

COMMENTARY



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The EU's 'resilience' agenda in Central Asia: too distant, too ambitious

The EU seeks to promote 'resilience' in Central Asia. The war in Ukraine should urge the EU to rethink its region-based approach to building resilience in Central Asia. Easier said than done, as the geographical distance of Central Asia and consequential strategic insignificance have led the EU to ignore the different resilience challenges that these countries face.

By Viktoriya Nem

When the European Union (EU) released a new strategy for Central Asia in 2019, one of its stated goals was to strengthen the resilience of the region, or its ability to withstand external and internal crises. The war in Ukraine is a crisis that is changing the status quo in Central Asia, given the region's close economic and political ties with Russia. In Europe, it is challenging the EU to become a more strategic actor. These shifting circumstances should prompt the EU to rethink its region-driven approach in building resilience in Central Asia. However, the geographical distance between both regions and the EU's default region-based thinking make it unlikely that Brussels will revisit its resilience agenda in Central Asia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks a shift in the development of the Eurasian continent. In Europe, it brought war to the region's borders and prompted the EU to take a decisively more geopolitical role. This manifested in swift-decision-making that resulted in substantial economic sanctions against Russia, including an import ban on Russian oil; humanitarian aid and accommodating Ukrainian refugees; and financial support to Ukraine and its armed forces. In Central Asia, it gave rise to considerations about the political and economic implications of the changing power status of Russia in the region, as Central Asia's traditional partner is increasingly cut off from the rest of the world.

And yet, when it comes to EU-Central Asia relations, not a lot is likely to change in the near future. Some characterised the EU's response to the war – including its decision to send direct military aid to Ukraine – as unprecedented for its foreign policy, because the EU broke its own rules on sending military assistance to other countries, opening a debate about the future of the EU's security and defence policies. However, the EU's main priority, as such, will remain managing the security risks in Europe

and its neighbourhood (the Western Balkans, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Turkey) rather than in a region like Central Asia, which is not close enough to merit a serious re-evaluation of its strategic importance in present circumstances.

Because EU-Central Asia relations are, to a substantial extent, informed by the geographical distance between the two, rather than trying to compete with Russia's or China's economic influence, the EU's presence in Central Asia is driven by its 'soft power' instrument in the form of a resilience (and prosperity) agenda. Resilience is one of the key features of the EU's Global Strategy, where it is conceptualised as the capacity of states and societies to reform and thus withstand and recover from internal and external crises. It seems a fuzzy concept, as the question of how resilience is to be interpreted and applied in the policy context is subject to debate even within the EU, as evidenced by the release of a follow-up Joint Communication (*A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action*, 7 June 2017) for clarification purposes. Even so, there is an explicit connection between resilience and security in the Global Strategy, where 'a resilient state is a secure state, and security is key for prosperity and democracy'. Consequently, the EU's investment into its resilience-building activities abroad is influenced by its security concerns, as instability in neighbouring countries threatens the security of the EU itself. Investing in resilient states and societies in the regions surrounding Europe pre-empts some of those risks.

This brings us to the EU's Strategy for Central Asia. Developed in 2007 and revised in 2019, the strategy gives an overview of the EU's engagement mechanisms and priorities in Central Asia, with the overall goal of boosting societal resilience across the region. One of the three stated priorities in the region is 'partnering for resilience', which includes rather diverse focus areas, ranging from democracy to border management to the environment, which seem to derive from the 2007 version of the strategy but are now bundled together under the resilience header.

While in the 2019 strategy the EU acknowledges 'the significant differences between the Central Asian countries in their socio-economic development stages and models', programmes and practice suggest that the EU's ambition of exporting its own successes of regional integration runs counter to its stated aims of strengthening resilience in Central Asia. The problem with approaching resilience from this regional angle is that Central Asia is not integrated enough for region-oriented programmes and initiatives to be truly effective at achieving resilient societies. The threats to stability that Central Asian countries face, for instance, including those from the fallout of the war in Ukraine, are not of the same nature or priority level across countries. For instance, for Kazakhstan, which is still in a deep political crisis after the events of Bloody January, the most pressing challenge lies in managing the ongoing political reforms against citizens' expectations for real political change while minimising the spill over effect of the European oil ban against Russia on its energy exports to the European market. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are highly dependent on remittances to sustain their economy, are concerned with the World Bank's projected 25-30 per cent drop in remittance inflows from Russia.

The EU's initial neighbourhood policy development – and subsequent necessity to differentiate between the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Eastern Partnership – is an illustration of how approaching regions that are not culturally, economically, or politically homogeneous as one coherent entity is not always effective.

In the same vein, the EU's resilience engagement in Central Asia may benefit from a degree of differentiation, addressing each country's vulnerabilities and security challenges separately rather than through 'one-size-fits-all' instruments. In the area of civil society support in Central Asia, for instance, the EU is already facing criticism for its tendency to export European solutions with the expectation that these will work in the Central Asian context as well.

On the ground, the EU's resilience-driven activities translate into various thematic programmes; some long-standing (Border Management Programme in Central Asia, BOMCA, for example) and others emerging because of a specific crisis, like the Central Asia Covid-19 Crisis Response Programme (CACCR) that aimed at increasing resilience of national healthcare systems in Central Asia as part of the Team Europe global response to covid-19. The global success of Team Europe gave rise to a variety of national and regional initiatives, with two regional ones being developed for Central Asia: 'Water-Energy-Climate Change in Central Asia' and 'EU-Central Asia Digital Bridge'. Two of the main goals are to 'scale up' the EU's collective impact and 'increase visibility' of its development efforts. This suggests that the Team Europe format is at least partly driven by the EU's self-image/branding aspirations as opposed to development needs and priorities of partner countries. As its core innovation lies in the pooling of available financial resources, further centralising the already-centralised system, both in terms of priority-setting power and financial instruments, it remains to be seen whether the adoption of the Team Europe format is going to benefit Central Asia.

It is unlikely that the EU's approach to resilience in Central Asia will change in a meaningful way any time soon. First, Central Asia's geographical distance determines the low strategic importance of Central Asia for the EU. Given the impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU's domestic security, the priorities will remain closer to its borders. Second, even if the EU were to re-evaluate the strategic importance of Central Asia and look to enhance engagement to the level of 'neighbourhood' countries, it would still do it through the lens of regionalism because of the EU's habit of exporting its own regional integration story, presenting itself as a 'knowledgeable mentor'. However, in terms of resilience support, this approach is unlikely to work because Central Asia is not a coherent enough region, especially with regard to the specific security and stability risks that each country faces.

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