

Issue 21 - June 2019

EUCAM Watch



Photo: European External Action Service via Flickr under Creative Commons license



New EU Strategy for Central Asia: First reactions

Enough to do for the EU in Central Asia

I always have a 'to-do list' at work. And, alike most people, before I complete one task, I already have a few others to add. So in order to prioritise, my list is actually three lists: one with bullet points with what needs to be done this week (make phone calls, answer emails); one with those items that have a deadline down the road (project report, call for proposals); and a sort of wish-list with those things I would like to do when and if time allows (develop a new idea).

The new EU strategy for Central Asia, adopted by the EU Council on 17 June, reads a bit like this. It includes things that the EU will do ('the EU will strengthen cooperation on vocational education and training'); things to continue to address over the coming years ('the EU will continue to promote respect for human rights'); and matters to devote attention to in due course ('the EU will aim to encourage more sustainable and inclusive growth models in the region'). In sum, rather than a strategy, it is an approach or more simply, a 'to-do list'.

This is not a bad thing. The new EU strategy is a rich policy document that builds on the experience gathered over the past 12 years, and which has benefitted from input from EU member states and Central Asian governments, as well as European and Central Asian civil societies. Most importantly, it is a flexible document that will guide European policy towards Central Asia over the coming decade.

The 2007 strategy had focused heavily on energy security as this was a European concern at the time, with Central Asia offering new energy import opportunities. The document was ill-prepared to cope with the importance of Central Asia to European (and US) engagement in Afghanistan some years later and the worsening of relations with Russia. The current document seems less rigid in terms of specific topics (possibly except for connectivity, which could end up being just a buzz word that loses importance over time), and seems better prepared to assume new challenges and take on opportunities, as stressed under its two main headers of resilience and prosperity.

At EUCAM we are happy that the new strategy takes up several matters advocated by our authors over the past 10 years. First, the document is more flexible on regional cooperation, accounting for the diversity of the Central Asian states and being open to participation by Afghanistan and Eastern Partnership countries. Second, the document is clear on the importance of democracy promotion in terms of accountability vis-à-vis the population as well as a means to attract investment, while highlighting human rights as an essential element of relations. Third, the document addresses human security and accountable security-sector governance. These two elements, which are intertwined with democracy, present a more enduring approach to promoting the security of average citizens than previous notions of 'security and stability' or geo-political thinking. Fourth, the document embeds sustainable energy, while being more modest about grand international energy infrastructure. Fifth, it pays much more attention to linking Central Asian societies' social and economic issues, such as promoting local trade or addressing the rural-urban divide. Sixth, there is a heavy focus on youth and education with links to job creation. Finally, the new strategy foresees

more engagement with European and Central Asian civil society organisations (CSOs), also highlighting research, for instance on drivers of violent extremism.

Under this new guiding document, the EU will have to address a host of matters in a tangible way. One of the main challenges will be how closely to integrate the strategy and the upcoming Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) in operational terms. While the EU's new funding instrument will probably offer greater flexibility to address new issues as well as adapt funding to changing interests and circumstances, there is a risk that transparency in terms of funding dedicated to projects and programmes be weakened. Here, renewed efforts in civil society monitoring of EU policy and spending will be important to increase efficiency of implementation and, where useful, discuss the approach chosen by EU institutions. European and Central Asian civil society will also need to better understand the evolving Europe-Central Asia relationship, while the European policy community will need to better grasp the underlining developments in Central Asia to which the strategy will need to react. In this sense, the new strategy is a 'positive challenge' not only for the EU and Central Asian partners, but also for civil society and researchers.

In this EUCAM Watch, we have asked four EUCAM associate researchers and advisory group members to share their first impressions on the new EU strategy for Central Asia.

*Editorial by **Jos Boonstra**,
EUCAM Coordinator,
Centre for European Security Studies, Groningen*

Table of Contents

- 2** *Enough to do for the EU in Central Asia*, editorial by Jos Boonstra
- 4** *Interviews with Fabienne Bossuyt, Nargis Kassenova, Marlene Laruelle and Tika Tsertsvadze*
- 10** EUCAM News
- 11** Latest Publication

Interviews

Fabienne Bossuyt, Assistant Professor, Centre for EU Studies, Department of Political Science, Ghent University

Your first impression?

The new strategy is long and may come across as a 'Christmas tree' of subjects, even more so than the 2007 strategy. That said, it should be acknowledged that the penholder faced the daunting task of reconciling the (undoubtedly diverging) preferences of EU member states and EU institutional actors with the input of an extensive consultation process that accompanied the preparation of the new strategy. It seems that the strategy should be considered in the first place as a broad framework for the EU's relations with the region. Within this broad framework, the EU sought to single out two key priorities: promoting the resilience of Central Asian states and societies, and boosting their prosperity. Fostering regional cooperation is identified as a cross-cutting priority. I personally have the impression that the two key priorities are just a branding for a very wide range of areas, many of which were also covered in the first strategy.

Given that I have been involved as a rapporteur in several of the consultation meetings that the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia had organised, I can honestly state that the new strategy reflects many of the issues identified and recommendations given by the stakeholders that had participated in the consultations. Put differently, the wide range of stakeholders have truly been given a voice in the strategy. The question remains, however, to what extent it is the purpose of a foreign policy strategy to reflect nearly all the concerns raised by the stakeholders.

How do you see the relation with other key EU strategies, foremost the Asia Connectivity Strategy and the EU Global Strategy?

The EU's new strategy for Central Asia is very clearly in line with other key EU strategies. I see the strongest links with the EU's Connectivity Strategy and the Global Strategy, as reflected most explicitly in the central aim that the strategy identifies, which is to make sure that the region develops as 'a sustainable, more resilient, prosperous, and closely interconnected economic and political space'.

There is also a close connection with the EU's Consensus on Development, as reflected by the strong focus on sustainable development. Overall, the strategy emerges as a prime example of the EU's pursuit of policy coherence, whereby it attempts to guarantee coherence among all its external policies.

When it comes to the connection with the Global Strategy, it should be noted that the new strategy suggests that the risk of the EU compromising its fundamental values under the guise of 'principled pragmatism' did not materialise. In contrast, the EU is seizing the recent wind of change in some Central Asian countries, in particular Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan,

as an opportunity to uphold its commitment to promoting democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

What do you think about the proposals concerning cooperation between European and Central Asian civil societies, as well as more attention to think tank and academic cooperation?

The new strategy pays explicit attention to the role of local civil society. This is not surprising considering that the EU organised several consultation meetings with European and especially Central Asian civil society in order to identify how the EU can improve its engagement with civil society in Central Asia in view of the new strategy. These consultations have now translated into the establishment of a new institutional platform, the EU-Central Asia forum. The aim of this forum, which is expected to take place annually on the occasion of the EU-Central Asia Ministerial meetings and which will be held for the first time in Bishkek in July, is to involve a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, academics and think tankers, in the development of the EU-Central Asia partnership.

When it comes to the role of civil society, overall, the new strategy seems to focus specifically on enabling civil society participation in public decision-making as a way to ensure the sustainability of the modernisation processes in Central Asia. This is arguably a very European view on the role of civil society. Although it is very commendable that the EU extensively consulted local civil society in view of preparing the new strategy, the strategy seems to have a rather narrow view on the role that civil society can play in the specific non-Western context of Central Asia. It is also in this context that it is mentioned in the strategy that the EU will develop training opportunities on human rights and advocacy skills for civil society activists and human rights defenders, and promote cross-border contacts with their counterparts in the EU.

With respect to the issue of think tank and academic cooperation, the EU seems to have taken up the reoccurring recommendation of supporting research on Central Asia and on EU-Central Asia relations, and promoting more opportunities for interaction between researchers and think-tankers from the EU and Central Asia. However, no specific initiatives are mentioned on how this commitment will be realised. Hence, it remains to be seen how this will be implemented in practice.

Nargis Kassenova, Senior Fellow, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies; Associate Professor, KIMEP University

Your first impression?

The new strategy is the result of many years of consultation and deliberation and, in my view, the efforts paid off. It is less generic and more tailored to the realities on the ground and the needs of Central Asian states and societies than the 2007 strategy. During its preparation, there were fears that it would turn out to be like a 'Christmas tree', with multiple priorities added by myriad stakeholders, spreading thin the EU's efforts to effect real change in the

region. While it is true that the list of priorities is long, which was probably inevitable, this is compensated by the precision of policies and steps envisioned, promising more effective engagement.

Are there specific aspects of the new strategy that you see as an improvement compared to the 2007 document?

I particularly appreciated the following aspects of the new strategy: *First*, the possibility of linking EU programmes in Central Asia with those in Eastern Partnership countries. The states and societies that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago have common experiences and face similar challenges. There is a good amount of learning that can be done if connections are increased. Less bureaucratic geographic divisions among Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe could help create good synergies and foster one single European neighbourhood, rather than having 'neighbours' and 'neighbours of neighbours.'

Second, the promotion of sustainable connectivity in Eurasia. If, as envisioned in the new strategy, the EU and Central Asian states are able to establish partnerships 'following market principles, guaranteeing transparency and based on international standards,' and focusing on transport, energy, digital connectivity, and people-to-people contacts, the region will have a brighter future. It is a very tall order, but there is hope that the shared challenge of China's Belt and Road Initiative can stimulate both sides to cooperate more.

Third, the very pronounced and timely emphasis on intra-regional cooperation. It is a cross-cutting priority, dovetailing particularly well cooperation in the areas of environmental protection, water management, border management, and trade. What is new and promising is the goal of increasing intra-regional research and innovation cooperation, and intra-regional mobility of students, teaching staff, and researchers.

Fourth, the new strategy mentions that the 'EU should seek to develop European studies in Central Asian universities,' and that 'EU Member States' universities should be encouraged to establish more partnership and branches with Central Asian universities.' I consider these very valuable developments, particularly if the study of Europe, European humanities and social sciences can foster better self-reflection on the region and its developments. My personal dream would be to see a European college/university in Central Asia that becomes a strong and vibrant platform for European academic and cultural presence in the region, helping us strengthen connections and mutual understanding, and shape a better future.

How do you think the new strategy will be received by Central Asian governments?

I think it will be well received, given that the document was developed in consultation with Central Asian governments themselves and thus reflects their needs and interests. The emphasis on human rights and civil society, which tends to be a bit of a sore spot, is probably nothing new or unexpected to Central Asian governments.

Marlene Laruelle, Research Professor of International Affairs and Associate Director of the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University

Your first impression?

For a document based on a consensus among 28 members, it is reasonably coherent. I appreciate the fact that it avoided the pitfall of many official similar documents that tend to be excessively focused on energy issues and terrorism. While both issues are mentioned, they are not given excessive weight. I also like the fact that the document mentions climate change and disaster risk reduction, vocational education, youth and migration, European Chambers of Commerce – several points that EUCAM members have been advocating for a long time. I also like the notion that the EU strategy is ‘non-exclusive’ – explicitly referring to China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Russia-led structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), even if there is no clear articulation about the difference between those projects and that of the EU. Yet, it still remains a very broad strategy, based on a lot of wishful thinking, accumulating ideas in too many directions, and unable to resist the buzz concept of ‘connectivity’. It does not address some key problems such as the patronal nature of political regimes or, more importantly, provide a list of associated concrete policies/activities/budgets.

Do you think the new strategy will help improve the EU’s support to socio-economic developments in Central Asia?

The new strategy is too broad to affirm whether it will be able or not to improve socio-economic developments in Central Asia. It does mention important issues such as the rural-urban divide, the question of returnee migrants, the need for a more inclusive growth model, employability issues and labour conditions, SMEs, exchanging know-how, etc. However, it remains at a too abstract level to come up with concrete and coordinated strategies. For instance, in the list of proposed initiatives, ‘enhancing dialogue and cooperation on migration and mobility in the framework of the EPCAs and of the United Nations’ (p. 6) is an empty shell, not saying anything concrete on how the EU can help Central Asia tackle migration. Promoting ‘exchanges of best practices on youth employability, women empowerment’ and ‘skills gaps and labour market modernization’ seem a little bit more targeted, but still too broad to measure its potential efficiency.

I would have preferred to have seen less options and one or two flagship initiatives, for example promoting EU best practices and know-how in agri-business and new technologies, two sectors crucial for Central Asian economies, with an emphasis on rural employment in the former and urban youth in the later.

How do you see the new strategy vis-à-vis the US’s approach to Central Asia?

The US’s policy toward Central Asia is even broader and therefore even more lacking in real substance. It focuses on reducing the region’s dependence on Russia, preventing Iran

from becoming as influential in Central Asia as it is in Afghanistan or the Middle East, and bolstering the role of US allies in the region, especially India. In terms of transformations within Central Asian states, it is mainly centred on democratic transition, better governance and market economy. The State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, as well as USAID, also push for religious freedom, health reform, reform of the judicial system, youth participation, and strengthening independent media and access to information. But these pious wishes are rarely followed by concrete policies: the C5+1 has become the main instrument for Washington to remain visible in the region, but in terms of security cooperation, economic presence, and soft power, the role of the US has dramatically diminished compared to that of the EU.

Tika Tsertsvadze, International Advocacy Manager, International Partnership for Human Rights

Your first impression?

The new EU-Central Asia strategy looks more focused and narrower in terms of priority areas. It has explicit language on human rights, rule of law and democracy, and refers to issues such as human rights defenders, media and freedom of expression, torture prevention, women and minority rights, etc. At the same time, it identifies several areas under which cooperation on human rights, democracy and rule of law should be pursued, and this includes bilateral agreements between the EU and respective countries, GSP+ where applicable, multilateral fora (UN, OSCE), and close cooperation with local civil society. The document clearly points out to endemic corruption and justice systems (access to justice and independent and well-functioning courts) as issues that need to be addressed. Having such explicit and clear language on these issues is a big departure from the more general concepts the EU referred to in the 2007 strategy. This indicates that the EU has the right tools to identify the issues which require the most attention.



Photo: By Peretz Partensky via Flickr under Creative Commons license

Do you expect the new strategy to help the EU promote and defend democratic and human rights values?

The EU will need to walk-the-talk and put in practice the principles and ideas expressed in the strategy. The state of democracy, rule of law and human rights is fragile across the region. The post-Soviet legacy in these areas is still very present. Work needs to be done on two levels. On the one hand, it is necessary to continue as well as increase support to individuals and organisations. This kind of support includes regular meetings with CSOs, political support when individuals or organisations are under threat, and financial support to enable these groups to operate, among others. On the other hand, the EU needs to find the champions among the governments of Central Asian countries who would be willing and able to advance with democratic reforms from the inside, including establishing fully functioning and independent institutions. Individual rights cannot be effectively protected without principles of democracy, starting with free and competitive elections and extending to guarantying free speech and uncensored distribution of views, political pluralism, protection of minority rights, etc.

Does Central Asian civil society development and involvement receive ample attention?

There is certainly a degree of engagement with Central Asian civil society. This is done ahead of the EU human rights dialogues, high-level visits or other bilateral talks. This is an important component of cooperation with CSOs. EU engagement with and support for CSOs will remain crucial. In ideal circumstances, CSOs should be able to have a constructive dialogue with their respective governments and to hold them accountable. But this requires change in the political culture across Central Asia, so that CSOs no longer be seen as a 'threat to the regime stability' and begin to be considered as partners that work to achieve shared objectives. Until then, the EU is the only actor that can voice CSO concerns with the region's governments, and it needs to ensure that Central Asian CSOs can continue to operate.

The new strategy seeks to help civil society to stay active and develop. It refers specifically to the need to intensify cooperation with civil society and suggests establishing an EU-Central Asia forum on the margins of the EU-Central Asia Ministerial meetings. This is an interesting initiative that could certainly bring an added value, as long as civil society (in the broader understanding mentioned in the strategy – academia, think-tanks, businesses, and CSOs) has a real opportunity to engage with their respective governments in a tripartite format within these meetings. At the same time, when identifying such regional formats of cooperation, it should be clear from the outset what would be the thematic priorities, and where regional cooperation would have an added value on the CSO dimension, especially given that such regional cooperation already exists within the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM).

EUCAM News

EUCAM in Brussels

On 5 June, EUCAM, the European Neighbourhood Council and the Egmont Institute organised in Brussels the roundtable *New Strategy – Similar Challenges: EU-Central Asia security cooperation*. The event was attended by EU officials, civil society representatives and two groups of fellows – from EUCAM and from an Internews project on Central Asia. EU officials headed by EUSR Peter Burian and EEAS Central Asia Division Deputy Director Philippe van Amersfoort took a keen interest in the research presented by our fellows and shared with participants the background and thinking behind the new EU strategy for Central Asia.

The Hague

On 2 May, EUCAM fellows Asiya Kuzembayeva, Aizada Kadyrova, and Khurshid Zafari travelled to The Hague and had the opportunity to visit the Dutch Parliament and talk with representatives from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

A Patchwork of Enclaves

EUCAM fellow Khurshid Zafari and EUCAM Coordinator Jos Boonstra visited Baarle-Nassau (The Netherlands) and Baarle-Hertog (Belgium) to have meetings with representatives of both municipalities, as well as with a local historian and expert on enclaves. The region can best be described as ‘one village, two municipalities, 30 enclaves, 2 countries’. This patchwork of enclaves could offer interesting experiences in terms of settling disputes, determining borders and developing practical solutions for the eight enclaves in the Fergana Valley of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Latest publication

www.eucentralasia.eu

Reconsidering EU Education Assistance to Central Asia

EUCAM Policy Brief, No. 37, June 2019

Sebastien Peyrouse

Central Asia’s educational systems have been deteriorating for almost three decades. Education is a key EU-driven area of EU-Central Asia cooperation. However, the EU’s focus on promoting large-scale systemic reform has not been attuned to local circumstances, and governments have been unwilling to pursue EU-driven educational reform. The new EU strategy for Central Asia provides an opportunity to develop concrete education programmes that are tailored to each country’s needs and can have a sustainable impact.



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.



Supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.