



Studying Europe in Central Asia: the case of Kyrgyzstan

Maxim Ryabkov, Director of the OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan

As the European Union sets out an ambitious agenda in its Central Asian strategy, its support for education may be used to raise awareness of Europe and help states create national cadres capable of sustaining the desired dialogue. Moreover, for the European donor community, promotion of European studies in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan in particular can be seen as a politically neutral endeavor, which can be justified independently of the trade-offs between security and human rights.

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan is not very hungry for knowledge about Europe, and does not identify with European images, ideas or institutions. Obstacles are considerable, given institutional inertia, the lack of cultural and ideological affinities and the poor state of higher education in the region.

A number of universities in Kyrgyzstan have

already introduced European studies into their curricula. These initiatives take the form of either a European studies department or courses focusing on the European Union, together with more traditional ones on European culture and languages. While it is far too early to take stock, some preliminary impressions can already be discussed. For us it is not so important here to argue either for or against donor support for European studies in Kyrgyzstan, but to look at this initiative as, first of all, an *educational* project which requires specific organisational format.

Kyrgyzstan and European studies: general considerations

The chief danger for any educational programme is that it fails to attract good students and fails to give them knowledge that will translate into meaningful career opportunities. The two dangers are connected: lack of expected career opportunities will lead to failure to attract good students. The question here is how European studies may foster a better professional development of the students. School-to-work transitions are never as smooth as we want them to be, but in Kyrgyzstan they are at times grotesquely inefficient. Also, from a purely pedagogical viewpoint, one cannot truly engage the minds of students, unless they understand why they should invest their efforts in education.

Maxim Ryabkov is a director of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. He holds a Ph.D. from the Central European University (2005). Previously, he worked as a resident international fellow in the Academic Fellowship Program of the Open Society Institute. Ryabkov also taught at the American University in Central Asia and carried out consultancy and research assignments for the CASE, Agha Khan Development Network, and GTZ. His academic interests focus on management in higher education and competing models of higher education and their relation to social transformation.

In this regard and especially for students at the Masters degree level, career considerations are overwhelmingly important.

So let us construct an image of a Kyrgyz graduate who could use advanced knowledge of European Affairs. Central Asian graduates will not join the European civil service. They will not in all probability serve on the boards of European companies and universities. They will however work for international organizations, local universities, civic sectors and national administrations and in these capacities will interact with European partners, but will hardly have careers focused exclusively on Europe.

These factors are reinforced by a geographical distance, which translates into historical, cultural and other differences. European Studies in any of the Central Asian Republics will therefore address the development of a distant region, whose institutions, culture, sociopolitical and economic practices will in the foreseeable future continue to differ radically from the Kyrgyz realities. Teaching about Europe is teaching about a very different social reality, contact with which is first cultural and educational and only later physical and professional. As Central Asia is going to be slow in adopting European models, mere knowledge of the latter without additional specialisation will hardly be in demand. This consideration appears to be important for decisions to invest in full-fledged European studies departments.

Furthermore, the graduate employment situation in Kyrgyzstan is marked by considerable confusion. While there is an oversupply of low-quality higher education, professional career paths are not yet established, and it is simply impossible for students to predict what specific skills may be required by the market when they leave school. Lack of meritocracy culminates in an unfair and ultimately inefficient distribution of positions of responsibility. All this makes school-to-work transition rather difficult.

Policy implications

These considerations lead to a few policy recommendations. First of all it seems advisable to make European studies part of a curriculum, which would simultaneously foster Central Asian expertise and knowledge of European affairs. The synergy resulting from studying different regions will enhance not only the employability of the graduate, but also students' intellectual confidence in dealing with issues of their countries. Secondly, European studies could be made available to students of various departments, in order to cast the net wide and reach the best students, while minimising the risks of administrative malfunction. Thirdly, professional socialisation usually benefits from meaningful internships, possibly at European institutions.

As with all international development aid, there is a danger of moral hazard, when the recipient of assistance welcomes the aid without reciprocating with genuine involvement in the realisation of the plans of the donor. One way to avoid moral hazard is to aim at long-term relations between Central Asian and European educational establishments, conditional on satisfactory performance and aimed at creating local capacity in teaching European studies. Such long-term ties can also include joint research, conferences and contributions to regional dialogue.

Aside from degree programmes, short-term endeavours, including those addressing working professionals, can be a good testing ground as well as a useful exercise on their own. Aiming at raising the awareness of European institutions and policies among journalists, civil servants, NGO activists and local staff of international organisations, such short-term, non-degree courses and trainings will use a flexible format with outcomes that are far easier to measure than those of degree programmes. While the

performance of a degree programme would take months and years to assess, a training will – or will not – show positive outcomes almost immediately. If participants are carefully selected based on merit, and their related professional socialisation is assured, short-term courses and training sessions can be a useful way to acquaint Central Asians with European practices in a number of areas, including institution-building, aid policies, conflict management and language policies.

Probably, none of the formats should be excluded from consideration at this point but to continue this discussion, an in-depth comprehensive study of the experience of international efforts to reform higher education in Kyrgyzstan is in order, to allow us to benefit from the considerable experience already accumulated.

European studies at the OSCE Academy

The OSCE Academy in Bishkek runs a Masters Programme in Political Science, which enrolls students from all Central Asian countries and a limited number of out-of-region applicants (including Afghanistan). The Programme combines general political science courses, such as International Relations and Political Theory, and more specialised and applied courses and modules, many of which are concerned either directly with Central Asia or with themes that are topical for Central Asia, such as conflict management, security or energy politics. While Central Asia is the main focus, considerable effort is made to teach students to compare their region with others and in general to take a global and critical view.

With the sponsorship of Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst, the Academy is introducing European studies in its curriculum. We like to believe that our approach reflects the realities of Central Asia and specifically the demands of professional relevance. We will teach European studies within an integrated curriculum that allows for a synergy of various regional and thematic components, with numerous applied modules and internships where students can see the functioning of European institutions and policies in practice.



The Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), Spain, in co-operation with the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Belgium, has launched a joint project entitled “EU Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM)”. The (EUCAM) initiative is an 18-month research and awareness-raising exercise supported by several EU member states and civil society organizations, which aims: to raise the profile of the EU-Central Asia Strategy; to strengthen debate about the EU-Central Asia relationship and the role of the Strategy in that relationship; to enhance accountability through the provision of high quality information and analysis; to promote mutual understanding by deepening the knowledge within European and Central Asian societies about EU policy in the region; and to develop ‘critical’ capacity within the EU and Central Asia through the establishment of a network that links communities concerned with the role of the EU in Central Asia.

EUCAM focuses on four priority areas in order to find a mix between the broad political ambitions of the Strategy and the narrower practical priorities of EU institutions and member state assistance programmes: Democracy and Human Rights; Security and Stability; Energy and Natural Resources ; Education and Social Relations

This monitoring exercise is implemented by an Expert Working Group, established by FRIDE and CEPS. The group consists of experts from the Central Asian states and the members countries of the EU. In addition to expert meetings, several public seminars will be organised for a broad audience including EU representatives, national officials and legislators, the local civil society community, media and other stakeholders.

EUCAM is sponsored by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project is also supported by the Czech Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office.



FRIDE is a think tank based in Madrid that aims to provide original and 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 nongovernmental bodies through rigorous analysis, rooted in the values of justice, equality and democracy.



Founded in 1983 in Brussels, The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) is one of the most experienced and authoritative think tanks operating in the European Union today. CEPS serves as a leading forum for debate on EU affairs. 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.