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### Political and security relations Analysis of the EU's comparative advantages and Central Asian interests

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## Executive Summary

This paper examines the EU’s comparative advantages and disadvantages in its political and security engagement with Central Asian countries. The EU’s and its member states’ political and security engagement with Central Asia has been restricted by regional rivalry between the countries, occasional mismatches in their political and security priorities, as well as the dominance of external powers. The EU’s main security priorities in Central Asia are counter-narcotics and counter-extremism measures, and some of the more successful EU programmes in the region have addressed specific issues such as drug addiction and border security.

However, the EU’s strategies to promote their ideas of democratisation and their anti-corruption agenda are often viewed by Central Asian countries as an attempt to exert regime change or influence the distribution of power, negatively impacting on how the EU is viewed in the region. Moreover, the EU’s Western understandings of how Central Asia’s domestic political environment works is also likely to restrict deeper cooperation between them. Most Central Asian countries have personalised, and centralised governments controlled by small groups of influential stakeholders, making it difficult for political outsiders to affect decision-making.

More broadly, there is a general lack of information in Central Asia about the EU’s intention towards the region, and locals can be mistrustful of the EU’s influence. This view, reinforced by the pervasive Russian-language and Russian state media, is likely preventing the EU from deeper engagement with Central Asian countries.

## 1. Introduction

This paper evaluates the implementation of the EU's Central Asian security and political policy, and its perception in the five Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Where possible, both the EU and its member states and their policies and perceptions were assessed.

This paper first outlines the EU's comparative advantages and disadvantages in its political and security relations with Central Asia and identifies areas in which EU policies have been successfully implemented, as well as how they could be improved. The paper also offers a comparative discussion of other actors' presence in and engagement with Central Asian countries – particularly Russia and the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) – and assesses areas in which these countries may have an advantage over the EU in their political, security and military relations. The influence of other competing countries such as India, South Korea and Turkey have also been considered, given their historical, cultural and occasionally linguistic ties to the region. Finally, the paper offers several options for deepening the EU's engagement in Central Asia, including narrowing the scope of broader projects, interacting with specific ministries or multi-lateral institutions and raising awareness about the EU political agenda through social media in local languages.

The paper looks at EU policies in 2007-2018, a timeline that takes into account the inception of the EU's first Strategy for Central Asia<sup>2</sup>. This policy paper is the second of three phases of the SEnECA project; mapping – analysis – recommendations. It is based on and serves as a successive analysis of the mapping exercise on political and security relations, economic relations and trade, as well as cultural relations between the EU and Central Asia, all of which were presented in the first nine SEnECA policy papers.<sup>3</sup> This paper also provides recommendations for Europe's future policy-making in Central Asia.

This policy paper was supported by semi-structured interviews, conducted by the SEnECA consortium partners. Altogether, the SEnECA partners - which included CAISS, the Kyrgyz National University (KNU), Zerkalo, Ynanch-Vepa and the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) - conducted 22 semi-structured interviews (based on 17 questions) with representatives of Central Asian academic institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses, and governmental agencies. All interviews were conducted from September-November 2018 - two were conducted in Kazakhstan, six in Kyrgyzstan, four in Tajikistan, one in Turkmenistan and nine in Uzbekistan. The interviews were anonymised, revealing only the city, country, sector of operation and interview date, to avoid any repercussions for interviewees and allow them to talk more openly.

This paper is structured in three parts. Chapter two examines the EU's political and security engagement with Central Asia, including their mutual security concerns. Chapter three looks at several external actors including Russia, China, India, Turkey and the U.S., and the extent of their security and political involvement in Central Asia. The fourth chapter then details the advantages and disadvantages that the EU has in comparison to these external actors in their involvement in Central Asia, as well as looking at how the EU is perceived on the ground in these countries.

## 2. EU's political and security engagement with Central Asia

### 2.1. EU political and security agenda in Central Asia

For the past ten years, the EU has primarily engaged with Central Asia through its 2007 strategy, entitled "EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership". This strategy envisaged deeper

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<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (Brussels, 2007), 2, 4, 10-13, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st\\_10113\\_2007\\_init\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st_10113_2007_init_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> "Policy Papers & Briefs," SEnECA, <http://www.seneca-eu.net/policy-papers-briefs/>

cooperation by improving both regional and bilateral ties, and identified seven priority areas, which included addressing common security threats, promoting the rule of law, human rights, and democratisation.<sup>4</sup> However, this strategy was broad and lacked the financial resources to have an enduring effect beyond the life cycle of separate projects.

The EU's attempts to engage more deeply with Central Asia have been restricted by political rivalries between the Central Asian countries, which have prevented the adoption of a coordinated regional strategy. Aside from deep-rooted ethnic divisions, there is also intense disagreement over borders in the Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, personal animosity between leaders, rivalry over access to water and poor energy management. Traditionally, the EU has taken a "soft-security" approach to Central Asia, choosing to examine issues such as corruption, rule of law, standards of living and tackling authoritarian regimes – all of which contribute to domestic instability that can prevent these countries from addressing threats to their national security.

The EU already works with Central Asia through several existing official structures. Given their UN membership, the EU engages with Central Asia through the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventative Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), which works with Central Asian governments on conflict prevention, encouraging regional cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan and monitoring security situations such as inter-ethnic tensions.<sup>5</sup> At a local level, some of the EU's more successful projects have involved targeted interventions to address the root causes of mutual security issues, particularly in drug trafficking and organised crime (see section 2.2 below for more details). Central Asia also already cooperates with the OSCE, which could be an important link in security cooperation with the EU; there are OSCE programme offices in Astana, Bishkek and Dushanbe and an OSCE Centre in Ashgabat. However, some of the OSCE's most active projects are in other areas, such as their monitoring mission of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, while others such as the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe - which helps to train border security officers - lacks financial resources to allow long-term commitments.<sup>6</sup>

The EU also offers legislative support to address security issues in Central Asia. There are already several EU-led civil society initiatives focusing on changing legislation, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) in Uzbekistan,<sup>7</sup> which strengthens legislation to protect children's rights. Plans to establish an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kyrgyzstan,<sup>8</sup> to deepen bilateral relations are only on the condition that Kyrgyzstan improves the transparency of its election processes.<sup>9</sup> While cooperating with some of the more politically restrictive Central Asian countries is difficult, the EU announced in November 2018 that it would be opening a delegation in Turkmenistan. This announcement came after the 14<sup>th</sup> EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting in Brussels and offered a signal that the EU was interested in enhancing its cooperation in Central Asia both bilaterally and regionally.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Shairbek Juraev, "Comparing the EU and Russia engagements in Central Asia," *L'Europe en Formation*, April 2014, no. 374, [https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2014-4-page-77.htm?try\\_download=1](https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2014-4-page-77.htm?try_download=1)

<sup>5</sup> "Programmes of Action 2018-2020," United Nations Regional Centre for Preventative Diplomacy for Central Asia, 2018, <https://unrcca.unmissions.org/programmes-action>

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Lehne, "Reviving the OSCE: European security and the Ukraine crisis," Carnegie Europe Paper, September 22, 2015, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/09/22/reviving-osce-european-security-and-ukraine-crisis-pub-61362>

<sup>7</sup> Anna Gussarova, Māris Andžāns, eds., *Policy Paper No. 1. Political and security relations. Mapping EU-Central Asian relations*, DOI: [10.17185/dupublico/47233](https://doi.org/10.17185/dupublico/47233); Anna Gussarova, Māris Andžāns, eds., *Policy Paper No. 2. Political and security relations. Mapping Central Asia's relations with other Asian states*, DOI: [10.17185/dupublico/47234](https://doi.org/10.17185/dupublico/47234); Anna Gussarova, Māris Andžāns, eds., *Policy Paper No. 3. Political and Security Relations. Mapping strategies of Russia, USA and China towards Central Asia*, DOI: [10.17185/dupublico/47235](https://doi.org/10.17185/dupublico/47235)

<sup>8</sup> Sevvara Khamidova "Civil Society in Uzbekistan: building from the ground up", *EUCAM*, No.31 (July 2018), <https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/07/civil-society-in-uzbekistan-building-from-the-ground-up/>

<sup>9</sup> "Kyrgyz Republic: EU to launch negotiations on new agreement," Council of the European Union, October 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/10/09/kyrgyz-republic-launch-negotiations/#>

<sup>10</sup> "New opportunities to take EU-Central Asia Partnership forward," European External Action Service, November 26, 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54425/new-opportunities-take-eu-central-asia-partnership-forward\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54425/new-opportunities-take-eu-central-asia-partnership-forward_en)

The activities of the European Union Special Representatives (EUSR) in Central Asia have increased the EU's policy activities in the region.<sup>11</sup> Since 2010, the EU has paid increasing attention to democracy issues, including the protection of human rights and development of the non-governmental sector in Central Asia. After Kazakhstan completed its Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010<sup>12</sup>, the country began to roll back its record on politics, freedoms and human rights – starting from the Zhanaozen massacre of 2011, the adoption of the restrictive religion law, followed by serious amendments to laws on counter-terrorism. In Uzbekistan, then President Islam Karimov (1991-2016) oversaw a politically repressive administration that restricted the media and was criticised for its human rights violations. As a result, in 2012 the EU in its progress report on the EU's Strategy for Central Asia maintained that it would be prioritising supporting human rights and democracy there.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2. Regional funding allocations

More importantly for Central Asia, the EU has increased its financial support for projects on regional and bilateral cooperation with Central Asia for 2014-2020, which sends an important message of support to the region. The EU has allocated EUR 1.68 billion for this period, 56 percent more than previous funding tranches in 2007-2013, but the distribution of funds is not equal.<sup>14</sup> As can be seen from Table 1 below, there has been a clear increase in funds allocated for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan received much less funding. This is likely because of Turkmenistan's politically repressive administration, but the EU has planned to open a liaison office to Turkmenistan in 2019, indicating that it is still willing to engage with the country.<sup>15</sup> The reduction in funding to Kazakhstan is likely because it is an upper-middle income country and thus is ineligible to receive EU funding after the current 2014-2020 Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) expires, so will only be able to receive EU regional funding packages.

A lack of EU funding projects in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan will likely create a gap that other actors such as Russia, China and Turkey could fill, which would leave the EU at a disadvantage. However, as of 2021, Kazakhstan should be able to qualify to receive institutional reform support under the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, which will replace all EU funding tranches.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Paramonov, ed., "Vliyaniye Evropejskogo Soyuza na Tsentral'nyuyu Aziyu: obzor, analiz i prognozy," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Analysis Paper, Almaty, 2017, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kasachstan/13414-20170614.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights House Foundation, *Kazakhstan: OSCE commitments remain unfulfilled*, December 1, 2010, <https://humanrightshouse.org/articles/kazakhstan-osce-commitments-remain-unfulfilled/>

<sup>13</sup> European External Action Service, *Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia: Implementation Review and outline for Future Orientations*, June 28, 2012, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20120628\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20120628_progress_report_en.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> EU Diplomatic Mission in Kazakhstan, *Zaklyuchenie Soveta o Strategii ES po Tsentral'noy Azii*, June 22, 2015, [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/documents/press\\_corner/2015/fac\\_22\\_june\\_2015\\_ru.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/documents/press_corner/2015/fac_22_june_2015_ru.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Yusuf Hatip, "EU to open delegation in Turkmenistan next year," *Anadolu Agency*, November 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eu-to-open-delegation-in-turkmenistan-next-year/1319785>

<sup>16</sup> Sergey Marinin, "Key Kazakh interests in working with Europe," *EUCAM Commentary* – No. 29, July 15, 2018, <https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/07/key-kazakh-interests-in-working-with-europe/>

**Table 1.** EU funds allocated for bilateral indicative programs in Central Asia, in million EUR.<sup>17</sup>

Country	Years		
	2007-2010	2011-2013	2014-2020 (incl.est.)
Kazakhstan	44	30	-
Kyrgyzstan	55	51	184
Tajikistan	66	62	251
Turkmenistan	22	31	37
Uzbekistan	32.8	42	168

The EU has also allocated a EUR 124 million package for regional cooperation to implement various projects, including the rule of law and regional cooperation.<sup>18</sup> However, these allocated funds are likely to be spread between multiple projects and activities in less developed countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while in Uzbekistan the EU's priority will be reinforcing the economy and promoting political dialogue.

### 2.3. Mutual EU and Central Asian security concerns – countering extremism and drug trafficking

The EU and Central Asia currently cooperate most deeply on two main security aspects; countering violent extremism and tackling drug trafficking.<sup>19</sup> Drug trafficking is a major security concern for both EU and Central Asia, as the Central Asian countries are a transit route for drugs originating in Afghanistan that are then trafficked to Europe. However, drug abuse in Central Asian countries is usually considered a security issue rather than an illness, and so it is managed accordingly by the Ministries of the Interior rather than the Ministries of Health. Drug addiction in prisons is also a serious local issue, but responsibility for the prison service varies among Central Asian countries. This means that the EU's approach to tackling drug dependency is likely to be very different to Central Asian countries, an important obstacle to be aware of and overcome when promoting a new security strategy for the region.

All five Central Asian states already cooperate with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and its regional office in Tashkent on reducing drug trafficking, transnational organised crime and extremism.<sup>20</sup> While it is difficult to ascertain how effective projects have been due to a lack of data in Central Asia, anecdotal evidence from countries such as Turkmenistan report that they are particularly interested in gaining the EU's experience on more holistic methods of countering drug abuse, such as psychotherapy and ways of detecting substance abuse early.<sup>21</sup>

Political instability in Afghanistan also poses a threat to the Central Asian countries and to wider European security, and EU leaders frequently meet with Central Asian leaders to discuss this. Most recently, in November 2018 Brussels hosted the EU-Central Asia ministerial meeting to discuss the upcoming EU's strategy toward the region, focusing on its economic potential and natural

<sup>17</sup> Andrey Chebotarev, "Strategiya Evropeyskogo Soyuza v Tsentral'noy Azii: Novye kontury i vozmozhnye perspektivy," Analytical Report, Analytical Center of the Library of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, ISBN 978-601-7824-00-6, Astana, 2016,15.

<sup>18</sup> "EU to promote sustainable development in Central Asia with €124 million," European Commission, November 23, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/kyrgyzstan/eu-promote-sustainable-development-central-asia-124-million>

<sup>19</sup> Representative of an academic institution in Uzbekistan, interview by SEnECA in person, September 26, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

<sup>20</sup> "UNODC launches counter-extremism network for Central Asian region," UNODC, May 2018, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2018/May/unodc-launches-counter-extremism-network-for-central-asia-region.html>

<sup>21</sup> Michels Ingo, et al., "Improvement of Treatment of Drug use Disorders in Central Asia; the contribution of the EU Central Asian Drug Action Programme (CADAP)," *Journal of Addiction Medicine and Therapy*, 5(1), 2017, [http://cadap-eu.org/upload/file/publications/prevention\\_and\\_treatment/improvement.pdf](http://cadap-eu.org/upload/file/publications/prevention_and_treatment/improvement.pdf)

resources.<sup>22</sup> Earlier in July 2018, the EU held the fifth round of its annual political and security dialogue with Central Asian countries in Turkmenistan. Several mutual security concerns were evident from the conference, including the receding of the Aral Sea, issues around nuclear arms controls and approaches to countering violent extremism.<sup>23</sup> In March 2018, Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative on Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, visited Uzbekistan and participated in the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> The conference included discussions on the EU and Afghanistan's cooperation in counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics, as well as on the movements of foreign terrorist fighters across the region from Syria and Iraq - a salient security concern for both Central Asia and the EU.

These frequent high-level meetings highlight the EU's commitment to engaging in security processes in the region. Moreover, at the Tashkent conference, Uzbekistan proposed to host talks between the Talibs and the government of Afghanistan, which was well received by the European delegation and viewed as way of improving regional cooperation to end the conflict.<sup>25</sup> The EU and Central Asia are also working to reduce the risks of exposure to chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons by sharing technical assistance and improving the quality of locals' technical qualifications.<sup>26</sup>

In comparison, countries such as Turkey and Russia have done little to engage Central Asia on these security issues, aside from occasional high-level meetings of security officials. For example, Turkish National Defence Minister Nurettin Canikli visited Uzbekistan in July 2017<sup>27</sup>, but few tangible security agreements resulted from that visit. In contrast, following Mogherini's visit in March 2018 there have been several other high-profile meetings between the EU and Central Asia, such as the November 2018 Cooperation Council, which examined bilateral relations between the EU and Uzbekistan and discussed ways of promoting good governance and improving civil society in the country.<sup>28</sup>

The EU has also had some success with its border reform programmes, for example, BOMCA, which aims to tackle illegal drug and human trafficking, as well as facilitating cross-border trade<sup>29</sup> and the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP, 2001-2014) focused on strengthening Central Asia's policies to reduce demand for drugs and reinforce border security. One of the main successes of the CADAP programme were the beneficial services that the programme gave recipient countries, including improvements in customs administration and sanitary inspections of products.<sup>30</sup> The long-term element of the project was the TREAT programme, which introduced drug addiction treatment in prisons and in the healthcare system. While data from Central Asia is scarce, there is anecdotal evidence that CADAP reduced some local dependency on drugs – this positive effect could also be because of the increasing engagement on behalf of Central Asian governments to address the issue.

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<sup>22</sup> Elya Altynsarina, "Kazakhstan presents proposals for new EU strategy on Central Asia," November 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/11/kazakhstan-presents-proposals-for-new-eu-strategy-on-central-asia/>

<sup>23</sup> "The EU and the countries of Central Asia held their High-level Political and Security Dialogue in Ashgabat on 9 July 2018," EU Liaison Office in Turkmenistan, July 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkmenistan/48293/eu-and-countries-central-asia-held-their-high-level-political-and-security-dialogue-ashgabat-9\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkmenistan/48293/eu-and-countries-central-asia-held-their-high-level-political-and-security-dialogue-ashgabat-9_en)

<sup>24</sup> "Federica Mogherini participated in the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan," Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan, March 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/uzbekistan/42194/federica-mogherini-participated-tashkent-conference-afghanistan\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/uzbekistan/42194/federica-mogherini-participated-tashkent-conference-afghanistan_en)

<sup>25</sup> Farid Behbud, "Experts see recent Tashkent conference on peace in Afghanistan as a step forward," Xinhua, March 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/30/c\\_137076670.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/30/c_137076670.htm)

<sup>26</sup> European Council, Project Results, April 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/node/527\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/node/527_en)

<sup>27</sup> "President of Uzbekistan received the Minister of National Defence of Turkey," Uzbekistan National News Agency, July 2017, <http://uza.uz/en/politics/president-of-uzbekistan-received-the-minister-of-national-de-26-07-2017>

<sup>28</sup> European Council, EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council, November 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2018/11/22/uzbekistan/>

<sup>29</sup> "Background of the Program, Border Management Programme in Central Asia," BOMCA, 2018, <https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/programme/background>

<sup>30</sup> "Central Asia – Border management," European Commission, International Cooperation and Development, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/central-asia/eu-support-border-management-central-asia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/central-asia/eu-support-border-management-central-asia_en)

Projects such as CADAP give the EU an advantage over other actors such as Russia, whose chief involvement in countering drug trafficking is at a state and ministerial level, between Russia's Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN) and its counterparts in Central Asia. These agencies view the issue as a hard security problem and have focused on reinforcing borders and detaining drug traffickers. While the Russian authorities' official attitude to drugs is slowly changing, Russia's historical approach to drug addiction has been to treat symptoms of drug abuse, rather than using more holistic methods such as therapy to treat drug addiction, which reduces the likelihood of relapse.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. External actors' and the EU's political and security engagement

#### 3.1. Global powers and other regional actors in Central Asia

Russia dominates the security agenda in Central Asia, although it does not have an overarching strategy due to its significant bilateral and multilateral ties in the region. Russia cooperates with Central Asia over shared security issues such as countering violent extremism - a particularly important issue for Russia given its large and often socially marginalised migrant community from Central Asia which is vulnerable to radicalisation from terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS).<sup>32</sup> Russia is also a major donor to regional projects against opiate trafficking from Afghanistan via Central Asia, as well as to a NATO-Russia Council project that trains law enforcement personnel from Central Asia to counter drug trafficking, which includes training in Moscow and Ankara (Turkey).<sup>33</sup>

For Russia, the concept of security in Central Asia is a series of specific threats that require hard security responses. This approach is mostly motivated by the concern about how these threats might impact Russia directly. As a result, Russia's main security engagement in Central Asia is focused on providing training and military equipment to counter threats posed by terrorism and organised crime. Russia also has a joint air defence system with all the Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan, which is an observer. This regulatory framework allows all countries to coordinate the defence of their airspace, including missile early-warning systems. Russia also provides significant military supplies to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and is considering supplying S-400 missile systems to Kazakhstan.<sup>34</sup> There are multiple Russian military bases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan<sup>35</sup>, and their militaries train together as part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO's stipulated focus is ensuring regional security, and its member states coordinate on countering issues such as terrorism, extremism and separatism. This puts Russia at an advantage over the EU, which does not have a military relationship with Central Asia. Russia views the Central Asian countries as part of its sphere of influence and as a necessary security buffer to offset Europe and NATO's military activity, which would make it extremely difficult for the EU to bolster a more formal security relationship with Central Asia.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a political, security and infrastructure strategy that intends to link China to Europe, using many of the Central Asian countries as a transit corridor. China's relationship with Kazakhstan is likely to emerge as an area of serious competition with EU member

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander Marshall, "From drug war to culture war: Russia's growing role in the global drug debate," Policy Brief 5, *Global Drug Policy Observatory*, July 2014, <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/academic-colleges/arts-and-humanities/research/gdpo/gdpo-pdfs/From-drug-war-to-culture-war-Russia-s-growing-role-in-the-global-drug-debate.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Mohammed S. Elshimi, et al., *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia*, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), April 2018, [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/RUSI-report\\_Central-Asia-Radicalisation\\_ENG\\_24042018.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/RUSI-report_Central-Asia-Radicalisation_ENG_24042018.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> "NATO-Russia counter-narcotics training reaches milestone," NATO, April 2012, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_86310.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_86310.htm)

<sup>34</sup> Dmitry Stefanovich, "Russian Military Cooperation Goals in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/russias-military-cooperation-goals-in-central-asia/>

<sup>35</sup> "Where are US and Russian Military Bases in the World?," Radio Free Europe, <https://www.rferl.org/a/where-are-us-and-russian-military-bases-in-the-world/28890842.html>

states in the coming years. This is because China considers Kazakhstan an important gateway country to the EU and is likely to divert significant investment into improving Kazakhstan's infrastructure. Kazakhstan is also eager to reap the economic benefits from this partnership, as it attempts to diversify its economy away from reliance on oil and natural resources exports, in favour of upgrading its roads and railways.<sup>36</sup> Another important political issue is the religious restrictions that the Chinese government has placed on the practices of ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz Muslims. According to the Chinese authorities, in 2016 there were 1.46 million ethnic Kazakhs and about 200,000 ethnic Kyrgyz living in China.<sup>37</sup> Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are currently trying to draw attention to these groups, with little effect. Their respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs are attempting to use diplomacy to free those Kyrgyz and Kazakhs that have been imprisoned in China, and locate the ones that are unaccounted for, or appear to have left the country seeking asylum either in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan.

Since Central Asia's independence from the Soviet Union, trade ties with India have weakened, but it maintains a stake in ensuring regional stability – India mainly engages with Central Asia through its membership in the SCO (a member since 2017), and it has conducted small-scale training exercises for Tajikistan's Air Force.<sup>38</sup> Though India considers China a regional rival, they share many of the same security concerns about the importance of stabilising the Central Asian region, particularly Afghanistan. The Indian authorities appear to be interested in deepening political ties with Central Asia. However, India lacks a clear policy towards the region; Modi's "Neighbourhood First" policy<sup>39</sup> emphasises the importance of regions close to India, which could extend to Central Asia, but this remit has not been made clear. While India is likely to maintain a political interest in Central Asia, its engagement is more likely to remain piecemeal than to emerge as a dominant power to compete with Russia and China. Given this fragmented engagement, India is unlikely to emerge as a serious security rival to European interests in the region.

Other countries such as Turkey have also attempted to engage in the security agenda in Central Asia. Following several terrorist attacks in Turkey in recent years and the high-profile trials of the likely perpetrators, Turkey has increased its attention towards countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, some of whose nationals are thought to have been responsible for the attacks.<sup>40</sup> Turkey's presence in Central Asia appears to be growing, although it will avoid clashing with Russia's strategic interests in the region and could be a useful partner for Russia to help counter Chinese influence there. Turkey's membership of NATO and attempts to balance a diplomatic relationship with both the EU and powers such as Russia will ensure Turkey will avoid directly clashing with European security interests in Central Asia. Thus far, Turkey has broadly fallen in line with European policies towards Central Asia, such as by actively supporting Kazakhstan's bid to join the WTO. Turkey is also eager to access EU markets, a major driving force behind its attractiveness as a partner for Central Asian countries.<sup>41</sup> Turkey is more likely to be a partner country for the EU in the region than a security competitor.

The U.S. has had political and security interests in Central Asia since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and has apportioned significant funds to support its military actions in Afghanistan – in this sense it

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<sup>36</sup> Kemal Kirisci, Philippe Le Corre, "The new geopolitics of Central Asia: China vies for influences in Russia's backyard," Brookings, January 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/02/the-new-geopolitics-of-central-asia-china-vies-for-influence-in-russias-backyard/>

<sup>37</sup> Catherine Putz, "Central Asians organize to draw attention to Xinjiang camps," *The Diplomat*, December 4, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/central-asians-organize-to-draw-attention-to-xinjiang-camps/>

<sup>38</sup> "After IAF's Farkhor Air Base, India-Tajikistan Set for more Security Pacts," *Indian Defence News*, May 2018, <http://www.defencenews.in/article/After-IAFs-Farkhor-Air-Base,-India-Tajikistan-Set-for-More-Security-Pacts-558003>

<sup>39</sup> Vinay Kaura, "Grading India's Neighbourhood Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/grading-indias-neighborhood-diplomacy/>

<sup>40</sup> "Turkey sentences 6 to life for 2016 Istanbul airport attack," *Rudaw*, November 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/161120181>

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Wheeler, "Turkey's role and interests in Central Asia," *Saferworld Briefing*, October 2013, [https://www.google.com/search?q=turkey+and+EU+presence+in+central+asia&rlz=1C1GCEA\\_enGB807GB807&oq=turkey+and+EU+presence+in+central+asia&ags=chrome..69i57.5078i0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#](https://www.google.com/search?q=turkey+and+EU+presence+in+central+asia&rlz=1C1GCEA_enGB807GB807&oq=turkey+and+EU+presence+in+central+asia&ags=chrome..69i57.5078i0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#)

follows Russia's 'hard security' approach to the region and invests in programmes such as Foreign Military Education and Training programme (IMET). The U.S. in 2001-2016 spent USD 1.9 billion on military reinforcements such as training security personnel and improving local counter-narcotics capabilities.<sup>42</sup> While all five states noted some improvements in the capabilities of their security services, the programme did not sufficiently address drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Moreover, U.S. funding for programmes in Central Asia are likely to be cut in the coming years – the U.S. President Donald Trump appears less interested in the region than his predecessor and more than halved U.S. budget spending on the Caucasus and Central Asia in 2018.<sup>43</sup> This particularly affected countries like Kyrgyzstan, the main recipient of the U.S. programmes, and almost entirely cut programmes in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

The U.S. will continue to approach the Central Asian countries through a series of bilateral relationships. Given the recent political reforms in Uzbekistan, the U.S. is planning to increase<sup>44</sup> its military education, training, and technical assistance to the country, while it will increase its cooperation with Kazakhstan over space exploration. The C5+1 - a framework for dialogue between the U.S. and Central Asian states - is also designed to address security issues in the region such as counter-terrorism, but this is a recent initiative that was first introduced in 2015 and has had little time to bear fruit. Moreover, the U.S. State Department has since 2017 delayed the appointment of an Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, which oversees all Central Asian countries – the current acting head has tended to prioritise other countries such as Pakistan and India.<sup>45</sup>

Iran is also a growing security player in the region – Iran has a deep historical connection to Central Asia and also has important linguistic links to Tajikistan in particular. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran has strived to position itself as a strong international security and political partner, but this has had limited success. This is chiefly because Russia is an important political ally for Iran and a major arms supplier – Iran has been cautious not to pursue security policies in the region that would bring it into conflict with Russia. Moreover, while Iran seeks membership of the SCO, according to a 2010 amendment to the SCO constitution it will not admit members that are under international sanctions.<sup>46</sup> The sanctions on Iran have also prevented it from becoming a major trade partner for Central Asian states.

### 3.2. EU's comparative advantages in political and security relations with Central Asia

First, the dominance of Russia and China in Central Asia is likely to pose a challenge for deepening the EU's engagement in the region. The EU is broadly viewed in Central Asia as a secondary power, whereas Russia, China and the U.S. are the main political and security players. Russia, China and India have a long history of relationships with Central Asia, but the EU's presence in Central Asia has been relatively recent, except for the Baltic states. Russia and China's bilateral approach to Central Asia has thus far proven to be more successful at improving ties than the EU's regional approach. That said, the EU could still take advantage of Kazakhstan's deepening partnership with China, as Kazakhstan's improving infrastructure would allow a greater volume of cargo to flow into and out of Europe. However, the supply route will run through Russia, which is likely to complicate this, owing to the EU's difficult political relationship with Russia.

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<sup>42</sup> Mariya Omelicheva, "US Security Assistance to Central Asia: Examining Limits, Exploring Opportunities," *PONARS Eurasia*, October 2017, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/us-security-assistance-central-asia>

<sup>43</sup> Joshua Kucera, "White House Proposes Slashing US Programs in Caucasus, Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, May 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/white-house-proposes-slashing-us-programs-in-caucasus-central-asia>

<sup>44</sup> Chatham house discussions on Central Asia security challenges with German and U.S. embassies personnel, European George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies, October 24, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, "Central Asia in 2018: What's the future of the C5+1?," *Geopolitical Monitor*, July 2018, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/central-asia-in-2018-whats-the-future-of-the-c51/>

<sup>46</sup> Edward Wastnidge, "Central Asia in the Iranian geopolitical imagination", *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 1, February 2017, <https://www.veruscript.com/CJES/publications/central-asia-in-the-iranian-geopolitical-imagination/>

There are other ways in which the EU could have an advantage over external powers. For example, the EU has a technological advantage over other actors in Central Asia in cyber security - European technology and experience are in demand, particularly to address financial crime. There is scope for the EU to deepen its relationship with countries like Kazakhstan in cyber security – Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has prioritised improving their participation in international organisations that address cyber threats and is interested in working more closely with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), to increase Kazakhstan's rating in the ITU's Global Cybersecurity Index by 2022.<sup>47</sup> While Kazakhstan and Russia in June 2018 signed a cyber-security agreement on information sharing, the Kazakh authorities are also cautious of Russia's actions in cyber space, noting several cyber-attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure in 2017 that they attributed to Russia.<sup>48</sup> In this sense, the EU is likely to be viewed as more politically neutral than Russia and a more viable cyber security partner.

While cyber cooperation between the EU and Central Asia is currently limited, several useful information sharing initiatives have borne fruit. In October 2018, Georgia hosted a cyber security workshop, organised by the European George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies, and attended by cyber law enforcement officials from various Western countries and Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>49</sup> This workshop shared ideas and experiences on investigating financial cybercrime. These kinds of events on cybercrime, information operations and ways of building resilience have already received support among government and security officials in Central Asia.

However, the EU would still likely face some competition in cyberspace from Russia and China. Russia and Central Asia already cooperate on cyber security through the SCO, which holds an annual security forum in Moscow that includes representatives from the CSTO on information technology and cyber defence.<sup>50</sup> China also works with Central Asian countries on cyber defence and counter-terrorism through official structures such as the SCO.<sup>51</sup> However, the EU could also increase its participation in existing cyber security formats - in 2018, Kyrgyzstan was one of the first beneficiary countries of the Global Cyber Security Capacity Building Program. This is a World Bank-led initiative that has allocated USD 50 million for technical assistance to governments to shore up their cyber security. The program was one of the first in Central Asia and helped Kyrgyzstan's government to understand the gaps in their cyber security capabilities and build up their cyber resilience.<sup>52</sup>

While Russia and China are the EU's main security and political rivals in Central Asia, there are still opportunities for the EU to take advantage of the improving infrastructure that Chinese and Russia investment in the region will bring. Moreover, the EU's technological abilities and experience in tackling financial crime are generally well-received in Central Asia. Cooperation over cyber security is likely to be an area of improving engagement in the coming years, although this engagement is currently quite fragmented.

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<sup>47</sup> Anna Gussarova, "Kazakhstan Launches Cyber Shield Concept," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol 14. Issue 150, November 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/kazakhstan-launches-cyber-shield-concept/>

<sup>48</sup> Arman Kaliyev, "Kazakhstan's cyber-security agreement with Russia deemed unwise," *Caravanserai*, June 2018, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2018/06/25/feature-01](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/06/25/feature-01)

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Brinkman, George C Marshall European Center for Security Studies, "Marshall Center Cyber Program Hosts Central Asia Regional Information Assurance," October 2018, [https://www.army.mil/article/212681/marshall\\_center\\_cyber\\_program\\_hosts\\_central\\_asia\\_regional\\_information\\_assurance\\_workshop](https://www.army.mil/article/212681/marshall_center_cyber_program_hosts_central_asia_regional_information_assurance_workshop)

<sup>50</sup> "SCO responds to cyber challenges," Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, June 2011, <http://infoshos.ru/en/?idn=8349>

<sup>51</sup> "China ready to improve security cooperation among SCO members: official", Xinhua, July 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/07/c\\_136188345.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/07/c_136188345.htm)

<sup>52</sup> Natalija Gerlvanovska-Garcia, "Building up cyber resilience in the Kyrgyz Republic", World Bank Blog, June 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/europeandcentralasia/building-cyber-resilience-kyrgyz-republic>

## 4. The EU's perception in Central Asia

### 4.1. Poor awareness of EU intent and structure in Central Asia

Upon the anniversary of the EU's revision of its regional strategy, several reports revealed how the EU was perceived on the ground in Central Asia.<sup>53</sup> This report and other previous progress reports in 2010 and 2012 both revealed that there is a fundamental mismatch between the EU's aims and objectives in the region and local needs.<sup>54</sup> Both reports note that the EU has relatively low visibility in the region, and that locals' understanding of how the EU operates and its intent are unclear.<sup>55</sup>

There are two distinct challenges to deeper security and political integration between the EU and Central Asia. The first is a fundamental lack of trust between the EU and Central Asia, which may be a hangover from the Cold War, when diplomatic relations were particularly poor. Most of Central Asia's political authorities were brought up under the influence of the Soviet political discourse, which took place both in the heavily censored public (the media, speeches of political leaders) and the private.

The second challenge is a lack of knowledge, understanding, and exposure to the EU. Many Central Asians do not have any personal experience of the EU due to restrictions on travel given the expense and difficulty obtaining a visa to Europe. In Central Asian countries, the Russian media is much more actively engaged with the public, given the prevalence of Russian spoken in the region, but there is very little information available in local languages on the EU's foreign and security policies. The Russian media tends to promote news stories about NATO's enlargement and political issues between Russia and the West,<sup>56</sup> in particular Russian-Ukrainian relations following the occupation of Crimea, while the West (including the EU and the US) is usually portrayed negatively. Moreover, there is a prevailing view in Tajikistan that the EU is more interested in engaging with countries with larger economies such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan,<sup>57</sup> which impacts on their views of the EU's strategy in the region.

In some cases, the EU may be unaware of how their operations are viewed on the ground – in Kyrgyzstan, there is a prevailing view among the political elite that the EU is fulfilling an intelligence function, and that it gathers data on Central Asian countries through its projects and local initiatives.<sup>58</sup> Following the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in the early 2000s, the political elites in Central Asia - particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - have become increasingly suspicious of any foreign activities and sources of funding, including the EU. This is likely to impact on the EU's ability to promote initiatives in Kyrgyzstan that involve working with civil society.

There is a demand for the EU to invest more into raising awareness of its diverse culture in Central Asia and to increase the exposure of Central Asians to the EU. If Central Asians are unable to visit Europe, it might be worth bringing Europe to the region by helping the local population become more familiar with what the EU stands for.<sup>59</sup> Individual EU embassies and European Commission delegations in the Central Asian countries do host events, but they are small-scale and poorly advertised. In all Central Asian countries, the target audience for these cultural events appears to be mainly urban Russian-speaking youth, as events are often advertised in two languages – English and Russian. This excludes many other ethnic and linguistic groups in Central Asia. The German Embassy is particularly active in the region while others – Italy, Finland, Poland, France, and Latvia

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<sup>53</sup> Jos Boonstra, "Reviewing the EU's approach to Central Asia," EUCAM, No34- February 2015, <https://eucentralasia.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EUCAM-Working-Papers-Reports-PDF-19.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on Central Asia. 3179th Foreign Affairs Council meeting Luxembourg, 25 June 2012*, [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131149.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131149.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> Representative of an academic institution in Kazakhstan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 10, 2018, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

<sup>57</sup> Representative of an NGO in Tajikistan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 10, 2018, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

<sup>58</sup> Representative of an academic institution in Kyrgyzstan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 9, 2018, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>59</sup> Representative of an academic institution in Kyrgyzstan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 9, 2018, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Representative of an NGO in Tajikistan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 10, 2018, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

– lack the same level of engagement, particularly in political and security areas.<sup>60</sup> A possible solution to this would be to hold more events in local languages, and to improve the advertising of EU events in the print and online media, or via downloadable phone apps. The approach should be tailored to each individual country– in places like Turkmenistan where the internet and people's online activities are closely monitored, phone apps advertising European events may not be widely used but print media may be a more effective way of reaching out to the community.

#### 4.2. Divergent approaches to concepts

Central Asian countries' perceptions of concepts that play a role in security – such as religion and the political opposition – may be different from the EU. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and in many ways Uzbekistan, are tightly controlled by personalised and centralised governments, meaning that decision-making powers are confined to a small group of stakeholders (elites and old clans) and justifications for those decisions are often not clear.<sup>61</sup> This makes it difficult for political outsiders such as the EU to penetrate this tight-knit circle and establish a relationship with decision-makers in the government.

The EU and Central Asia's understandings of the “political opposition” also differ – some Central Asian countries do not differentiate between moderate or extremist opposition forces, tending to classify most opposition groups as “destructive” groups that threaten national security.<sup>62</sup> This makes it difficult for the EU to initiate projects on political reform or democratisation. Central Asian countries also diverge in their definitions of “extremism”, “terrorism”, and in their attitudes to certain strands of Islam – Kyrgyzstan's policy is relatively liberal, but both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have more rigid restrictions and punishments for terrorists.<sup>63</sup> While Uzbekistan is beginning to change, its historical approach to Islam has been quite repressive, restricting most public displays of Islamic practice and dress.<sup>64</sup> This would make it more complex for the EU to set up counter-extremism projects designed to promote more ‘moderate’ strands of Islam.

#### 4.3. Scope for cooperation

The EU could attempt to engage Central Asian states bilaterally over security and politics, which would allow the EU and its member states to examine the countries' security needs individually. However, the EU's agenda should still focus on issues such as promoting democratisation, improving human rights and strengthening the rule of law, which are often lacking in Central Asia. As can be seen from Table 2 below, notwithstanding some significant political changes in countries like Uzbekistan, none of the political systems in Central Asia are viewed as free, with only Kyrgyzstan considered the most politically progressive. As the most politically free country in the region, Kyrgyzstan has been more interested than others in working with the EU to address human rights abuses.<sup>65</sup> However, another obstacle to the EU's political and security agenda in the region will be convincing the Central Asian governments that their agenda is worth considering – the leaders occasionally agree on the need to counter specific security threats but rarely feel the need to deliver on democratisation, as this would threaten their political control over the country.

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<sup>60</sup> Representative of an NGO in Tajikistan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 10, 2018, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

<sup>61</sup> Representative of an academic institution in Kyrgyzstan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 9, 2018, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>62</sup> Representative of an academic institution in Tajikistan, interview by SEnECA in person, October 10, 2018, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

<sup>63</sup> Business representative from Kyrgyzstan, interview by SEnECA in person, September 27, 2018, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>64</sup> Mukhammadsharif Mamatkulov, “Emboldened by change, some Uzbek imams turn of loudspeakers for call to prayer,” *Reuters*, December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-islam/emboldened-by-change-some-uzbek-imams-turn-on-loudspeakers-for-call-to-prayer-idUSKBN1E51KQ>

<sup>65</sup> Jos Boonsta, Riccardo Panella, “Three Reasons why the EU matters to Central Asia”, *Voices of Central Asia*, March 2018, <http://voicesoncentralasia.org/three-reasons-why-the-eu-matters-to-central-asia/>

**Table 2.** Central Asia Ranking on Freedom, Rule of Law and Democracy<sup>66</sup> (values closer to zero indicate fewer political freedoms).

Country	Ranking 2017-2018		
	Rule of Law Index (World Justice Project; points from 0 to 1)	Freedom in the World (Freedom House)	Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit; points from 1 to 10)
Kazakhstan	0.51	Not free	141 <sup>st</sup> place; 3.06 points
Kyrgyzstan	0.47	Partly free	95 <sup>th</sup> place; 5.11 points
Tajikistan	-	Not free	159 <sup>th</sup> place; 1.93 points
Turkmenistan	-	Not free	162 <sup>nd</sup> place; 1.72 points
Uzbekistan	0.46	Not free	158 <sup>th</sup> place; 1.95 points

There is frequent contact between Central Asian and European officials from Latvia, Romania, Germany and France, and there have been numerous joint declarations such as partnerships and commitments to democratic values. However, the EU's political agenda and influence in Central Asia has been and remains relatively low, particularly when compared to Russian and Chinese influences.<sup>67</sup> The EU ought to approach Central Asia in a more flexible way, avoiding the “one-size-fits-all” approach. In practical terms, this will mean the re-evaluation of the current balance between multilateral and bilateral activities in certain areas of cooperation, including security and political relations.

## 5. Conclusions

Federica Mogherini at the 14<sup>th</sup> EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting emphasised the need and demand for new diversified partnerships and a deeper EU engagement with Central Asia.<sup>68</sup> Some of the changing political dynamics in Central Asia could facilitate this – Uzbekistan for example, is currently undergoing widespread political and social reforms following the death of President Islam Karimov in 2016. Incumbent President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has overturned some of Karimov's more repressive legislation and has eased restrictions on Islam.<sup>69</sup> He has also identified five priority areas for the country's development, including addressing Afghanistan, terrorism and drug trafficking, which the EU could take advantage of.

Evidently, the “one-size-fits-all” approach does not work for Central Asia; the five countries are divided by regional rivalries and many of them are still young independent states which value their sovereignty over deepening regional cooperation. Instead of approaching the region as a group, such as in EU's previous strategies, EU could select one partner, preferably a more economically developed country such as Kazakhstan and/or Uzbekistan and establish deeper security and political cooperation with other Central Asian states through this country.<sup>70</sup> This would help deepen inter-

<sup>66</sup> “Freedom in the World 2018. Democracy in Crisis,” Freedom House, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>; “The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2017,” The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018, <https://infographics.economist.com/2018/DemocracyIndex/>; “Rule of Law Index 2017-2018,” World Justice Project, 2018, <http://data.worldjusticeproject.org/>

<sup>67</sup> Jos Boonstra, Tika Tsertsvadze, Marlene Laruelle, “Towards a new EU Strategy for Central Asia,” *EUCAM Watch* – No. 23, December 13, 2018, <https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/12/towards-a-new-eu-strategy-for-central-asia/>

<sup>68</sup> “New opportunities to take EU-Central Asia Partnership forward,” European External Action Service, November 26, 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54425/new-opportunities-take-eu-central-asia-partnership-forward\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54425/new-opportunities-take-eu-central-asia-partnership-forward_en)

<sup>69</sup> Mukhammadsharif Mamatkulov, “Emboldened by change, some Uzbek imams turn on loudspeakers for call to prayer,” *Reuters*, December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-islam/emboldened-by-change-some-uzbek-imams-turn-on-loudspeakers-for-call-to-prayer-idUSKBN1E51KQ>

<sup>70</sup> Katrin Bottger, Julian Plottka, Central Asia and the South Caucasus: The EU's Involvement and Regional Perspectives- L'Asie centrale et le Caucase du Sud: l'engagement de l'UE et perspectives régionales” ‘Été-Summer’ (1) 2018.

regional cooperation, but there is a risk that this would also entrench local rivalries and allegations of favouritism towards certain countries. The EU could also learn from Russia's approach to Central Asia, as it has increasingly been approaching countries individually, while continuing to engage through multilateral institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and CSTO or engaging with the China-led Belt and Road Initiative.

Engagement with Central Asia requires a tailor-made security and political approach that accounts for the differences between all five countries. The most successful EU-led projects in the region have been detailed and often unilateral projects that devote resources to tackling a specific problem in one particular country. Brussels could also improve its engagement with countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan by finalising a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Turkmenistan and adopting an EPCA<sup>71</sup> with Uzbekistan<sup>72</sup>. The EU should also build on its existing counter-narcotics programmes by assisting Central Asian countries in institutionalising their management of drug dependency, as well as assisting in developing policies that view drug trafficking as a public health issue and not solely as a security concern. The EU could also assist in promoting coordination among ministries to advance shared responsibility for issues caused by drug trafficking.

As this paper has shown, the EU's aims and objectives in Central Asia are not often well understood by local populations. Investing in clear summaries in local languages, as well as articulating the meaning of unfamiliar social concepts such as identity would better enable Central Asian populations to understand the EU's mission in their countries and open up further areas for cooperation. Ultimately, the EU's goals for political and security cooperation have been better addressed with some countries than others, but Central Asia's complex domestic political environment and divergent understandings of security and political concepts will continue to remain some of the key obstacles to deeper cooperation with the EU.

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<sup>71</sup> "Uzbekistan: EU to open negotiations on new comprehensive agreement," Council of the European Union, July 16, 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/07/16/uzbekistan-eu-to-open-negotiations-on-new-comprehensive-agreement/#>

<sup>72</sup> Jos Boonstra, Tika Tsertsvadze, Marlene Laruelle, "Towards a new EU Strategy for Central Asia," *EUCAM Watch* – No. 23, December 13, 2018, <https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/12/towards-a-new-eu-strategy-for-central-asia/>

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