

The European Union Policy in Central Asia: New Strategies and Old Complexities

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Faced with an exponentially growing Chinese presence and the continuation of strong Russian influence, the European Union is seeking to find its place in Central Asia. Beyond grand discourses about the partnership between the European Union and the Central Asian states, the mutual relations have until recently remained rather limited: hindered by the absence of a common long-term strategy, they have faltered on Brussels' inability to reconcile political and economic objectives and the failure of numerous programs, leaving the image of a bureaucratic institution which is complex, costly and scarcely effective. However, since 2007, the EU has sought to speak in a more affirmative voice in Central Asia: the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan, the upheavals in the Middle East, tensions over energy supplies with Russia, China's rise to power, and the scathing critiques of the Central Asian capitals toward Washington. All these elements have prepared the ground for the EU to play its hand in the region, especially as the Central Asian regimes have often called on Europe to make its intentions more clearly known. In addition, the EU has started to exert its economic influence: it is one of the main trading partners of the five states and today intends to work toward transforming the bilateral economic relations of its member states into a global dynamic with a broader impact on Central Asian societies.

The Political and Social Complexity of the Central Asian Region

The political trajectories of the five states have many features in common. They are all going through a deterioration in their political situations where opposition parties are either placed in very difficult situation (this is the case for Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan) or are unable to exist (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). The media has also had limits placed on its freedom of expression, to say nothing of the human rights situation. Central Asian heads of states have succeeded in securing power inside their own families. They have personally misappropriated a part of the oil and gas manna and demand high rent from foreign investors desirous of establishing themselves in the country, whatever their field of activity. Since 2001 they have also developed a so-called "enlightened" secular authority by putting forward their role as a bastion to Islamism. Since the events of September 11, 2001 and the "war on terror", the international circumstances have made it possible for the ruling elites to justify greater authoritarianism in the name of secularism, especially in Uzbekistan. They have encouraged not only the international community but also the population, which is rather fearful of the eventuality of civil war or the coming to power of religious extremists, to turn a blind eye to the regime's abuses of power.

The region is also caught in the middle of drug trafficking networks. Until the end of the 1990s, Central Asia's role in global drug trafficking was that of a place of transit. This situation has slowly altered and today the five states are starting to become sites of production, transformation and consumption. The "Afghan cancer" is corrupting the whole of the region: In 2007, production in Afghanistan attained a new record at more than 7,500 tons of opium, which after transformation equals some 700 tons of heroin. In all of Central Asia, the shadow economy, essentially drug trafficking, reaps more revenues than the official economy. It finances two sorts of milieu: established leaders and clandestine Islamist circles. Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and even more so Tajikistan are in turn to become "narco-states": a number of state representatives, at each administrative level, from the directors of kolkhozes to the regional authorities and the highest-ranking state officials (i.e. the presidential families), are directly involved in the drug trade, and has corrupted the entire state functioning, in particular customs officers and the police corps. This trade has also enabled Islamist groups to gather considerable financial means, permitting them to function underground.

This situation is part of a larger context that affects all the states of the region, with the exception of

Kazakhstan, namely the pauperization of the urban and rural populations. The Central Asian economies can be classified as rent economies: the region's development is subject to the ups and downs of world prices of oil, gas, metals and cotton. What has eventuated in Central Asia is no different from the situation in other rent economies: an inability to distribute the manna; a widening of social inequalities and weak administrative structures; an absence of real legal constraints, as well as of institutional mechanisms to ensure that economic decisions are made in the public interest. Kazakhstan is the only state to have any real economic dynamism, which comes from its oil production. In the other states, the arrival of the market economy above all led to the impoverishment of a still mostly rural population. According to United Nations figures, approximately 70 percent of Tajikistan's population lives below the poverty line on less than a dollar per day. In Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan this figure drops to 50 percent, but numerous zones remain on the verge of economic strangulation. In Tajikistan, entire regions of people suffer malnutrition and even near-famine.¹

The 2008 world financial crisis has dramatically weakened these already fragile economies, and intensified general social discontent: the large numbers of Central Asian migrants (nearly three million Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks) that go to work in Russia and Kazakhstan each year, mostly on construction worksites, returned to their countries of origin this year without the expected money. Though the risks of civil war, which were real after the disappearance of the USSR, have faded and though Tajikistan seems to have found some stability, the political and economic achievements of the region remain far from outstanding. With the exception of Kazakhstan, the Central Asian states have been sliding steadily into a global social crisis and the political stability ought not to be regarded as a certainty.

In this context, China, which has yet to bring the unstable province of Xinjiang under control, wishes to leave the strategic management of Central Asia to Moscow and to focus its efforts at the commercial level. Perceived as the number one enemy at the time of independence, China is gradually winning sympathizers among the Central Asian political elites. While some key figures are on record as expressing their unilateral critiques of the Chinese presence, others do not conceal their sympathy, and even admiration, for Beijing's dynamism. However, the majority of Central Asians tend to advance both pro- and anti-Chinese arguments. A feeling of mistrust about Beijing's "hidden" objectives prevails: Despite its currently positive effects, there is a suspicion that in the long term China's presence will cause huge problems for Central Asian nations. The authoritarian shift of the current Central Asian regimes in the 2000s earned them much criticism from the West and led them to strengthen ties with the two neighboring powers, Russia and China. The United States' influence in the region has continued to wane during recent years. Under pressure from Moscow, Bishkek has come, for example, to demand the closure of the last American base in the region in February 2009. The European Union's strengthened presence since 2006-2007 has not been enough to provide western countries with a decisive influence compared to that of Moscow and Beijing.

A New European Strategy in Central Asia?

The international community showed great interest in the states that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But at the beginning of the 1990s, the European Union's stance toward Central Asia was relatively timid, being mainly preoccupied by German reunification and the future integration of Central European states. Some countries deemed it unnecessary to open embassies in the region and left their posts in Moscow or Istanbul to take responsibility for Central Asia. The first European Commission office opened in Almaty in 1994, and was then transferred to the new Kazakhstani capital, Astana, in 2007. Led by an ambassador, this representative mission is also tasked with looking after Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where two branches were set up that are directed by some representatives. However, the Tajik and Kyrgyz authorities often complain about

¹ *Central Asia Human Development*, United Nations Development Programme, 2005.

not having their own autonomous delegations. In Tashkent, the Commission has a House of Europe, led by a consultant without any diplomatic status, as also in Ashgabat, where an office was only opened in April 2008. These missions are concerned with cooperation in policy sectors but do not deal with trade or consular questions, which remain the responsibilities of EU member countries.

In Summer 2007, the German EU presidency launched a new text, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, designed to give a new impetus to relations between the two zones.² The *Strategy*, in its very ambitiousness, signals a marked evolution in the European perception of Central Asia. The EU plans to double its aid to Central Asia for the period 2007-2013. This aid has three overall objectives: stability and security, the struggle against poverty, and regional cooperation both between the states of Central Asia themselves and with the EU in the domains of energy, transport, higher education, and the environment. In June 2008, the European Council and the European Commission published a *Joint Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy*.³ By contrast to the preceding programs, which involved the five states in one and the same regional strategy despite the divergences in their respective situations, the *Strategy* of 2007 is focused on bilateral relations, allowing it to be able to target better the specific problems of each state. In Central Asia itself, this differentiation was viewed favourably and interpreted as proof of the EU's increasingly pragmatic interest in the region. Even so, the regional approach remains pertinent for all transnational questions such as organized crime, drug trafficking, and water management, which accounts for approximately one third of the budget.

Official EU publications are self-congratulatory over their success in some domains, in particular on issues of promoting reform in the administrative sector and in good governance at the local level, not to mention their supporting of civil society. However, many observers have given far more modest assessments of the situation, and are even critical of the results obtained and the EU's visibility in the region.⁴ The EU's lack of unity over foreign policy issues in fact undermines its effectiveness as an institution. The often contradictory discourses between, on the one hand, the Strasburg Parliament, and, on the other, the Brussels Commission, in particular on the question of human rights, not to mention the glaring divergences between member states, increase the opacity of the EU's actions and give the impression that it is mostly about discourse and not action. The Commission's grand statements about cooperation with Central Asia are not necessarily relayed by member states and indeed cannot be materialized with the budget allocated, which is far too modest. The member states in fact have contradictory priorities: Germany, for example, has sought to emphasize economic and energy cooperation over and above political reform, a stance which has generated numerous polemics.⁵

The Complex Question of Supporting Democratization

The accepted EU discourse on the transition to democracy is increasingly badly received in the Central Asian arena: the established regimes are against the principle of a diversified political life and alternation through ballots, while for their part the citizens often associate democracy with lower living standards, and more and more with chaos and anarchy. This latter association is also fostered by the ruling regimes, particularly since the "Tulip revolution" of March 2005 in Kyrgyzstan. Increasing references to the successes of Russia under Putin and of neighboring China do not aid the EU in the promotion of its political conceptions. For the EU, however, it is imperative to preserve the integrity of European political principles. It dismisses the idea according to which democracy and human rights are a domestic issue, and does not to subscribe to local culturalist discourses which

² *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, Brussels, 2007.

³ *Joint Progress Report by the Council and the European Commission to the European Council on the implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy*, Brussels, 2008.

⁴ *Central Asia: What Role For The European Union?*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report, N°113 – 10 April 2006, <<http://merln.ndu.edu/archive/icg/centralasiaeu.pdf>>.

⁵ Melvin Neil, Boonstra Jos, "The EU Strategy for Central Asia @ Year One", *EUCAM Policy Brief*, No. 1, October 2008.

claim that democracy cannot be applied to non-European states. Whereas Moscow and Beijing state that the established regimes are a guarantee of stability against the current dangers, the EU thinks that they are, on the contrary, harbouring future instability by their refusal of political alternation. This view necessarily limits the EU's room for manoeuvre, since the Central Asia capitals suspect it of desiring a political change.⁶

At the end of the 1990s and the start of the 2000s, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were reputed to have received preferential treatment from the EU in terms of financing for having the most developed NGO and "civil society" network. More recently, however, debate has shifted focus to Kazakhstan, deemed to be the country most open to EU cooperation, despite the authoritarianism of Nursultan Nazarbaev, and to Turkmenistan, whose change of president in winter 2006-2007 raised many hopes. According to several European experts, these two states are today in a situation of dependency with respect to the EU, the first owing to its accession to the Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010, the second owing the Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's desire to get the country out of isolation.⁷ They claim that the EU, accompanied by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or United Nations agencies, could then work some political and economic leverage and call for countries to heed to certain international norms. Other experts, on the contrary, claim that it is impossible to impose democracy from the outside. They argue that it is necessary to "work on the future" by preparing the future generations for political reforms and by focusing on questions of good administrative governance. However, once again, this strategy is difficult to implement since good governance presumes the neutrality of the state and its functionaries, whereas the norms of the Central Asian regimes are, in practice, corruption and patronage.⁸

The Main Controversies Dividing the EU in Its View of Central Asia

Three main controversies surrounding Central Asia have informed debates between EU member states. The first, since 2005, concerns the sanctions applied to Uzbekistan after the repression of the Andijan insurrection. The arrival of the Uzbek Interior Minister, Zokir Almatov, in Germany right after the adoption of sanctions was heavily criticized, as was the EU's refusal to host the Uzbek refugees—provisionally settled in Romania—who fled their country following the events.⁹ Each time the sanctions were renegotiated, fierce debates opposed those who consider that they are pointless, that they only work to increase Russia's and China's influence over Tashkent, and that future policy should be focused on reconciling with Uzbekistan; and those who think that the lifting of sanctions might undermine the EU's credibility since, even if they have only very minimal economic effects, they are of essential symbolic importance.¹⁰ Germany, the largest European investor in the country and the renter of the Termez military aerodrome, which stations 2,200 German soldiers, has from the start militated for sanctions to be lifted. With the exception of the arms embargo, which has been kept in place, the sanctions were finally lifted in October 2008.

The second controversy took place in 2007, during Kazakhstan's candidacy for the OSCE Chairmanship. Berlin organized the lobbying in favor of Astana and did so without stipulating any obligatory political reforms, while Great Britain expressed a much more reserved opinion on the legitimacy of that election, and France held an intermediary position. Lastly, in 2008, the repeated initiatives of associations for the defence of human rights concerning the use of child labor for harvesting cotton in Uzbekistan ended up bearing fruit. The largest British supermarket chain, TESCO, signalled that from now on it would refuse to sell cotton originating in Uzbekistan, and this

⁶ Zhovtis Eugheniy, "Democratisation and Human Rights in Central Asia: Problems, Development Prospects and the Role of the International Community", in Melvin Neil (ed.), *Engaging Central Asia, The European Union's New Strategy, In the Heart of Eurasia*, Brussels, Centre For European Policy Studies, 2008, pp. 20-42.

⁷ Denison Michael, "Turkmenistan and the EU: Contexts and Possibilities for Greater Engagement", *Ibid.*, pp. 81-104.

⁸ See Transparency International website on corruption, <www.transparency.org>.

⁹ Only 74 will be able to stay in Europe, the others will be moved to the American continent or to Australia.

¹⁰ Hall Michael, "The EU and Uzbekistan: Where to go from here?", *Ibid.*, pp. 68-80.

stance was also adopted by the largest textile consumers, such as Wal-Mart, Hennes & Mauritz, JC Penney, and Marks & Spencer. The associations asked that UNICEF, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) also adopt a clear position on the issue and stop accepting Tashkent's falsified reports on it. They also ask that the United States exclude Uzbek cotton from the generalized system of preferences. Despite adopting the new *Strategy* toward Central Asia, designed to favor the economic sector, the EU has not succeeded in resolving the contradictions between its political objectives to promote democratic values and its commercial priorities.

The Major Trends of European Aid to Central Asia

In total, between 1991 and 2006, the European Union has committed more than 1.3 billion euros of aid to Central Asia. This money has gone in diverse sectors linked to the promotion of democracy and pluralism, to economic modernization, regional cooperation, energy, water, the environment, as well as the fight against threats such as terrorism, and the trafficking of drugs and human beings.¹¹ Since the end of the TACIS (Technical Aid to the CIS) program in 2006, EU aid has been restructured around the so-called Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which merges together various geographical and thematic instruments: this is no longer a programme specific to the post-Soviet states and it includes in it all the institutional tools at the Commission's disposal. A number of terms concerning the application of the DCI remain vague but the aid for Central Asia is set to increase: between 2007 and 2010, the DCI financing to Central Asia will be 314 million euros, a third of which will be devoted to regional cooperation and the remaining two-thirds to bilateral aid programs.¹²

In the framework of regional cooperation, four main objectives have been defined: first, support for the energy and transport networks, and integration into the world market; second, improvement in environmental management, in particular water and forests; third, the monitoring of borders and migration as well as customs duties and the fight against organized crime; and lastly, the promotion of education exchanges. Even so, two-thirds of the aid will go to bilateral programs focused on poverty reduction and, to a lesser extent, good governance and economic reform. In addition to the DCI, European assistance is structured around four thematic programs: the instrument for democracy and human rights; the instrument for nuclear safety; the instrument of stability; and the humanitarian instrument.¹³ The first, as always, remains problematic in relation to the question of the budget allocated to political stakes. Despite the obstacles encountered in the promotion of democratic values in Central Asia, the Commission intends to pursue programs for the development of civil society, including the Central Asia Tempus, at least in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The instrument of nuclear safety guarantees EU aid to signatories in the event of nuclear threat, while the instrument for stability has as its objective to support initiatives for the maintaining of peace, to help countries combat organized crime, terrorism and transnational threats.¹⁴

Despite this multitude of structures, the EU as political entity remains paradoxically invisible in the Central Asian arena: like Japan, it is one of the largest donors, but also one of the least known, confirming its difficulties in performing as an international actor in its own right. The enormous

¹¹ <http://delkaz.ec.europa.eu/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=38&Itemid=124>.

¹² *Stratégie d'assistance à l'Asie centrale 2007-2013 et programme indicatif 2007-2010*, <<http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/fr/lvb/r17106.htm>>.

¹³ Liamine Salvagni Alessandro, "Quel rôle pour l'Union européenne en Asie centrale ?", *Le Courrier des Pays de l'Est*, No. 1057, 2006, pp. 17-29.

¹⁴ Kimmage Daniel, "Security Challenges in Central Asia: Implications for the EU's Engagement Strategy", in Melvin Neil (ed.), *Engaging Central Asia, The European Union's New Strategy, In the Heart of Eurasia*, op. cit. pp. 9-19.

European bureaucratic machine has therefore not succeeded in diffusing a positive image of itself in Central Asia. Moreover, all of its programs have received broad criticism: grandiloquent objectives but modest means; absence of transparency in the recruitment of European enterprises; poor qualifications of the expertise agencies selected to carry out feasibility studies for projects; the shamelessly high salaries given to expatriates; the lack of substance of their knowledge of the region; the failure to favor the local enterprises that would benefit from a transfer of technology and know-how through cooperation with European firms. In addition, the use of the funds granted are subject to very little monitoring: once the subsidy has been granted, the distribution of European money is not sufficiently supervised and leads to mediocre results, and sometimes the allocated sums are even totally misappropriated.

Conclusions

The EU might be one of the main commercial partners of the republics of Central Asia; nevertheless, it continues to have poor visibility as an international actor in its own right. The states of Central Asia are disappointed by Brussels' lack of enthusiasm for the region, by the low levels of financing its offers by comparison with China and Russia, by its political blackmailing on questions of human rights, and they find it hard to understand the priority accorded to the Mediterranean basin in the EU partnership rationales. For almost two decades, the EU approach to development has stayed fragmented and has concentrated on financing multiple projects rather than on the elaboration of a genuine strategy. It is also based on a model of regional cooperation which has never functioned given the Central Asian states' reticence to work together. Though the *Strategy* of 2007 really does turn a new page in the history of EU-Central Asian relations by focusing on bilateral relations, Brussels is arriving somewhat late on the Central Asian geopolitical market and will find it difficult to overcome the contradictory interests of its member states. However, in spite of these multiple obstacles, the EU has a certain number of cards in hand. The Central Asia states obviously need to preserve a balance between the main regional and global actors, especially Russia and China. Europe enjoys a particularly elevated cultural prestige in Central Asia and its capacity to present a more nuanced analysis of contemporary conflicts than Washington's will provide it with a non-negligible asset in the Central Asian capitals.

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