

# COMMENTARY



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## EU-Central Asia co-operation: same venue, different tune.

*As a result of Russia's war in Ukraine, the focus of Europe-Central Asia relations is likely to change. In weathering these changes, both regions will need to nurture their mechanisms of cooperation. They will also need to be better informed about each other's developments and make long-term investments in people and exchanges.*

*By Gulzada Rysbekova*

The war in Ukraine will impact international relations in Eurasia, including the ties between the European Union (EU) and Central Asia. Whereas both regions are unlikely to either work closer together or drift apart, the focus of the EU's engagement with Central Asia and Central Asia's views on Europe are likely to change. In a landscape of declining Russian influence and growing Chinese prominence, Central Asian states will increasingly buttress their identity by developing national narratives and embracing either authoritarian or traditionalist values. So, what can Europe do to play a positive role in Central Asia that serves its own political, economic, and development cooperation interests and is welcomed by Central Asian counterparts? Whereas it is unclear how Central Asia will develop in terms of security and stability, there is a need for short-term analyses and inside knowledge on Central Asian developments, as well as a longer-term interest in building closer ties and understanding between Europeans and Central Asians.

The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia outlines three intertwined concepts: resilience, prosperity, and cooperation. In terms of resilience, the EU outlines its ambition to help Central Asian countries and societies better withstand economic, security, and other pressures and risks. Under the prosperity envelope, the EU seeks to support Central Asia and strengthen its economies through facilitating trade and education. To do this, the third chapter discusses the mechanisms through which the EU and Central Asia work together and could work better together. Most political mechanisms have existed for a long time, such as the Annual Foreign Affairs Ministers' Meetings and the High-level Political and Security Dialogue. Others are fairly new, such as the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum or have not yet seen the light of day such as the senior officials' meetings.

The infrastructure built over the past 15 years since the launch of the 2007 EU-Central Asia strategy should be able to offer both regions the means for coordination and cooperation. But this infrastructure has neither been tested to the fullest, as there have not been severe rifts in the relations between Europe and Central Asia since 2005, when the EU installed and later lifted sanctions against Uzbekistan, nor have these mechanisms played a key role in substantially advancing cooperation.

Central Asia is in a difficult position, both economically following international sanctions against Russia and in terms of foreign policy development. In Central Asia, there are severe concerns over the war in Europe and the EU's own relationship with China and Russia. Central Asian leaders are walking a thin rope in between Western sanctions on Russia that have a bearing on the region, especially on Kazakhstani oil exports, and refusal to publicly support Russia, including through non-recognition of the new republics in Ukraine. Central Asian countries will wait and carefully assess Russia's evolution and what value there will be in their participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union. Meanwhile, increased investments by China are welcome in the short-term, but there are growing concerns over the increasing dependence through debt. Most importantly, the process of nation building – or the shredding of one's 'post-Sovietness' – and establishing a national narrative is likely to speed up in current circumstances. Central Asian leaders will increasingly resort to a nationalistic message while preaching traditional values. This, in turn, could bring about tensions in society, as well as rivalry and disagreement among countries in the region.

For its part, the EU is set to become more strategic in defining its external policies. The emphasis on the Western Balkans and North African and East European neighbours is likely to deepen. Europe's key security challenges will lie in the continued refugee crisis to its south and the war in Ukraine to its east. Rethinking EU enlargement and building strong economic and political ties with direct neighbours will stand central. In turn, attention to regions further afield like Central Asia might dwindle as the direct security interests there are just less prominent for Europe. In this sense, the EU should exploit its ties with Central Asia to the maximum and think long-term to forge a stable relationship with the evolving countries of Central Asia. Besides the EU's declared ambitions in promoting resilience and prosperity, Brussels should work better together with Central Asia by nurturing its regional mechanisms, learning more about Central Asia's development, and making long-term investments to promote exchanges. These ingredients will be essential for both regions to 'work better together' in the future:

*Maintain and deepen regional mechanisms.* Central Asia has become prone to instability. At a national level, Kyrgyzstan has had its share of revolts and regime changes, while Kazakhstan was shaken by the crisis of January 2022 and Uzbekistan saw protests in Karakalpakstan in early July against proposed constitutional amendments and a subsequent violent clampdown. In May 2022, the authorities in Tajikistan violently quelled protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan region. Meanwhile, on a regional level, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are at odds over enclaves where violent skirmishes are a regular occurrence. Instability and violence could very well occur more often and be more intense. Whereas Europe will not step in a security vacuum potentially left by Russia, it should engage through its regional mechanism. A good example, even though 'closer to home', is the EU's recent mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

*Get better informed on Central Asia.* Europeans and Central Asians still know very little about each other. In the case of Europe, this became apparent in the reaction to and reporting on the violent events mentioned above. There is little understanding within European governments about the existing tensions over enclaves or the power structures in Central Asian countries. With the number and intensity of security crises on the rise, from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, the EU needs to invest in acquiring knowledge about these 'former' Soviet regions. The EU should increase its support to research and use European and Central Asian think tanks to acquire insights, as prescribed by the EU's strategy. The argument also works the other way around; whereas Central Asian understanding of EU instruments and mechanisms is improving, the input that think tanks can currently offer on Europe to their respective governments is modest at best.

*People to people contacts for the long-haul.* The EU should also focus on building long-term people-to-people ties. The most obvious way to do this is via higher education and through civil society cooperation. In the case of the former, the EU should be more creative, going beyond Erasmus to offer targeted fellowship, internship and exchange opportunities for young people from Central Asia. In the latter case, the EU could lay the ground for longer-term cooperation among NGOs from both regions. As part of its regional cooperation efforts, the EU should also look into cooperation through culture, tourism or sport, among others. There is much to gain in promoting the exchange of experiences, especially in terms of avoiding tensions and conflict.

The venue of cooperation in terms of interests and strategy has not changed for the EU and Central Asia. The tune, however, has changed, as all actors involved are profoundly affected by the war in Ukraine. The EU should prepare for engagement in the turbulent events of the region. In the same vein, Central Asia needs to nurture and further build its ties with Europe so as to have a solid partner to help in its process of change.

**Author:**

*Gulzada Rysbekova is a 2022 alumna EUCAM research fellow of the Centre for European Security Studies (CESS), Groningen, the Netherlands*



EUCAM is supported by a grant by the Open Society Foundations.