

## POLICY PAPER

No. 12

Cultural relations

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

February 2019



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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770256.

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## Executive Summary

There are several regional and external actors that are currently engaged in intense competition over the future of Central Asia’s culture (education, media, tourism), social life (people-to-people contacts, civil society) and identity (including politics of memory), to win over the “hearts and minds” of the Central Asian people. However, this issue has been underestimated in previous research of the region. The European Union (hereafter the EU) and its member states are underperforming in this area in comparison to several key external powers, especially Russia. Despite the EU’s claims that Central Asian countries are important partners to them, the EU has not provided sufficient financial commitments and ways of supporting these claims.

The paper concludes that the new EU strategy for Central Asia, due to be approved in 2019, should provide a more efficient response to the cultural policies and identity narratives of the key external powers and Central Asian countries. Aside from increasing financial and institutional engagement, the EU should establish a new and innovative identity narrative that would address both how the Union is perceived in Central Asia, as well as how Central Asia is perceived in the EU. The leading theme of this new EU identity narrative should be promoting the importance of a Central Asian cultural heritage to the EU and its contribution to the Union.

## 1. Introduction

This paper evaluates EU's Central Asian policy implementation and its perception in the region in cultural and related issues. The EU was analysed both at the Union level and at a member state level. Given that the policy of the EU is directly related to the policies of EU member states in the region (and their effects in Central Asia might not be distinguishable compared to other world powers like China, Russia or the U.S.), the role of the EU member states was included in the analysis. Where possible, both the EU and its member states and their policies and perceptions were assessed. The timeframe of the document analysis covers 2007-2018 so that it coincides with the inception of the first EU Strategy for Central Asia<sup>2</sup>.

This policy paper is the second of three phases in the SEnECA project: mapping – analysis – recommendations. It is based on and serves as a successive analysis to the mapping exercise on political and security relations, economic relations and trade, as well as cultural and other relations between the EU and Central Asia, which were presented in the first nine SEnECA policy papers.<sup>3</sup> This paper will also provide a comprehensive basis for further recommendations for future priorities in European policy-making toward Central Asia.

This policy paper was supported by semi-structured interviews. Altogether, the SEnECA consortium partners (CAISS, 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. Two of the interviews were conducted in Kazakhstan, six in Kyrgyzstan, four in Tajikistan, one in Turkmenistan and nine in Uzbekistan. To ensure answers that are more open and to avoid potential issues for interviewees when discussing sensitive topics, the interviews were anonymized revealing only the city, country, sector of operation and date of the interview. Interviews were conducted in September-November 2018.

The first chapter (no. 2) of this policy paper examines the EU's cultural policy in Central Asia, which provides a comparison of official documents and statements. The paper then identifies the ways in which the EU's culture policy is implemented in the region and provides data on domestic perceptions of the EU's cultural policy in the region. The second chapter (no. 3) identifies the cultural policy of the main external powers and the Central Asian countries. The third chapter (no. 4) analyses the EU's competitive advantages and disadvantages in comparison to other external powers.

## 2. The EU's cultural policy in Central Asia

### 2.1. EU strategy in the field of culture

The EU's strategy for Central Asia was endorsed by the EU Council in 2007. This strategy regulates the EU's activities in the region and acts as a policy umbrella for all member states. The document addresses various issues including history, culture, and identity. It states that "Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together [...] With their rich traditions and centuries-old exchanges, the EU and Central Asia can contribute actively to the dialogue between civilisations."<sup>4</sup>

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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> 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>4</sup> Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (Brussels, 2007), 9-10, [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)

The EU's strategy also emphasises the importance of intercultural dialogue as one of the key ways to cooperate between the EU and Central Asia. The EU's strategy assumes that Central Asia distinguishes itself by the peaceful coexistence of religions, traditions, and ethnicities. According to the EU's strategy, "[m]oderate and tolerant Islamic thinking respecting the constitutional secular principle is a hall-mark of the Central Asian countries."<sup>5</sup>

The EU maintains that it would be interested in sharing its experience and expertise in areas such as good governance, human rights, rule of law with Central Asian countries.<sup>6</sup> As part of the strategy, the EU established the European Education Initiative, which aims to increase the quality of Central Asia's education systems to an international standard.<sup>7</sup> The EU also declared its readiness to act as a source of inspiration for Central Asia in the sphere of regional integration.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in 2017 the EU Council discussed its conclusions on the implementation of the EU's 2007 strategy, and encouraged the European Commission and member states to pursue multi-country programmes to advance regional cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

As part of the strategy, the EU launched the Central Asia Research and Education Network (CAREN)<sup>10</sup> which aims to create a high-capacity data-communications network for academics, researchers, and students in Central Asia. CAREN presents itself as a continuation of the Silk Road ("From an Ancient Trade Route to a Virtual Highway"): it "[...] was launched to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information between academic institutions in Eurasia."<sup>11</sup>

The EU Council's conclusions also reaffirmed the EU's commitment to democratisation. The EU Strategy for Central Asia operates within the framework of the EU Global Strategy, adopted in June 2016. It mentions Central Asia in the context of the East, stating "it is in the interests of our citizens to invest in the resilience of states and societies to the east stretching into Central Asia [...]."<sup>12</sup> From the point of view of EU cultural diplomacy and engagement with Central Asia, the most important issue in the EU Global Strategy is to give strong support to regional cooperation which "offers states and peoples the opportunity to [...] express more fully cultures and identities [...]."<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the EU announced that it would nurture social resilience by deepening work on education and culture.<sup>14</sup>

The cultural diplomacy and identity narrative appear to be less significant in the EU Strategy for Central Asia and the afore-mentioned Council conclusions. Concepts such as "people-to people contacts", "culture", "cultural policy" and "diplomacy", "nation-building" and "regional identity" were not mentioned in the EU strategy and the word "tourism" occurred only once, in parenthesis. The same can be observed in the EU Council's conclusions from 2015-2017, aside from one mention of people-to-people contacts. While recognising the importance of education, the EU Strategy still did not extensively address the content of education programs. The same discourse on the technical and institutional modernisation of education was present in the Council's conclusions on the EU's 2007 strategy, endorsed in June 2015. Only in June 2017 did the EU recognise that its support for

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<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (Brussels, 2007), 17, [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>6</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (Brussels, 2007), 6, [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>9</sup> Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (Brussels, 2007), 2, [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>10</sup> CAREN replaced the Virtual Silk Highway.

<sup>11</sup> Central Asian Research and Education Network (CAREN), "From an Ancient Trade Route to a Virtual Highway," accessed: November 24, 2018, <https://caren.geant.org/Project/Background/pages/home.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> European External Action Service, Shared Vision, *Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, 9, accessed: November 23, 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 26.

education should also promote the “values of democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms and intercultural dialogue.”<sup>15</sup>

The EU in the Council's conclusions also emphasised that people-to-people contacts, and international cooperation may contribute substantially to this effort. However, issues such as the legacy of history, cultural values and nation-state building were still absent from the conclusions. In the EU Strategy, the section on “building bridges: inter-cultural dialogue” is the least developed, containing only four sentences in a text that totals more than 18 pages. The section also neglects the vilification of Islam by regional political elites. In fact, for many years the local political elites of Central Asia exaggerated the threat of Islamist extremism and repressed non-violent conservative Muslim groups. By exaggerating the Islamist extremism threat, the elites sought to maintain power and achieve external support, although this attitude has somewhat changed in recent years.

A crucial shortcoming of the EU's Strategy for Central Asia is its modest and imitative identity narrative. This tendency expresses itself through the use of terminology from Chinese and Russian narratives: Silk Road, Eurasia, dialogue between civilisations, cultural exchange, etc. The EU has not managed to create an identity narrative about Central Asia that would put the region in the centre of European cultural policy and enhance its image in this part of the world. For example, the EU did not take into consideration that Central Asian heritage is one of sources of European Renaissance and Enlightenment (science, philosophy). Frederick Starr, an American historian, in his work “Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane” correctly described the period mentioned in the title of his book, “This was truly an Age of Enlightenment, several centuries of cultural flowering during which Central Asia was the intellectual hub of the world. [...] It bridged time as well as geography, in the process becoming the great link between antiquity and the modern world. To a far greater extent than today's Europeans, Chinese, Indians, or Middle Easterners realize, they are all the heirs of the remarkable cultural and intellectual effervescence in Central Asia.”<sup>16</sup>

The identity narrative behind EU-Central Asia exchanges should emphasise the role of Europe in the dissemination of Central Asian intellectual heritage. It was Europe that first incorporated the legacy of Golden Age of Central Asia into its culture, further transferring this legacy to the rest of the world, including Russia, China, and Turkey.

## 2.2. EU cultural diplomacy practices

The EU Strategy for Central Asia maintains that cooperation in education is a priority. EU educational projects in Central Asia include the EU Education Initiative (EUEI) with Central Asia (launched in 2012), which includes programmes such as the Central Asian Education Platform (CAEP), Tempus (2007-2013), Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus+ (since 2006), and the Central Asia Research and Education Network (CAREN) (since 2009).<sup>17</sup> Cooperation between Central Asian and European educational institutions, especially universities, requires not only an organisational framework, but also the modernisation of this sector in Central Asia. The Tempus European programme was a particularly good way to improve the modernisation of the education system in the EU's surrounding area, including Central Asia, but it only had a limited presence in Central Asia. The programme also covered Europe and its neighbours, Russia, and the Western Balkans. Central Asian universities were less developed in comparison to educational institutions from these countries, as they had more experience in working with the EU and were better equipped to complete the project requirements.

The participation of Central Asian countries in the Bologna Process has also been limited. So far, only Kazakhstan is a signatory to the Process, and a member of the European Higher Education

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<sup>15</sup> Council of the European Union, op. cit., June 19, 2017, 4, accessed: November 30, 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23991/st10387en17-conclusions-on-the-eu-strategy-for-central-asia.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Starr, “Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane,” Princeton, 2013, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Gussarova, Māris Andžāns, eds., “Policy Paper No. 7: Cultural and other relations – Mapping EU-Central Asia relations. Strengthening and Energizing EU-Central Asia Relations, September 2018, 5, DOI: [10.17185/dupublico/47241](https://doi.org/10.17185/dupublico/47241)

Area.<sup>18</sup> There is no standardised and institutionalised model of educational cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries. This kind of model is required to create a stable base upon which to develop specialised Central Asian studies in Europe, separately from departments of oriental studies. EU funding to promote the study of Central Asian languages at universities in Europe is very limited, and there is little awareness among students at European universities about the existence of departments of Central Asian studies. A promising area for the development of education and scientific relations between the EU and Central Asia seems to be the EU's technical assistance. Establishing advanced research centres at higher educational institutions has been very helpful, developing a system of postgraduate education and creating a favourable institutional environment for start-ups.<sup>19</sup>

There are currently seven Capacity Building projects in Higher Education (CBHE) operating in Central Asia, which aim to develop new curricula, materials, and advanced training for teachers. Unilateral Jean Monnet projects have also been set up in the region.<sup>20</sup> However, Kazakhstan is disproportionately represented in the Erasmus budget, with more than half of all funds allocated to the country (55 percent). Projects in Uzbekistan accounted for less than a quarter of funding, 15 percent was allocated to Kyrgyzstan, and 5 percent – to Tajikistan. Erasmus's footprint in Turkmenistan has been negligible, with just 1 percent of funding allocated to education initiatives there.<sup>21</sup> Programs organised by the EU member states can also be effective, such as Germany's German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which is the most active project in the region; the French Bactria project in Tajikistan, and the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) have also been quite successful. Their relative success is based on the high level of engagement of local students. Poland and Latvia are especially active within the European Education Initiative. However, regional experts maintain that these initiatives – which are generally assessed favourably by locals –, still fail to sufficiently respond to the needs of local communities.<sup>22</sup> Summing up, after more than ten years since the launch of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, the EU did not become the top destination for students from Central Asia. According to the UNESCO data, their number enrolled at the EU universities (without the UK which is leaving the EU in 2019) has oscillated around 8,000-9,000 people in the recent years.<sup>23</sup>

EU member states have also set up a number of cultural institutions in Central Asia, focused on the promotion of European culture and deepening mutual cooperation in that field, such as the Goethe Institut and the Institut Français.<sup>24</sup> However, their presence in the region is still limited; the Goethe Institut only operates in two countries (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), while the Institut Français limits its activities to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The British Council operates in two countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), but the United Kingdom will be leaving the EU in 2019, and so the activities of the British Council will not be able to directly reinforce the EU policy. There is also the Scandinavian Council, a non-profit organisation established to “promote interaction and communication between the countries of Scandinavia and Kazakhstan in the field of culture, art and education.”<sup>25</sup>

EU member states have a wide range of national institutions (ministries, government-affiliated foundations, political and independent foundations, non-governmental organisations, research centres, public and private universities, think tanks and others) that are conducting cultural activities in Central

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with a Tajik NGO representative (anonymous) by Zerkalo, September 23, 2018, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Kyrgyz NGO (anonymous) by KNU, October 19, 2018, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with an Uzbek academic (anonymous) by UWED, September 26, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

<sup>21</sup> European Commission, “Erasmus+ for higher education in Kyrgyzstan”, 2017, accessed: November 25, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/asia-central/erasmusplus\\_kyrgyzstan\\_2017.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/asia-central/erasmusplus_kyrgyzstan_2017.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Interview with an Uzbek academic (anonymous) by UWED, October 5, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

<sup>23</sup> UNESCO, “Global Flow of Tertiary- Level Students,” accessed: November 24, 2018, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>

<sup>24</sup> Goethe Institut, Standorte, accessed: November 25, 2018, <https://www.goethe.de/de/www.html>; Institut français, Les Instituts français dans le monde, accessed: November 27, 2018, <http://www.ifmapp.institutfrancais.com/les-if-dans-le-monde>

<sup>25</sup> The Scandinavian Council, accessed: January 15, 2018, <http://sc.org.kz.tilda.ws/>

Asia.<sup>26</sup> However, they lack diplomatic support on the ground. Following the expected UK's withdrawal from the EU, only France and Germany will have embassies and consulates in all five countries of the region. Only two EU countries (Romania and Italy) have embassies in three Central Asian states and six EU member states (Poland, Latvia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria) have embassies in two Central Asian countries.

Joint artistic ventures between local partners and European governmental and non-governmental organisations such as the Goethe Institut and the Institut Français are popular in Central Asian cities. The activities carried out by the EU diplomatic missions, such as embassies and delegations with the participation of European artists, are also well received.<sup>27</sup> In addition to promoting European culture and art, the added value of these endeavours is the networking between European and Central Asian artists. Concerts, film workshops, and cinema festivals are all particularly good examples of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian artists. Although cooperation in the arts is improving, the scale of the EU's activities in Central Asia is still limited, particularly in comparison with the activities in South Caucasus countries or Ukraine. The number of cinema festivals, concerts, exhibitions, translations of books and movies that are financially supported by the EU and its member states in Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine is much larger than in Central Asia.

The EU supports civil society activities in Central Asia through funding bodies such as the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). In previous years, some Central Asian authorities tended to accuse European NGOs and their regional partners of exporting “colour revolutions,”<sup>28</sup> attempting to promote regime change. These NGOs are still occasionally presented in official discourse as a “fifth column”, or “agents” of Western influence, which negatively impacts public perceptions of the EU activities in the third sector.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the political environment has improved. Until recently the countries of Central Asia had been reluctant to cooperate with European NGOs over political reforms, with a partial exemption in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the most politically free country of the region. Their attitude towards European NGOs improved partly because Kazakhstan launched some limited political reforms, and Uzbekistan has experienced a political thaw after a leadership change in 2016. However, Turkmenistan remains inward-looking, and there is little scope for civil society to develop there due to the lack of political opposition and independent media.<sup>30</sup> Civil society in Tajikistan is also weak and the political environment is deteriorating because of the ruling elite's authoritarian inclinations.<sup>31</sup>

According to interviews conducted with stakeholders in Central Asia, most people in the region are not familiar with the concept of civil society, and consider the third sector as mainly consisting of service non-profit organisations, funded by the state.<sup>32</sup> There is also limited EU support for projects that raise social awareness about civil society and foster civic activism.<sup>33</sup> The EU must find a way to establish practical ways of interacting between government agencies, business communities, NGOs, and academia. According to the interviews, there should also be deeper cooperation between economic and security research centres and NGOs dealing with humanitarian issues from Central Asia and the EU.<sup>34</sup> The EU should support civil society organisations in Central Asia. Many EU member states pay lip service to this issue but do not provide tangible financial support to the local NGOs.

As a result, people-to-people contacts between people from the EU and Central Asian are improving slowly but consistently. However, the number of EU citizens visiting the region remains very limited,

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<sup>26</sup> Anna Gussarova, Māris Andžāns, eds., “Policy Paper No. 7: Cultural and other relations – Mapping EU-Central Asia relations. Strengthening and Energizing EU-Central Asia Relations, September 2018, DOI: [10.17185/dupublico/47241](https://doi.org/10.17185/dupublico/47241)

<sup>27</sup> Interview with an Uzbek NGO representative (anonymous) by UWED, October 3, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

<sup>28</sup> Olga Alinda Spaiser, “The European Union's Influence in Central Asia: Geopolitical Challenges and Responses,” Lanham 2018, 90-91.

<sup>29</sup> Anna Gussarova, Māris Andžāns, eds., op. cit.,

<sup>30</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World, accessed: November 25, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>

<sup>31</sup> Interview with a Kazakh academic by CAISS, October 22, 2018, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with an Uzbek academic (anonymous) by UWED, September 26, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with an Uzbek NGO representative (anonymous) by UWED, October 19, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with an Uzbek academic (anonymous) by UWED, September 26, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

particularly in comparison to Russia. For instance, in 2017 Germany was the main country of origin for EU tourists visiting Kazakhstan, but this number was almost 20 times smaller than the number of Russians.<sup>35</sup>

Opportunities to encourage tourism from the EU prompted Uzbekistan in July 2018 to introduce a system of electronic visas for a period of up to 30 days for all EU citizens (excluding Cyprus), making it easier for tourists to travel. That said, stringent EU visa requirements for Central Asians have made their travel to the EU more difficult in comparison to Turkey or Russia, which have no visa requirements for most of Central Asian countries.<sup>36</sup> In 2017, almost 150,000 EU visas were issued for citizens of Kazakhstan and around 35,000 for citizens of other Central Asian states (25,000 for Uzbeks). Considering the relative size of the population, Russian citizens received over ten times more visas than citizens of Central Asia with a cheaper visa fee.<sup>37</sup>

Tourism is one of the most promising sectors of Central Asia's economic growth. Central Asia is gradually developing its tourism potential, based primarily on its history and natural heritage sites, as well as extreme sports such as mountain climbing. The region also has the potential to develop sport tourism (winter sports, hunting and fishing, aquatics, horse riding), medical tourism, ecotourism, and "ethnographic" tourism, which involves learning about local folk traditions. However, the main issue is that Central Asia is geographically remote – there are a limited number of flight connections and tickets are expensive. Central Asia also lacks a well-developed tourism infrastructure, particularly hotels, road and rail transport. The main tourist routes that cover key tourist attractions often do not have detailed information in English or other languages on local historic, architectural, or archaeological sites. This requires significant investment should these countries hope for a substantial rise in the number of tourists. Central Asian countries should also work on long-term development strategies together, as well as creating joint tourist programs to facilitate tourism travel around the region.<sup>38</sup> A positive example of this is Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's planned introduction of a common visa for both countries, designed to attract foreign tourists.<sup>39</sup> EU engagement in the development of this sector is quite limited and is unlikely to change without a considerable increase in the number of EU tourists visiting the region.

### 2.3. Perception of EU cultural diplomacy in the region

Unlike the approaches of countries such as Russia, Turkey, and China, the EU's strategy refers to the importance of promoting democratic values, which will affect how the EU is perceived among regional political elites. The EU's promotion of democratic values has prompted some political elites in Central Asia to become suspicious of their intent. However, should the EU focus on aspects such as emphasising the rule of law and not solely on democratisation, the EU's agenda would likely be viewed more positively.<sup>40</sup>

Besides its democratic agenda, the EU and its member states differ from China, Russia, and Turkey in the liberal values that form the basis for EU cultural diplomacy. Some Central Asian countries are particularly conservative, although this degree varies substantially between countries, from liberal Kazakh Muslims to more conservative Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz people.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Committee on statistics, Turizm Kazakhstana, 26, accessed: November 25, 2018, [http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav\\_externalId/publicationsCompilations?lang=ru&\\_adf.ctrl-state=qxt6nxycv\\_128&\\_afLoop=3811769051847724#%40%3F\\_afLoop%3D3811769051847724%26lang%3Dru%26\\_adf.ctrl-state%3Dh5c2uw7ij\\_64](http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/publicationsCompilations?lang=ru&_adf.ctrl-state=qxt6nxycv_128&_afLoop=3811769051847724#%40%3F_afLoop%3D3811769051847724%26lang%3Dru%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Dh5c2uw7ij_64)

<sup>36</sup> Turkmenistani citizens need visas to Russia.

<sup>37</sup> European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, "Complete statistics on short-stay visas issued by the Schengen States," accessed: November 24, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy\\_en#stats](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy_en#stats)

<sup>38</sup> Interview with a Kyrgyz NGO (anonymous) by KNU, September 27, 2018, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>39</sup> "Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan about to reach agreement on creating analogue of Schengen visa for Central Asia", *Kun*, September 19, 2018, accessed: November 25, 2018, <https://kun.uz/en/news/2018/09/18/uzbekistan-kazakhstan-about-to-reach-agreement-on-creating-analogue-of-schengen-visa-for-central-asia>

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a Kazakh NGO (anonymous) by CAISS, November 8, 2018, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

<sup>41</sup> Pew Research Center, "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society," April 30, 2013, accessed: November 26, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>

The divergence of values is striking in the case of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) and other minority rights. European societies are generally more liberal than those in Central Asia. As U.S. scientists Marlene Laruelle and Eric McGlinchey note, the issue of LGBTI “[...] is particularly sensitive, as it pairs well with post-Soviet narratives of decadent Western values and the need for a so-called Eurasian civilization to safeguard the region’s traditional values and morality.”<sup>42</sup>

There are virtually no opinion polls conducted in Central Asia on the EU engagement in culture and so it is difficult to determine Central Asian societies’ responses to the EU cultural diplomacy. Regional societies’ attitudes to EU cultural diplomacy are best summarised through the interviews conducted with Central Asian experts. In general, the EU is perceived positively in the region, but Russia’s actions in the region have greater public appeal. The main perception of the EU stems from its image as a soft power that does not have an “imperial” geopolitical agenda; its significant economic potential and reputation as a business innovator, as well as the enduring perception of European culture and education as being of a high standard. However, the SEnECA interviews did also confirm the objections of Central Asian societies towards some of the EU’s more liberal cultural values.

According to SEnECA interviews conducted for the purpose of this study, Central Asian societies (especially students, intelligentsia, urban middle class, the scientific community) view the EU’s cultural and educational experience (research, quality of learning) as attractive.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the interviewees stressed that EU culture, education, and science are perceived by the middle class in the region as being of a better quality than Russian, Turkish, or Chinese institutions. Overall, the EU’s cultural and educational agenda is particularly well received by younger people – many students hope to study and gain work experience in EU member states, or work at European companies in their home countries. Young people are generally more fluent in official EU languages, particularly English, German, or French, than older people in Central Asia who predominantly grew up speaking Russian as a second language.

People’s perception of the EU is strongly influenced by the media. The EU’s presence in the media in Central Asia is limited because of the lower proficiency in European languages in the region in comparison to Russian, and the negligible presence of EU media outlets in Central Asia. Meanwhile, the largest Russian TV channels also broadcast across the region and are popular opinion-forming and entertainment outlets. There are also many newspapers and magazines published in Russian. Regional state channels, as well as many private media outlets broadcast at least partially in Russian. In addition, Turkish TV and radio stations broadcast throughout Central Asia and online on a much wider scale than EU media outlets. Russian also dominates among internet users in Central Asia, and so most people in Central Asia still function in Russia’s information and media sphere.

Russia has for many decades acted as Central Asia’s “window to Europe” by bringing many elements of European culture to the region. However, Russian media outlets tend to promote a disproportionately negative image of the West, which to a large degree shapes the Central Asian public’s opinions about the EU. As Nargis Kassenova, a Kazakh scientist, notes, “[t]raditionally, it was the Russian influence that set the basis for Europe’s entry into the region. [...] Over the past years, Russia as a channel of “Europeanness” was cluttered due to politically-driven anti-Western sentiment (Europe as Gayropa, among other things), fuelled by the Russian media.”<sup>44</sup> In effect, the EU’s current engagement with the region faces a challenge which may be described as a rise of “civilizational distance”, namely a deepening divergence of cultural values.

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<sup>42</sup> Marlene Laruelle and Eric McGlinchey, *Renewing EU and US Soft Power in Central Asia*, EUCAM Commentary No 28, October 2017, 3.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Interview with a Kazakh NGO (anonymous) by CAISS, November 8, 2018, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

<sup>44</sup> Nargis Kassenova, “Projecting soft power as an imperative for the EU in Central Asia,” *Euractiv*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/opinion/projecting-soft-power-as-an-imperative-for-the-eu-in-central-asia/>

### 3. Cultural policies of Central Asian countries and main external powers

#### 3.1. Central Asian countries

Kazakhstan's identity politics puts a particular emphasis on interethnic and interreligious co-existence, but also stresses the importance of the Kazakh language, history and culture. According to official narratives, Kazakhstan strives to build a civil community, rather than an ethnic one. While emphasising the importance of protecting national minority rights, Kazakhstan also promotes learning the Kazakh language as a way of integrating people more closely with Kazakhstan's civic identity. As part of its language policy, in October 2017 Kazakhstan decided to switch from the Cyrillic to Latin script by 2025, which aims to strengthen ties between Kazakhstan and the Turkic world.<sup>45</sup> Kazakhstan's nation-building process is closely intertwined with state-building efforts, particularly modernisation. In 2012, Kazakhstan launched the "Kazakhstan 2050" strategy, which aims to ensure the rule of law and a unified nation for the future as priorities.<sup>46</sup>

Kazakhstan developed its concept of "Eurasianism" as a basis for state policy. "Eurasianism" refers to the meeting point between European and Asian cultures and political ideas. Kazakh "Eurasianism" also has global implications – according to President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan is located in the "heart of Eurasia" and so represents the "epicentre of the world". President Nazarbayev promotes the vision of Kazakh national identity as by definition an original multicultural synthesis. In 2009 President Nazarbayev stated that "there are individuals who like to make a link between Kazakhstan and Europe; and there are those who also like to see Kazakhstan to be closely tied to the Asian "Tigers"; still there are others who want to consider Russia as our strategic partner, while suggesting not to ignore the Turkish model for development. [...] Kazakhstan as a Eurasian state that has its own history and its own future, would have a completely different path to travel down the road. Our model for development will not resemble other countries; it will include in itself the achievements from different civilizations."<sup>47</sup>

Kazakhstan attempts to present itself as a multiethnic and multi-religious civic nation and a source of inspiration for the world. In 2003, in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Nazarbayev launched a "dialogue of civilizations", called the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. This dialogue regularly brings together high-profile politicians and religious leaders including from Islam and Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

The recent political liberalisation of Uzbekistan following a leadership change has prompted a meaningful change of its policy on relations between the state and religion. In July 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev established an international research centre in Samarkand, whose mission is to study the rich cultural heritage of the Islamic civilisation, secular and religious knowledge, and to educate the public (especially the younger generation) on it.<sup>49</sup> Mirziyoyev also announced the establishment of an Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, as well as an Islamic Culture Centre. These institutions are designed to tackle religious ignorance and promote Islam's true historical values. Mirziyoyev also promotes Uzbekistan's historic contributions to "enlightened Islam" (a key term in the new Uzbek identity narrative) in fields such as medicine, biology, astronomy, philosophy, and mathematics.

The change of president in Uzbekistan also prompted a political rapprochement with all of its Central Asian neighbours after 30 years of strained relations. In March 2018, the leaders of all five countries – four presidents and the head of the Parliament of Turkmenistan – met in Kazakhstan to discuss

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Globe, "With New Alphabet, Kazakhstan Moves Decisively Away From Russian World", *Commentaries*, The Jamestown Foundation, March 5, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/new-alphabet-kazakhstan-moves-decisively-away-russian-world/>

<sup>46</sup> Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev, *Strategy Kazakhstan 2050, New Political Course for the Established State*, December 14, 2012, accessed: December 24, 2018, <https://strategy2050.kz/en/multilanguage/>

<sup>47</sup> Golam Mostafa, "The Concept of 'Eurasia': Kazakhstan's Eurasian Policy and its Implications," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 4(2013), 164.

<sup>48</sup> Kazinform, "6th Congress of World and Traditional Religions' Leaders kicks off in Astana", October 18, 2018, [https://www.inform.kz/en/6th-congress-of-world-and-traditional-religions-leaders-kicks-off-in-astana\\_a3417143](https://www.inform.kz/en/6th-congress-of-world-and-traditional-religions-leaders-kicks-off-in-astana_a3417143)

<sup>49</sup> Svante E. Cornell, Jacob Zenn, "Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan," *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, June 2018, 32, <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2018-06-Uzbekistan-Secular.pdf>

the future collaboration of the five Central Asian countries. This was the first time that the leaders of all five countries had met since 2005. The meeting was chaired by the Kazakh President Nazarbayev, who maintained that third parties were not required to address political issues in Central Asia, and that the five states could come to agreements without external involvement.<sup>50</sup>

In Turkmenistan, the ruling elite defines national identity through the idea of steppe Turkmen nomadic and tribal traditions, as well as through the country's heritage from the Seljuk Turkic Empire – a territory that in the Middle Ages stretched from Anatolia to China. This state tradition links Turkmenistan with Turkey, which has allowed them to establish a uniquely close relationship through their shared culture and people-to-people contacts. Turkmenistan is also significant in the region because of the personality cult surrounding its previous president “Türkmenbaşy”, meaning “the Head of Turkmens” (1990-2006), and current president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.

In comparison, Kyrgyzstan's identity politics is based on traditional nomadic culture, including epic poetry and sport. Since 2014, Kyrgyzstan has hosted the World Nomad Games every two years. The initiative was supported by members of the Turkic Council: Turkey, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Kyrgyzstan achieved an impressive inbound mobility rate of international students. In the 2016-2017 academic year around 15,000 foreign students were enrolled at Kyrgyz universities, accounting for almost 7 percent of all students studying at the Kyrgyz universities. By comparison, less than 14,000 foreign students studied in Kazakhstan – slightly over 2 percent of all students. In both countries, students from Central Asia accounted for around half of all international students. By comparison, the number of foreign students studying in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is minimal, and number is also quite limited in Tajikistan.<sup>51</sup>

Tajikistan differs from the rest of Central Asia as the only Persian-language country. Moreover, many Tajiks live outside of the country, mostly in Afghanistan (around 65 percent of the entire population). This means that Tajikistan has a close but sometimes difficult cultural relationship with Iran and Afghanistan, and to lesser degree with India. Tajikistan's links with Iran originate in the Samanid Empire, which existed during the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries and was at that time probably one of the most civilised states in the world. Nevertheless, differences in culture – including alphabet, denomination, historical experience, and the system of values - have pushed Tajikistan closer to other Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.2. Main external powers

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of,<sup>53</sup> is formally an economic integration project that is dominated by Russia. Through the EEU, Russia remains the main player in the cultural field in Central Asia. In 2016-2017, around 130,000 students from Central Asia studied at Russian universities. At the same time, Russian universities opened almost 20 branches in Central Asia.<sup>54</sup> The Russian World Foundation (Russkiy Mir) is represented in Kazakhstan (three centres), Kyrgyzstan (three centres, two “cabinets” i.e. programs), Tajikistan (four centres) and Uzbekistan (five “cabinets”).<sup>55</sup> Russia also has significant diplomatic infrastructure in place in Central Asia that it uses to promote cultural initiatives – Russia has embassies in all countries of the region and operates five consulates there.

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Globe, “Central Asia Ready to Move on Without Russia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 15, Issue: 42, The Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asia-ready-move-without-russia/>

<sup>51</sup> UNESCO, “Global Flow of Tertiary- Level Students,” accessed: November 24, 2018, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>

<sup>52</sup> Mohira Suyarkulova, “Statehood as dialogue: conflicting historical narratives of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan”, [in:] *The Transformation of Tajikistan: The Sources of Statehood*, ed. John Heathershaw, Edmund Herzig, New York 2013, 166-172.

<sup>53</sup> The EEU established in 2015 is composed of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia. Tajikistan was supposed to join the organization, but the accession negotiations stalled.

<sup>54</sup> Alexey Fominykh, “Higher education as an instrument of Russia's public diplomacy in Central Asia,” *Central Asia's Affairs*, 3/2017, 40-41, accessed: December 8, 2018. <http://kisi.kz/uploads/33/files/UINN4mmR.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Russkiy Mir Foundation, accessed: November 24, 2018. <https://russkiymir.ru/en/>

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)<sup>56</sup> are the main cooperation formats that China promotes, and which include the entire Central Asian region (except Turkmenistan, which is not a member of the SCO). The projects have a strong cultural component as well as a Central Asian dimension.<sup>57</sup> BRI aims to increase communication and cooperation between China and the West through joint infrastructure but also cultural and trade exchanges. The BRI also aims to promote regional cultural and historical heritage links, as well as developing people-to-people contacts. The initiative promotes ideas of a multi-polar world, further economic globalisation and cultural diversity. It foresees the enhancement of cooperation in the tourism sector (routes, products), education (joint schools, scholarships) and culture (e.g. the BRI Film Festival Alliance in Shanghai, the BRI Film Week, etc.).<sup>58</sup> Through the Silk Road initiative, China presents itself as the successor of the most developed superpower of the earlier times and promotes its image as a traditionally benevolent power exporting prosperity and stability into Eurasia. The SCO aims to strengthen positive neighbourly relations among the member states, promoting effective cooperation in culture, education and tourism. On the other hand, Chinese engagement with Central Asia in the sphere of culture and education mostly is realised on the bilateral basis through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Some Central Asian countries (especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) cooperate particularly closely with Turkey in the field of culture. The Council of Cooperation of the Turkic-Speaking Countries, also known as the Turkic Council, is the main way that Turkey works with the region.<sup>59</sup> Despite its official neutrality, Turkmenistan has participated in several Turkic Summits as a guest of honour, but Uzbekistan – owing to its poor relations with Turkey – has boycotted the Council. That said, the recent change of leadership in Uzbekistan has allowed a rapprochement between Tashkent and Ankara and, as a result, in September 2018 the President of Uzbekistan participated in the Turkic Council summit for the first time and announced its intent to join the organisation. However, Turkmenistan did not participate in the Summit. The Council emphasises the importance of common Turkic historical and spiritual links as a way of deepening cooperation between the states, and also recognises the significance of fostering historical and cultural links between Turkic speaking people.<sup>60</sup> The motif of the Silk Road is also present in the Turkic narrative, though on a considerably smaller scale than in the case of China.<sup>61</sup>

Turkey initially gained a strong position in culture in Central Asia but has started to lose this momentum due to the spill over of internal conflicts into the region. In 2017-2018, around 17,000 students from Central Asia were enrolled at Turkish universities.<sup>62</sup> Turkish state and private foundations established four universities in the region and several dozen high schools. Nevertheless, Turkish soft power in the region was gravely weakened by internal political struggles erupting in Turkey between President Erdogan and Fethullah Gülen, a conservative preacher who has been active in promoting Turkish education abroad.<sup>63</sup> Cooperation in the cultural sphere between Turkey and Kazakhstan and

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<sup>56</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) besides China and Central Asian countries (excluding Turkmenistan) includes Russia, India and Pakistan.

<sup>57</sup> It was not an accident that the initiative was unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013. All the countries of Central Asia, excluding Turkmenistan, joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank established by China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

<sup>58</sup> "Belt and Road Initiative yields fruitful results in the cultural arena," *China Daily*, August 28, 2018, <http://www.china-daily.com.cn/a/201808/28/WS5b850dfaa310add14f3883b5.html>

<sup>59</sup> The Turkic Council was established in 2009 by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey.

<sup>60</sup> According to its webpage, "by promoting deeper relations and solidarity amongst Turkic speaking countries, it aims to serve as a new regional instrument for advancing international cooperation in Eurasian continent, particularly in Central Asia and Caucasus." Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, General Information, accessed: December 10, 2018, [http://www.turkkon.org/en-US/general\\_information/299/308](http://www.turkkon.org/en-US/general_information/299/308)

<sup>61</sup> Within the framework of cooperation in the tourist sector, the Turkic Council launched "Modern Silk Road Joint Tour Package", which is a guided tour to the most significant landmarks along the Silk Road in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>62</sup> Yükseköğretim bilgi yönetim sistemi, 2017-2018 Öğretim Yılı Yükseköğretim İstatistikleri, accessed: November 23, 2018, <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Qantara.de, "Erdogan seizes the school initiative," November 28, 2018, <https://en.qantara.de/content/turkey-and-the-gulen-movement-erdogan-seizes-the-school-initiative>

Kyrgyzstan operates in the framework of the Turkic Council through the Turkic Academy, International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation.

## 4. Comparative advantages and disadvantages of EU in Central Asia

### 4.1. EU's weak and strong areas

The main disadvantage of the EU in comparison to Russia – and to a lesser degree Turkey and China – is its limited engagement in the region. For example, the number of Central Asian students enrolled at EU universities (excluding the UK) is around 15 times smaller than those studying at Russian universities (although ethnic Russians from Central Asia are overrepresented among them). The number of Central Asian students at Turkish universities is almost two times larger than those enrolled at EU universities (excluding the UK).<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, the EU's engagement in the region in the field of culture and education is bigger than that of other key actors including the U.S.

People-to-people contacts between the Russians and Central Asian nations are significantly greater than between the EU citizens and Central Asians. The number of Kyrgyzs, Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks visiting Russia is also several hundred times larger than their co-nationals travelling to the EU. The situation is somewhat better in the case of Kazakh citizens, but the gap remains large. The number of Central Asians visiting Turkey is also several times larger than the number travelling to the EU because of much stricter EU visa regulations.<sup>65</sup> Turkey provides at least 30 days without visa for Central Asian citizens; moreover, Turkey has been traditionally one of the most attractive tourists (all-inclusive vacation) destinations in Central Asia (and is cheaper than the EU).

Notwithstanding this, the EU has strong competitive advantages in the research and development sector (research centres, inventions, cooperation between business/state institutions and academia) which is more developed than that of other main external powers, though China is gradually catching up. The EU outperforms Russia in this sector, and its development is particularly important for Kazakhstan. However, the EU's experience in higher education and research and development may not be applicable in Central Asia; they are two distant regions with different cultures and their own historical experiences. However, some EU member states share a common legacy of Tsarist and Communist rule in the Central Asian region. The EU has more experience in the tourism sector than Russia, China, and Turkey that it can assist Central Asian countries in developing. Prospects for deepening regional cooperation in Central Asia are also likely to offer the EU a competitive advantage. While internal problems such as Brexit and the Eurozone have meant that the EU has lost some of its attractiveness in terms of regional integration, it still remains the most advanced and successful example of this. It was notable that following the 2018 Astana Summit of regional leaders, President Nazarbayev referred to the Visegrád Group (hereafter V-4) as a source of inspiration for Central Asian leaders because the summit was so informal.<sup>66</sup>

The expected departure of the UK from the EU is also likely to reduce the EU's leverage in the Central Asia, because of the UK's relatively strong influence in Central Asia (for instance, two British universities and two offices of the British Council operating in the region). It is likely that the EU will be able to continue to cooperate closely with the UK in culture and education in Central Asia, as well as with external powers such as South Korea, Japan, the U.S, and Ukraine. All these states share the worldview and many interests with the EU. Russia, China and Turkey do not have similar plans to cooperate with the aforementioned states in the same way that the EU does.

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<sup>64</sup> UNESCO, "Global Flow of Tertiary - Level Students," accessed: November 24, 2018, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>

<sup>65</sup> Interview with an Uzbek NGO representative (anonymous) by UWED, October 3, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

<sup>66</sup> Svante E. Cornell, Frederick Starr, "Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Relevance of World Models", The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst, December 4, 2018, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13547-regional-cooperation-in-central-asia-relevance-of-world-models.html>

Kazakhstan's modernisation programme and the liberalisation of the political system in Uzbekistan have also created an opportunity for the EU to intensify its cooperation with the region. Russia, China or Turkey all have issues with high levels of corruption in their political infrastructure, and so are not able to offer frameworks for the rule of law in Central Asia, one of the key elements of the reform agenda in Kazakhstan. The EU is able to do this. It is worth noting that President Nazarbayev in his book "The Kazakh Way" published in 2007, devoted a tribute to Lee Kuan Yew, the late Prime Minister of Singapore and Charles de Gaulle, the late President of France.<sup>67</sup>

The treatment of Singapore as a role model by the Kazakh elite could be an opportunity for the EU's "soft" democratisation agenda (rule of law and evolutionary implementation of reforms) in Central Asia. According to Freedom House, Singapore is a partly free country that is more democratic than Russia, China, and Turkey.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Kazakhstan treats European values as an integral and significant part of its Eurasian identity. Indeed, as scientists Svante E. Cornell and Frederick Starr rightly point out – "[...] a closer look at Kazakhstan's development since independence highlights the important European aspects of its statehood. Kazakhstan is a secular state with a civic conception of the nation based on an inclusive, citizenship-based understanding of membership in the national community."<sup>69</sup> The idea that Europe is the epicentre of developed civilisation and also an important source of inspiration for Russia, is deeply rooted in Kazakh culture.

The ongoing empowerment of Central Asian elites will make them more sensitive toward the issue of external patronage by Russia, but also occasionally by China and Turkey, and Russia's narrative on the positive legacy of Tsarist and Soviet rule. Unlike Russia, the former colonial powers in the EU underwent a more self-critical reflection on their expansion in the world. The new identity politics of Islam in Uzbekistan could also be another opportunity for the EU to deepen its engagement in Central Asia. Muslim communities living in the EU have significant untapped assets that could be used to better engage Central Asia. Most Muslims in the EU are Hanafi Sunni, which have for centuries been linked to the Turkic and Iranian people of Central Asia. Most EU governments demonstrate a genuine commitment to multiculturalism, including promoting the integration of Muslim communities. However, the rise of national populists in Europe that play the 'Islamophobia' card in Europe may undermine the generally positive image of the EU in Central Asia.

## 4.2. External powers' weak and strong areas

The allure of the Russian identity narrative originates from a common Tsarist and Soviet heritage, the popularity of the Russian language and culture, and the high level of people-to-people contacts, including labour immigrants, tourists, and students. Central Asian countries' level of proficiency in Russian varies from country to country but it is generally high, and the number of Russian-speakers is still much greater than speakers of any other foreign language. On the other hand, despite the continuing popularity of the Russian language and culture in Central Asia, the number of Russian native-speakers (ethnic Russians and other Slav communities) living in Central Asia has declined since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Among the younger generation, proficiency in Russian is slowly but systematically declining.

Russia tends to idealise its history and actively uses its post-colonial legacy. It presents itself as a sort of multicultural paradise, in contrast to post-colonial "imperialistic" Europe. However, while Russia's legacy in Central Asia does have some positive elements (e.g. abolition of slavery, rise of literacy, emancipation of women), over the last two centuries the Tsarist and Soviet regimes were responsible for significant acts of violent repression against indigenous populations in the region. Russia along with Eurasianism promotes the idea of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) based on the state-tradition of Kievan Rus', the Orthodox Church, Slavdom, and the Russian language and culture.

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<sup>67</sup> Eduardo Araral, "Independent Kazakhstan Following Similar Path as Singapore toward Successful Development", *The Astana Times*, December 5, 2016, accessed: December 5, 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2016/12/independent-kazakhstan-following-similar-path-as-singapore-toward-successful-development/>

<sup>68</sup> Freedom House, op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> Svante E. Cornell, Johan Engvall, "Kazakhstan in Europe: Why Not?," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies, October 2017, 5.

However, serious tensions may arise between Eurasianism and the *Russkiy Mir* in Central Asia, as the latter is strongly Russia-centric and tends to sideline Central Asian traditions. The Russian version of Eurasianism also has imperial inclinations that undermine the pre-conquest state traditions of Central Asian nations.

Thanks to China's growing economy, it has a theoretically greater financial potential than Russia or Turkey, which could be invested into promoting its culture in Central Asia. China mostly manages to avoid the discourse of domination towards Central Asia. Culture plays a less significant role in China's engagement with the region in comparison to Russia and Turkey. Moreover, the linguistic barrier weakens the attractiveness of Chinese culture in Central Asia. In comparison to Russian, but also Turkish and certain other European languages, Chinese is not particularly well known in the region. Moreover, there is a wide gap between China's identity narrative and the political reality of the Chinese government. A particularly sensitive issue is China's increasing repressions of the Muslim population living in Xinjiang (Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz people).<sup>70</sup> The discrimination and persecution of these nations in China may substantially weaken the allure of Chinese soft power in the region.

Turkey's identity narrative towards Central Asia is based on a strong ethnic and cultural background. No other third country has as many links with the Turkic countries of Central Asia as Turkey does. Culture and identity occupy a key place in Turkey's narrative in Central Asia. Turkey's ambitions to lead the Turkic world are considered less imposing and assertive than the Russian narrative, and the lack of a Soviet and Tsarist experience makes Turkey different from the Turkic nations of Central Asia. However, ethnic differences also reduce Turkey's ability to reach out to Iranian Tajiks. Turkey's attractiveness to Central Asian societies as a Turkic "older brother" will depend on its ability to avoid a lasting deterioration of relations with the West and the growing influence of political Islam in internal politics. Moreover, Turkey also does not have an economic potential that is comparable with that of Russia, China, or the EU.

## 5. Conclusions

The EU's geographical distance, weak economic ties with regional states (aside from Kazakhstan), and weakly-developed historical and cultural ties with the region in the modern period in comparison to other stakeholders all limit its ability to engage more deeply with Central Asia in the cultural sector. Cultural diplomacy has not been the strongest aspect of the EU's Strategy for Central Asia that was adopted in 2007. The EU did not sufficiently recognise the importance of identity and cultural issues and did not compete sufficiently in these spheres with the agendas and activities of external and regional actors. As a result, the EU did not manage to establish an attractive vision of historical and contemporary ties between Central Asia and Europe. By the end of 2019, the EU is scheduled to endorse a new strategy for Central Asia, which provides the EU with a window of opportunity to create a "grand" identity narrative that would increase its attractiveness in the region. The main foundation of this narrative should be an emphasis on the special bond between current European culture and the legacy of Central Asian enlightenment that was at its height during the Medieval Golden Age.

The EU's main limitations in Central Asia are the lack of sufficient institutional representation and financial resources also in the field of culture. They indicate that despite declarations on the importance of Central Asia in the EU – both in the Strategy and in the Council's conclusions - the region was not a priority for the European institutions or member states. Moreover, as has been noticed in the paper, the EU Strategy puts a limited emphasis on the cultural aspects of its policy towards the region.

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<sup>70</sup> John Sudworth, China's hidden camps, BBC News, October 24, 2018, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/China\\_hidden\\_camps](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/China_hidden_camps)

The EU must also therefore improve its practical and financial engagement in the field of culture and education within the framework of the new Strategy. However, the EU must be prepared that any possible increase in its engagement in the region's culture may be met with a strongly negative response from Russia.

The EU ought to strike a proper balance between the future and the past in its cultural diplomacy and education policy towards Central Asia. It should also establish more mutual EU-Central Asian research projects on historical and cultural relations between Europe and the region. At the same time, the EU ought to considerably increase its cooperation with the region in the research and development sector, because this is the area in which the EU has the strongest competitive advantage. The EU should also strengthen the coordination of its educational policy of other actors with similar interests, e.g. the U.S. or Ukraine (which is an important destination for students from Central Asia). The enhancement of cooperation with the UK despite the "Brexit" should also be a priority for the EU. In the Conclusions of the Council from 2015-2017, when assessing the EU Strategy for Central Asia, the EU member states called for improving the coordination of their national policies toward the region. Until now, the level of coordination of the policies of EU member countries in the field of culture and education in Central Asia is rather modest. Mostly, the cooperation is based on regional formats (e.g. Nordic countries) or bilateral basis (two EU member states). The number of such projects or initiatives is still insufficient. In the case of cultural diplomacy, the best scenario would be to establish several expert groups of the member states under the leadership of one nation. They would be able to divide responsibilities for various cultural activities according to their competitive advantages.

The most important goals of a new EU Strategy should be the increase of European soft power in the region through media and education, as well as the improvement of people-to-people contacts. The achievement of these goals requires an increase in the number of Central Asian students at European universities (new and robust European and national scholarship programs), the establishment of relatively cheap flight connections to the region, and the liberalisation of EU visas for Central Asian citizens.

Evidently, there is an asymmetry in the EU and Central Asian societies' knowledge of each other's cultures. The Central Asians are much more aware of the most important elements of European heritage than Europeans of the crucial contribution of Central Asia to human civilisation. Many activities have been undertaken by European cultural institutions and embassies to increase knowledge of European culture in Central Asia (e.g. film festivals, concerts), but there are still very few initiatives launched to promote Central Asian culture in Europe. Developing linguistic and cultural capacities for cooperating with Central Asia at European universities is necessary. The best-case scenario would be if the countries of the region established Central Asian Cultural Centres in main European capitals in cooperation with the EU. These centres could host exhibitions, concerts, film festivals, lectures, and language courses. The centres as common regional endeavours would also increase cooperation between the Central Asia countries.

## Document metadata

<b>Title of Deliverable</b>	<b>Policy Paper No. 12 – Cultural relations. Analysis of the EU's comparative advantages and Central Asian interests</b>	
<b>Deliverable No.</b>	<b>D2.2</b>	
<b>Work Package</b>	<b>WP2</b>	
<b>Dissemination level</b>	<b>Public</b>	
<b>Nature</b>	<b>Report</b>	
<b>Target Group</b>	<b>European Commission / General public (public)</b>	
<b>Contractual Delivery Date</b>	<b>30.11.2018</b>	
<b>Actual Delivery Date</b>	<b>19.02.2019</b>	
<b>Version</b>	<b>1.0</b>	
<b>Responsible editor</b>	Anna Gussarova (CAISS), Māris Andžāns (LIIA)	18.02.2019
<b>Contributors</b>	Adam Balcer (WiseEuropa)	18.02.2019
<b>Internal WP Reviewers</b>	Anna Gussarova (CAISS), Māris Andžāns (LIIA), Emily Ferris (RUSI)	18.02.2019
<b>Internal Reviewer</b>	Katrin Böttger (IEP)	15.02.2019
<b>Approved by</b>	Anna Gussarova (CAISS), Māris Andžāns (LIIA), WP leaders	18.02.2019
	Michael Kaeding (UDE), coordinator	19.02.2019

## Version history

Version	Date	Description
0.1	05.12.2018	First outline by Adam Balcer and Arkadiusz Legieć
0.2	07.12.2018	Internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.3	11.12.2018	Updated version by Adam Balcer
0.4	13.12.2018	Second internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.5	20.12.2018	Updated version by Adam Balcer
0.6	20.12.2018	Third internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.7	21.12.2018	Updated version by Adam Balcer
0.8	23.12.2018	Fourth internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.9	29.12.2018	Updated version by Adam Balcer
0.10	30.12.2018	Fifth internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.11	01.01.2019	Updated version by Adam Balcer
0.12	02.01.2019	Sixth internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.13	03.01.2019	Updated version by Adam Balcer
0.14	05.01.2019	Seventh internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns

0.15	08.01.2019	Eight internal WP review and reshuffle by Anna Gussarova and Emily Ferris
0.16	15.01.2019	Ninth internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.17	16.01.2019	Tenth internal WP review by Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns
0.18	16.01.2019	Eleventh internal WP review by Māris Andžāns and Anna Gussarova
0.19	11.02.2019	Twelfth internal WP review by Emily Ferris, Māris Andžāns and Anna Gussarova
0.20	15.02.2019	Review by Katrin Böttger
0.21	15.02.2019	Updated version by Adam Balcer
0.22	18.02.2019	Thirteenth internal WP review by Māris Andžāns and Anna Gussarova
1.0	19.02.2019	Final format by Maria Gies and approval by Michael Kaeding Final version submitted to EC

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