

# POLICY BRIEF



**European development  
cooperation with Central Asia:  
From abstract to concrete**

# European development cooperation with Central Asia: From abstract to concrete

## Authors

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The European Union (EU) is a substantial development cooperation partner for Central Asia. Between 2021 and 2024, the European Commission (EC) allocated €229 million to Kyrgyzstan (€62 million), Tajikistan (€91 million), and Uzbekistan (€76 million). The full budget cycle until 2027 includes an additional €140 million, also involving Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Next to that, the EU is increasingly linking its support to activities funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB), while several member states have their own individual development cooperation programmes. While these investments may seem minimal compared with funds destined to North African countries and the EU's East European neighbours, for countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, they are very relevant. Understanding EU development cooperation is hard, as there is not much information available on the process in-between the indicative programmes and the projects that one might see being implemented on the ground.

EU development cooperation has gone through a transformation over the past few years, as planned institutional reforms ahead of the 2021-7 budget cycle were immediately tested by the Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The former resulted in the concerted Team Europe approach. The latter highlighted the connectivity focus with Central Asia. But neither resulted in a substantial change in funding levels. The regional component of the EU's development efforts is geared toward connectivity with Central Asia through trade, energy (transition), and digitalisation.

## Key points:

- EU development cooperation with Central Asia is a technical process that is difficult to fathom for outside observers who seek to understand and value its impact.
- As the EU works with Central Asian governments through 'blending and guarantees' and 'sectoral budget support', there is a need to prioritise concrete projects where Central Asians and Europeans can work together.
- If Central Asian and European civil societies want to remain relevant through impactful projects, they need to get smart on digitalisation, energy transition, and climate change.

Bilaterally, attention is paid to human rights and civil society, as well as topics like agriculture, education, and healthcare. Today, the bulk of EU development cooperation funding is allocated through Global Gateway Team Europe Initiatives. In the case of Central Asia, this translates into a focus on connectivity, mixing development cooperation funds with trade, energy, climate, and digital objectives.

As Central Asia has risen in prominence on the European foreign policy radar in recent years, there is increased interest among EU member states to be engaged with the region. But only the largest members have embassies in all or almost all Central Asian countries, while the bulk of EU countries only have an embassy in Kazakhstan. Because the EU has delegations in all five countries, it has a strong European representation and coordination position in Central Asia. Several member states are already involved in EU programming in the region, participating in various long-term activities.<sup>1</sup> Some countries, such as Italy,<sup>2</sup> are also investing in connectivity with Central Asia, while others are likely to consider increased involvement. Ideally, such investments would be accompanied by development cooperation projects.

This policy brief outlines eight connectivity project ideas that are characterised by human interaction, with long-term benefits for both Europe and Central Asia. Some of the suggestions have already been partially initiated. This is great news, but more is needed. While this policy paper argues for increased funding for Central Asia, it advocates that investments be channelled through civil society projects, which currently represent only a small slice of a modest pie. If the EU finds connectivity important, it should offer a larger slice of the existing pie to civil society and a smaller one to Central Asian governments, or decide to bake a bigger pie.

This paper advocates for more European engagement with Central Asians as part of the EU's connectivity approach.<sup>3</sup> We do so in three segments; the eight ideas below are elaborated in-depth towards the end of the paper.

### ***Ideas for structural support***

1. Boost the European educational presence in Central Asia.
2. Create a digitalisation hub and an energy transition centre in Central Asia.

### ***Ideas for capacity building***

3. Fund governance and rule of law projects for mixed groups of civil servants and civil society actors.
4. Develop an attractive media programme that builds capacity and counters Russian disinformation.
5. Help Central Asian researchers get access to European funding.

1 For instance, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia are involved in the Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate.

2 Fabio Indeo and Frank Maracchione, 'The localisation of Italian Multilateralism: The Italy-Central Asia 5+1 Format in a Comparative Analysis with China and the United States', *Studies on Central Asia and the Caucasus* 1, 2024, pp. 181-200.

3 Also see Jos Boonstra, 'EU-Central Asia connectivity: Using all the pieces', EUCAM Policy Brief 39, October 2024, available at <EU-Central Asia connectivity: Using all the pieces – EUCAM>, accessed on 5 November 2024.

### ***Ideas for experience-sharing***

6. Support civil society cross-border projects that link to connectivity objectives.
7. Redevelop a genuine Europe-Central Asia Civil Society Forum.
8. Build a Central Asian young professionals visiting programme.

This policy brief is divided into two main parts. The first part briefly outlines the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of EU development cooperation with Central Asia. This work builds on a background paper by CESS intern Rik Coopman, for which the authors are grateful. This section also leans on an online survey among the EUCAM network of alumni fellows, associates, and advisors (28 respondents), and interviews conducted in May and July 2024 in Brussels. The second part presents the above-mentioned eight ideas for the EU and its member states to deepen and diversify their connectivity approach, focusing on the human interaction component. This part also reacts to the question occasionally posed by national European policymakers: ‘What projects or field would be good to support in Central Asia?’. This section too draws on the EUCAM network survey, as well as on a brainstorming meeting with Aida Aidarkulova and Tlegen Kuandykov (CAPS Unlock, Almaty), Rashid Gabdulhakov (University of Groningen), and Roman Vakulchuk (NUPI, Oslo) both of which sought to bring together expertise from and about Central Asia and Europe. The authors would like to thank the meeting participants for their inputs, as well as Chiara Pierobon (Viadrina University of Frankfurt) for also reviewing a draft version of this paper.

## **European development cooperation**

Under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) or ‘Global Europe’, in the budget cycle for 2021-7, the EU has around €80 billion to invest on geographic programmes, thematic programmes, rapid response actions, as well as unforeseen circumstances. Of this budget, roughly €575 million is allocated to Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> Whereas this is a rather modest portion of the EU’s global development assistance, 64 per cent of EUCAM survey respondents considered the EU to be a ‘visible’ actor, while almost 40 per cent agreed that ‘the EU is the most important development cooperation partner to Central Asia’. Still, three out of four believe that ‘the EU should provide more funding for development cooperation with Central Asia’. At the same time, 43 per cent ‘agree’ and 39 per cent ‘fully agree’ with the statement that ‘EU development assistance helps Central Asian countries to develop in a positive direction’.

A novelty established during the Covid lockdowns is the Team Europe approach that aims to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the EU’s external actions by pooling resources and expertise. Team Europe Initiatives include the EU, member states with their agencies, and the EIB and EBRD. The scale of this effort is unprecedented, with more than 150 Team

4 This amount is based on indicated amounts for the regional component, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan (2021-27) and the amounts for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan up to 2024, plus an estimated top up of identical levels of funding in 2025-7.

For a basic table of NDICI spending in 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, p.6.

Europe Initiatives being developed and implemented worldwide. Three of them include Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, the EU is working with France, Germany, and Latvia on an initiative focused on the agri-food sector and livelihoods. Estonia, Finland, and Latvia are also working with European financial institutions on a regional Team Europe initiative that seeks to build digital connectivity. The most ambitious Team Europe initiative for Central Asia is on Water, Energy and Climate, a coordinated effort among seven EU member states and both banks.

The NDICI uses three different funding mechanisms in Central Asia. The first is 'sectoral budget support', whereby partner countries develop targets and indicators in line with their own national strategies, on which they report. The EU works with relevant ministries, and if the EU is satisfied with reporting, funds are released to the finance ministry.<sup>5</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, the EU supports education, digitalisation, and water management; in Tajikistan, vocational education; and in Uzbekistan, agriculture. A second, recently-developed way of funding is 'blending and guarantees', where NDICI funds are joined by private funding while the EIB foresees in guarantees on investments. The EU is increasingly using blending to attract funding for its Investment Facility for Central Asia that aims to support development programming. For instance, it has enhanced water and sanitation infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and supported the growth of micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across the region.

The third way to distribute funds is through non-region-specific thematic programmes. In Central Asia, the thematic programmes for Human Rights and Democracy and for Civil Society Organisations are relevant, but the region could also benefit from projects funded through the Global Challenges programme and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace. These programmes work through calls for proposals, whereby civil society actors in Europe and Central Asia work together on specific objectives for a limited period. It is this engagement that is still most visible to Central Asians on the ground. When asked which of the three funding mechanisms they 'prefer to be emphasised', almost two thirds of EUCAM network survey respondents argued for the EU dispersing funds via projects, while close to 29 per cent saw more merit in blending and guarantees. Only 7 per cent believed that sectoral budget support should be emphasised. This seems in line with the question of 'who should be the primary partners of EU development cooperation', to which respondents argued for cooperation with civil society as primary partners (this work will often commence through projects), followed by companies in second place, universities and schools in the third place, and lastly governments and local authorities (sectoral budget support).

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5 Interview, European policymaker, 27 June 2024.

## EU project funding

The EU tries to explain the NDICI to the public through infographics<sup>6</sup> and, in Central Asia's case, through explainers on development cooperation initiatives<sup>7</sup> and factsheets offering examples of projects.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this does not fully remedy the lack of information on how EU development works in practice. There is a hiatus between the EU's indicative programmes for regions and countries, and actual projects on the ground. Whereas EU indicative programmes often conclude with an (excellent) annex of what projects other donors are implementing, such lists with subjects, donors, implementers, dates, and amounts are non-existent for EU projects in Central Asia. At the same time, it is difficult to grasp what exactly some of the larger Team Europe Initiatives imply in practise. The number of strategies, policy documents, indicative programmes, and factsheets is impressive, but it is difficult to gauge the actual size and impact of the work on the ground.

Whereas Team Europe Initiatives help coordinate and streamline efforts by different European donors on timely connectivity topics, there is also a need for increased engagement through tangible projects implemented by different European and Central Asian civil society actors. Eight out of ten survey respondents 'agree' or 'fully agree' with the statement: 'The EU's focus in Central Asia should be on new challenges like renewable energy and digitalisation'. At the same time, the survey indicates similar percentages of support for the idea that 'EU supported civil society actors need to become more open to new challenges'. So far, only few projects on digitalisation, energy, and climate include Central Asian NGOs and think tanks. This should change, especially as the national priorities outlined in the NDICI indicative programmes do focus on such topics. In Kyrgyzstan, 'governance and digital transformation' and 'green and climate resilient economy' are two of three priority areas,<sup>9</sup> while there are similar priorities focusing on green and digital and on governance or management in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, bilateral assistance toward these matters is much smaller, making engagement dependent on regional NDICI funding or on global instruments that are less relevant for Central Asia or for these subjects.

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'Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – "Global Europe"', Factsheet, available at <[https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-07/factsheet-global-europendici-june-2021\\_en.pdf](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-07/factsheet-global-europendici-june-2021_en.pdf)>, accessed on 19 September 2024.

7 See for example: 'Central Asia-EU – Water-Energy-Climate Change in Central Asia', Global Gateway infographic, 2024, available at <[https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/media/250930/download/3fdbcdb63-4043-4021-9d5e-267b6f73c954\\_en](https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/media/250930/download/3fdbcdb63-4043-4021-9d5e-267b6f73c954_en)> and '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](https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/media/250931/download/6d7da60e-0729-4ec6-8d96-7fce07f0fea7_en)>, accessed on 19 September 2024.

8 'Connecting EU and Central Asia – Illustrative list of cooperation and projects examples', Factsheet, available at <[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/connecting-eu-and-central-asia-illustrative-list-cooperation-and-project-examples\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/connecting-eu-and-central-asia-illustrative-list-cooperation-and-project-examples_en)>, accessed on 19 September 2024.

9 'Kyrgyz Republic: Multi-annual Indicative Programme 2021-2027', available at <[https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8c344d8b-fb06-47af-8e2c-e2c1c9b5b45d\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8c344d8b-fb06-47af-8e2c-e2c1c9b5b45d_en)>, accessed on 13 September 2024.

When asked ‘which European countries are most visible with national projects’, over 64 per cent mentioned big EU members like Germany and France, followed by non-member Europeans Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (25 per cent of respondents). And indeed, the larger EU member states that have embassies in (most) Central Asian countries, plus these three non-EU European countries, are the most visible and active in Central Asia. In terms of development cooperation, Scandinavia, The Netherlands, and Baltic countries also play a modest role, while Central (Hungary, for instance) and South (Spain and Italy, etc.) Europeans seek to be engaged through business and trade activities. Team Europe Initiatives make it easier for EU members to become active in Central Asia through a ministry or national agency, without needing to open embassies or build a network beforehand. Some countries are also increasingly interested in developing or expanding their own presence in Central Asia in parallel or complementary to EU connectivity approaches. Since EU development funding in the region is modest in size, and the number of ongoing activities is minimal compared to those in Eastern Europe or North Africa, European donors can easily build a presence and profile in Central Asia through targeted projects.

## Project ideas for European engagement in Central Asia

The EU already has ideas for people-to-people projects. It outlined these in the EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2019,<sup>10</sup> where it discussed investing in youth, education, innovation, and culture, and envisioned increased involvement of civil society. The EU followed up on these plans in 2023 in a Joint Roadmap<sup>11</sup> in which the EU and Central Asian partners outlined the intention to promote people-to-people initiatives, ranging from promoting sustainable tourism and nominating Central Asian cultural capitals, to redeveloping the annual Civil Society Forum and working more on media. Unfortunately, most of these ideas are yet to be developed, financed, or implemented. In addition to making this a reality, the EU should also connect its ideas with the suggestions below, all of which are in line with the EU’s strategy, roadmap, and broader connectivity approaches to Central Asia. Ideally, the proposed ideas and suggestions will be used by member states that are keen to make an investment that will yield long-term impact in the form of networks and knowledge sharing.

In developing the ideas, one of our central objectives was to get more Europeans and Central Asians together around the connectivity topics of digitalisation, energy transition, and climate change. We have chosen to present our ideas under three headers that characterise most civil society initiatives and projects:

- *Structural support to individuals and institutions that play a role in awareness-raising and in building networks.*
- *Capacity building emphasising knowledge transfer from Europeans to Central Asians.*
- *Experience sharing where Central Asians and Europeans meet over common interests.*

When asked which process deserves most attention in EU development cooperation, more than half of EUCAM survey respondents preferred capacity building of people and institutions, while experience sharing between diverse groups of Central Asians and

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10 ‘The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership’, Brussels, May 2019.

11 ‘Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia’, Brussels, October 2023.

Europeans came in second (25 per cent), and longer-term support received 21 per cent priority. Clearly, it is believed that Europe can bring expertise to the table that could contribute to Central Asia's development.

## ***Ideas for structural support***

### ***1. Boost European educational presence in Central Asia.***

Several think tanks and NGOs, including EUCAM, have argued for increased European activity in the educational field in Central Asia. The EU's attraction is high among Central Asian students, but the European higher education offer is dwarfed by China and Russia's. Boosting European educational presence in Central Asia would help sustain a range of connectivity objectives, from a wider pool of highly-educated professionals who can work with European companies and institutions to better understanding of Central Asian and European cultures.

There are three options for the EU to increase its long-term higher education support. The most ambitious would be to open a university in Central Asia. The College of Europe based in Brugge and Natolin would be a great model or host, as it is currently developing a campus in Tirana to cover the Western Balkans. Less ambitious, but potentially very impactful, would be increased EU support to the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. The Academy is a top destination for students from all Central Asian countries, and it is often one of the first places to visit for Europeans curious to learn about the region. Recently, the Academy developed an MA in Human Rights and Sustainability with EU funding, in cooperation with the Global Campus of Human Rights from Venice. This is a model that could be expanded at the OSCE Academy, but also exported to Central Asian universities. On a lower level of ambition, the EU could open study centres in Central Asian capitals that would be run by Central Asians and where young people could get information on Europe (including educational opportunities) and attend meetings and exhibitions.

### ***2. Create a digitalisation hub and an energy transition centre in Central Asia.***

The two regional Team Europe Initiatives – digitalisation and energy transition – are still under construction. Both subjects are likely to stay on the EU's agenda for Central Asia. The EU should consider developing two centres or hubs that would stand central to its initiatives in the region. In a digitalisation hub, NGOs could develop or implement projects; they would also share a platform to become more knowledgeable on issues such as A.I. or cybersecurity. European and Central Asian businesses and online startups could meet and exchange experiences on doing responsible business that is climate neutral, community friendly, and pushes back on corruption. The hub – possibly only accessible in the digital sphere – would offer the EU and Central Asian governments a podium to reveal and explain their digitalisation policies. In short, a place to connect.

An energy transition centre could be devoted to the Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate, and the EU's Green Deal, in which Central Asia should become a relevant partner. This applies for instance to the area of critical materials, as Central Asia possesses vast reserves of chromium, cobalt, copper, lithium and other minerals that are increasingly used in the



production of clean energy technologies.<sup>12</sup> Also in this field broader engagement of civil societies and business is warranted that could come together in an energy transition centre. The EU should function as an intermediary (together with their Central Asian government counterparts) in incentivising European businesses to anchor their engagement on critical materials and energy transition in local communities through co-sponsorships and civil society projects.

### ***Ideas for capacity building***

#### ***3. Fund governance and rule of law projects for mixed groups of civil servants and civil society actors.***

In our survey, several respondents argued for addressing mixed target groups with a focus on capacity building. The EU's connectivity plans on energy transition and on digitalisation also have a governance angle. Increased opportunity to apply digital services should imply safeguarding privacy and protection against cybersecurity threats. In the case of energy, applying due diligence in renewable energy companies is often overlooked. Bringing civil servants and civil society together in a training environment with European and Central Asian professionals on good governance and rule of law, linked to aspects of digitalisation or energy transition would improve know-how and build working relations between different target groups (the private sector could be a target group as well).

There lies an important role for civil society here, as they could contribute through their knowledge and experience in applying good governance and rule of law standards. This also applies to civil servants who know their procedures but lack knowledge on new topics of energy transition or A.I. in the digital domain. As the EU transfers knowledge through funding these types of civil society-implemented capacity building projects, it gains partners with a better understanding of good governance and rule of law practices and a network of interlocutors with whom to cooperate.

#### ***4. Develop an attractive media programme that builds capacity and counters Russian disinformation.***

The EU's 2023 Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia wants to 'explore the idea of developing opportunities (contacts, mobility with the EU interlocutors and trainers) for representatives of the press and the media sector in Central Asia'. An excellent idea. Here are ways to go about this from a connectivity standpoint:

Central Asian countries suffer from Russian disinformation through traditional media (TV, newspapers, and radio) and (often interlinked) online platforms and social media. EU-funded projects should focus on combining journalistic excellence with countering Russian and other disinformation. This could be done, for instance, through projects to modernise the study of journalism in Central Asia; projects to train young journalists to deliver attractive, high-quality online content in local languages; projects in which Central Asian and Ukrainian journalists can exchange experiences and build ties (offering Russian language alternatives to Russian disinformation narratives); projects that link young online

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12 Roman Vakulchuk and Indra Overland, 'Central Asia is a missing link in analyses of critical materials for the global clean energy transition' *One Earth* 4, 2021, pp.1678-1692.

bloggers to traditional print-paper journalists to exchange best practices; or projects on management and business to instruct local media outlets to become economically resilient.<sup>13</sup> Of course, such initiatives would need to be backed by close monitoring by the EU of media legislation in Central Asian countries, offering its help in developing new laws where needed and opposing restrictive legislation when proposed.

### **5. Help Central Asian researchers get access to European funding.**

Whereas the 2019 EU strategy calls for increased opportunities for researchers and think-tankers from the EU and Central Asia, this has not yet translated into substantively more engagement. So far, only one Horizon project has focussed specifically on Central Asia (Seneca), while very few Central Asian institutions and researchers are engaged in Horizon consortia. Of course, numerous European universities focus on different disciplines on Central Asia, but there are few mechanisms that give access to academic talent from Central Asia to Europe. At the same time, cooperation between Central Asian and European think tanks and policy research institutes is minimal, as there are almost no funding opportunities available.

The EU could tackle this shortcoming in its connectivity approach in two ways. First, there is a need for academic and think tank training; basic skills of how to write a PhD proposal or draft a policy brief are hard to come by in Central Asia. This also applies to the skills needed to develop research grant proposals under Horizon or other European programmes. A great grassroots example of how to tackle this issue is the USTA mentorship, in which Central Asian academics based worldwide team up with peers from European and American universities. A second way is to develop calls in Horizon on Central Asia (or include Central Asia in broader calls) that aim to connect the region to Europe's 'neighbourhood', as there have been regular calls on Eastern Europe. Such research projects are instrumental in building academic and think tank ties between Europe and Central Asia, and are often too expensive to initiate by national European research agencies.

### **Ideas for experience sharing**

### **6. Support cross-border civil society projects that link to connectivity objectives.**

A lot of EU-Central Asia connectivity plans in terms of energy and transport relies on relations between Central Asian countries and their ability to facilitate cross-border arrangements. At the same time, new infrastructure will have an effect on local communities in Central Asia, as border lands change, for better or worse, in economic set-up. The EU is no stranger to cross-border projects. For instance, the BOMCA border management programme, which has been around for two decades, pays attention to improvement of cross-border cooperation (component 4). A large part of EU development cooperation funding to Central Asia is earmarked as regional, whereas actual projects on the ground where Central Asians meet are limited.

With greater investment in connectivity also comes a need to include the people that

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13 For more media development ideas, specifically related to Kyrgyzstan, see Rashid Gabdulhakov, 'I still trust the Russian media more', EUCAM Policy Brief 38, June 2023, available at <<https://eucentralasia.eu/i-still-trust-the-russian-media-more/>>, accessed on 5 November 2024.

are either negatively affected by new infrastructure projects or ignored in reaping the benefits of connectivity. EU support to local communities through civil society initiatives could be boosted substantially. The EU could be more present through official visits to show commitment and assess the impact of connectivity policies. The EU could also increasingly support tourism as a way to support local entrepreneurs and boost people-to-people connectivity. European project support could also be directed to media outlets and journalists to build capacity and cooperate with their peers cross-border. Through all these efforts, the EU could learn more about local circumstances in Central Asia while contributing to building regional cross-border information networks.

### ***7. Redevelop a genuine Europe-Central Asia Civil Society Forum.***

The EU's Joint Roadmap with Central Asia devotes particular attention to the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, which has been organised, initially by the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) team and more recently by an external party. The roadmap proposes to strengthen the Forum to engage civil society and think tanks in decision-making. But so far, the gatherings have shown a mixed picture. The EU's good intentions and the EUSR team's initial efforts to organise an inclusive event have been blurred by the lack of civil society involvement in setting the agenda, the absence of European civil society organisations at the gatherings, and the presence of Central Asian governmental NGOs (GONGOs) in the forum.

Currently, the EU is developing a Civil Society Facility based on existing programmes for pre-accession and for Eastern Partnership countries. A facility for Central Asia is likely to be modest and primarily aimed at re-developing the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum although there likely will be some possibilities for NGO project grants and civil society capacity building. The EU would do well to start with a thorough needs assessment of what European and especially Central Asian civil society organisations think is useful in terms of EU-Central Asia civil society cooperation and involvement in policy relations between both regions.

Working with Central Asian civil society can be challenging, as NGOs are practically non-existent (Turkmenistan and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan) or under pressure (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). If the aim is to have a forum where NGOs and think tanks from Europe and Central Asia can exchange views and deliver input to EU-Central Asia policies, it would make sense to (re-)start with holding more modest gatherings in Europe/Brussels (organised by a European civil society platform/organisation) so genuine civil society can take the initiative with support of the EU. An initial forum of Central Asian and European civil society organisations could start building an agenda and work programme. Finally, as the EU itself indicates in its Roadmap, the emphasis should lie on youth in civil society bringing talented NGO and think tank representatives to Europe (see next point).

### ***8. Build a Central Asian young professionals visiting programme.***

The Joint Roadmap also wants to 'explore and promote the development of 'a "Young European Ambassadors" network based on the experience of Eastern Partnership countries'. Informally, such a network already exists, if one combines the few earlier and currently existing fellowship programmes open to Central Asian academics and civil society representatives.

Next to the earlier EUCAM fellowship that was aimed at young Central Asian civil society actors to learn in and about Europe, there was a European Neighbourhood Council (ENC) fellowship for Central Asian journalists, and there are still programmes implemented by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), and a few others. With modest effort and funding, alumni fellows of these and a few other Europe-based programmes could be connected. At the same time, the EU should find a way to make funding available to support existing and new fellowship programmes for young Central Asian practitioners, researchers, and civil society actors. This is easier said than done, as fellowships have proven difficult to fund through EU and other European mechanisms.<sup>14</sup>

Fellowships give young Central Asians an opportunity to learn, network, and experience Europe, while the EU and national institutions benefit from the knowledge these fellows bring to the table. Fellowships are clearly a method where structural support, capacity building, and experience-sharing come together.

## To conclude

EU development cooperation funding to Central Asia is modest compared to that toward regions closer to Europe, but enough to address the human aspect of Europe's connectivity approach. To have a significant impact, the EU should focus less on programming with governments and more on tangible projects with civil society in Central Asia and Europe. Projects should aim to bring Europeans and Central Asians together on timely subjects of common interest. Such connectivity investments should also be more transparent to help European governments and citizens better understand how funding is being spent and for Central Asian counterparts to be aware of what Europe is doing in their region. Not all responsibility lies with the EU to deliver sound planning, transparency, and funding. European member states need to translate their increased interest in Central Asia into active development cooperation involvement. Lastly, European and Central Asian civil society will need to get smart on digitalisation, energy transition, and climate change to play their roles in monitoring, research, training, and awareness raising.

14 'Fellowship Focus', EUCAM Watch 26, October 2023, available at <<https://eucentralasia.eu/fellowship-focus-watch-no-26/>>, accessed on 14 November 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.



The EUCAM 'Monitoring and Ideas Lab' project is funded by the Russia and Eastern Europe Knowledge Alliance (REKA) – a network established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands to connect experts on Russia and Eastern Europe with policymakers and with each other.