3 December 2019

Impressions of the SEnECA Final Conference, Brussels, 14-15 November

The Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE) organized the SEnECA Final Conference “What Future for EU-Central Asia Relations?” in Brussels on 14 and 15 November 2019. The event was the concluding conference of the Horizon 2020 project „SEnECA – Strengthening and Energizing EU-Central Asia relations“. It aimed at bringing together EU policymakers, diplomats, researchers, civil society actors and journalists to discuss the future relations between the EU and Central Asia and SEnECA’s output with regard to the further development of the relations between the two regions.

The two-day conference was opened by Dr Katrin Böttger, scientific coordinator of SEnECA and director of the Institute for European Politics (IEP). In his keynote speech, Andris Ameriks, vice-chair of the DCAS at the European Parliament (EP), shed light on the EP’s perspective on Central Asia, underlining that the EU’s engagement in CA has progressively increased since 1990. Focusing on the current legislature (2019-2024), Mr Ameriks mentioned that the EP should keep the successful political cooperation with Central Asian states by setting up delegations to discuss policies for the near future. Conversely, EU Special Representative for Central Asia Ambassador Peter Burian’s speech was focused on the implementation of the new EU strategy on CA that was published in May 2019. According to Ambassador Burian, “the EU-CA Strategy is a non-exclusive partnership that should enhance regional cooperation and stability in the region”. Furthermore, Mr Burian stated that CA shall not be regarded as a transit region only, but as a place where “trains stop”, referring to how connectivity should play a key role in bringing prosperity to CA people.

The first panel of the conference featured the SEnECA recommendations for the implementation of the new EU Strategy, which have been published recently as SEnECA Policy Papers No. 14 and 15. The recommendations were presented by SEnECA researchers Dr Andris Sprūds, director of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, and Anna Gussarova, director of the Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies. Raising awareness on Central Asia in the EU and vice versa, and involving EU member states in the implementation of the new strategy were among the top priorities mentioned by the researchers. Moreover, Dr Fabienne Bossuyt, professor at the Centre for EU Studies of Ghent University, and Nicholas Taylor, team leader for Central Asia and Mongolia in DG DEVCO, commented and assessed the recommendations. They suggested to pay more attention to the local perspectives in the region and advocated for a more home-grown governance.

In a session on education and research, SEnECA researcher Dr Yzatbek Berenaliev, professor at the Kyrgyz National University, presented SEnECA’s output in the field of education, in particular the research on the current state of affairs of Central Asian Studies in the EU and vice versa. Andreas Marazis, head of research for Eastern Europe and Central Asia of the European Neighbourhood Council, Dr Anne Spangemacher, project officer Erasmus+ at EACEA, and Dr Jeroen Van den Bosch, project manager and EISCAS Coordinator, joined the

Further information:

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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debate and provided useful comments. Integrating European languages into education in Central Asia, building know-how in a sustainable way, and the need to invest into primary and secondary education in the region were mentioned as key priorities. Another session centred on how the EU is perceived in Central Asia and vice versa. Dr Susann Heinecke, senior programme manager at the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE) presented the SEnECA long-term Central Asia communication strategy, delivering recommendations on how Central Asia could be better communicated in Europe. Burhon Mirzaoliev, counsellor at the Embassy of Tajikistan in Belgium, and Rashid Gabdulhakov, lecturer at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, contributed to the discussion that focused on the unbalanced perception of Central Asia in Europe and what could be done to improve that.

The first day of the conference was closed with a panel on culture as a catalyst for social change in Central Asia, with inputs by Florian Coppenrath, associated research fellow at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Krista Pikkat, director of the UNESCO Almaty Office and UNESCO Representative to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, H. E. Dilyor Khakimov, Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the Benelux countries, Angela Atzori, cooperation officer at DEVCO, and Kahramon Bakaev, executive director at the Centre for Sociological Research “Zerkalo”. The distinguished speakers underlined that culture can serve as an engine for economic development, as an opportunity to promote human rights and justice, and as a support for the protection of heritage and identity. Furthermore, Krista Pikkat shared her experience on the UNESCO-EU Silk Roads project, which aimed at improving the livelihoods of the communities in the region. Conversely, Florian Coppenrath spoke about how hip-hop can serve to fostering discussion in the Kyrgyz society.

The second conference day opened with a high-level discussion on how connectivity between Asia and Europe could benefit Central Asian countries. The panellists included Dr Abdughani Mamadazimov, lead researcher at the Centre for Sociological Research “Zerkalo”, H. E. Romana Vlahutin, Ambassador at large for connectivity, H. E. Aigul Kuspan, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Belgium, Mircea Ciopraga, Secretary General of TRACECA, and Dr Jacopo Maria Pepe, research fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations. Ambassador Romana Vlahutin presented the EU Connectivity Strategy between Europe and Asia published in September 2018, and underscored that this strategy aims at digital and human connectivity with infrastructures, financing and partnership at its core. While Ambassador Aigul Kuspan also referred to the importance of regional cooperation, Jacopo Pepe highlighted that digitalization, elimination of soft barriers, investments in infrastructure and market reforms are crucial policies that urge to be implemented. Lastly, Mircea Ciopraga shared his experience on how the TRACECA project has contributed to enhance transport infrastructure in the region by investing in Central Asia’s ports and railways.

The last panel of the conference shed light on how EU-Central Asia relations will look like in 2030. Moderator Bruce Pannier kicked off the panel discussion revealing how rapidly the population is growing in Central Asia and how certainly this will have an impact on the societies and leadership in the upcoming years. Philippe Van Amersfoort, deputy head of Central Asia Division in the EEAS, indicated that the demand for more engagement in Central Asia comes from the demand of Central Asian states. By contrast, Sinikukka Saari, senior associate analyst at the EU Institute for Security Studies, pointed out that the EU should help...
Central Asian states to tackle corruption and clientelism in the region. However, issues such as geopolitical competition, influence of world powers, multilateral politics, oil industry, reforms of market economy cannot be taken out of the table, Sultan Akimbekov, director of the Institute of Asian Studies and SEnECA advisory board member, argued. SEnECA Policy Paper No. 13 “Central Asia in 2030: SEnECA forecasts for the region and the role of the European Union” served to stimulate the discussion.

In a final statement, Dr Michael Kaeding, SEnECA project coordinator and professor in EU politics at the University of Duisburg-Essen, highlighted the achieved results of the SEnECA project: bringing stakeholders together, promoting research in Central Asia, developing a database of researchers, creating a lively website and social media content, publishing fifteen papers, and disseminating insightful information on EU-Central Asia relations. The SEnECA Final Conference concluded with the screening of the Kyrgyz film “The Song of the Tree” and a public discussion with the main promoter of the film and brother of the film’s director Taalaybek Dayirbekov. The two-day event also served as an opportunity to view some of the photos that were shown at the SEnECA Photo Exhibition in April 2019. In total 215 people attended the SEnECA Final Conference.

About SEnECA

The SEnECA project has been funded by the Horizon 2020 programme and runs from January 2018 to December 2019. It supports cooperation between Central Asia and the European Union by intensifying academic regional networking. The project is led by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) and the University of Duisburg-Essen and further includes 10 organisations from the EU and Central Asia as members of the project consortium.