

POLICY BRIEF



EU-Central Asia connectivity: Using all the pieces

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The European Union (EU) has embarked on a connectivity agenda with Central Asia. While energy security and transition, as well as transport and digitalisation, are prioritised, these issues are being developed separately from ongoing work in the field of democratisation¹ and civil society engagement.² The EU is leaning heavily on the concept of connectivity and the building of infrastructure corridors. This is key to the EU's new notion of geopolitical power and its aim of curtailing Chinese and other influences. Central Asia is an important test case and battleground for this new approach. But corridors do not equate to good geopolitics. If it is to sustain its geopolitical ambitions, the EU will need to adopt a more concerted approach aimed at bringing actors and topics together. After all, pipelines, roads, and data cables are only as valuable as people make them. For connectivity to work between the EU and Central Asia, it will need to be inclusive, rules-based, and transparent with a view to building networks in which a variety of European and Central Asian people are pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, not only governments and a few companies.

Energy security concerns have returned to the EU's agenda. Today's European discourse of corridors that run from China via Central Asia and the Caucasus to Europe, surpassing Russia, are similar to the plans that unfolded in the mid-2000's when Russia started using energy as a weapon of extortion against Ukraine and the EU.

Key points:

- In response to Russia's war and China's rise, the EU has embarked on a geopolitical eastward connectivity endeavour in which Central Asia is an important component.
- In the EU's policy discourse on Central Asia, democracy promotion is downplayed, while engagement with Central Asian civil societies is detached from the EU's connectivity ambitions.
- The EU should beef-up and integrate human connectivity into its corridor plans, as pipelines, roads, and data cables are only as valuable as people make them.

1 In this paper, democracy promotion is regarded as the sum of support to good governance, rule of law, and respect for human rights.

2 In this paper, civil society is regarded as any place where civilians organise themselves outside of the state and business, with an emphasis on non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

After years of debates and numerous studies, no energy infrastructure that surpassed Russia emerged back then between Central Asia and Europe. Now, with the Northern Corridor through Russia still in use, instability rising in the Caucasus, and decreased European dependence on fossil fuels, it is not certain that a new energy corridor will fully materialise. At the same time, while, on paper, renewable hydrogen exports from Central Asia could be a viable option, in practise, it is a rather futuristic ambition. In contrast to the mid-2000's, these days broader transport and energy infrastructure is being developed through China's Belt and Road initiative and countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. For its part, the EU has made the Global Gateway – consisting of a Transcaspian network together with Team Europe's initiatives on Water, Energy, and Climate Change and on Digital Connectivity – the centre piece of its engagement with Central Asia.

Europe would do well to develop energy alternatives, improve trade routes, and assist Central Asian countries with their energy transition and digitalisation. But for these links to be sustainable and effective, plans will need to be underpinned by increased engagement with Central Asia as a whole, not only with its governments. Whereas Central Asian countries are unlikely to evolve into democracies in the short-term, working towards better governance, rules-based procedures, more transparency, and basic human rights, is of interest to both the EU and Central Asia, as European investors will likely seek stability over quick gains. While the EU aims to be more geopolitical in its relations, it is still ill-equipped to compete with China, Russia, and even Turkey on their terms. The attraction of being recognised by the EU and of having an alternative to China and Russia holds sway in Central Asia and should be used by the EU to forge ties that go beyond investment pledges and declaratory documents.

How can the EU better integrate realistic democracy promotion and concrete civil society engagement with the pursuit of its energy, transport, and digitalisation agenda with Central Asia? To answer this question, this policy brief starts by discussing the status and implementation of the 2019 EU Strategy towards Central Asia. It then zooms into the EU's three 'flagship' initiatives with Central Asia, namely the establishment of a Transcaspian network,³ and Team Europe's initiatives on Water, Energy, and Climate Change and on Digital Connectivity.⁴ Lastly, it discusses the EU's activities in terms of democratisation and civil society support.

In the conclusion, the paper presents seven suggestions to strengthen the EU's connectivity approach to Central Asia:

1. Revisit the 2019 EU-Central Asia Strategy and seek to reintegrate connectivity with democracy, education, and civil society objectives.
2. Commission follow-up studies to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) report to assess how EU investments into the Transcaspian

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3 In this policy brief, the terms Transcaspian network and 'the corridor' are both used. These are just two terms among many that are used by policymakers and academics such as Transcaspian route, Transcaspian corridor or middle corridor.

4 For the sake of simplicity, we refer to the two Global Gateway Team Europe initiatives as 'the initiatives'.

network will affect the local circumstances and development of Central Asian countries.

3. Urge member states that are interested in energy, trade, and digital connectivity with Central Asia to connect their investments to support for democracy, education, and civil society.
4. Set standards on corruption, rule of law, good governance, and inclusiveness with Central Asian countries in return for assistance with their energy transition.
5. Set standards on human rights, rule of law, good governance, and inclusiveness with Central Asian countries in return for assistance in digitalisation.
6. Invest in rule of law and good governance cooperation with Central Asia that is realistic and tangible.
7. Invest in capacity building and education in Central Asia and support exchanges between European and Central Asian (civil) societies.

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The strategy

EU foreign policy, and the environment it operates in, has changed since 2019 when Brussels presented a long-thought-through and debated Central Asia Strategy.⁵ The covid pandemic, climate change, anti-democratic challenges, and Russia's war against Ukraine have all had their bearing on Europe-Central Asia relations. European leaders now see Central Asian countries as more than a simple appendix to Russia. Central Asian leaderships are more eager to build ties with the EU, even though they remain nervous about Russia's future regarding energy transit or as a destination for labour migration. A new high-level meeting format was created in 2022 for Central Asian heads of state and the President of the European Council, while a summit is planned for the end of 2024. In EU circles, 'it's easier to get things done on Central Asia',⁶ while in the weekly meetings of the Working Party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia (COEST) – in which member state representatives discuss Eastern Europe and Central Asia – more time is reserved for Central Asia as Ukraine is discussed in the Foreign Affairs Council.⁷ The main point of contention is Russia, as Central

5 For a recent overview on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, see: Rosamund Shreeves, Angelos Delivorias, and Anna Caprile, 'The EU Strategy on Central Asia: Towards new momentum?', Briefing, European Parliament Research Service, April 2024.

6 Interview with European policymaker, 26 June 2024.

7 Jos Boonstra, 'Modest but consistent: European Union policymaking towards Central Asia', *Crossroads Central Asia*, September 2023, p. 5.

Asian countries transit sanctioned goods to Russia. Evasion of sanctions is a frustration with which the EU has difficulty in dealing. 'Engagement is good, but results are not enough',⁸ argues one policymaker.

Over the past five years, Central Asia has had its share of instability, ranging from unrest and protests that were violently put down in Kazakhstan in January 2022 and in Uzbekistan's autonomous region of Karakalpakstan that same year, to hostilities between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over enclaves and regular tensions over Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region. Today, these stability concerns are seen as less urgent than those in the South Caucasus to which Central Asian is increasingly linked. The risk of war in the South Caucasus is a variable affecting EU-Central Asia relations: Georgia has changed its fur from reform-minded to authoritarian rule-building; Azerbaijan is self-confident after winning a war against Armenia and remains difficult to work with according to European observers and insiders alike; while Armenia is in limbo after losing Nagorno-Karabakh and rethinking its ties with Russia. At the same time, Azerbaijan is increasingly positioning itself as a Central Asian country and an indispensable hub between Asia and Europe – a role that Georgia also aspires to.

How does this all bode for the EU-Central Asia Strategy? Isn't it time to develop a new document? Not really, argue several observers and insiders. While there was at one point interest from Central Asian countries and a few civil society representatives in updating the strategy, the idea did not gain traction. There are three reasons that argue against the development of a new Strategy. *First*, it would be difficult (if not impossible) to reach agreement on language regarding Russia's war in Ukraine.⁹ Central Asians will want to stay neutral and oppose terminology on Russia that the EU will demand. Whereas it is an EU text, a cheerful outlook from Central Asia towards the strategy is of course imperative. *Second*, the current EU Strategy was the result of a lengthy and inclusive process, in which Central Asian countries and civil societies were invited to chip in alongside a more decisive input by EU member states. The feeling now is that there is no time to deliberate strategies, and the focus should be on implementation.¹⁰ *Third*, lots of language on democracy and human rights would be lost, as some EU member states would likely want to tone this down, while Central Asian leaderships would also try to have a renewed say on this. In Brussels, the talk of the town is connectivity, not democracy promotion.

There is nothing in the current strategy that is invalid or no longer applies. Resilience (made up of democracy, security, and the environment) and prosperity (consisting of economy, trade, connectivity, and education) are both still important. In today's discourse, the environment, economy, trade, and connectivity are timely and inter-linked, while democracy, security, and education are increasingly treated as separate dossiers of ongoing work. The EU should reintegrate these topics to ensure that it plays to its strengths, namely the promotion of its democratic values and the offer of cooperation on education. These two aspects are key to building sustainable trade and energy connectivity.

8 Interview with European policymaker, 26 June 2024.

9 Interview with European policymaker, 26 June 2024.

10 Point of view expressed during a roundtable on EU-Central Asia relations, 29 May 2024.

Whereas the EU should include security as a topic linked to connectivity, Brussels' possibilities are limited. Central Asian countries are increasingly keen to collaborate with European partners on security, also as a means to limit Russia's security influence.¹¹ But the EU should not engage in security cooperation that consists of military and surveillance hardware, as it could be wrongly used by Central Asian partners. The EU's long-term border management project BOMCA focuses on capacity building and experience sharing but lacks military advice or security-related equipment. This approach could also be applied to other security fields such as security sector governance and cybersecurity, as aspects of democracy and education are incorporated into security cooperation.

The EU has enough strategies and documents to engage with Central Asia. The EU Global Strategy, a Connecting Europe and Asia Connectivity Strategy, the EU-Central Asia Strategy, a Joint Roadmap for deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia, and a potential Black Sea Strategy in 2025.¹² One observer argues that the amount of EU paperwork is remarkable, especially compared to the outputs, which remain limited. However, the material does give good insights to researchers on the EU's intentions.¹³ Another observer argues that while all of these strategies might be important to the EU and its bureaucracy, Central Asian leadership take little interest, as Presidents define policies, not strategies.¹⁴ It is recognised, nonetheless, that Central Asian leaders do take note of strategies, as their policymakers actively negotiate for increased trade and security cooperation.

The most recently-added document is a Joint Roadmap that appeared in October 2023¹⁵ and was proposed by Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The document has been a useful exercise of engagement between EU and Central Asian policymakers. It also serves as an insightful checklist of ongoing EU-Central Asia activities and plans. However, most action points start with 'resume', 'continue', 'consider', 'strengthen', and 'explore', making it rather free of any specific obligation. The main disappointment lies in its structure and focus. Whereas the EU Strategy for Central Asia starts out with democracy and human rights, the roadmap mentions these issues in the introduction but does not attach any action points to them. The parts on 'security' and 'people-to-people' at the end do not carry the same weight on content as the first parts on 'political dialogue', 'trade', and 'energy'. One could imagine that the EU wanted to keep the security part to a minimum (no hard security support to Central Asian regimes) and that Central Asian countries were not keen on the people-to-people section (civil society initiatives). The document breathes a departure from the EU's holistic approach and seems to rely on high-level political dialogue that should lead to more trade and energy cooperation.

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11 Interview with European policymaker, 26 June 2024.

12 Interview with European policymaker, 26 June 2024.

13 Listen to 'A Chat in the Yurt', EUCAM podcast, episode XI, with Aijan Sharshenova, 12 February 2024.

14 Point of view expressed during a roundtable on EU-Central Asia relations, 29 May 2024.

15 'Joint roadmap for deepening ties between the EU and Central Asia', Council of the European Union, 23 October 2023.

The corridor

The EU has embarked on building a connection between China and Europe via Central Asia and the South Caucasus that runs south of Russia and north of Iran. In EU circles, the preference is to talk about the Central Trans-Caspian Network as the EU stresses that it is a network, although the terms corridor and route are also used. Outside of the bureaucracy, people often speak about the Middle Corridor, a term that can also be seen as a parallel Azerbaijan-Kazakhstani initiative. And indeed, the Transcaspian network is not built in isolation, but interconnects and overlaps with infrastructure built by other actors.

The EU now regards 'the corridor' as the main work between the EU and Central Asia, although policymakers have different takes on the plans. Some see the Transcaspian network as the main driver of EU-Central Asia relations. Others see it as a practical 'Plan B' in case the Northern Corridor through Russia is shut down because of the war or a new situation in Russia. Still others emphasise the opportunity for EU energy diversification, while some stress Central Asian development and energy transition. Whatever the views, the EU is set to follow-up on the June 2023 'Sustainable transport connections between Europe and Central Asia' report by the EBRD that proposes to develop thirty-three hard infrastructure investments and seven soft connectivity measures.

The EBRD report aims to identify the most sustainable transport connections between Central Asia and Europe, but it does not take into account the broader strategic environment in the Caucasus and Central Asia, or plans by other actors such as China's Belt and Road initiative, Russia's infrastructural plans, and initiatives that South Caucasus and Central Asian countries develop themselves. The assessment of what impact 'the corridor' would have on the socio-economic make-up of the countries involved is superficial, as it barely considers governance. In discussing soft connectivity measures, the report argues for the separation of policymaking and licensing and unbundling of state-owned businesses, but it is unclear on how this could be achieved as control of business lies at the core of Central Asian regimes' grip on power. The soft connectivity measures discussed aim at digitalisation, interoperability, and trade facilitation but largely leave rule of law, governance, and human rights out of the equation. While the study offers a great 'to do list' to make 'the corridor' happen, it does not argue that the Transcaspian network is a good idea that should be pursued. Nonetheless, the EU policy community does see the report as the green light to put all cards on the corridor.

Whereas the costs of implementing soft connectivity measures are still unclear, infrastructural investments are measured at €18.5 billion. To begin hurdling support and attract investment for 'the corridor', in January 2024 the EU organised a Global Gateway Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity. The EU and some financial institutions had already pledged €10 billion.¹⁶ Some companies from Kazakhstan have shown interest. And while it is possible that the plans spark curiosity among some larger EU member states, broader interest among European companies is certainly not assured.

16 Key outcomes of the Global Gateway Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity, Brussels, 29-30 January 2024.

As they assess their needs and the risks involved, they are likely to take a wait and see approach. Currently, the EU is building a Coordination Platform, while the EU and Central Asia are planning a summit for the end of 2024 and a second Investors Forum next year.

There are good energy security and trade development reasons to build a network through Central Asia and the Caucasus, but there are also concerns that are not highlighted in policy documents or reports on EU planning. *First*, 'the corridor' itself is considered a risk, as it runs through a series of authoritarian-governed countries that do not always see eye-to-eye, and the Caspian Sea where littoral states have conflicting interests. Here, in contrast to shipping, where a commodity goes directly from producer to buyer, numerous borders need to be crossed, with high risks of conflict and blockades along the way. Georgia's recent authoritarian turn already begs some reconsideration on the EU's part regarding data and electricity infrastructure through the Black Sea, especially if the country's upcoming elections end October 2024 lead to a further entrenching of the current government.¹⁷ In the past, similar concerns have kept European investors away from the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Increased EU engagement on transparency, accountability, and standards that lead to more trustworthy procedures could maybe motivate European investors.

A *second* major concern is that the Transcaspian network becomes an exclusive link that is used primarily by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to develop their economies and multi-vector policies. There could be little benefit to other Central Asian countries like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan while Armenia in the South Caucasus is also largely excluded from most infrastructure plans. Besides giving Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan an advantage in the region, there is also the risk of exclusion within these countries themselves, as authoritarian regimes are notorious for using economic gains for personal enrichment or regime security instead of for the development of their economies and societies. Thus, a connectivity approach should also integrate a people-to-people approach that includes education and civil society, instead of fully relying on government-to-government cooperation.

The initiatives

As part of the Global Gateway, the EU developed two Team Europe initiatives directed at Central Asia. The Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate Change is substantial, while the Initiative on Digital Connectivity is humbler. The Team Europe approach brings together EU institutions, member states, the EBRD and the European Investment Bank (EIB) in joint projects. The EU would do well to approach these longer-term Global Gateway engagements in concert with its stated democratisation and human rights proclamations, by applying clearer conditionality with partner countries and involving civil society.¹⁸

The Water, Energy and Climate Change initiative seeks to bring new coordination to ongoing EU work, as well as initiate new avenues of activity. The first category includes the EU's programmes on water (the EU Water Initiative) and energy (the project Sustainable

17 Interview with European policymaker, 26 June 2024.

18 Richard Youngs, 'A call to defend democracy. Reviving democracy support under the EU's incoming leadership', European Endowment for Democracy, 2024, p.10.

Energy Connectivity in Central Asia). More recent plans include paying increasing attention to issues such as the long-standing draught of the Aral Sea, and investing in building the Tajik Rogun Dam project to boost hydroelectric power, which used to be a source of tension with Uzbekistan but that now is foremost a bottomless pit of investment.

There are doubts on the viability of the initiative. The EU risks spreading its attention too thinly at extremely sensitive programmes, while it does not have the knowledge or capacity on the ground (even with member state and/or EIB/EBRD involvement) to carefully guide and monitor investments and projects. To secure the success of such a broad Team Europe, the EU will need to ensure that it continues to be regarded as a neutral partner that is positively engaged on sensitive topics while managing expectations regarding the results that the initiative can realistically obtain. The EU will also need to be 'strict and accountable' and avoid that European taxpayers' and investors' money be lost among corruption in Central Asia.¹⁹ Whereas EU officials are happy to lay out some of the initiative's initial plans, little is known on the 'what' and 'how' of the project, especially regarding its funding and implementation.²⁰

The Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity is clearer, as it largely comes down to infrastructure to increase Central Asians' internet access. The plan foresees satellite connections through the building of 'earth stations' with integrated datacentres, in addition to a longer-term plan to build a data cable to Central Asia through the Caspian Sea.²¹ The EU's connectivity plans with Central Asia are primarily built on the notion that increased internet access will create a digital economy in Central Asia and, with that, increase trade.

Whereas closing the digital gap is a great transformative feature for Central Asian societies, it is more likely that governments are the ones prospering from digitalisation. By focusing on bringing 'hard' digital connections to Central Asia, it is likely that 'soft' digital connectivity in the form of regulations and standards will be adapted only half-heartedly by local regimes, possibly even leading to digital authoritarianism.²² The EU argues for guiding digital connectivity with 'policy dialogue for better governance, including improved adherence to EU data and data flow management core principles and cybersecurity'.²³ This will be challenging, as the difference in cybersecurity and digitalisation policies is big in Central Asia, with some countries having basic regulations and laws and others barely any arrangements at all. In all Central Asian countries, there is a big gap between limited technical capacity and vulnerability to cyber threats.²⁴

19 Shyngys Zipatolla, 'Mission impossible: The Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate in Central Asia', EUCAM Commentary No. 54, July 2023, p3.

20 'Central Asia-EU – Water-Energy-Climate Change in Central Asia', Global Gateway infographic, 2024, available at: https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/media/250930/download/3fdcbd63-4043-4021-9d5e-267b6f73c954_en

21 'Central Asia-EU – Central Asia Digital Bridge', Global Gateway infographic, 2024, available at: https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/media/250931/download/6d7da60e-0729-4ec6-8d96-7fce07f0fea7_en

22 Alouddin Komilov, 'The European Union and Central Asia: Bridging the digital divide', EUCAM Commentary No. 53, July 2023, p3.

23 'Central Asia-EU – Central Asia Digital Bridge', 2024, op. cit.

24 Listen to 'A Chat in the Yurt', EUCAM podcast, episode XVII, with Laylo Mirali and Anouk Vos, 25 September 2024.

Democracy and civil society

EU democracy promotion abroad is connected to the status of democracy in the EU itself. As the EU is troubled by member states that are breaking down democratic institutions, concerned with populist parties gaining influence, and alert to disinformation affecting democracy, it is less staunch in promoting democracy abroad, at least in practice. Not so on paper. For internal purposes, in 2020 the EU adopted a European Democracy Action Plan and, three years later, it introduced a Defence of Democracy package, both aimed at strengthening accountability, transparency, and inclusivity in democracies, as well as promoting free, fair, and resilient elections in the EU. Regarding external democracy promotion, also in 2020 the EU adopted its third Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, aimed at promoting democracy and defending human rights worldwide – a policy that has been around since 2012 with an EU Special Representative in place and a budget allocated to meeting objectives. At the same time, democracy is part of EU agreements with partners and is highlighted in most strategic documents.

Whereas the framework is in place, the promotion of democracy and human rights has increasingly become detached from other policy fields with Central Asia. Surely, concerns about laws that curtail media or civil society are criticised by EU dignitaries when meeting with Central Asian counterparts, but it is non-consequential. In the field of human rights, the EU chooses to focus on individual cases that are being discussed in meetings, while not urging partners to improve the broader human rights situation in their countries.²⁵ Democracy-related language in documents and agreements is resisted by Central Asian leaderships but eventually agreed to; public lip service to democracy by EU officials is accepted as part of the game; and democracy-related projects aimed at the authorities is welcomed if it does not directly touch power structures.

As European democracy-promotion experts call for clearer conditionality on democracy with partners abroad,²⁶ the EU has moved in the exact opposite direction with Kyrgyzstan. For four years, democratic credentials and human rights have spiralled downwards in the country while the EU negotiated an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kyrgyzstan. The EPCA was signed in June 2024, just two months after Kyrgyzstan adopted a foreign agents' law to curtail NGO activity. This is said to have prompted serious debates within the EU bureaucracy, with some advocating for postponing the agreement's signature and others preferring to move ahead.²⁷ Today the narrative is that 'Through the signing of the EPCA, the EU and the Kyrgyz Republic will strengthen the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for democratic principles, the rule of law and good governance, as well as the development of parliamentary democracy'.²⁸ Another way of looking at this is that, by signing the EPCA, the EU has given up its leverage over Kyrgyzstan. One could argue that, from President Sadyr Japarov's perspective, curtailing media and NGO freedoms leads to more engagement with Brussels.

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25 Interview with civil society representative, 27 June 2024.

26 Richard Youngs, 2024, op. cit., p.6.

27 Interview with European policymaker, 26 June 2024.

28 'EU-Kyrgyz Republic. Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement', EU infographic, June 2024, available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/factsheet-enhanced-partnership-and-cooperation-agreement-between-eu-and-kyrgyz-republic_en

This could also pose a risk to the EU's leverage over Tajikistan and Uzbekistan amidst ongoing EPCA negotiations with these two countries.

Aside from democracy promotion with Central Asian authorities, EU support to civil society organisations is also difficult. Whereas the EU is distributing funds, NGOs are facing challenges to survive in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. That is if they are not forbidden, like in Turkmenistan and, to some extent, in Uzbekistan. As the EU seeks to support civil society, some Central Asian governments' discourse is that NGOs are Western agents that are spreading modernist views that are contrary to traditional values. Often, such views are reflected in new laws, mostly imported from Russia. Over the past five years, the EU has organised annual EU-Central Asia civil society fora. Initially, these meetings were welcomed and well-attended, but hard to organise for the EU. Currently, these fora are being reevaluated. To avoid that these meetings become a gathering for government-organised NGOs (GONGOs), with agendas heavily set by Central Asian governments and EU bureaucracies, it would make sense to hold these meetings in Brussels for and by EU-based and Central Asian NGOs.

The EU is active through a flurry of funded people-to-people programmes and projects. Most of these initiatives stand separate from the connectivity subjects of energy and trade. Regarding digitalisation, there seems to be more connection with people-to-people initiatives, as the EU and member states are increasingly active with digitalisation and cybersecurity training programmes in Central Asia.²⁹ Ongoing educational cooperation stands largely by itself through the Erasmus programme – in this field, substantial gains could be made in increasingly connecting educational cooperation to connectivity-related areas.

Bringing priorities together

The EU should avoid tunnel vision in building an energy, transport, and digital network with Central Asia. In contrast to Chinese or Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani plans, EU investment should be embedded into a broader connectivity approach that cooperates with governments on transparent and accountable procedures and human rights, and involves populations through education and civil society initiatives. Here are seven steps for the EU to get its connectivity approach to Central Asia right:

1. *Revisit the 2019 EU-Central Asia Strategy and seek to reintegrate connectivity with democracy, education, and civil society objectives.* The promotion of the concepts of resilience and prosperity in Central Asia still apply today. The holistic approach bringing together economic, governance, security, and social matters is also still valid. Now that the EU has chosen to group economic and energy issues under the connectivity header, it should avoid treating democracy promotion, education, and security as a separate dossier. This should be apparent in the EU's engagement with Central Asia from high-level meetings to connecting projects.

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29 Illustrative list of cooperation and project examples, EU infographic, available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_central_asia_connectivity_-_project_examples_.pdf

2. *Commission follow-up studies to the EBRD report to assess how EU investments into the Transcaspiian network will affect the local circumstances and development of Central Asian countries.* The report 'Sustainable transport connections between Europe and Central Asia' offers the EU the possibility of pushing 'the corridor' ahead by establishing a 'to-do list' of soft connectivity measures and hard infrastructure investments. Central Asian (and South Caucasus') countries internal situation, with their feeble socio-economic balances, is discussed but not assessed. In line with its holistic approach, the EU should be more aware of how connectivity policies can positively or negatively affect social-economic balances in Central Asia. In the EU, there are independent think tanks that could provide such insights.
3. *Urge member states that are interested in energy, trade, and digital connectivity with Central Asia to connect their investments to support for democracy, education, and civil society.* The EU is institutionally well represented in Central Asia, whereas most member states have only a few or no embassies in the region, relying mostly on EU delegations to represent them. In trying to increase member state involvement, the EU could offer packages of 'hard' infrastructural investments together with 'soft' democratisation, education, and people-to-people projects. The EU offers access, coordination, and guidance in Central Asia, while member states can bring increased activities, funding, and weight to the table. Even though there are several member states already involved, investment in infrastructure and support to EU projects are often disconnected.
4. *Set standards on corruption, rule of law, good governance, and inclusiveness with Central Asian countries in return for assistance with their energy transition.* The Central Asian countries most likely to prosper from the EU's connectivity approach are also the main fossil-energy producers. While Kazakhstan and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are keen to provide oil and gas to Europe, they are also aware of the need to shift to alternative sources of energy and exports. The EU plans to cooperate on energy transition through its Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate Change. As part of this, the EU could for instance provide Central Asia with expertise in creating an innovative environment for green energy startups (with the help of member states).³⁰ In making investments and helping all five countries to switch from fossil-fuel production or imports to green-energy production and consumption, the EU should demand clear progress in jointly agreed rules and procedures. These standards are not meant to forge European-style democracies, but rather to make Central Asia a more trustworthy partner for Europe (and others) to invest in.
5. *Set standards on human rights, rule of law, good governance, and inclusiveness with Central Asian countries in return for assistance in digitalisation.* The EU can help Central Asian countries have better access to the internet, digitalising various aspects of the bureaucracy such as trade clearances and border crossings, as well as by providing expertise on cybersecurity. But delivering infrastructure and expertise for digitalisation also comes with risks in authoritarian countries, as authorities

30 Listen to 'A Chat in the Yurt', EUCAM podcast, episode IX, with Roman Vakulchuk, 27 November 2023.

receive more means to identify and track critics or control groups of people.³¹ The EU is a leader in guiding and regulating digitalisation and should transfer tailored advice to Central Asian partners that receive greater digital means so as to ensure that new technology is accessible to those that are keen to make use of it, not only to those who can afford it. Moreover, the EU should closely monitor the appliance of assistance in digitalisation to avoid misuse, as well as combine such efforts with assistance programmes on cybersecurity and digital literacy.

6. *Invest in rule of law and good governance cooperation with Central Asia that is realistic and tangible.* Central Asian governments have no intension of moving their countries towards democracy. EU prescriptions of democracy are bound to be seen as an unwelcome interference or double standards. Still, there is ample space for the EU to work with Central Asia on democracy. Next to setting clear standards in relation to Team Europe initiatives (points 4 and 5), the EU could implement concrete experience-sharing and capacity building projects with Central Asia. Projects work best when they can connect a concrete topic (cybersecurity, water management, urban planning, etc.) to governance issues (transparency, accountability, gender, etc.) and when they have a particular focus on civil servants but also on civil society and youth. Such work should be non-political and seek to generate knowledge and awareness.
7. *Invest in capacity building and education in Central Asia and support exchanges between European and Central Asian (civil) societies.* Pipelines, roads, and data cables are only as valuable as people make them. The dimension of people-to-people connectivity is often ignored and underfunded. If the EU really sees Central Asia as important for diversification of different commodities, then it should also invest in becoming a trustworthy partner itself. The best way for this is still capacity building and education initiatives, in which Europeans and Central Asians exchange experiences and knowledge, for instance through a genuine civil society forum in Europe. Infrastructure connectivity investments take time to materialise and so do education programmes, so it is best if they are developed hand in hand. Options for EU and member state engagement through capacity building and experience sharing programming will be presented in EUCAM's upcoming brief (no. 40).

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31 Listen to 'A Chat in the Yurt', EUCAM podcast, episode XVI, with Bakhytzhan Kurmanov and Colin Knox, 3 September 2024.



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 continues 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.



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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