

Defending Human Rights and Promoting Democracy: Euro-Atlantic approaches towards Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

CONCLUSIONS

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Turkmenistan witnessed a swift change of leadership when Gurbanguly Berdimukhamadov took over from absolute ruler Saparmurat Niazov, who died at the end of 2006. Whereas some progress was made in terms of legislative reform and opening the country up to the outside world, hopes for an overhaul of the administration and engagement with political reform seem to have evaporated.

- The majority of changes and reforms that have taken place over the last two years have been cosmetic. President Berdimukhamadov wants to be seen as a reformer but, at the same time, he is carefully building up his own power base that might turn into a new personality cult.
- The country remains isolated but tries to build relations with the EU, especially in the energy sector. The quantity of Turkmen gas deposits is uncertain and the regime wants to settle big contracts as soon as possible. Meanwhile, it remains very difficult to do business in and with Turkmenistan in other economic sectors.
- There is no reason for the EU or its member states to be hesitant in criticising the enormous human rights violations that take place in Turkmenistan. A more active and critical stance would be welcomed and would not be likely to isolate Turkmenistan further. In this sense, the EU could look to the US, a country that is critical in its dealings with Ashgabat.
- In working with Turkmenistan, the EU might want to make use of countries that often have identical interests and are better positioned to work with Ashgabat, such as Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkey.

Uzbekistan is ruled by Islom Karimov, who has not shown any willingness to engage in democratic reform and has failed to improve the poor human rights record he gained in May 2005, when Uzbek security forces killed hundreds of protesters in the city of Andjion. When Uzbek authorities proved unwilling to allow international organisations to investigate these tragic events, the EU and the US imposed sanctions. As a result, Uzbekistan has turned to Russia, which largely abstained from criticising it, and has moved away from Western countries. This scenario is currently changing as the United States and the EU, headed by German initiatives, seek to repair ties with Tashkent.

- Uzbekistan represents a threat to regional security due to its instability. There seems to be no post-Karimov scenario, while unrest and frustration is mounting in the most populous Central Asian country. The growth of radical Islam might prove to be another factor that could increase instability.

- Uzbekistan has engaged with the EU in a human rights dialogue and has organised a civil society seminar jointly with the EU on media freedom. Unfortunately, only pro-regime NGOs were invited to this seminar.
- The human rights situation has barely improved, despite EU sanctions upon Tashkent leaders' travels to Europe and a weapons embargo (the latter is still in place). The Uzbek leadership has acquired a skill in making cosmetic changes in order to satisfy important partners: it did so in 2001-2, when the US needed access to Uzbekistan for the war on terrorism in Afghanistan; and it has done so in relation to the EU over the past year. Nonetheless, some positive movement is noticeable in local legislation. How this relates to practice is yet to be seen.
- Human rights abuses, such as forced child labour in cotton fields, remain one of the most visible offences in Uzbekistan.

In June 2007, the **European Union** presented a Strategy for Central Asia. Since then, the Union has been strengthening a regional approach towards the area, focusing especially on bilateral ties with Central Asian republics. Brussels has concluded 'bilateral priority papers' with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but has also established human rights dialogues with Ashgabat and Tashkent. Human rights, the rule of law, good governance and democratisation constitute the first priority outlined in the Strategy for Central Asia, though the EU has to balance this interest with an engagement on security and energy.

- Human rights dialogues have now taken place in all five Central Asian countries. The EU touches upon a range of human rights questions with the Central Asian authorities, from media freedom and child protection, to freedom of assembly and women's rights. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan objected to the dialogues because they feel their standards are higher than those of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Turkmen and Uzbek leaderships welcome these dialogues, provided they are held behind closed doors.
- The EU has come a long way in a short time in terms of upgrading its relations with the countries of Central Asia. This is part of an ongoing process and Spain can play an important role in upgrading and strengthening the EU Strategy for Central Asia. Indeed, building an effective and broad engagement will ultimately require the interest and actions of a broad range of member states.
- EU moves to strengthen its role in Central Asia should take into account the experience of other organisations and countries that have been active in the region for longer. A broad lesson from these other approaches is, in particular, the need for a clear political vision for the region to guide engagement and to avoid projects becoming the driving force of relations. This is especially important for the difficult cases of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The EU has a number of potential partners for parts of its engagement in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan and Turkey.
- The question of security and energy interests in the region needs to be carefully considered by the EU. While the region faces a number of security challenges, the single largest security threat to the region's stability is the violence being perpetrated against the population by the political regimes themselves.
- A key immediate task is to improve the EU's communication strategy in relation to its policies in Central Asia. This should be aimed at alerting interested parties in Europe, but also at reaching out and informing individuals, groups and networks in Central Asia of the EU and its policies. The fact that the Council's Special Representative for Central Asia, Pierre Morel, now also holds a similar position in relation to Georgia is regarded by many as a sign of disinterest in Central Asia.
- The EU has now advocated the questions of dialogue and engagement as the principal means of approaching the countries of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. If this is to be successful, thought needs to be given to the aim of this dialogue. What are the costs of dialogue with the authoritarian regimes of the region - loss of credibility with opposition groups, the risks of actually supporting oppressive governments? How broad should dialogue be - should opposition figures, such as Islamists, be included?

- The EU still has insufficient capacity and institutional memory with regard to its dealings with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This allows the regimes in these countries to outwit the EU on key issues such as the monitoring of human rights.

NATO has a longstanding relationship with Central Asia through its successful Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme that binds all non-NATO members in the Euro-Atlantic area, including Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Alliance was established to defend democracy, but nowadays it also plays an important role in promoting democracy in general and democratic defence reform in specific PfP countries that seek closer ties with the Alliance. NATO rarely uses sanctions and normally opts to keep lines of communication open with human rights wrongdoers through the PfP. However, it did cancel most of its activities with Uzbekistan after the Andijon events. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - which are excluded from most regional and international fora - are probably the least active PfP countries.

- NATO's role in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is extremely limited. NATO has a clear interest in working with both countries in order to gain better access to Afghanistan (the ISAF mission).
- In the field of democratisation and human rights, NATO barely plays a role in these PfP member states; nor does it do so in terms of democratic defence reform.

The **OSCE** is present in both countries through an OSCE Centre in Ashgabat and a Project Coordinator in Uzbekistan, and both states are members of this troubled organisation. Members are divided over the purpose and tasks of the OSCE. A group of Eastern members led by Russia wants the OSCE to be further institutionalised and its main focus to be on security. This group wants to cling strongly to consensus decision-making on most, if not all, issues. The second group, led by the US, wants OSCE institutions to function relatively independently while focusing on the human dimension of democracy and human rights. A variety of countries and views lie between these two perspectives. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan clearly belong to the 'Russia group'.

- The OSCE is mainly centred on Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, doing small but focused projects. The attention paid to work on democratisation and human rights is limited due to a lack of funding and resistance from the Turkmen and Uzbek regimes.
- Turkmenistan tends to be clear and open with the OSCE when arguing which issues it is interested in and which it is not.
- In 2010, Kazakhstan will chair the OSCE; unfortunately, standards of democracy and human rights in the country have not improved over the last year (and some say they have actually deteriorated). Kazakhstan will have to reform many aspects of its structures in order to meet the 'Madrid obligations' it made during the OSCE Ministerial conference held in Madrid in November 2008. Nonetheless, the Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship can be considered an opportunity to bring OSCE members together again and it might have some positive impact on Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, since attention towards the region will increase as a result of this Chairmanship.
- Spain will be presiding over the EU Council in the first half of 2010, which provides an opportunity for EU/Spanish foreign policy to coordinate with the Kazakh Chairmanship of the OSCE.