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EUCAM Watch



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Uzbekistan opening up

Optimism and doubt...

Uzbekistan has begun to take steps towards openness, and economic and political reform. Since the death of President Islam Karimov in September 2016 and the parliamentary appointment of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the new President of the Republic, Uzbekistan has improved relations with its neighbours and started a process of internal reform. Despite these positive signs, it is still too early to estimate the extent of Uzbekistan's political transformation over the coming years.

The Uzbek government is rejuvenating the civil service with the appointment of new young faces, releasing political prisoners and opening up space for civil society and media, while indicating to international partners that it is open to cooperation and foreign investments. All this has been set in motion without external pushes for democratisation or economic incentives from external partners. Given that Uzbekistan has been a 'closed country' for so long, there are only a handful of international donors active in the country. While there is now a renewed interest among the donor community to develop partnerships and implement democratisation projects in Uzbekistan, it is still unclear where the focus should be, as the Uzbek government seems to be open to almost anything. Uzbekistan is also establishing better and more practical relations with neighbouring republics, particularly on border issues and water management. Whereas so far Uzbekistan has focused mainly on improving bilateral ties and does not yet seem inclined to join regional and international fora, Tashkent's opening could potentially translate into new opportunities for regional cooperation.

External observers welcome these changes but are not yet convinced that democratic reforms will take root. At the moment, reforms have only scratched the surface, leaving the main institutions – parliament, government and the judiciary – untouched. It is also unclear what the views of the country's elites are. If current reforms do not bring quick benefits for the elites, there is a risk that further reforms will be stalled (not much has been done so far to counter corruption, for instance). In addition, should the President feel threatened by these increased freedoms, reforms could be reversed. Regional openness could also backfire should neighbours feel that Uzbekistan's 'trade openness' could hurt their own markets or that a more active Uzbekistan could lead to a (renewed) rivalry between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for regional leadership.

The European Union (EU) is one of the few international donors active in Uzbekistan. After the full lifting of sanctions in 2010, the EU opened a Delegation in Tashkent in 2011. The EU had found it difficult to work with the previous government and allocate funding to meaningful projects. Now, the EU might be overwhelmed by the possibilities and the demand for cooperation. Brussels has indicated its disposition to discuss an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Uzbekistan that would replace the current standard partnership and cooperation agreement. However, before tying itself to an EPCA, the EU and Uzbekistan should draft and implement a modest 1-2-year action or cooperation plan, making use of unspent funding earmarked for Uzbekistan under the current Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). Such a plan could consist of a package

of targeted projects aimed at democratic reform, coordinated by the EU, implemented by Uzbekistan, and supervised by both. This could be a good test case for EU-Uzbekistan cooperation. First, on the one hand, it would show the EU that Uzbekistan is serious about reform and, on the other hand, convince Uzbekistan that the EU is an important cooperation partner. Second, it could help set priorities for EU development cooperation funding under the new funding cycle as of 2021. And third, a positive track-record of cooperation could further pave the way for successful EPCA negotiations. Should the EU want to start EPCA talks as soon as possible – to include this in the new 2019 EU-Central Asia Strategy – such an action plan should be implemented whilst negotiations are ongoing, but not after.

In June, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society representatives debated about reform in Uzbekistan at a roundtable organised in Brussels by the EUCAM programme of the Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) based in Groningen, the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC) based in Brussels, and the Open Society Europe Policy Institute (OSEPI), also based in Brussels. In this EUCAM Watch, you will find short interviews with the speakers, including EUSR Peter Burian and OSF programme officer Alisher Ilkhamov, regarding their views on Uzbekistan’s democratic reform and regional cooperation in Central Asia.

*Editorial by **Jos Boonstra**,
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Uzbekistan's reforms

Peter Burian – European Union Special Representative for Central Asia, Brussels

How do you assess the main challenges for Uzbekistan's democratic reform?

Uzbekistan's smooth power transition after President Karimov's passing in 2016, accompanied by an opening towards improving relations with neighbours, regional cooperation, and ambitious reforms, has been welcomed by friends and partners of Uzbekistan. The new President of the Republic, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has moved ahead with wide-ranging changes to existing policies and strategies, something rather unexpected considering he was Prime Minister under the previous administration.

However, upon further analysis, the current leadership's move towards reform does not seem to have been the product of a tactical decision, but rather a strategic choice rooted in the realisation that previous policies were leading the country in an unsustainable and potentially destabilising direction.

The current reform process has several encouraging elements. The president has appointed young and well-prepared individuals to strategic leadership positions. The state's opaque security sector is being cleaned and reformed. The country is pushing for economic liberalisation and better neighbourly relations, and is improving the space for civil society dialogue and the overall human rights situation. However, there are many challenges to overcome to ensure success and sustainability of reforms, including a lack of human resources and administrative



capacity, unprepared sectoral transformation strategies, and how to implement reforms in a timely manner so as to avoid legal contradictions.

What are the prospects for EU-Uzbekistan relations?

The current EU-Uzbekistan dialogue is very positive and characterised by Uzbekistan's unprecedented level of interest in EU technical assistance and know-how. The EU is very interested in supporting ongoing reforms based on a partnership for sustainable development and modernization. We want to help the country in developing business opportunities by improving the business climate, rule of law, governance, and the fight against corruption. We see the promotion of our core values in this process as indispensable. Respect for human rights, a vibrant civil society, and independent media are the basis for the stability of every country, and we are encouraged by Uzbekistan's steps to improve the country's record in these areas.

Our bilateral dialogue is already well advanced; however, we see more room for closer cooperation. We are currently discussing bringing the existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) to the next level. An Enhanced PCA would offer both sides opportunities to strengthen and broaden engagement in many important issues, such as human rights, rule of law and respect for democratic principles. The EU stands ready to support Uzbekistan's efforts to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which would considerably improve the country's economic potential and appeal to EU businesses. We are increasingly engaged in capacity-building projects and programmes, and are strengthening donor coordination activities in this regard together with other major partners, like the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Finally, we believe that Uzbekistan's success will be key for the success of the EU Central Asia Strategy, which aims at supporting the stability, prosperity and sustainable development of Central Asia as a whole.

Alisher Ilkhamov – Programme Officer, Open Society Foundations, United Kingdom

What are the main obstacles to Uzbekistan's democratic development?

It is still unclear how President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reform process will unfold. One could say that his course of reforms resembles the one implemented in the Soviet Union by Nikita Khrushchev, characterised by an authoritarian reformist model, full of contradictions and without touching the fundamentals of the governance system.

While some changes are taking place, mainly due to the president's intention to shake up the status quo and get the country out of international isolation, an authoritarian regime remains in place and there are no signs that could indicate a change in the nature of the regime. Uzbekistan has only just begun its reform process, and my bet is that the Mirziyoyev regime will continue implementing reforms until Uzbekistan reaches a level similar to Kazakhstan. In the latter, we see a relatively milder form of authoritarianism, where there is no democracy, but there is some room for civil society, the international press and international NGOs can easily get accreditation, and local businesses and international investors enjoy more economic freedom and face less administrative pressure from the authorities. The Achilles heel of the current Uzbek regime is the alliance that the President has forged with some corrupt figures in the government, following the logic of inter-clan struggle. This would explain why there has not been any tangible progress so far in the establishment of anti-corruption mechanisms or regarding measures to increase independence of the judiciary. There are still some 'untouchables' in the government.

What role can the EU now best play in Uzbekistan?

The EU would need to see Uzbekistan as a credible and reliable partner in the region, with stable foreign policy and internal politics, built on the foundations of a strong civil society. If Uzbekistan remains under-reformed, relying heavily on police control over all spheres of state and society, it will be forced to constantly swing between different regional and global powers – Russia, China or the US – as did the Karimov regime.

The EU should work with reformists within the Uzbek ruling elites, professionals, and intellectuals to define a benchmarked plan, with measurable interim results, of deep reforms that would allow to build the foundations for a vibrant civil society and to establish standards of transparency and accountability in the governance system.

Alisher Siddique – Director of RFE/RL’s Uzbek Service, Prague

What have been the main changes in the Uzbek media landscape since Mirziyoyev came to power?

The media is still not free in Uzbekistan. But since Mirziyoyev assumed power, the government has expanded media freedoms, including the number of topics they are allowed to report on without state approval. The government has also begun to allow foreign news outlets to operate. For instance, German Deutsche Welle and US Voice of America got accredited, and BBC’s and RFE/RL’s accreditations are being processed. Officials have begun commenting more eagerly and showing more respect towards journalists. Press offices of multiple state entities have started operating more openly.

And what are the main challenges for the media?

First, the media in Uzbekistan is not and will not be able in the foreseeable future to challenge the government’s actions. *Second*, media in Uzbekistan remains heavily pro-Russian (this is due to multiple factors, including Russian sponsorship of local media outlets). *Third*, pro-Islamic tendencies in the media are on the rise. Several new Islamic websites have been launched and authorities have not taken any measures to curb the harmful fundamentalist propaganda that is displayed on some of these websites: most pro-Islamic media outlets have anti-western, anti-democratic and anti-scientific narratives. Pro-Islamic media in Uzbekistan is unable to publish effective anti-radicalism coverage. *Fourth*, the media in Uzbekistan lacks credibility: potential sources are reluctant to provide information. The media is vulnerable and may reveal its sources if requested by the security services or other authorities. *Fifth*, local journalists lack training in basic journalism such as news gathering, investigation, fact checking and storytelling.

In this context, RFE/RL Uzbek Service continues to report critical news on Uzbekistan, providing accurate accounts of the situation on the ground, serving as a model for local media and making an impact on authorities at all levels through its large social media.

Zaynab Dost – Research Relationship Manager, Mergermarket & freelance contributor Central Asia Analytical Network (CAAN), London

What is the current situation of education in Uzbekistan?

The educational system is undergoing several changes. It is run by three separate authorities: the Ministry of Public Education, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education, and the newly-created Department for Pre-School Education, established in October 2017, with the mission of improving nurseries and increasing enrolment to reach 50 per cent by 2020.

Overall, schools in Uzbekistan (9,628) lack skilled teachers and books. Staff are frequently expected to perform unpaid work including landscaping, census conducting etc. Many teachers complain that they are overloaded with unnecessary paperwork. The so-called 'good' schools, including Russian ones (1,912), are overcrowded, forcing wealthier parents to turn to private tutors or private schools.

Unlike pre-schools and secondary schools, tertiary education receives little public funding despite being state-managed. Admission numbers are low and the gross tertiary education enrolment is only 8.5 per cent. The authorities promised to increase it to 18 per cent by 2020, and have opened a few new universities this year (including through joint partnerships with Russia and Korea), but it is still not enough to satisfy an ever-growing demand for tertiary education.

Simultaneously, quality remains a challenge, and there is increasing need and demand for innovation. For now, pro-rectors for innovation are sourcing ideas from university staff and students on better organisational and study methods. In June, a new official 'roadmap' calling for anti-plagiarism, better performance, and less paperwork saw the light of day. However, persisting corruption, over-presence of ideological courses, and absence of private universities are yet to be addressed.

What European support is needed in the field of education?

Many Uzbek schools are not well equipped and there is a huge need to improve even basic infrastructure. More importantly, salaries are low and there is a chronic shortage of staff. The EU could partner with Uzbekistan to develop qualification courses and to offer financial incentives schemes for primary and secondary school teachers. Additionally, the EU could assist the ministries in charge of education in drafting curricula that also incorporate soft skills and creativity.

In tertiary education, there is a need to promote female enrolment, currently at 39 per cent. A low rate of female tertiary enrolment has negative implications for secular values,



Photo: Nowruz in Bukhara by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra via Flickr under Creative Commons license

security, and development. The EU should, through its support programmes, also help Uzbekistan to encourage more girls to study science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM).

Uzbekistan claims it needs external donors' help to fund its state programme for tertiary education development (2017-2021). Universities have been advised to employ European and Asian professors on an annual basis and there are calls for collaboration with foreign universities. The country seems to be open again to academic exchanges and scholarships. This is an excellent opportunity for the EU to strengthen its soft power by helping the country to develop a skilled workforce.

Sevara Khamidova – former EUCAM Fellow, Uzbekistan (also see EUCAM commentary no. 31, July 2018)

What is the current situation of civil society in Uzbekistan?

After almost 15 years of silence, civil society in Uzbekistan has begun to have some freedom and has even been invited by the government to work together for democratic change. On the one hand, this drastic change has so far resulted in the release of political prisoners; freedom of speech and religious rights; opportunities for the media to discuss social issues; and an invitation to NGOs to contribute to anti-corruption campaigns. On the other hand, while new regulations have allowed religious leaders to become more vocal and have strengthened the role of the *mahalla* in promoting traditional values, this is creating new challenges for social secularity. After receiving freedom to speak, some imams and religious media are spreading misinformed ideas and propaganda against a modern lifestyle. Some recent examples include Tashkent's imam Rahmatullo Saifutdinov introducing the idea that if, during sexual intercourse, the man or the woman dreams about other people than their wife or husband their child would be born with homosexual orientations. His arguments are widely supported among the religious community. This is very disturbing and alarming.

It is important to support the development of critical-analysis platforms and civic education, and to boost grass-roots NGOs working with young people to foster their inclusion into decision-making processes, and their analytical thinking and leadership skills. Otherwise, the current dominion of traditional and religious values over secularity might lead to negative consequences, such as religious influence over politics, and the suppression of personal freedoms and rights.

Is Uzbekistan receiving enough European attention now that it has begun to open up?

There is optimism in the sense that there is ongoing discussion in Brussels about Uzbekistan's international and internal opening. But, at the same time, it is very unclear whether this interest in a renewed partnership between the EU and Uzbekistan is short-term or it will translate into long-term support for democratic and economic reform, as

well as investment and increasing trade levels. The same can be said about Uzbekistan and its fragile democratic change. Will this opening continue and, if so, for how long? Can the Uzbek government guarantee that it will stay committed to human rights protection, social freedoms and democracy without the West needing to push time and again? Both the EU and Uzbekistan should apply the lessons learnt from their recent past, characterised by Uzbekistan's closed and authoritarian character over the past 15 years and EU sanctions, in order not to repeat the same mistakes. For this, Europe needs critical research capacity focusing on Uzbekistan, and Uzbekistan needs to develop and strengthen its up until now non-existent culture of think tanks and research capacity in universities and beyond.

Regional Cooperation

We asked Diana Mamatova from Kyrgyzstan, Sergey Marinin from Kazakhstan, and Nushofarin Noziri from Tajikistan how Uzbekistan's domestic and foreign policy is regarded in neighbouring countries and if there are new opportunities to solve disputes and build regional cooperation.

Diana Mamatova, former Central Asia Program (CAP) fellow, Kyrgyzstan

For decades, relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were characterised by cross-border conflicts, and disputes over lands and borders, use of roads, water and irrigation, pastures, trade, identity and so on. In 2017, there was a breakthrough. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan made several agreements to cooperate across political, economic, and socio-cultural sectors. This has been possible mainly due to the political will of both presidents, something crucial and very characteristic of Central Asian relations.

Overall, relations between Tashkent and Bishkek are pragmatic. On the one hand, they focus on burning issues, like border demarcation and delimitation and access to and distribution of water, and on the other hand, they aim at creating economic opportunities in the areas of transport, trade, industry, and gas. All of this is 'glued' with socio-cultural initiatives between the cross-border communities. Prospects of maintaining and deepening inter-state cooperation are yet to be tested. Although Tashkent and Bishkek signed a historical agreement on 85 per cent of their shared borders, the remaining 15 per cent is marked by highly disputed plots and five tricky ethnic exclaves. Both countries agreed to jointly work on water issues, though it is questionable whether compromise will be achieved. In the economic sector, the trade turnover between the countries doubled in 2017, and Uzbekistan aims to bring trade volumes with Kyrgyzstan to approximately €500 million in the coming years.

It is still premature to speculate whether the recent warming of relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan will continue and allow to build regional cooperation. One can certainly argue that relations have been 'reloaded' and there are opportunities for expanding this mutually beneficial cooperation. A key question is whether the ongoing 'change' will also bring changes in the political development of the Central Asian region in support of good governance practices, rule of law, and respect for human rights.

Sergey Marinin, former EUCAM fellow, Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan seems content with how the log jam between the two Central Asian power houses is being finally broken in light of Uzbekistan's change of heart.

Trade levels increased from €1.1 to €1.7 billion in 2017 and are projected to reach €5 billion by 2020. Better relations have led to better business ties and greater mutual investments. In 2017, commercial agreements for almost €1 billion were signed. Tashkent and Astana continue to launch ambitious cooperation initiatives to resolve water and energy issues, particularly three large-scale transport and gas processing investment projects that will further pull the two countries together economically. As for regional cooperation, the summit held in March in Astana among four of the five Central Asian presidents showed an internal drive for regional cooperation, rather than being inspired by external powers, and could be considered as an important step towards establishing mutual trust in the region. After two decades of rivalry, the Uzbek-Kazakh relationship is one of the most important factors for successful regional cooperation. Also Kazakhstan announced that 2018 is the 'Year of Uzbekistan', with more than 200 tourism and cultural events planned throughout the year.

All of the above indicates a positive outlook for bilateral and regional relations. However, Uzbekistan's reform process is still in its early days and there are no guarantees that this openness towards neighbours will be sustained, while there is also a risk that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan began to see each other again as competitors instead of partners.

Nushofarin Noziri, former EUCAM fellow, Tajikistan

Tajikistan has welcomed the new Mirziyoyev administration in Uzbekistan. Relations between the two countries focus mainly on the development of the hydroelectric power plant project in Rogun, as well as on trade, transport, and borders.



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Uzbek President Mirziyoyev's first official visit to Tajikistan in March 2018 represented a watershed. During the visit, Uzbekistan signed off on the construction of the Rogun dam, which had been opposed under former President Karimov due to fears that it could disrupt the flow of water needed for Uzbek cotton production. The two countries also agreed to supply electricity (Tajikistan to Uzbekistan) and natural gas (Uzbekistan to Tajikistan). Additionally, and perhaps the most anticipated outcome of the visit, was the abolishment of the visa regime between the two countries, and the re-opening of nine border checkpoints to complement the only two functioning ones. After 25 years, direct flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe were resumed. Uzbekistan is also considering abolishing entry fees for road traffic, specifically for freight and buses, as a way to increase trade between both countries. This is very important, as both states are landlocked, do not belong to the Eurasian Economic Union that partially surrounds them, and have no trade relations with neighbouring Turkmenistan or Afghanistan.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan share a unique history. Both countries have substantial national minorities from one another within their borders and both share a long border with Afghanistan that remains poorly monitored. Cooperation between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan is vital for the development of both countries, as well as for the region overall.

EUCAM News

New website

EUCAM celebrates its tenth birthday with a new website. For us, our website is one of our main communication tools, and a drastic 'facelift' was long overdue. We have launched a smart-looking, user-friendly and more secure website, while seeking to keep elements of the old website to guarantee recognisability. The new website offers new features, which give us the flexibility to create attractive digital content (commentaries, policy briefs and EUCAM Watch editorials) and offer a better user experience. Check out our new website at www.eucentralasia.eu. We would be very happy to receive your feedback at info@eucentralasia.eu.

First EUCAM fellows complete their Groningen stay

This July, three young, talented Central Asian researchers completed the first EUCAM fellowships. Over the course of three months, they worked on their individual research projects and with the EUCAM and CESS teams in our office in Groningen. They participated in trainings, interacted with colleagues of other fellowship programmes, visited several institutions in The Hague and travelled twice to Brussels to visit EU institutions and meet with civil society experts. Sevara, Nusha and Sergey did a wonderful job. Surely, they have improved their skills and understanding of European policies, but they also helped us further develop and fine-tune our fellowship programme. Thank you!

New Publications at www.eucentralasia.eu

Civil society in Uzbekistan: Building from the ground up

EUCAM Commentary No. 31 (July 2018)

Sevara Khamidova

Uzbekistan's new direction under president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has opened up space for civil society development. In order to build an effective and vibrant civil society, Uzbekistan needs to develop the capacity of NGOs and boost critical thinking and monitoring. However, this is easier said than done, as it is still unclear what direction political reform will take, while, at the same time, conservative religious views are becoming increasingly dominant. Can the European Union play a supporting role in the establishment of a new civil society in Uzbekistan?

<https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/07/civil-society-in-uzbekistan-building-from-the-ground-up/>

North, West, home best. Tajik labour migration and EU development cooperation

EUCAM Commentary No. 30 (July 2018)

Nushofarin Noziri

Labour migration has helped Tajikistan to sustain itself as an independent state, but the negative consequences of migration have severely impacted Tajik society. What can the EU do to help Tajikistan to curtail migration and offer more job opportunities at home?

<https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/07/north-west-home-best-tajik-labour-migration-and-eu-development-cooperation/>

Key Kazakh interests in working with Europe

EUCAM Commentary No. 29 (July 2018)

Sergey Marinin

During the past decade, a significant boost was given to EU-Kazakhstan cooperation. The new EU Strategy for Central Asia due to be launched in 2019 provides an opportunity for Kazakhstan to further cement its interest in working with the EU. What are Kazakhstan's main priorities in working with Europe?

<https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/07/key-kazakh-interests-in-working-with-europe/>



EUCAM

Established in 2008 by FRIDE as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. As part of CESS, EUCAM will continue to raise the profile of European-Central Asian relations in general, and more specifically to:

- Critically, though constructively, scrutinize European policies towards Central Asia;
- Enhance knowledge of European engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research;
- Raise awareness on the importance of Central Asia and Europe's engagement, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from Europe and Central Asia and provide a forum for debate.



CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance political development, democracy, human rights and in particular security, by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges.

CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.



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