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EU-CENTRAL ASIA MONITORING

The EU Strategy for Central Asia @ Year One

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Policy brief

On the 20th of July 2007, the Council of the European Union adopted “The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership”. The Strategy signalled the EU’s ambition to initiate a fundamental shift in its relations with Central Asia through, for the first time, linking general political goals to a concrete working prospectus in the region. The Strategy also formed a key element of the external relations agenda of the German Presidency of the EU in the first half of 2007 and was integral to Berlin’s wider push to upgrade Europe’s engagement with the countries of the former Soviet Union (notably through initiatives to strengthen the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Black Sea Synergy) within the framework of what some observers called a new ‘Ostpolitik’.¹

The Strategy sets itself a high bar for achievement, identifying a broad range of priorities for the future relationship between the EU and the states of region. One year on from the adoption of the Strategy, the EU has made important progress in strengthening political contacts with Central Asia, but

the Strategy has yet to deliver on its promise to foster a broad range of engagements. Moreover, considerable questions remain about the political direction of the EU’s approach to Central Asia and about the methods that have been employed to promote the Strategy. With the war in Georgia in the summer of 2008 promoting a rethink of the Union’s approach to Russia, Ukraine and the South Caucasus, there is also a strong case for revisiting the EU Strategy for Central Asia and to consider ways to make Europe’s contacts more effective with the key countries of the region.

The Strategy’s Official Aims and Achievements

The Strategy sets out a broad range of general objectives. First is achieving stability and prosperity in Central Asia, including attention to common security challenges such as migration, the fight against organised crime and international terrorism, human, drugs and arms trafficking. The “development and consolidation of stable, just and open societies adhering to international norms”, is identified as “essential to bring the partnership between the European Union and Central Asian States to full fruition”. The Strategy also acknowledges the EU’s dependency on external energy resources and outlines the ambition to foster cooperation with Central Asian countries to enhance European energy security and also to strengthen the energy markets within Central Asia.

¹ Iris Kempe, *A New Ostpolitik? Priorities and Realities of Germany’s EU Council Presidency*, Bertelsmann Group for Policy Research, CAP Policy Analysis No. 4, August 2007 and “Towards a new EU Ostpolitik? – Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia”, speech by Minister of State Gernot Erler, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 7 February 2007 (<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Infoservice/Presse/Rede/2007/070207-Erler-EUOstpolitik.html>).



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Moving beyond the general ‘strategic’ directions of the Strategy, the paper outlines a set of concrete commitments including strengthening political dialogue, establishing a “result-oriented” Human Rights Dialogue, a European Education Initiative, an EU Rule of Law Initiative, an “e-silk-highway”, projects on environmental issues (water) and a regular energy dialogue. Intercultural dialogue is also identified as a goal for EU-Central Asia relations. The paper notes the important role that EU member states are playing in relations with Central Asia, and indicates that the Strategy is to provide the “overall framework” for the EU policies in the region.

Achievement of the broad aims of the Strategy is to be supported by the European Commission’s assistance programme for 2007-13. For this period, the Commission will double assistance, compared with the previous period, to Central Asia with some €750 million allocated for 2007-13 under the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). The Strategy is also to be supported by the opening of new and the upgrading of existing Commission delegations in the region.

During the first year of the operation of the Strategy, the EU’s engagement was given further substance in the form of a set of bilateral Priority Papers agreed between the European Union and the individual Central Asian governments in the first half of 2008. The priority documents detail the range of projects to be conducted within the framework of the Strategy, including those supported by individual EU member states.

One year after the launch of the Strategy, the Council and the European Commission released an official assessment of the achievements of the Strategy during its first 12 months in the form of a progress report.² The report notes “a new quality of cooperation” evolving over the first year of the Strategy between the EU and Central Asia. Other successes are indicated, notably that all Central Asian states have agreed to a structured human rights dialogue. The EU’s commitment to border management (the BOMCA programme), which predates the Strategy, and anti-drugs issues in the region are highlighted. The energetic activity of the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia – Ambassador Pierre Morel – in support of the Strategy is noted.

The achievement placed at the centre of the report is that high-level political contacts have been “visibly intensified” – indeed the report is long on recording the various meetings that have taken place, including two between the EU Troika and the five Central Asian states and various visits to the region by high-level EU

²Joint Progress Report by the Council and the European Commission to the European Council on the Implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy (<http://delkaz.ec.europa.eu/joomla/images/Strategy/joint%20progress%20report%20on%20eu%20ca%20strategy.pdf>).

officials. These contacts appear to have promoted a certain meeting of minds between EU officials and Central Asian leaders on key issues. Notable in the progress report is the following revealing statement: “The EU and Central Asian states are attributing increasing importance to ‘common threats and challenges’ as a cornerstone of intensified relations”. In this connection, the Paris Ministerial Forum on Security Challenges in September 2008 is accorded particular significance. Indeed, subsequent press reports of the meeting suggested that narrowly drawn notions of security are the foundation of the EU’s political engagement in the region.³

The report also points to a number of programmes currently in development – specifically initiatives in education and rule of law. The greater coordination of the activity of member states in the region is noted, as is the strengthened regional energy dialogue through the Baku Initiative, with the agreement in 2008 on a memorandum of understanding on energy with Turkmenistan seen as a particular achievement and a supplement to the one with Kazakhstan from 2006.

While the picture presented in the report is a positive one, some shortcomings are implicitly acknowledged. For example, in the Conclusion it is noted that “greater effort should be made to promote human rights and democratisation and to ensure active involvement of civil society, Parliaments, local authorities and other actors in the monitoring and implementation of the Strategy”.

The Strategy was originally designed to provide the foundation for EU relations with Central Asia for the foreseeable future. Indeed, three EU Presidencies (France, the Czech Republic and Sweden) have committed themselves to maintaining the Strategy and its seven priority areas (human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratisation; education; economic development, trade and investment; energy and transport; environment and water; common threats and challenges; and intercultural dialogue) through to the end of 2009.⁴

Assessing the Strategy

The introduction of the Strategy and its first year of implementation have had important positive aspects. The adoption of the EU Strategy in 2007 was a significant and bold statement of intent by the EU; signalling that the Union planned to upgrade its influence in a part of the

³ Phillippa Runner, “Human rights take back seat at EU-Central Asia talks”, *euobserver.com*, 19 September 2008.

⁴ The Future: The 18-month programme of the Council, prepared by the future French, Czech and Swedish Presidencies adopted 30 June 2008, (http://www.ue2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/ProgrammePFUE/Trio_EN.pdf).

former Soviet Union that up until then had commanded little serious attention within Brussels. The EU has made a firm commitment to launch a diverse series of initiatives – rule of law, education, water issues – that are designed to help to meet some of the major challenges facing Central Asia and, at the same time, strengthen the bonds between the Union and countries of the region.

The EU will commit substantial resources, although still relatively minor sums in comparison to the funds available to other parts of the ‘East’ (which are themselves smaller than those available to the Mediterranean partner countries), to these projects. Also the EU’s commitment to promoting stability and security in Central Asia is a positive sign. This is especially true after the Georgia crisis of August although it is unclear at this stage how far the EU is willing to go in its commitment to Central Asia. The states and societies of Central Asia have faced serious security challenges and are likely to be confronted by even more trying times in the future. Cooperation with the European Union can help the region to meet and overcome these challenges, which is also in the interest of the EU.

At the same time, important questions remain about the nature of the emerging relationship and the direction that it is taking. Two broad issues stand out in particular. There is widespread concern, especially in European civil society, that in developing a new relationship with Central Asia the EU has largely abandoned its normal comprehensive approach to security issues in favour of a policy of *realpolitik*.⁵ Policy is focused on securing access to the region’s energy supplies and to ensuring that the states of Central Asia assist western countries involved in the conflict in Afghanistan rather than promoting genuine long-term stability built on the emergence of civil society, rule of law and forms of democratic politics. This suspicion is reinforced by public statements by EU officials that appear to employ narrow notions of security and stability as the basis for Brussels policy in the region and the definitions of threats promoted by regimes of the region.⁶

Secondly, despite the ‘strategic’ ambition of the new EU approach to Central Asia, there are important questions about how strategically the Strategy is being implemented. The adoption of the Strategy has channelled the EU’s engagement with five rather diverse countries into a single regional framework within which the EU has sought to balance its bilateral relations. While

the assumption that the five ‘stans’ constitute a distinct region has a certain merit – issues such as water management and the geopolitical stance vis-à-vis Russia and China are common challenges – the former Soviet region is undergoing rapid changes. This emphasis on the five countries in Central Asia as a distinct region also has the effect of largely decoupling the Strategy from other initiatives that the Union is promoting in Eurasia, since most of Central Asia’s states will not be considered as partners for the EU on a par with, *inter alia*, Georgia and Ukraine.

Human Rights/Democracy versus Energy and Security Interests

While the EU professes to be adhering to its conventional approach to security issues in the form of the various ‘human dimension’ initiatives in the pipeline for the region and with the establishment of the mechanism of the human rights dialogue, the core of the EU engagement appears focused on a narrow understanding of security and stability in the region based on geopolitical concerns. As a result, the EU has pursued energy and security as its priorities while other issues have been downgraded.

During the first year of the implementation of the Strategy, the European Union confined its dialogue with Central Asia to discussions between European Union officials and representatives of the regimes in the region. The Union did not seek in a significant way to engage civil society organisations and representatives from within Central Asia, nor did it seek to promote initiatives that would strengthen in a meaningful way such organisations. As an EU official is quoted as stating: “It’s unrealistic to expect these countries to become like Europe. None of our [energy] competitors in the region – Russia, China, America – make co-operation conditional on human rights”.⁷

In adopting state-centric notions of security for the region, the EU will ultimately weaken its position in Central Asia. As many observers have noted, one of the central challenges to stability and security in Central Asia is the corrupt and authoritarian regimes of the region. To construct a ‘common security’ agenda around the interests of these cliques without offering a credible set of policies that can promote the transformation of these regimes towards European conceptions of democratic and rule-based societies risks accelerating the growth of instability in the region.

⁵ Cornelius Graubner, “EU Strategy on Central Asia: Realpolitik After all”, *Central Asia Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 14 May 2008 (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4859>).

⁶ Daniel Kimmage, *Security Challenges in Central Asia: Implications for the EU’s Engagement Strategy*, CEPS Policy Brief No. 139, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, July 2007.

⁷ Philippa Runner, “Human rights take back seat at EU-Central Asia talks”, *Euobserver.com*, 19 September 2008 (<http://euobserver.com/24/26778>).

In any major future security crisis in Central Asia brought about by the collapse of one or more of the region's regimes, it will be Russia and China that will take the lead in developing solutions and advancing their interests rather than Brussels. If the EU is to develop a deep-seated engagement in Central Asia capable of offering a durable increase in the Union's role in the region, Brussels should play to the strengths of the European model of development combining human and state security and being frank about the advantages of this approach in meetings with the region's leaders.

Reintegrating the human rights dialogue into the heart of the Strategy. The human rights dialogues that have been set-up with Central Asian republics involve serious meetings, but the mechanism itself decouples human rights issues from the political dimension of the EU's engagement in the region. Core values cannot be dealt with effectively on the sidelines through meetings behind closed doors. Criticism by EU officials of human rights abuses has been mild and the human rights dialogues do not offer enough incentives (positive or negative) to the Central Asian leaderships. The European Parliament and international watchdog organisations such as Human Rights Watch have called for a clear definition of the aims and the priorities of the dialogues and even for benchmarks to be established as a minimum for this practice to be successful.

Already at the start of the dialogues, Uzbekistan has shown how this mechanism can be manipulated, even subverted. A joint EU-Uzbekistan 'freedom of the media event' that was part of the dialogue was postponed by the Uzbeks, then rescheduled around the same dates while making sure that the original invitees, which included critical Uzbek civil society members and Western NGOs, would find it difficult to participate. The first human rights dialogue in Turkmenistan took place while Turkmen police were arresting a dissident upon his return home from exile. This approach works to the detriment of human rights and to the EU's credibility on these issues.

Human rights need to be reintegrated into the heart of the EU's engagement in the region and linked to a programme designed to promote legislative reform and liberalisation. Recentering the dialogues – perhaps holding them in conjunction with EU Troika meetings or linked to the planned series of security conferences – would send a strong message that the Union regards human rights as something essential to promoting durable stability in the region.

The need to establish a democratisation and good governance initiative. Whereas the Indicative Programme is reasonably clear on what the EU hopes to achieve in the field of democracy and good governance and the Strategy also elaborates upon democracy, the Progress Report keeps mostly silent on this 'key aspect'. Some issues connected to democracy and good

governance are trumpeted such as the new rule of law initiative, which will be coordinated by France and Germany. The EU uses different agencies to promote democracy and good governance such as the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Institution Building Partnership Programme (IBPP), but also it depends for a large part on initiatives of member states such as Germany and Sweden.

A targeted 'democratisation and good governance initiative' would be a useful new asset in the EU's engagement in Central Asia. First, it could serve as a means to coordinate efforts by different EU agencies and member states. Second, it could help explain to the Central Asian leaderships what the purpose is of the EU's approach to democracy; that the aim is increasing accountability and transparency but also effectiveness of governance – and thereby promoting security and stability – and that the EU is not in the business of regime-change. Lastly, such an initiative should make a distinction between the efforts that will be undertaken in a bilateral way in support of bureaucracies – the assistance work that the EU is good at – and direct assistance to civil society through easily accessible funds for small projects – something that the EU has been slow, or perhaps reluctant, to develop. A democracy initiative could help Brussels to find the right mix of involving civil society and working with state and local government institutions.

Until now the EU has failed to engage strongly with civil society – the Strategy seems to be essentially about EU officials and Central Asia leaders. When officials travel to the region they should meet more often and publicly with representatives of civil society. Also they should benefit from the expertise, views and skills of independent thinking. Without consultation with civil society in Central Asia, the EU risks being party to the creation of policies – in education or rule of law for example, that do not mesh with reality on the ground and may even, as a result, be counter-productive.

Being clear on EU energy interests in Central Asia. Since the launch of the Strategy, the EU has made some progress in strengthening the energy relationship with Central Asia. At the EU Troika meeting in Ashgabat in April 2008, Turkmenistan is reported to have pledged to supply 10 bcm per annum of natural gas to the EU from 2009 with the suggestion that Turkmenistan would also support the construction of a trans-Caspian gas pipeline. Hailed at the time by Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner as a breakthrough, serious questions remain about the pledge: Does Turkmenistan actually have this amount of gas ready for

export and how will the gas reach Europe other than through Russian pipelines?⁸

Despite the considerable efforts by the EU on the energy issue and the steps forward noted above, over a year after the launch of the EU Strategy, the prospect of Central Asian gas reaching Europe in pipelines that avoid Russia seems as remote as ever. Indeed, following the conflict in Georgia in the summer of 2008, the chances that the Nabucco pipeline will be built seem at best slim, with the prospects for the construction of the far more complex and politically sensitive trans-Caspian gas pipeline even dimmer.

With little that is concrete to show from the EU-Central Asian energy dialogue, it is important to keep account of the cost of the priority that the EU has given to energy issues in Central Asia. The pursuit of energy and security interests has played a major part in marginalising traditional EU concerns related to democracy and human rights. In important ways, the dialogue with the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia in this policy sector has provided legitimacy to these regimes and served to further isolate the already-weak civil society in the region.

In the end one wonders whether the pursuit of Central Asian gas supplies is really worth the price. Even if the unlikely occurs – the Nabucco and Transcaspian pipelines are built, the Western energy companies accept the enormous commercial risks of these projects, that Turkmenistan actually has the capacity to export enough gas and that Kazakhstan joins it later (and Russia and China allow all of this to proceed) – events in Georgia have shown how vulnerable this export route will be to Russian actions. Moreover, such a pipeline is unlikely to be able to transmit much more than 20 bcm pa of gas to Europe (total European consumption is projected to top 550 bcm per annum by the time Caspian gas would arrive) and therefore it will only be significant on the margins of EU demand, although it is still possible that it could be a commercially profitable enterprise. Critically, the importation of natural gas from Central Asia will not free the EU from dependence on Russian gas supplies nor from having to eventually reach an agreement with Moscow on energy supplies in Eurasia.⁹

Given the huge political and commercial uncertainties, the technical and cost challenges and the likely marginal impact of gas supplies from the Caspian to the Europe market, the EU should seek to recast its energy dialogue with Central Asia into a more realistic and effective policy that rebalances energy with human dimension

⁸ Bruce Pannier, “Turkmenistan: Confusion Reigns About Ashgabat's Commitment To Nabucco”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 April 2008.

⁹ International Crisis Group, *Central Asia's Energy Risks*, Asia Report N°133, 24 May 2007.

issues. Perhaps the strongest reason for the EU to pursue an energy dialogue with the Central Asian countries is that the direct supply of gas to Europe would help to alleviate the current dependence of the Central Asians on Russia for the export of energy and, thereby, enhance their independence from Moscow. Building an energy relationship with the EU is thus primarily in the interests of the Central Asian states themselves. Recognition of this by Brussels would allow the EU to strengthen its leverage in terms of promoting a more comprehensive relationship with the region, including a stronger place for European values – not least in terms of requiring transparency in the management of energy revenues.¹⁰

The Need for Better National Differentiation in the Strategy

Kazakhstan's rise as regional leader. In recent years, Kazakhstan has taken an increasingly prominent role in Central Asia and more widely, reflecting the growing confidence of the country built upon the wealth generated by extensive hydrocarbon reserves. Kazakhstan has gradually supplanted Uzbekistan as the leading Central Asian state, taking on regional leadership roles in respect to, *inter alia*, helping to stabilise Turkmenistan after the death of Niazov, assisting Tajikistan during the food crisis in the harsh winter of 2007-08 and investing in neighbouring states. Following the conflict in Georgia in the summer of 2008, many Central Asian countries looked to Kazakhstan as a rallying point to resist pressure from Moscow to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. While Kazakhstan's role as regional leader is not uncontested – and indeed is not always welcomed – with Uzbekistan remaining the leading military power, the country's continued economic growth will further strengthen its position in the region.

Despite the emerging importance of Kazakhstan, the EU has been slow to recognise the significance of the change. The EU Strategy document does not accord Kazakhstan a particular place in relations with the European Union. Indeed, when the EU presented the Kazakh side with the draft version of the national priority paper for future cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan at the Ashgabat Troika meeting in 2008, it was Astana that took the lead in seeking to upgrade the document. In recent years, Kazakhstan has expressed interest in a closer relationship to the EU's European Neighbourhood (ENP) Programme, stronger ties with the Council of Europe and after considerable lobbying by Astana, Kazakhstan will become chairman-in-office of the OSCE in 2010.

Perhaps most significantly, in the summer of 2008 President Nazarbaev launched his State Programme “The

¹⁰ The Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (<http://eitransparency.org/>).

Path to Europe” for 2009-11.¹¹ The President has set as the main goal of the Programme the development of ‘strategic partnerships’ with leading European countries. Cooperation with Europe is proposed across a range of areas including transport, energy, education, strengthening rule of law and building stronger links between civil society in Europe and Kazakhstan. The Programme indicates that “European standards” are to be used as the basis for the future development of the country. In this way, the Programme makes clear that Kazakhstan sees closer integration with Europe as central to its project of domestic modernisation. Kazakhstan’s Chairmanship of the OSCE is viewed by Astana as integral to building its relationship with Europe.

OSCE Chairmanship. The Chairmanship of the OSCE is not only an opportunity for Kazakhstan and its leadership, which views the award of the Chairmanship as a significant national achievement, but also a chance for the EU to advance considerably its relationship with Astana. It is clear that the OSCE is facing major challenges as a result of the deterioration of relations between Moscow and the western participating states (as well as some eastern states). Despite the problems that beset the organisation, the OSCE remains the only Euro-Asian security organisation and the Chairmanship is the most influential institution within the organisation.

The Kazakh Chairmanship offers a genuine, and perhaps the final, opportunity to begin to reshape the OSCE to fit the changing realities of Europe and Eurasia at the start of the 21st century. This is a tall challenge for any state, but Kazakhstan has some considerable advantages in respect to this agenda. Being close to Russia but also keen to make its own independent mark, Kazakhstan may be able to build consensus and promote new agendas that would be difficult for countries from the west.

It will however be diplomatically difficult for Astana to balance its strategic partnership with Russia with the increasingly strong ties with the EU and US, since these parties are at odds over the role of the OSCE as an organisation. The EU can play a vital role here in supporting the Kazakh Chairmanship and assisting in the development of new directions for the organisation that continue the OSCE’s comprehensive approach to security issues – combining the three dimensions of human, economic/environment and military security – but seek to apply them to emerging security challenges.

Meanwhile, the run-up to the 2010 Chairmanship also gives room to encourage meaningful reform in Kazakhstan – in line with the Path to Europe State Programme. The Kazakhs pledged in November 2007 in Madrid to undertake reforms in areas such as election

law, local governance and media freedom to help to secure the Chairmanship. To date, little progress is notable in respect to these pledges. The EU Strategy and Kazakhstan’s ambition to move closer to Europe presents a window of opportunity to work with Astana on reforms in line with the country’s OSCE commitments.

Uzbekistan’s significance for the EU. The Strategy has been instrumental for the EU’s recent efforts to boost bilateral relations with the Central Asian states. The creation of the Strategy has, however, tied the EU to certain assumptions – notably that the five states within the Strategy should be dealt with together by the EU. This assumption brings with it certain problems. Firstly, in order to maintain a balance in dealing with the five states, the EU has been reluctant officially to prioritise relations with one or other of the states of the region. At the same time, unofficially – reflecting the framing of the five states as a region with Uzbekistan at the centre as well Germany’s strong interest in promoting engagement with Tashkent – the EU has pursued a policy of prioritising Uzbekistan.

During the design of the EU Strategy and its subsequent implementation, EU officials have pointed to the fact that Uzbekistan is the most populous country in Central Asia and shares borders with all of the other countries as justification for putting the country at the centre of the Strategy. Uzbekistan sees itself as the regional leader and in the Soviet period was the most developed of the ‘Asian’ republics. The years of independence have not, however, built on this legacy. Under the Karimov leadership, Uzbekistan has undergone de-industrialisation, and a serious degrading of its educational and agricultural infrastructure, as well as a massive expansion of state-based corruption. These developments have in large part been a reflection of the emergence of the country as among the most authoritarian regimes in the world.

In these conditions, Tashkent has faced growing insurrection, fuelled by social discontent and inspired by violent ideologies of change, including radical Islamism. In 2005, a large-scale uprising, involving armed militants, was brutally repressed by the Uzbek authorities leading to hundreds of deaths. The EU responded to the massacre with a call for an international inquiry and the imposition of sanctions. The first year of implementation of the Strategy resulted however in a drive to bring Uzbekistan back into the embrace of the EU. This process has divided the Union in its approach to Central Asia – pitting, on one side, much of European civil society and a significant number of member states that are unconvinced about the utility of engaging with a regime that shows little sign of being open to reform, and on the other a group of member states led by Germany urging dialogue. This political struggle has distorted the EU’s approach to Central Asia, focusing considerable

¹¹ *O gosudarstvennoi programme “Put’ v Evropu” na 2009-2011 gody. Ukaz Prezidenta Respublika Kazakhstan ot 29 avgusta 2008 goda No. 653.*

time and effort on a country that under its current leadership is the least amenable to opening to the EU.

Internal instability of Uzbekistan is a worry shared by the EU and Russia alike but the Union's minor influence on Tashkent makes it an unlikely stabilising force in the event of mayhem. Moreover, Uzbekistan has only limited energy reserves for export and delivery to the EU and bypassing Russia is unlikely. The current policy of engagement with Tashkent lacks a political and even economic foundation in Uzbekistan and has no clear mechanism to move the country towards a reformist path. In these circumstances, the EU should focus its relations on other countries in the region where there are real prospects for encouraging a reformist dynamic.

Turkmenistan. Following the emergence of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov as President, Turkmenistan has begun gradually to exchange its former isolationist and extreme authoritarian leadership for a milder version of the former regime. While the situation on the ground is far from desirable from a human rights and democratisation perspective there is, unlike in neighbouring Uzbekistan, a reform dynamic that presents opportunities for the EU to strengthen through the Strategy.

Although the EU should try to engage Ashgabat, there are limits to what it can do and should do; essentially the country remains very restrictive. Nonetheless, the EU could be active in work on good governance. To date, the EU's activities have been relatively modest and mostly focused in the energy sector. The current overhaul by President Berdimukhammedov of the constitution and legislative structure might offer an opening for the EU to concretely influence the process from a less sensitive 'efficiency' perspective rather than a democracy stand. Another field where the EU can make a mark is education; a sector that was decimated under Niazov's rule leaving a legacy that will affect the country's development for many years to come. In this respect, the programmatic initiatives that the EU is developing under the umbrella of the Strategy need to be carefully tailored to the evolving situation in Turkmenistan.

A focus on **Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan**, which both lack hydrocarbon energy resources and are poor but offer good prospects for EU democracy and human rights promotion, should be priorities for the Union's engagement in Central Asia. During the independence years, Kyrgyzstan has developed a vibrant civil society and a pluralist form of politics. The political 'instability' in the country during this period has in important ways reflected the lively public life of the country. At the same time, the country faces serious challenges and requires considerable international assistance. In recent years, it has experienced a growing political crisis that has threatened to roll back the pluralist politics established during the first decade and half of independence. The EU

needs to develop a more clearly targeted political approach to the country backed by assistance. Brussels should aim to consolidate the institution of government in Kyrgyzstan while ensuring that this is not done at the expense of civil society and political pluralism. The EUSR could play a vital role here mediating between the various parties and working with the government to ensure that new legislation accords with international standards.

Tajikistan is perhaps the closest of all the Central Asian countries to a failed state. The winter energy crisis of 2007-08 highlighted the deepening problems in the country. The EU has given this country relatively minor attention compared to the energy rich-states. From a security perspective, Tajikistan is of crucial importance due to its border with Afghanistan and drug trafficking. The EU should be careful not to bypass the two countries where it can relatively have most influence on positive change and development.

Transparency and Participation in the Strategy

The EU Strategy for Central Asia was drafted under the German Presidency and in close collaboration with EU institutions and in consultation with member states. While expert institutions in Germany were involved in the process of developing the Strategy, the wider European civil society and expert community and national and the European parliaments did not have a significant input into the drafting process. Subsequently, the implementation of the Strategy has strongly reflected the manner in which the document was originally drafted with EU institutions and a few member states driving the process in contact with officials from the Central Asian states. The narrow nature of the EU engagement has attracted criticism for a number of reasons. The shortcomings of this initial approach were acknowledged in the Conclusion to the Progress Report, which identified the need to work more closely with civil society, parliament, local authorities and other actors interested in the Strategy. In the future, the EU should look to broaden the implementation of the Strategy to draw upon the depth of interest within the EU and also to build a wide constituency of support for the Strategy in the countries of Central Asia.

Advertising the strategy and explaining the EU's role in the region. The EU is still underrepresented in the Central Asian states. The Union's role and impact compared to Chinese investment and US political weight continue to be limited. Meanwhile the region remains foremost orientated towards and for a large part dependent upon Russia. If the EU wants to make a mark, it will have to sell the product 'Europe', not only to the region's leadership, which welcomes investment, recognition and dialogue as part of their multi-vector

policy that aims to balance Russia's role, but also to the population-at-large.

While this is in part an issue of communication, it is also fundamentally a question of participation. The general public and civil organisations need to be involved with the actual implementation of the Strategy and consulted on its goals and content. Traditional EU approaches such as developing education programmes that bring Central Asian students to Europe, support of Central Asian civil society (in the broadest sense) and visa facilitation will have some impact. But at heart, the EU needs to take its message out of the region's presidential palaces and ministerial buildings to engage directly with wider society and to build a web of contacts between the diversity of institutions, organisations and communities in Europe and Central Asia.

The transparency of EU policy. If the last year has seen the EU seeking to build relations with Central Asian republics that go beyond the standard Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), there has been surprisingly little information provided by the EU on the actual content of its activities in Central Asia and little public consultation about the implementation of the Strategy. The broad framework for the EU engagement is available as public documents – the Strategy itself, the Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia,¹² the Indicative Programme¹³ and the one-year Progress Report – but key information is unavailable.

In the early part of 2008, the EU undertook a process of developing bilateral priority papers with each of the Central Asian states. These papers are designed to give practical substance to the general framework of EU engagement. In addition, the EU has drafted concept papers for the EU's thematic initiatives – such as that on the Rule of Law initiative. These documents would seem to be the actual EU policy in Central Asia. The documents have been developed in close consultation with the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia – which can share these papers amongst themselves – but without wider discussion within Europe or Central Asia. None of these documents is currently available to the public. This approach to policy does not promote trust and wide support within Europe for the Strategy and indeed feeds the suspicions of those who are concerned that the EU is not actually interested in its professed commitment to fostering greater attention to human rights and democracy issues in Central Asia. The EU should re-examine the

way that policy is developed for the region to include wider transparency and consultation.

An additional aspect that deserves more clarity is the way that the EU currently spends €14 million (2007-2010) in the region. Although the Indicative Programme is clear on where the priorities lie – regional vs. bilateral assistance, the percentages of assistance to each of the countries, and in what subject areas – it is unclear what the EU is actually doing on the ground through the projects it supports. It is not so much a case of transparency but of clarity in explaining to stakeholders how funds are actually spent (on civil society initiatives, twinning between government agencies, EU consultants, etc.) and by which EU agency the projects are implemented or commissioned. While the EU has wisely decided not to grant budget support to the most repressive Central Asian states, which also command significant energy riches, it does not reveal how much of the allocated funds are bilaterally agreed between the EU and a government and what part the EU will give directly to non-state actors. More easily accessible information on the EU's work would be to the benefit of the EU's own impact assessment as well as offer information to outside interested parties in Europe and Central Asia.

The Way forward to the Future: Refocusing, Reintegrating and Upgrading

The EU Strategy for Central Asia is a new development. Given its relative youth, one should be careful not to judge the success of the initiative too critically given that it has only been in place for just over a year. The introduction of the Strategy has done much to stimulate interest in and awareness of Central Asia amongst policy-makers within the EU and pushed some EU member states to take the region more seriously. EU officials have pursued high-level political contacts with the governments of Central Asia, which has helped to raise the profile of the Union amongst the region's elite. In the years to come, as the planned practical initiatives are launched, the EU's impact on the region is likely to increase.

While we have to be realistic about what the Strategy can achieve in a short time, it is also important not to assess the EU's role in Central Asia purely in terms of the degree to which the Strategy is being implemented. The EU has acknowledged that Central Asia is an important region for the Union and, moreover, a part of the broader engagement with the 'East'. Central Asia is a large and diverse region that is undergoing change while also being the subject of considerable interest from a variety of other powerful international actors – notably the Russian Federation, the Republic of China and the United States. The relevant question to ask in respect to the Strategy is if the EU is willing and able to use the Strategy to its full

¹² Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007-2013 (http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/central_asia/rsp/07_13_en.pdf).

¹³ Central Asia Indicative Programme (2007-2010) (http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/central_asia/rsp/nip_07_10_en.pdf).

extent in becoming a serious and influential political actor as well as an initiator of practical assistance projects.

Despite the initiative to introduce the Strategy, EU policy towards Central Asia remains the Cinderella of the Union's Eastern policies. The Strategy lacks the resources necessary to have a major impact on the ground in Central Asia, does not receive the necessary support from member states and the current approach to the region lacks the necessary political focus to achieve the aims that the EU would like in the region. This suggests that if the EU is to strengthen its engagement in ways that are likely to have a significant impact capable of living up to the Union's ambitions, a number of steps will be required.

Firstly, the EU needs to refocus its engagement on the areas where it can make a major difference given its relatively weak resources in the region and bearing in mind the political realities on the ground. Above all, this points to the need to reconsider the national priorities in the region, reflecting the very different ambitions, capabilities and needs of the Central Asian states and societies.

Uzbekistan is important to Central Asia's stability but is stagnant politically and economically, and its leadership has yet to demonstrate a willingness to change. At the same time, Kazakhstan offers a different prospect. The country, while currently having a non-democratic political system and only weak observation of human rights, has developed a large and dynamic economy. The political system, reflecting the economic power of a rising middle class and private business interests, has the prospect of developing areas of pluralism in the future and of strengthening the rule of law.

Kazakhstan is seeking a deeper engagement with the EU but Astana's potential cannot easily be exploited within the Strategy which effectively places all the countries of Central Asia in a separate category from the rest of the states of the former Soviet Union (the 'neighbourhood'). What is needed are approaches that can link parts of the whole region that are of strategic interest to the EU. For this reason, ways should be sought to extend relations with Kazakhstan – and maybe others in the future – beyond the Strategy, with Astana invited to participate in the new Eastern Partnership and other elements of neighbourhood architecture in Brussels policies, such as the Black Sea Synergy and the ENP.

Beyond rethinking the national focus of relations in Central Asia, there is also a strong case for re-examining the approach that the EU has pursued in the region up to this point. The effort to establish EU-Central Asia relations on the basis of common security issues and an energy partnership is a politically risky policy since the focus for such policies becomes the ruling elites, which are ultimately fragile and subject to overthrow or

collapse, rather than the societies of the region as a whole.

The risks in this case are hardly balanced by the benefits in terms of possible energy relationships since the actual impact of Central Asian gas supplies will at best be marginal on the EU market. It is also an approach that is likely to divide the EU internally as invariably the Union will be drawn into damaging debates about how the Union should deal with coercive measures employed by non-democratic regimes against the general population to maintain illegitimate rule.

To maximise the impact of the EU in its dealings with Central Asia, the Union should ensure that it is the comprehensive notions of security, whereby human rights and democratization are seen as essential to ensuring stability and security, rather than the state-centric notions that underpin the relationship. The human rights dialogues should be reintegrated with the political dialogues and the EU should seek to develop a democratisation and good governance initiative in the region.

In the years to come, a greater effort is needed to pull the range of activities more tightly together tighter as a political strategy rather than just a set of different engagements. For this we need to have an ongoing and broad discussion, with a diversity of representatives from Central Asia, inter alia, about the EU's aims in the region. The EU has taken an important step by launching the Strategy and making a start in implementing some of its features. It will be essential that political momentum is kept up and that the Strategy goes well beyond the Council, Commission and elites of Central Asia.

Finally, the Strategy is an important first step by the EU in terms of its relations with Central Asia. The events of the summer in Georgia and the growing frictions with the Russian Federation over the situation in other former Soviet states suggest however that the EU needs to begin to think comprehensively about Eurasia as a whole. Against this background, relations with the Central Asian states and societies need to be upgraded and integrated with wider policy, and this shift needs to be backed by political will and increased resources. If the EU is to play an influential role in a region that plays a key part in the broader puzzle of Eurasia, the Union – including the member states – is going to have to get far more serious about Central Asia.

About EUCAM

The EU Strategy for Central Asia

The European Union has signalled its intention to strengthen its engagement with the countries of Central Asia in the coming years. The immediate focus of this engagement will be the EU Strategy for Central Asia that was created in June 2007. The precise direction and character of the EU initiative has yet to be determined and is likely to unfold at least as much in response to the evolving political and international situation in Central Asia as to the broad framework outlined in the Strategy.

Given the dynamic character of the emerging EU approach to the states of Central Asia, the broad interest in this relationship within a diversity of communities in Europe and Central Asia, the Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), Spain, in cooperation with the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Belgium, have launched a joint project to monitor the implementation of the new EU approach to Central Asia.

Objectives

EUCAM is designed to raise the profile of the EU Strategy for Central Asia and more specifically to:

- Critically, though constructively, monitor the EU's implementation of the Strategy;
- Enhance knowledge of the EU initiative toward Central Asia and to generate practical recommendations to strengthen the EU's engagement with Central Asia through the Strategy and other mechanisms;
- Raise awareness among European policy-makers and civil society on the importance of Central Asia and the EU's engagement as well as explain and discuss EU policies among Central Asian communities;
- Establish a network of experts and civil society institutions from EU member states and Central Asian countries designed to strengthen awareness within the EU and across Central Asia of the EU approach to the region and to provide a forum for a variety of communities to comment on the Strategy.

Output

EUCAM will produce the following range of publications:

- Regular briefings will be undertaken over the course of the project, bi-monthly briefings on EU-Central Asia relations are produced and distributed broadly by means of an email list server using the CEPS and FRIDE networks. The briefings contain the latest documents on EU-Central Asia relations; up-to-date information on the EU's progress in implementing the Strategy; and developments in Central Asian countries.
- A series of policy briefs will be written by permanent and ad hoc Working Group members. The majority of the papers examine issues related to the four core themes identified above, with other papers commissioned in response to emerging areas beyond the main themes.
- A series of commentaries on the evolving partnership between the EU and the states of Central Asia will be commissioned reflecting specific developments in the EU-Central Asian relationship.
- A final monitoring report of the EUCAM Expert Working Group will be produced by the project rapporteurs.

Whereas the EUCAM project officially runs until February 2010, CEPS and FRIDE aim at a longer-term effort. Having institutionalised an Expert Working Group and Advisory Council we expect to proceed with monitoring EU policy towards Central Asia, raise awareness in the EU and Central Asia and deliver tailored advice after 2010.

About FRIDE

FRIDE is a think tank based in Madrid that aims to provide the best and most innovative thinking on Europe's role in the international arena. It strives to break new ground in its core research interests – peace and security, human rights, democracy promotion and development and humanitarian aid – and mould debate in governmental and non-governmental bodies through rigorous analysis, rooted in the values of justice, equality and democracy.

FRIDE seeks to provide fresh and innovative thinking on Europe's role on the international stage. As a prominent European think tank, FRIDE benefits from political independence, diversity of views and the intellectual background of its international staff. Since its establishment in 1999, FRIDE has organised or participated in the creation and development of various projects that reinforce not only FRIDE's commitment to debate and analysis, but also to progressive action thinking.

On 19 November 2007, FRIDE organised a seminar entitled *the EU Strategy for Central Asia: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights*. The event featured speakers from the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, key international organisations dealing with Central Asia as well as NGO representatives from the region.

The rationale behind the FRIDE event was to assess the EU position and activities so far after a Strategy for Central Asia was published in the summer. Moreover, the seminar aimed to provide policy recommendations for increased cooperation and EU assistance to Central Asia. Lastly, the OSCE's role in Central Asia was debated since all the Central Asian states are participating states of the organisation and it has been involved in the region for a longer time than the EU through its field missions. The informative and frank discussions produced some tangible conclusions and recommendations (see <http://www.fride.org/publication/313/the-eu-strategy-for-central-asia-promoting-democracy-and-human-rights>).

About CEPS

Founded in Brussels in 1983, the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) is among the most experienced and authoritative think tanks operating in the European Union today. CEPS serves as a leading forum for debate on EU affairs, and its most distinguishing feature lies in its strong in-house research capacity, complemented by an extensive network of partner institutes throughout the world.

CEPS 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 also provides a forum for discussion among all stakeholders in the European policy process and builds collaborative networks of researchers, policy-makers and business representatives across the whole of Europe. CEPS disseminates its findings and views through a regular flow of publications and public events.

CEPS has in-depth experience with research on EU-Central Asia relations. Latest publications include:

- *Engaging Central Asia: The European Union's New Strategy in the Heart of Eurasia*, Neil Melvin (ed.), June 2008
- Nargis Kassenova, *The New EU Strategy towards Central Asia: A View from the Region*, CEPS Policy Brief No. 148, January 2008
- Bhavne Dave, *The EU and Kazakhstan. Balancing Economic Cooperation and Aiding Democratic Reforms in the Central Asian Region*, CEPS Policy Brief No. 127, May 2007
- Neil J. Melvin, *The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia*, CEPS Policy Brief No. 128, March 2007
- Michael Denison, *Turkmenistan in Transition. A Window for EU Engagement?*, CEPS Policy Brief No. 129, April 2007
- Matteo Fumagalli, *Tajikistan and the EU. From Post-Conflict Reconstruction to Critical Engagement*, CEPS Policy Brief No. 130, June 2007



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