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The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy

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Policy brief

Last summer, on the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, the European Council approved continuation of the Strategy's implementation in its current form. The Council Conclusions on Central Asia highlight that the Strategy has 'proven itself and remains valid'. In terms of achievements, the ministers point to the development of the EU's diplomatic presence in the region since 2007 and the EU's response to the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan. They note that while all of the former goals of the Strategy remain pertinent – including human rights, rule of law, good governance and democracy, youth and education, economic development, trade and investment, energy and transport, environmental sustainability and water, combating common threats and challenges – the issue of Afghanistan has moved to the centre of the Strategy. The ministers also argue for clearer prioritisation in the Strategy and set out a long list of key priorities.

Clearly, there are important lessons to be drawn from the initial implementation of the Strategy. An examination of the first five years of the EU's enhanced engagement in Central Asia raises, however, more issues than only those of a technical nature. In particular, the modest at best achievements of this period raise serious questions about the political aims and practice of the EU in the region. Despite the adoption of the Strategy and its recent positive self-assessment by the EU, the reality is that Europe remains a marginal player in

Central Asia, operating significantly below its potential.

The lessons of the first phase of the Strategy are particularly important because Central Asia today faces serious challenges that the EU's initial approach has been poorly prepared to address. Unfortunately, in seeking to chart a way forward, the EU has adopted a 'steady as she goes approach', essentially simply extending existing policies.¹ For the second phase of the Strategy, the EU should seek to develop an engagement built on a realistic recognition of its strategic interests and comparative advantage in Central Asia, where important regional shifts are underway. Critically, it should place support for genuine political reform and the protection of human rights along with a comprehensive approach to security at the heart of the Strategy. The adoption of such a policy of values-based realism would offer the prospect of a more strategic and forward-looking engagement that could play to the EU's strengths in Central Asia.

The experience of the EU Central Asia Strategy

Despite the achievements of the Central Asia Strategy noted in the Council Conclusions, the results of the new EU engagement in the region have been underwhelming. Crucially, the adoption of

¹ J. Boonstra, 'EU Central Asia Policy: Steady as She Goes', *Central Asia Policy Brief*, 4 (August 2012), http://www.centralasiaprogram.org/images/Policy_Brief_4_August_2012.pdf.

the Strategy meant the abandonment of the former EU position on democracy and human rights in the region. Its substitution for a policy of dialogue and engagement seems to have done almost nothing to affect the behaviour of the Central Asian governments positively or to improve the situation on the ground.

Human rights, good governance, rule of law and democracy

The EU Strategy for Central Asia was adopted after the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia had already been consolidated. As a way to achieve concrete progress on human rights and democracy issues, the EU decided to shift from placing them at the political core of the EU's engagement to compartmentalising these issues in projects and set piece dialogue mechanisms, to allow progress on other issues to proceed.

In fact, during the life of the EU Strategy, there has been little evidence of any substantial progress on human rights, governance, democracy and civil society in the countries of Central Asia as a result of EU activity.² If anything, there has been a further rolling back of these issues under the EU watch. According to Freedom House, during the lifetime of the EU Strategy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the situation with regard to such issues has remained at internationally low levels or deteriorated across the range of areas they measure: civil society, electoral progress, national democratic governance, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence.³

Transparency International reports similar lack of progress or even deterioration in the region with regard to corruption.⁴ And according to the Annual Press Freedom Index produced by Reporters Without Borders, the Central Asian countries have all experienced an absolute deterioration in press freedom over the last five years.⁵ During the period of the EU Strategy, Central Asia has emerged as a region leading the way in the suppression of free speech on the Internet.

The EU Strategy has been a clear failure at reversing the deterioration in the human rights and democracy situation in Central Asia. The shift to engagement and to mechanisms of dialogue has delivered no results in these key areas that are traditionally seen as being at the core of the EU's external policies.

Energy security

A central aim of the EU Strategy of 2007 was to gain access

for European markets to the vast natural gas reserves of Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's gas was seen, together with the resources of Azerbaijan (and possibly Iraq), as part of the solution to breaking Russia's domination of EU gas supplies, especially in South-Eastern Europe.

The Central Asia Strategy was put together in the aftermath of the first Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute that led to supplies being cut off in January 2006. The EU's response to the cut-off was to launch an initiative to create the southern energy corridor that would bring Caspian gas to market. The Nabucco pipeline, to be supplied with Turkmen gas, was the centrepiece of the policy.

Following the launch of the Central Asia Strategy, a substantial effort was made to improve EU diplomatic relations with Turkmenistan, including through the push to conclude the long delayed Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) though not ratified yet. The mandate of the EU Special Representative was amended to include energy security issues. Turkmenistan was the target of numerous high-level visits by EU officials, including various commissioners, leading to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on energy issues between the EU and Turkmenistan in 2008.

Five years after the beginning of the EU Strategy, Turkmenistan has yet to commit commercial gas volumes to the Southern Energy Corridor, and the issue of crossing the Caspian remains unresolved, with no sign of the Trans-Caspian pipeline. During this period, China has reached a gas supply agreement with Turkmenistan, has initiated and built a major pipeline and is further expanding pipeline capacity. At the same time, gas markets are experiencing a revolution due to new unconventional gas technologies, rapidly changing market conditions and internal EU energy market regulation, in particular, the third energy package, which is helping to promote liberalisation and diversification.

Meanwhile, the dream of Nabucco has all but disappeared as a viable alternative with the emergence of Azerbaijan and Turkey's plan to construct the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), which could possibly link up with a highly truncated Nabucco (West) at the Bulgarian border. So, while it seems there is a realistic hope that Azeri gas will eventually reach European consumers, this project will come from a largely market-based initiative rather than from EU geostrategic energy strategy and energy diplomacy. Moreover, it is still unclear whether gas from Turkmenistan will ever be a part of the project, given that the recent deterioration of the Turkmen-Azeri relationship underlines the difficulties of the Trans-Caspian pipeline.

Despite the considerable investment in energy security diplomacy during the first five years of the Central Asia Strategy, the EU did not deliver on its own goals. The grandiose Nabucco project linked to a Trans-Caspian pipeline has been abandoned and a new energy landscape, based on Azerbaijan, is emerging. With new gas discoveries in Azerbaijani territory and with a smaller capacity on the initial TANAP, Turkmen gas is not a prerequisite for the Southern corridor to function. Increasingly, EU energy ambitions to use Central Asia to counter Russian energy policies appear not only unrealistic but also irrelevant.

² For an overview of the human rights situation, see Human Rights Watch, World Report 2012 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2012). Central Asian country chapters available at <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012#countries>.

³ Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2012 (Washington DC: Freedom House, 2012), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2012%20%20NIT%20Tables.pdf>.

⁴ Transparency International, 'Corruption Perceptions Index', November 2011, http://archive.transparency.org/publications/publications/other/corruption_perceptions_index_2011. It should be noted that some progress has been recorded on corruption in Kazakhstan during this period.

⁵ Reporters Without Borders, 'Press Freedom Index', 2012, http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012_1043.html.

Security

Alongside energy issues, security provided one of the main rationales for the EU Central Asia Strategy. The central issue was Afghanistan. In fact, in many respects, the appearance in 2007 of the Central Asia Strategy was as much a reflection of Europe's need to support its military commitments to ISAF as it was about an interest in the former Soviet Central Asian republics. In particular, the push by the German EU Presidency to adopt the Strategy and the focus on improving relations with Uzbekistan should be viewed in the context of Berlin's need to keep its military base in Termez open, so as to support German troops in the north of Afghanistan.

Since 2007, EU security policy in the region has had two main goals. Firstly, it has aimed at engaging the region's authoritarian leadership in dialogue over security issues, especially through periodic high-level meetings. These meetings have proved awkward affairs, with EU and member state representatives rubbing shoulders with a club of some of the world's worst human rights violators. The utility of such gatherings is also questionable. The Central Asians have been keen to discuss terrorism, Islamist extremism and issues of Afghanistan's future. But there has been little appetite to address either issues of human security or the role of the Central Asian regimes themselves in causing instability and violence. The proposal in the June 2012 EU Council Conclusions to institutionalise this format in the future raises the prospect of the EU continuing to engage based on a security agenda that is predominantly defined by Central Asia's leaders.

Secondly, the EU has sought to focus existing projects and new initiatives on Afghanistan, with the jewel in the crown for the EU being the BOMCA border management programme. The EU has for a decade been a supporter of strengthening border security and anti-trafficking activities, alongside the OSCE, the UN, the U.S. and Russia. But despite the considerable resources poured into the efforts in the past ten years, progress remains small-scale and Central Asia's borders remain as problematic as ever. One leading observer has noted, 'It can often be difficult to distinguish the quality of operations at ports of entry and borders that have received aid from those that have not.'⁶

The EU's activities have done little to improve security for the people of Central Asia or to address the causes of violence and instability that affect the region. Instead of broadening conceptions of security in the region towards EU approaches based on human and comprehensive forms of security, the EU has increasingly found itself operating within local paradigms and focusing on interactions with the Central Asian regimes, rather than with citizenry and civil society.

This is a highly problematic approach to promoting security and stability in the region, since it is the regimes of Central Asia that are the overwhelming sources of conflict and violence. The major incidents of armed conflict are not, as the Central Asian

governments seem to have persuaded the EU, the result of processes of democratisation. Rather, they are the result of the breakdown of the Central Asian authoritarian orders, as in the cases of Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010 and Tajikistan in 2010 and 2012, or of domestic repression, as in Uzbekistan in 2005 and Kazakhstan in December 2011.

Assessing the EU's Strategy for Central Asia

A close examination of the approach of the EU to Central Asia since 2007 makes it hard to avoid the conclusion that on its own terms, the EU Strategy has fallen short of its aims. On the positive side, the EU has raised its profile in the region and its engagement has increased. There is greater expertise and understanding of Central Asia within EU institutions; the EU has increased its diplomatic representation in the region and; the EU has also rolled out various programmes in Central Asia. But activities do not constitute a strategy. Five years after the launch of the EU Strategy in Central Asia, the EU remains a marginal player with a fragile presence in the region. It lacks a clear political vision of Europe's interests and comparative advantages in the region.

The one significant achievement is that European countries have managed to maintain access to the region for transit into and out of Afghanistan as part of the war effort – although this may be down to the policies of individual member states as much as any action by the EU. This focus has not, however, come without a cost in terms of the EU's role in Central Asia. Security aims related to the Afghanistan conflict and the region's energy resources have been pursued under the guise of 'dialogue' and 'engagement' by side-lining the traditional soft power strengths of the EU, such as its commitment to democracy, good governance, rule of law and human rights as the basis for genuine security and sustainable development. This unbalanced approach has been corrosive to the EU's image in the region – as recalled by the embarrassment and chaos caused by Uzbek President Islam Karimov's visit to Brussels in 2011 and the questions raised about EU assistance possibly being channelled through 'civil society' organisations run by President Karimov's family.⁷ Even more alarming is that this approach by the EU has effectively served to reinforce the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia by de facto agreeing to cooperate under the 'local rules'.⁸

The narrow focus of the EU on dialogue with the leaders of Central Asia has already shown its weakness in failing to anticipate the real security challenges in Central Asia. In 2010, when a violent conflict developed in Kyrgyzstan that came close to becoming a regional confrontation, the EU was uninformed, absent and eventually only able to make a contribution to post-conflict rehabilitation.

Looking ahead, if the EU is to build effectively on the positive

6 G. Gavrilis, 'Central Asia's Border Woes & the Impact of International Assistance', Central Eurasia Project, Open Society Foundation, May 2012, <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/central-asia-s-border-woes-impact-international-assistance>.

7 'The not so welcome guest: Who invited Islam Karimov to Brussels?' The European Voice, 27 January 2011, <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/the-not-so-welcome-guest/70077.aspx>. V. Axyonova, 'EU Human Rights and Democratisation Assistance to Central Asia: In Need of Further Reform', EUCAM Policy Brief 22, January 2012.

8 A. Cooley, 'The New Great Game in Central Asia: Geopolitics in a Post-Western World', Foreign Affairs, 7 August 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137813/alexander-cooley/the-new-great-game-in-central-asia>.

aspects of the first phase of its Strategy in Central Asia (as well as addressing the shortcomings of past policies), it will need to forge a far more coherent and focused political approach. The EU has the potential to make a significant impact on the situation on the ground in Central Asia, if it identifies and engages with the key challenges emerging in the region and employs the sorts of tools that play to the EU's strengths.

New strategic challenges in Central Asia

The onset of the second phase of the EU's increased engagement is taking place at a time when Central Asia itself is facing a new strategic situation. Rather than pursuing the current 'steady as she goes approach', the EU should seek to anticipate these challenges. It should mould its strategy and policies towards engaging with these developments at an early stage.

Endgame in Afghanistan

The EU Strategy for Central Asia was developed in a relatively benign strategic context. NATO's engagement in Afghanistan through ISAF provided a hard security umbrella that extended beyond the borders of Afghanistan into Central Asia. The EU's role was thus a softer security engagement, focused around border security, anti-trafficking and providing diplomatic cover to facilitate transit to Afghanistan, notably through the German military facilities in Uzbekistan.

The renewal of the EU Strategy for Central Asia is occurring at a time when the region is facing a much different situation than that of the previous five years. While the U.S. is likely to maintain a significant military presence in Afghanistan for years to come, it will be substantially reduced and European military forces will be largely withdrawn. For the next 18 months, the reverse transit (exit) of European military forces through Central Asia is likely to be a priority. But beyond that, the security interests of many European countries in the region are likely to tail off dramatically.

At the same time, security issues in the region are likely to remain vital. Some Central Asian governments are concerned about conflict 'spill-over' from Afghanistan. The U.S. is preparing to provide security assistance to Central Asia, possibly through Special Forces activity and new security relationships under the umbrella of the 'New Silk Road' initiative. Other governments and international security organisations are already considering changes to their engagement with the region – notably with Russia seeking to retool the CSTO as the leading regional security framework for Central Asia. The EU will need to identify ways in which its engagement in Central Asia can contribute to stability in Afghanistan in the absence of European military forces. This points to the need to link up EU programming on Afghanistan and Central Asia, on, for example, water issues.

Fluid relations among regional powers

The EU concept of the region of Central Asia as the five former Soviet republics was always an unimaginative one, which failed to provide a political basis for strategic engagement. Lumping Kazakhstan together with Tajikistan never had a political logic. The endgame in Afghanistan has promoted an increase in strategic thinking about a wider Central Asia, within countries of

the region and elsewhere.

The withdrawal of Western military forces has brought about an intensification of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral contacts between India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, the U.S., the Gulf States, Turkey and the Central Asian states. Together, these initiatives have the potential to reshape the regional borders and relationships in a still ill-defined region (west Asia, wider Central Asia, Greater Middle East) and through a myriad of relationships and institutions (among others, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Eurasian Union, the Customs Union, the Istanbul process, the Economic Cooperation Organisation and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation).

More and more, the countries of Central Asia will have to be approached in the context of their relationships with neighbouring countries – China, the Russian Federation, Afghanistan-south Asia, Iran, the Caspian region. In the years ahead, as more transport and energy infrastructure is constructed, the concept of former Soviet Central Asia will continue to lose its already fragile coherence. Kazakhstan has already evolved beyond the categorisation of a Central Asian country.

As the very definition of the region itself may be changing, there is a clear need for the EU to move beyond a bureaucratic/geographical approach. It must replace static, state-centric approaches linked to out-dated regional definitions with a functional approach that reaches beyond the putative borders of Central Asia and engages with the drivers of change.

Regime breakdown and violent transformations in Central Asia

The political focus of the first phase of the EU Strategy in Central Asia was the entrenched autocratic regimes of the region. It largely involved working with the concepts of security promoted by these regimes. The form of stability established in Central Asia in the post-Soviet decades, based on strong men, is now breaking down. The region faces power transitions involving the creation of new political orders and a consequent redistribution of wealth amongst new groups and individuals, particularly likely to take place in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the near to medium term.

The political instability of Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and the violence of 2010 are evidence of what can happen when Central Asian authoritarian orders unwind. The growing violence in Tajikistan resulting from the gradual breakdown of the political agreement to end the civil war presents another form of regime breakdown. The violence against oil workers during protests in western Kazakhstan in 2011, when there were also major questions about President Nazarbaev's health, offers a further indication of the instability that can emerge as authoritarian orders falter.

Such instances of violence challenge the particular countries involved, but they also have the potential to affect neighbouring countries through refugee movements, ethnic and kin ties, criminal networks, armed non-state actors and the intervention of external states. With former Soviet Central Asia ever more tied to the situation in Afghanistan as western forces draw down, preventing an intersection of violent instabilities across the region should be

a major priority in the years ahead. A clearer elaboration of the security development relationship in the implementation of the Strategy will be important. The EU should also consider investing its efforts more directly in conflict prevention and mediation, in particular, through the Special Representative.

European weakness

The formulation and launch of the Central Asia Strategy took place when the EU itself was confident about its own abilities to build major foreign policy engagements. The disappointments linked to the post-Lisbon Treaty foreign and security policy and the shortcomings of EU approaches highlighted by the Arab Spring have sapped much of that former confidence. Meanwhile, the limits of Europe's eastern policies have been accentuated by developments in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. Vladimir Putin's formal return, along with his ambitions to create a renewed push for a Russian-centred integration that includes the economic and security dimensions, raises the prospect of increasing tensions and a possible push back against Europe's enlargement agenda of the last two decades. To compound this, the economic crisis in Europe is drawing attention away from external policies in general, and certainly away from regions seen as far distant from Europe's central concerns.

In this context, what exactly can the EU bring to Central Asia? Indeed, why should the EU even be attempting a 'strategic' engagement in the region – especially when so many of the EU member states have negligible national interests in the region? And when global powers, such as China and the U.S., and regional stakeholders, such as Russia and Iran, are so active in Central Asia, what is Europe's comparative advantage in Central Asia, if any? The EU engagement in Central Asia needs to offer clear answers to these questions.

Building an EU value-realist approach to Central Asia

The second cut of the EU Central Asia Strategy is a chance to learn the lessons of the first phase and to correct them. For this to work, it is vital that the EU identifies the current and emerging challenges of Central Asia and seeks to concentrate on them. It must focus its resources upon clearly defined tasks linked to this agenda and to the areas in which it can make a difference.

Europe must be realistic about its actual interests and capabilities in Central Asia. The EU is not and will not be a classical great power in the region, able to engage in hard security approaches and to compete in geopolitical terms on issues such as energy. The EU is at best a second tier player in Central Asia, with relatively weak resources, especially as compared to China and the U.S. The EU cannot hope to achieve the transformational agenda that is set out in the Strategy. In seeking to follow this agenda, the EU is making itself even weaker, spreading its resources too thin and funding projects that are poorly focused and together do little to advance Europe's position in the region.

But if Europe is to deliver on its ambition of being a global actor, it needs to be present in Central Asia. Central Asia is intrinsically linked to the important regional dynamics that will underpin the new security order emerging in an as yet ill-defined area stretching

from the Caspian region to western China, into western Asia and Iran. Developments in this region will help shape the long-term relationships that are forged between India, China, Russia, the U.S., Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. These relationships and the regional organisations that emerge as their expression will also have a wider significance in the alliances and interests that emerge around the new global order. This is the context in which the EU needs to approach Central Asia and this is the realisation that needs to drive the political aims of EU engagement. If the EU is not present and influential on Central Asian issues, it is to a large degree giving up on its ambitions to be a global actor in this important wider region.

Europe is a relatively small player in Central Asia, but it need not be a marginal one. The EU cannot compete with Russia, China, and the U.S. in hard power geopolitics. But it can build a meaningful role for itself based on what it does best: promoting liberal-democratic forms of modernisation. This means putting the advocacy of democratisation and protection of human rights back in the main stream of EU engagement, moving them out of the ghetto of the dedicated dialogue mechanisms.

The recent adoption of the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (June 2012) offers a potential mechanism to help achieve such goals in regard to Central Asia – as it is strong on integrating human rights and democracy with energy and security interests. But it is important to demonstrate that this new document is not just a rhetorical response to the past shortcomings of EU policy. A good first step to demonstrate a real commitment to promoting such an integrated approach to Central Asia would be to organise a joint visit by the EUSR for Central Asia and the EUSR for Human Rights to the region.

Promoting liberal-democratic forms of modernisation also means moving away from state-centric concepts of security in the region and instead addressing human and comprehensive security. It means pulling back from the ineffective energy security diplomacy focused on supply side issues in favour of leveraging the power of the EU market, as demonstrated by the Third Energy Package, which has provided Europe with far greater energy security than a Trans-Caspian pipeline would, even if it were operational. And it means promoting transparency, common rules and secure investment environments based on rule of law.

But there is also a unique role in Central Asia for EU diplomacy, development policies and European civil society. The region is heading toward increased turbulence in the future and away from the strongman stability of recent decades. So, the EU can make important contributions through building its regional capacities in conflict early warning, prevention, mediation and dialogue, and peace building. This will mean building alliances, networks and engagements with a variety of individuals and groups, going far beyond the presidential apparatus in each Central Asian country.



Established in 2008 as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. Specifically, the project aims to:

- Scrutinise European policies towards Central Asia, paying specific attention to security, development and the promotion of democratic values within the context of Central Asia's position in world politics;
- Enhance knowledge of Europe's engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research and by raising awareness among European policy-makers and civil society representatives, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from European countries and Central Asian states and provide a forum to debate on European-Central Asian relations.

Currently, the broader programme is coordinated by FRIDE, in partnership with the Karelian Institute and CEPS, with the support of the Open Society Foundations and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main outputs of the programme are a series of policy briefs and comprehensive reports on key issues facing the Europe-Central Asia relationship.

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FRIDE is a European think tank for global action, based in Madrid, which provides fresh and innovative thinking on Europe's role on the international stage. Our mission is to inform policy and practice in order to ensure that the EU plays a more effective role in supporting multilateralism, democratic values, security and sustainable development. We seek to engage in rigorous analysis of the difficult debates on democracy and human rights, Europe and the international system, conflict and security, and development cooperation. FRIDE benefits from political independence and the diversity of views and intellectual background of its international team.



Founded in 1971, the Karelian Institute is a unit of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies of the University of Eastern Finland. It engages in basic and applied multi-disciplinary research, supports the supervision of postgraduate studies and researcher training, and participates in teaching. It focuses mainly on three thematic priorities: Borders and Russia; Ethnicity and Culture; and Regional and Rural Studies.



The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels is among the most experienced and authoritative think tanks operating in the European Union today. It aims to carry out state-of-the-art policy research leading to solutions to the challenges facing Europe today and to achieve high standards of academic excellence and maintain unqualified independence. CEPS provides a forum for discussion among all stakeholders in the European policy process.