgyzstan, where one ruling clan is replaced by another while political freedoms are constantly contracting.

A whole complex of criticism refers to the divergence between the EU's Central Asia Strategy and its 'Eastern Partnership' initiative, sometimes leading to the formulation of demands to involve the Central Asia states in that initiative and thus expand energy, transportation and environmental programs.<sup>45</sup>

With respect to the EU's projects in the Central Asia States it is also sometimes argued that the implementation of the EU Strategy lacks consistency, and that this, combined with the weak interconnection between projects and programs, results in a weak interaction between countries, the region and the topics. In this regard it is pointed out that a range of EU projects with great potential underperformed in the end and produced results lower than expected. This criticism included programs supposedly aimed at inter-state co-operation on security: BOMCA (a program on border management), CADAP (the Central Asia Drug Action Program), and several economic projects. Central Asia and the EU need to further develop these programs by considering changes in the structure of their administration. A model using multilateral forces to maintain order and ensure security, jointly with OSCE, UN, Europol and other organisations, would seem quite feasible. A completed project entitled 'Supporting Kazakhstan's Reform to Modernize its Public Administration' (in co-operation with the Agency for Civil Service Affairs of Kazakhstan) is mentioned as an example of the problem. The reform was carried out in such a way that it created a precedent for a large-scale reproduction of administrative red-tape. Furthermore, Kazakhstan's program 'Road to Europe' had initially enjoyed a widespread and positive public response, but its final results upon implementation turned out to be negligible.

In the area of energy co-operation and water resources a real challenge was to specify the real objectives for ensuring the EU's energy security within the framework of co-operation with Central Asia states, taking into account the appropriate potential and capacities of each of the states. It is apparent that Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and, to a certain extent, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan can provide a stable source of diversification of

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<sup>45</sup> M. Laumulin, in: *Strategiya...*, op.cit., p. 112.

oil, gas and electricity imports. It was widely expected in Central Asia that the EU Strategy would be more persistent in pursuing its energy security policies involving assets from the Central Asia region, as was not the case with respect to the Southern gas corridor.

As far as the operation of European businesses in Central Asia is concerned, we can see an expanded involvement of European companies in the development of Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector, as well as in the creation of alternative routes for transportation of oil to Europe via the Caspian Sea (including construction and expansion of terminals for unloading and receiving oil and liquid gas, construction of tankers and ferry fleets, as well as other measures). The main project with the EU is the joint development of Kazakhstan's Kashagan oil field in the north-eastern part of the Caspian Sea. In addition, one of the priorities of Tajikistan's government is a project for the completion of the Rogun Dam, which is in a desperate need of foreign investment. In view of the ambitiousness and demands of the project, the EU should consider supporting it as it opens large opportunities to revive the economy and strengthen ties with Central Asia.

The European Union is capable of providing technical support in order to create technically feasible and economically attractive investment packages on increasing hydroelectric capacities, which would be beneficial for all countries of the region. The EU can also provide its expert advice on optimal mechanisms for regulating water-related issues in Central Asia. Moreover, the European Union, in association with other international organisations, is invited to address the water problem in the region at the political level on a more regular basis.

Central Asia offers favourable conditions for investing in projects in the upstream countries, which would also be beneficial to the downstream countries. This would allow for avoiding the risk of inter-state 'water conflicts'. The European Union apparently should take a more clear position regarding the existing solutions to potential water conflicts in Central Asia and be more open in expressing its support of major investments in projects that would be advantageous to all the countries of the region. In this connection it can be hoped that the EU will take a more active stand *vis-à-vis* the question of construction of the Rogun dam in light of the recent World Bank report calling for the creation of a regional co-operation framework with a view to resolving the dispute over the dam.

In the area of transportation corridors in Central Asia it is said that while the EU was engaged in a protracted discussion and negotiations on the choice of the optimal routes for the transportation of energy raw materials from Central Asia, China received a *carte-blanc* and managed to build pipelines from Central Asia to its territory within a very

short time. The risk is that unless the EU coordinates a common energy policy very soon and includes Central Asia therein, it could weaken its position in global energy politics. The EU's transportation corridors and axes that run through Central Asia, both those from the East to West and from North to South, should be revised to adapt to the current transcontinental realities. For example, there are voices saying that the EU should support Kazakhstan's initiative to make the city of Aktau one of Central Asia's largest logistics hubs for land, air and sea transportation of cargo, and that European expertise should be used in upgrading and expanding the put-through capacity of Aktau's air and sea ports as well as in constructing modern railway main lines (in this case to Afghanistan via Turkmenistan).<sup>46</sup>

The larger chapter of human rights, rule of law, effective administration and democratisation has been repeatedly referred to as evidence of the weak results achieved by the EU through its so-far targeted policies towards Central Asia. As inscribed in a ranking of the goals achieved, composed by Central Asia experts, that area received the lowest ranking (in contrast to the goal of 'investing in the future: youth and education' which was ranked the highest).<sup>47</sup> The general attitude is that the European Union had unreasonably high expectations regarding the speed with which systemic reforms would take effect, as well as regarding changes in human rights, rule of law, effective administration and democratisation.<sup>48</sup>

This conclusion was also strongly voiced in the European Parliament's study of March 2014,<sup>49</sup> which stressed that the EU's 2007 Central Asia Strategy had so far brought limited results in improving the rule of law, good governance, democracy, and human rights in the region. It lacks clearly-defined objectives, which makes it harder to assess the EU's engagement. The study discussed and elaborated on this lack of results in promoting human rights in the Central Asia. First, EU public diplomacy tended to refer to human rights and democratic reform in rather general terms instead of raising specific issues, while at the same time lacking coherence and follow-up measures. Consequently, only a few specific human rights issues were seriously taken up or resolved. Second, overall financial assistance, and in particular that allocated to democracy and human rights,

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<sup>46</sup> Based on the author's interviews with representatives of business and administration.

<sup>47</sup> *Strategya...*, op.cit., p. 161.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161.

<sup>49</sup> Directorate-General for External Policies, 'Evaluation of the EU's human rights policies and engagement in Central Asia', European Parliament 2014, p. 34.

was limited and not always well-targeted, frequently aimed at achieving more quantifiable results than deep-rooted democratic transformations. To date, this approach has led to a situation where a number of programs in judicial, prison or parliamentary reform only tackle shortcomings on the surface, failing to trigger any meaningful long-term changes.

Some experts from the region point out that a source of controversy over the EU's policies regarding Central Asia countries concerns the fact that, while the EU itself has great competency in the field of human rights and an active judicial body – the European Court of Human Rights – the EU politicians often 'flirt' with authoritarian leaders in Central Asia countries and that the EU sometimes demonstrates excessive softness in relation to the existing political regimes with respect to the not-infrequent manifestations of harshness in the internal politics of Central Asia states. Observers note that not all Central Asia states assist in the dialogue on human rights within civil society and its institutions: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan rule out this form of dialogue, in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan such dialogue is often held only within an official framework, without the desired follow up on measures or results. In this connection it is recommended to: simplify the procedure for EU program funding of civil society in Central Asia; prevent the dialogue and discussions from turning into mere formalities; and to strengthen ties between the EU, the civil society of European countries and NGOs from Central Asia, as well as the dialogue between officials. Many observers point out the unrealised potential of the Rule of Law program. There is also a need for the EU member-states and the EU to coordinate their projects closely, including in key law reforms, like reforms of the judicial system, as well as in the creation of effective legislation, e.g. in the area of administrative and trade law.

As indicated, implementation of the European education initiative was highly assessed and it was recommended that it be targeted to develop Central Asia states and fight poverty. Also, many agree that education programs and projects to support civil society should be continued throughout all Central Asia states and that the European Union should focus on creating a cluster of independent advanced educational centres and research institutes, and support reforms in primary, secondary and high school education.<sup>50</sup>

Not surprisingly, the issue of funding is a lively and much-discussed topic and the general opinion is that the 2007–2013 EU budget for Central Asia was not sufficient. Accordingly, there were few tangible results in

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<sup>50</sup> See, e.g. P. Djons, *Obrazovatel'naya initsiativa ES v Tsentralnoy Azji*, "EUCAM report", No. 9/2010.

any of the seven areas of co-operation. It is proposed that there should be more task-oriented funding of projects, e.g. in the area of water resources, energy security, joint educational projects, etc., and that more private capital, including private capital from Central Asia as well as from international organisations (the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the UN, OSCE, the ENVSEC initiative<sup>51</sup> and others) should participate alongside the EU in implementing projects.

It seems that the dilemma so far for the European Union's policy for Central Asia has been to find the proper balance between economic co-operation and democratic reforms, while the dilemma for the Central Asia states in their relations with the EU and individual European countries has been essentially to find the right multi-vector balance between the interests of Russia, China, the US and the EU. The question is how to accommodate the upcoming new policy lines with that reality, taking into account the changing current developments and conditions which inevitably influence the political scene in Central Asia, i.e. the potential for an 'Afghanistan spill-over process'; the enhanced economic supremacy of China in the region; and Russia's position based on growing political assertiveness and – at the same time – suffering from the negative consequences of its conflict over Ukraine, which also affects some countries of the Central Asia region. A new EU Strategy should address these circumstances and build upon the lessons learnt from the experiences and some unquestioned achievements of the previous Strategy, as outlined above.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Despite the numerous setbacks and failures experienced during the period of the EU Strategy's implementation to date, the EU presence in Central Asia has been consolidated and strengthened in that difficult and demanding region. In particular Kazakhstan can be seen as the country which has most progressed in terms of drawing closer to and strengthening its links with Europe. Indeed, Kazakhstan positions itself as a European country. Kyrgyzstan has also manifested its openness to Europe and its principal values, including the EU's democratisation agenda, through its adoption of a parliamentary system based on the European model, and the Kyrgyz constitution is, quite intentionally, largely a copy of the Austrian constitution.

However, many admit that the influence of Europe could have been even greater if the EU had engaged itself in a deeper collaboration with

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<sup>51</sup> [www.envsec.org/](http://www.envsec.org/).



other international organisations operating in the region, including also Arab institutions. This has not been the case so far.

The suggestions and recommendations for the next stage strategic document, for the next decade or so, should include, in my opinion, the following items (without intending the list below to be exhaustive):

- the EU should continue its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Central Asia countries. At the same time it is desirable to apply the principle of ‘more for more’, which could generate more interest in the countries to implement reforms and modernize those countries concerned with close co-operation with Europe;
- the EU should elaborate a clear policy *vis-à-vis* the Russian-led integration processes in the region, which could effectively respond not only to new opportunities but also risks linked to the protectionist nature of the Eurasian Economic Union (in place since 1 January 2015, and expected to also include Kyrgyzstan from May 2015);
- the new security challenges should also be taken into account, including the Afghanistan spill-over process, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and the problem of recruitment and participation of Central Asia citizens in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, partly in connection with the so-called Islamic state;
- the repositioning of the ‘big players’ – China, Russia, the US, Turkey, and Iran and their policies towards and within the region of Central Asia - should be taken into close account. The challenge is to find a *modus vivendi* between the EU and those players, especially in light of the anticipated more active role and assertive approach to be taken by the EU *vis-à-vis* those actors;
- the EU must remain relevant in its regional approach and encourage and facilitate deeper and more intense co-operation inside the Central Asia region and more trade exchange between the five countries, while applying the balanced budget methodology (a considerable budget line for the regional dimension and continued strong budget envelopes for individual countries, also taking into account the exceptional position of Kazakhstan in terms of its non-eligibility to ODA). Undoubtedly, the new Strategy should intensify a dialogue in the formula ‘the EU plus five’;
- the energy agenda should be given a prominent place, keeping in mind the dynamic situation in this field which we have witnessed over past several years (the robust search for new energy sources and transportation routes by the EU in light of the recent international tensions, including the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the sanctions between Russia and the West, the energetic quest by Central Asia countries for alternative

- (to Russian pipelines) options for oil and gas deliveries to Europe, as well as the new trends in Russia-China gas deliveries, etc.;
- it is expedient to rethink the human rights approach and democratisation agenda as envisaged for the Central Asia countries, having in mind that it is difficult for the EU to promote democracy and defend human rights as the EU has little leverage in the region. Unlike with respect to the countries included in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the EU can offer the Central Asia countries neither political and economic associations nor visa-free travel to the EU. Moreover, the EU is seeking to carefully balance its promotion of EU values with its energy and security interests in the region. The recommendations in this area should include the following: human rights dialogues should not be stand-alone events, but part of a comprehensive EU engagement in the Central Asia; the EU should increasingly cooperate and coordinate with various regional and international organisations; co-operation programs on good governance, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law need to be extended beyond the governmental level and more civil society engagement is necessary to foster the growth and influence of local civil societies; grants to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Central Asia should focus on fewer priority areas, while more emphasis needs to be placed on the monitoring and evaluation of projects that can boost European understanding of the human rights environment in Central Asia and build local CSO capacities; assistance to official institutions needs to be further country-tailored to ensure that programs on judicial, prison or parliamentary reform, as well as broader human rights programs, can attain the desired short-term practical and long-term reform-oriented impacts;<sup>52</sup>
  - it is advisable to improve the identified shortcomings of the previous Strategy, such as: the lengthy decision-making process from the EU side; too high expectations with respect to some outcomes (especially when confronted with insufficient agendas or budgets, like in the human rights area, or containing unspecified deadlines and lacking concrete results); failure to adequately match the ambitious goals with the realities in the field in order to avoid any charges of an alleged ‘illusory idealisation’ of the EU policies in the Central Asia region (referring to ‘not addressing real needs and problems of the region’, such as issues of labour migration or accelerated and uncontrolled urbanisation, both of which have been allegedly ignored by the previous Strategy);<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> ‘Evaluation of the EU Human Rights Policies...’, op.cit., pp. 6–7.

<sup>53</sup> *Strategya...*, op.cit., p. 160.

- the EU's investment and economic links with the region should be given more attention, including creating broader opportunities for the blending and engagement of European private capital in the Central Asia region;
- in terms of effectiveness of the EU assistance package offered to the region, it is also important to implement principal ECA recommendations, such as the requirement to design any future regional programs so that they are likely to achieve a genuine regional dimension, to concentrate all assistance provided on a small number of sectors, to define and apply robust and objectively verifiable conditions for any continuing budget support programs, in particular giving sufficient attention to the support of anti-corruption mechanisms, and to report on results and impacts in a way that allows comparison with plans and objectives.<sup>54</sup>

Undeniably the EU has all the instruments and policies at its disposal which could transform the Central Asia region into an area of real opportunities for Europe, while at the same time making a real difference in that specific region, which is not accidentally also of great interest to other major global actors in terms of security, energy and transport, economic benefits, alleviation of poverty and promotion of universal values.

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<sup>54</sup> European Court of Auditors, 'EU Development Assistance to Central Asia', op.cit., p. 36.