

Tajikistan and the EU

From Post-Conflict Reconstruction to Critical Engagement

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For the European Union, the development of closer ties with Tajikistan within the context of the broader effort to forge a Strategy for the Central Asia could represent a significant opportunity. Tajikistan occupies a geographically peripheral position, but it is precisely this location outside the limelight – and therefore not so subject to the pressures of geopolitics and the struggle for energy resources that shapes much of the politics of the rest of the region – that could allow the EU to foster new forms of cooperation with the local authorities and to devise policies aimed at strengthening the Tajik state’s capacities and stability, which would significantly assist reform and development in the country. This would mean building on the encouraging developments taking place in bilateral relations and taking additional steps aimed at achieving the goals above in a more effective way.

The international community has typically looked at Tajikistan through the lenses of conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction. This has meant that bilateral relations have become routinised, and stasis rather than critical engagement has been the defining element of international strategies towards the country. It is argued here that it is now time to dispose of this framework and to begin to deal with Tajikistan as a ‘normal country’¹. Such a paradigm change would offer the European Union key opportunities, namely operating in a country that after the war has experienced relative stability (unlike some of its neighbours) and where, as a result, there is now the possibility to concentrate on advancing reform. Further, progress in key areas in Tajikistan would offer the opportunity to promote similar policies elsewhere in the region.

¹ A similar point has been made in J. Heathershaw, “The paradox of peacebuilding: Peril, promise and small arms in Tajikistan”, *Central Asian Survey*, 24(1), 2005, pp. 21-38.

Historical challenges facing the modern Tajik state and nation

The formation of Tajikistan was the consequence of the Soviet process of national delimitation and the territorial-administrative re-organisation of Central Asia (1924-36). Home to sedentary and nomadic communities until the Russian conquest in the late 19th century, the populations of Central Asia largely lacked experience of modern statehood. Instead, several forms of allegiance co-existed and overlapped: at the supra-national level (Islam) and at the local level (city and regional affiliations). National loyalties had also hardly developed among the peoples of the region. The Soviet effort to introduce new forms of political organisations and identity in Central Asia, therefore, played a formative role in shaping the Tajik state and the Tajik nation.

As a result of the process of national-territorial delimitation in Central Asia during the 1920s and 1930s – which established five entities (Union Republics) each of which bore the semblances of a state (with constitutions, flags, anthems, parliaments), but remained deprived of sovereignty, which rested with the Soviet state – Tajikistan was created in 1929 as the last piece in the regional puzzle. Tajikistan had previously been part of the Uzbek Union Republic (SSR), endowed with a lower degree of autonomy (Autonomous Republic).

With no history of previous independent statehood and no sense of political, institutional or even cultural coherence, different portions of territory were assembled to create a Tajik Republic. Historical centres of Persian/Tajik culture, such as the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, were assigned to the Uzbek SSR. The Tajik Republic comprised the south-western part of the Ferghana Valley (around Khujand), the Pamir areas (later to become Gorno-Badakhshan), the

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Hissar and Gharm valleys and the southern regions of Khatlon and Qurghonteppa along the Afghan border. A *modus vivendi* was established during the Soviet period, which allowed different regions to occupy distinct niches in the political and economic system of the country. At the same time, the division of the region left many in Tajikistan with a strong sense of historical injustice in terms of the loss of the 'heartland' of Tajik culture and the creation of a substantial number of co-ethnics concentrated in the Uzbek Republic.

Tajikistan from conflict to reconstruction

In the early 1990s, social and political order collapsed in Tajikistan when the liberalisation initiated by Gorbachev led to a sudden shift in power relations in the republic. As a result of these changes, the precarious political balance put in place by the Soviets to rule the diverse regions of the republic was shattered and the country virtually imploded. A sudden and particularly brutal civil war erupted in 1992 and although by 1993 the bloodiest phase of the conflict was over, formally the conflict continued until 1997, when a peace agreement was signed by representatives of the government forces and opposition factions. The Peace Accord set in place a power-sharing agreement where, at least formally, the government conceded to the opposition a role in the power structure and institutions. Ten years later, Tajikistan has slowly, but steadily emerged from the abyss of the civil war to a process of state formation and integration with the regional and international system.

For the larger part of the past decade, analysts and policy-makers have tended to look at Tajikistan's post-war course through the lenses of conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction. While this frame is not incorrect *per se*, this brought with it an implicit assumption that because Tajikistan was on a course of precarious recovery from the war, criticism of failed progress should be kept to a minimum to avoid the risk of derailing the post-conflict course, altering the fragile agreement and, in the end, plunging the country back into bloodshed. Though moderate encouragement was sensible, continuing to look at Tajikistan through the lenses of post-conflict reconstruction is turning post-war dynamics into stasis (perhaps even allowing the emergence of authoritarian politics).

Faced with this situation, the new approach to Central Asia being developed by the EU offers the opportunity to re-engage with Tajikistan at a vital stage in its post-independence history and, in particular, to introduce new policies that can assist the development of the country and avert the drift into authoritarianism. We argue in this paper that the focus of the EU's engagement with Tajikistan should be on three main issue areas: security and stability, economic transformation, and democratisation and political reform.

Security and stability

The draft of the EU Strategy for Central Asia identifies security and stability in the region as its key strategic interests. In this respect Tajikistan has come a long way from the abyss of the civil war during the 1990s. In the early post-war period, occasional episodes of unrest and insurgencies have continued even after the peace accord. Former warlords, disgruntled political figures and factions, or even renegade elements of the Tajik army have periodically challenged the authority of the centre. Former Tajik army Colonel Makhmud Khudoberdiev's occasional insurgencies in the late 1990s are typical of the type of challenges that persisted in the aftermath of the peace accord. Allegedly with the backing of neighbouring Uzbekistan, Khudoberdiev attempted a mutiny in southern Tajikistan 1997 and later attacked government buildings in the northern province in what appeared as a failed coup in 1998. The turbulent period continued, with Yoqub Solimov, former warlord and key ally of Rakhmonov, also plotting against the authorities.

After years of confrontation with former allies and warlords,² President Rakhmonov has been able to consolidate his position and that of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT).³ This has brought the marginalisation of former warlords previously associated with the administration, but consolidation of power has come to the expense of legitimate dissent. The political opposition as well as the media have been subject to tighter restrictions in what appears to be a decisive turn towards authoritarian policies. At the same time the country has remained remarkably stable and has not experienced the convulsions and unrest that have taken place in neighbouring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Tajik authorities have, nevertheless, faced the accusation of connivance or ineptitude with respect to control over the country's borders, as militants have been reported to have infiltrated Uzbek and Kyrgyz territory from the Tajik side of the border.

Since 2000, European assistance to enhance border security and combat drugs trafficking has come through two related programmes: the 'Border Management Programmes for Central Asia' (BOMCA) and the 'Central Asia Drug Action Programme' (CADAP).⁴ These programmes cover a number of areas (legal assistance, assistance at the customs,

² This includes the removal from official posts of former field commanders Saidsho Shamolov and the Cholov brothers (*Varorud*, 21 January 2002).

³ Actually the ruling circles seem to come all from the President's village of Dunghara in the southern Kulob region, causing wider resentment among the excluded groups from other parts of the country or even elsewhere in Kulob.

⁴ The budget allocated to BOMCA/CADAP is of about €36.5 million for the period 2001-08.

intelligence, human resources, drug abuse prevention) designed to improve security in the Central Asian region. Security at borders has in fact improved in recent years, but the clashes between border guards and criminal groups linked to drugs trafficking that took place along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in 2006⁵ are a reminder that more should be done in this area. Local communities and economies have traditionally thrived, thanks to 'shuttle trade' and the EU should encourage measures that enhance border security, but this should not come at the expense of promoting cross-border trade.

Economic transformation

The Tajik economy has grown significantly in recent years, which is obviously a welcome development. The GDP has risen at an annual average of 9.6% since 2000.⁶ Industrial production expanded, and so did agricultural output. Domestic consumption also grew as a result of a rise in salaries and especially of the remittances of Tajik migrants abroad. Poverty reduction measures, also through the TACIS programme, have also helped to decrease the poverty rate from 81% in 1999 to 64% of the population in the mid-2000s.

There are nevertheless worrying signs that raise questions about the long-term prospects for the country's economic development. The Tajik economy has been dependent on three main sources of revenue, none of which bodes well for the long-term viability of the country's economy: remittances from Tajik migrants, trafficking of narcotics and international aid. The paradoxical situation here is that all three converge to make Tajikistan a rentier state, which is a state whose revenue depends on a small number of resources. The trafficking of narcotics risks turning the country into a 'narcostate'⁷ and while some progress has been made and drug seizure levels have increased significantly in recent years, the administration has sent mixed signals. On the one hand attempts to curb corruption among border guards and the severing of ties with former warlords involved in narco-trafficking is a welcome development. On the other, this process appears selective, as the appointment of former General Ghaffor Mirzoev (a former PFT commander⁸) to head the State Drugs Control Agency raises doubts

⁵ RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), "Central Asia: Fighting erupts along Tajik-Kyrgyz Border", 12 May 2006 (available at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/05/2c513239-7c60-433a-a87e-37112536b9be.html>).

⁶ World Bank, World Bank Indicators (2001-2005), Washington, D.C.

⁷ E. Marat, "Impact of Drug Trade and Organized Crime on State Functioning in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan", *China and Eurasia Quarterly Forum*, 4(1), 2006, p. 105.

⁸ The PFT (Popular Front of Tajikistan) was one of the militias that fought in the civil war on the side of the 'government faction'.

over the seriousness of the Rakhmonov administration in this regard.⁹

Two other sources of revenue have contributed to enabling the population to cope with post-war hardship: remittances from labour migrants and poverty-alleviation measures. It is difficult to imagine how the growing Tajik population would have survived without remittances and international aid. It is estimated that the annual remittances from labour migrants amount to about \$6-8 billion,¹⁰ approximately the size of the country's GDP. At the same time, however, there are limits to the benefits these measures bring to economic development; they are palliatives, not solutions.

Action should be directed to help the Tajik economy to diversify and, thereby, to rely less on the fluctuations of global commodity prices. Tajikistan should also be more effectively integrated into the international economic system: the energy sector is an area where the country's potential has not yet been adequately developed. Plans to channel Central Asian hydropower resources southwards would demand that Tajikistan's infrastructure undergoes serious upgrading if the country is to benefit from transit trade.¹¹ This move would fit well with US strategy in Central and South Asia, but not necessarily the EU's. This is not a problem in itself and external actors can effectively synergise in the various projects while retaining a distinct agenda. Instead, there is a large potential for investing in developing Tajikistan's hydroelectric power, either independently or in coordination with Russian companies.¹²

Democratisation and political reform

Although progress has been made in the areas of security/stability and economic development (with all the caveats outlined above), it is in the area of political reform that the country is lagging behind. The two main challenges here are the criminalisation of political life and the overall institutional weakness of the Tajik state. Warlordism has been successfully

⁹ Analogous situations occurred in the cases of Mirzokhujo Nizomov, Hokim Kalandarov and Salamsho Muhabbatshoev, who were also elevated to key positions in official institutions (K. Nourzhanov, "Saviours of the nation or robber barons? Warlord politics in Tajikistan", *Central Asian Survey*, 24(2), 2005, p. 124).

¹⁰ See Marat, *op. cit.*

¹¹ This is an area that has been recently explored by the United States as well. The United States Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) in particular has commissioned feasibility studies in relation to the rehabilitation of existing power projects (Qayraqqum and Varzob) and the possibility to channel Tajikistan's resources southwards to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

¹² Iran has also begun developing the country's hydropower potential (see E. Marat, "Iran, Tajikistan strengthen cooperation in the energy sector", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 1 February 2006).

contained since the end of the civil war and warlords have either been jailed, pushed out of political life or killed. As President Rakhmonov's authority in the country has consolidated, potential challenges by former warlords and allies have been gradually sidelined. Although this is positive in terms of consolidating a central authority in the country, these criminal groups have not been totally neutralised and much remains to be done in this area.¹³ The emphasis in the current draft of the EU Strategy for Central Asia on the importance of rule of law, human rights, good governance and the presence of transparent political institutions for the 'development of a stable political framework and functioning economic structures' is to be welcomed, and a strategy of critical engagement (combining encouragement with criticism, when appropriate) should help shape reform, despite the region's many recalcitrant actors.

The consolidation of formal institutions is taking place only gradually (if at all) and much of the politics in Tajikistan occurs through informal institutions. Patron-client networks dominate both the politics of the centre and the regions. The interplay between formal and informal institutions, however, need not be seen as necessarily conflictual.¹⁴ While warlordism is certainly detrimental to the process of political reform in the country, working alongside local authority figures can contribute to make formal and informal institutions convergent towards the goal of initiating political reform. This should not be understood as suggesting that the EU should work with people outside the law. Rather, it should attempt to work along with traditional institutions such as the *avlod* (an institution comprising community elders and regulating relations among community members with shared kinship ties¹⁵) and the *mahalla* (neighbourhood community) to ensure that local community leaders have a stake in the system and particularly in the functioning of the system. This is an area that has thus far not received sufficient attention from the European Union, which has preferred to emphasise the role of formal institutions.

EU-Tajikistan relations have traditionally been governed by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and Tajikistan during the 1990s. It will be replaced by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which represents

the framework within which the European Union has dealt with the individual Central Asian states. The PCA with Tajikistan, signed in 2004, is awaiting ratification by the EU members, and pending that, an Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-related Matters signed on 1 May 2005, will provide the implementation of trade-related provisions of the PCA. The PCA covers a number of traditional policy areas (including political dialogue, economic cooperation, democracy and human rights, prevention of illegal activities, cultural and financial cooperation), as well as new areas of common interest, such as weapons of mass destruction (WMD), migration and terrorism reflecting the changes in the post-cold war international system. The importance of establishing rule of law, democracy and continuing political reform occupies a somewhat more peripheral place in the later articles of the PCA and more should be said about how the EU intends to operate in a way that takes into account the realities on the ground of how Tajik social and political relations are actually conducted.

Conclusion and recommendations

Humanitarian relief, poverty alleviation, border management and drug control (BOMCA/CADAP), and civil society promotion have been among the areas on which the EU has focused its relations with Tajikistan. Noticeable progress has been achieved in the past and the PCA shows that there is a will to develop relations further on both sides, provided that the key priorities outlined in the document are not diluted in a myriad of other issues. The breadth of the document can come to the detriment of its depth.

The approach that informs the PCA agreement, namely the focus on Tajikistan as a post-conflict country, has, however, outlived its initial purpose, and it is hoped that the EU Strategy will take this into account. Tajikistan is more than a peripheral country located in a hardly accessible area of Central Asia. Unlike Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the country has been far from the limelight in recent years and this provides a good opportunity for emphasising cooperation in a number of key issues. Relations between Tajikistan and the EU have intensified over the years. The signature of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement certainly constitutes an attempt to bring them to the next level, but for the full potential of the partnership to be fulfilled, a number of actions should be taken that would directly identify and tackle problem areas, as outlined below.

1. Work with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and Russia and China. There are several areas in which the interests of the EU converge with those of the above actors. Combating drugs trafficking and arms smuggling, as well as enhancing border security are common goals at the state, regional, and international levels. The waning of US influence in the region has opened a space that has been filled by the swift return of Russia and a growing Chinese

¹³ E. Marat, *Organized Crime, and Corruption in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*, Silk Road Papers, Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD) and Uppsala University (Uppsala, Sweden), October 2006.

¹⁴ A similar point (at a more general level, and not specific to the case in question) has been in G. Helmke and S. Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda", *Perspectives on Politics*, 2(4), 2004, pp. 725-739.

¹⁵ B.V. Babajanian, "The social exclusion framework and poverty reduction strategy in Tajikistan", *Central Asian Survey*, 25(4), 2006, p. 409.

economic presence, as exemplified by the formation and consolidation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a regional organisation created in 2001, involving Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁶ Russian and Tajik forces have cooperated on issues of border security and drug control for more than a decade. These are capital projects that other actors, including the EU, should build on. While Russia may not have been keen on sharing the provision of Tajikistan's security to other powers, the EU could encourage the SCO to become a stronger regional organisation that could actually undertake operations in its member states, for example on the Tajik-Afghan border, where joint activities could be conducted with the EU in a way that would make the EU less intrusive and thus less menacing to Russia and other local actors.

2. *Talk to the local community figures.* Patronage politics is endemic in the country and much of the political and economic developments occur outside the formal institutional framework. It should instead engage the local community leaders in the *avlod* and *mahalla* and make sure they have a stake in the system, so that cooperating with the EU will not simply mean benefiting from aid being 'parachuted' into a particular region, but will give them a stake in the reform process. Such local authority figures have played an important role in maintaining social stability and preventing conflicts from re-occurring.¹⁷ While patron-client relations may not have a positive impact on democratisation in the short term, informal institutions have played a crucial role in maintaining stability in the region and their role should not be discounted. Informal authority figures constitute 'entry points' to the system and working alongside them (and not against them) would give them a stake in the system and international actors access to local society.

2. *Press the authorities to alleviate the pressure on political opposition and liberalising the system.* A useful initial step could involve alleviating the pressure on local and international NGOs and the media as well as the gradual opening up of the political system.

¹⁶ Established as an intergovernmental organisation whose main goal was to establish mutual confidence between the member states and increase cooperation in border regions, the SCO has grown to become one of – if not the – most important regional organisation in Central Asia. It is the only one whose membership includes Russia and China. All the Central Asian republics, barring Turkmenistan, are also members. The SCO's main strategic objective is the fight against terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. In light of the recurrent calls for US withdrawal from the region, however, one may also add to these the reduction of the US presence and influence in Central Asia.

¹⁷ A similar argument was made in relation to the role played by the leaders of ethnic minority groups in managing and defusing inter-ethnic grievances tensions in M. Fumagalli, "Informal (ethno-)politics and local authority figures in Osh, Kyrgyzstan", *Ethnopolitics*, 6(2), forthcoming, 2007 pp. 1-23.

Political opposition exists, inside and outside the parliament, but it remains under increasingly tight restrictions set by the authorities. The EU should establish clear benchmarks for measuring progress and should not refrain from highlighting problem areas. Cooperation to contain the rise of radical Islamist groups should be expected, but combating terrorism should not be used by the government as an excuse to target all opposition. Tajikistan has been less exposed to this type of threat than the neighbouring republics, also as a result of the fact that an Islamic party is legal in the country, but the lack of outlets for voicing demands and channelling dissent may lead to a rise in popularity of what at present are fringe militant groups.

3. *Establish a legal framework to prevent abuse of Tajik migrants in Russia.* Attention should also focus on issues of human rights with regard to Tajik migrants in Russia (and elsewhere). The EU could work in concert with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and help delineate a legal framework to improve working and living conditions of migrants in the host country as well as in exerting pressure on the Russian authorities to ensure that abuses are not the norm.

4. *Criminalisation of the political life, corruption and institutional weakness.* These problems continue to represent fundamental challenges to the Tajik polity and society as a whole. The EU should increase pressure on the ruling administration to sever links between state officials and criminal elements (most notably the Minister for Emergency Situations, former warlord Mirzo Ziyoev¹⁸). Tajikistani authorities and the EU should agree on a realistic timeline for introducing substantial reforms and for monitoring progress.

5. *Develop Tajikistan's energy sector.* Developing hydroelectric power is an area that is crucial for achieving long-term viability of the Tajik economy and is fundamental for the whole region's economy too. Russian and now Iranian companies have begun investing in rehabilitating and upgrading existing hydropower plants. The EU should work in concert with other actors to favour the development of Tajikistan's unfulfilled potential in hydro-electric power in the region. The EU should also concentrate its efforts on facilitating bilateral and multilateral approaches to deal with disputes over water use and management as well as to develop water infrastructure (working in cooperation with local authorities to

¹⁸ Ziyoev was one of the leading figures in the United Tajik Opposition, which fought against the Rakhmonov faction in the civil war, but that was re-integrated as part of the reconciliation process. Another former warlord, the Interior Ministry's Special Force Brigade commander, Major-General Suhrob Qosimov resigned in March 2007 (*ASIAPlus*, 13 March 2007).

prevent potential environmental disasters resulting from the poor security of existing structures).

6. *Upgrade the country's transport infrastructure.* The movement of peoples and goods within the country requires far too long on bumpy roads. Roads connecting the capital Dushanbe with some of the major regional centres (Kulob, Khujand, Khorog) require urgent upgrading. In addition, attention could also focus on upgrading airport facilities (runways) and technical maintenance of ageing aircrafts.

7. *Make the education and training of the local youth a priority.* A central concern of international assistance programmes across the region has been the formation of the younger strata of the Central Asian population. This is particularly important in light of the fact that the Central Asian youth represents an increasingly large part of the region's overall population; about 37.9% of Tajikistan's population is under the age of 14,¹⁹ and it is inevitable to wonder about their future in a country in which the safety valve for the young (especially male) population has been migration. Unemployment, drug use, poor health and declining levels of literacy are among the key challenges that the younger generation faces.²⁰ The EU should continue its focus on youth and education; establishing a 'European Education Initiative in Central Asia' as indicated in the draft strategy is therefore an important step in this direction. In addition it should seek to coordinate its efforts with other organisations, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, as well as with Japan, which recently upgraded its assistance to the region. The aim should be the improvement of the quality of education provided in the country, through teaching training programmes, a rise in government spending in primary and secondary education and the expansion of scholarships and exchange programmes, but also tighter controls on corruption in schools and universities.

8. *Enhance EU visibility.* The EU has played an important role in many forms and areas in Tajikistan, but its presence, although beneficial, is often not visible and this means that outside narrow elite circles, the ordinary population is not aware of its actions. Increasing visibility could take several forms. At a diplomatic level this would entail strengthening the diplomatic representation of the EU in Tajikistan, as well as developing closer contacts with the national parliament. Additional measures could comprise improving the institutional and infrastructural cohesiveness of the country, such as airports and roads, upgrading the country's hydroelectric power stations and assisting and training Tajik forces.

¹⁹ Data (July 2006 est.) are taken from the *CIA World Factbook Tajikistan*, available at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ti.html#People> (accessed 18 March 2007).

²⁰ Crisis Group, *Youth in Central Asia: Losing the New Generation*, Asia Report No. 66, Brussels, 31 October 2003.

To conclude, this paper has argued that the 'post-conflict reconstruction' framework that has dominated international strategies with Tajikistan for large part of the post-war period has now outlived its initial purpose. The EU has now an opportunity to make a difference to the country's prospects for economic development and socio-political modernisation if it adopts a strategy of critical engagement, whereby it monitors and rewards progress, does not hesitate to identify areas where reforms are lagging behind, and places pressure on actors seeking to oppose change.

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