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EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

STRENGTHENING AND ENERGIZING RESEARCH COOPERATION. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES IN EUROPE AND EUROPEAN STUDIES IN CENTRAL ASIA



This Policy Brief summarises main findings and recommendations from SEnECA's analysis of research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. It shows, why research and higher education policy is relevant to EU-Central Asia relations and presents an analysis of current challenges of Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia. Based on this, it provides recommendations to decision-makers and researchers willing to address them. Finally, it proposes three measures which shall be given priority under the EU's new Central Asia policy: a scheme for student, researcher and lecturer mobility in Central Asia; institutional funding for a number of research hubs at universities; and making a regional or cross-border element compulsory for all research and higher education projects in/on Central Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

The new strategy “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” defines a number of *specific objectives to strengthen the research and higher education sectors in Central Asia*, which include:

- helping universities to modernise and meet the targets of the Bologna process;
- increasing and diversifying the number of local beneficiaries of EU research funding;
- stimulating academic mobility within the region;
- exploring possibilities to develop a “Central Asian Higher Education Area”;
- developing European studies at local universities.

Furthermore, the *strategy aims at strengthening research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia*, notably in the areas of water, food and environment, as well as encouraging the interaction of researchers and think-tankers from both regions.

The idea of a “Central Asian Higher Education Area” is crucial in the context of Uzbek efforts to improve regional cooperation and *end the period of failing regionalism in Central Asia*.¹ As ties between the

¹ Sebastian Krapoh/Alexandra Vasileva-Dienes: The region that isn't: China, Russia and the failure of regional integration in Central Asia, in: Asia Europe Journal, online first 27 May 2019, p. 1.

neighbours remain weak, the focus needs to be on trust-building measures. Research and higher education policy has potential in this respect: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have shown significant interest in internationalising their research and higher education systems. The potential for conflict in this policy area is low. Circular academic mobility in the region will create a new generation of decision-makers who trust their neighbours. Regarding its best-practice instrument “Erasmus+”, the EU can contribute long-standing experience in stimulating regional academic mobility.

Current forecasts expect the Central Asian population to increase from 73 million in 2019 to more than 100 million until 2050.² ***Integrating the growing workforce into the labour market is crucial for societal resilience in Central Asia.*** High youth unemployment rates could become a driver for instability if dissatisfaction with the economic situation grows, and make more young people vulnerable to radicalisation. Support for Central Asian (higher) education systems is a preventive measure that stabilises Central Asian societies. Therefore, Central Asian research and higher education systems need to become more sustainable and prevent brain drain.

In addition to benefits for Central Asians, support for research and higher education systems in the region is also in the interest of EU policy-makers. The Ukrainian crisis made clear that there is a lack of regional expertise for Eurasia in Europe. Measures to strengthen research on the region, including Central Asia, have started. However, especially Central Asian studies in Europe remain underdeveloped and insufficiently linked to decision-makers. ***Strengthening research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia will provide EU policy-makers with better expertise from Europe and the region itself.***

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Central Asian Studies in Europe remain institutionally fragmented what causes a number of challenges to improve research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. The following issues need to be addressed:³

- The high degree of fragmentation results in *limited access to research funding*.
- *A lack of intercultural competences* of university administrators, researchers, and students complicates cooperation between both regions.
- The *academic mobility flows remain unbalanced* due to lower interest in the Central Asian region among European students and scholars.
- *Researching authoritarian regimes* causes methodological and practical problems.

On the one hand, all ***Central Asian research and higher education systems*** are still in transition from Soviet times and face a number of common challenges, including insufficient cross-border cooperation. On the other hand, the reform processes have arrived at considerably different stages: *Kazakhstan* is a member state of the Bologna Process and most advanced. However, recent reforms are unsustainable and foster brain drain and, therefore, readjustment is necessary. *Kyrgyzstan* and *Tajikistan* are both willing to internationalise their research and higher education systems, but lack the required resources. The Turkmen and Uzbek research and higher education systems score lowest degrees of internationalisation. While liberalisation policy in *Uzbekistan* opens a window of opportunity also for research and higher education, *Turkmenistan* resists all incentives to open its isolated research and higher education sector.

In addition to the overall challenges, ***European Studies in Central Asia*** are also institutionally and disciplinarily fragmented what results in specific challenges. These include:⁴

- The number of *beneficiaries of European mobility schemes is uneven allocated* between the five countries, with Kazakhstan receiving about 65 per cent of all grants.
- They *familiarity with EU funding schemes and procedures is insufficient*.
- Some research institutions are in risk of becoming *financially dependent of EU funding*.
- Researchers' *proficiency in European languages is insufficient*, notably at peripheral institutions.
- *Academic mobility und cooperation remains low* between researchers, lecturers and students within Central Asia.

² World Population Review: Central Asia Population 2019, 12 May 2019, available at: <http://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/central-asia-population/> (last access: 16 November 2019).

³ For a detailed analysis see: Julian Plottka/Lydia Drews: The Current State of Affairs of Central Asian Studies in Europe, SEEnCA Background Paper, June 2019.

⁴ For a detailed analysis see: Nazira Momosheva/Yzatbek Berenaliev: The current state of affairs of European Studies in Central Asia, SEEnCA Background Paper, June 2019.

How the EU addresses these challenges depends on whether it will focus on international competitive lighthouse projects or offer broad support for a variety of research and higher education institutions as an instrument of development cooperation. The following sections provide a number of concrete recommendations, which serve both objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS⁵

Securing sufficient levels of funding is crucial for both, European Studies in Central Asia and Central Asian Studies in Europe. It can be addressed on two levels. First, researchers should work towards *establishing them as coherent research fields*. That will give them a better standing in the competition for funding. Funding institutions, notably the governments in Europe and Central Asia, should provide *sufficient institutional funding for a number of research hubs* at different universities. Complementary measures include:

- better *connecting researchers* and funding institutions;
- funding for *non-research activities*, notably networking and dissemination activities;
- consider *specifics of research in authoritarian regimes* in tenders and evaluations.

Second, existing research units should be empowered to become more competitive. If the following measures cover Central Asian research institutions, they contribute to increasing the number of beneficiaries of European research funding in Central Asia:

- *Seed-funding* enables researchers to write funding applications.
- *Science support centres* help researchers to comply with application requirements, and building administrative capacities to manage applications will improve their quality in the mid-term perspective.
- Strengthening *inter-administrative competences* by exchange and twinning programmes facilitates the writing of joint European-Central Asian funding applications.
- *Workshops on “how to write funding applications”* and *specialised language trainings* increase the quality of applications and enable more researchers to participate in tenders.
- Intensified *dissemination activities* on funding opportunities reach additional researchers outside the capitals and broaden the basis of those who apply for funding.

Measures to **increase academic mobility between Europe and Central Asia** should be taken with regard to *mass student mobility* as well as *offers for excellent researchers*. To increase the number of outgoing students, researchers and lecturers from Europe, it is necessary to strengthen Central Asian Studies in Europe and to make the region a more attractive research destination. Offers for Central Asian colleagues need to put more emphasis on circular mobility, otherwise academic mobility turns into brain drain.

- EU-Central Asian *collaborative master’s and joint PhD programmes* will help to increase mobility most importantly of Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek students, if dissemination activities at peripheral universities and research institutions are intensified.
- *Colleges for Central Asian guest fellows* at the newly funded research hubs contribute to building research capacities in Central Asia and should be combined with *return grants*, which allow fellows to re-establish in the region and disseminate their expertise to colleagues in the region.
- To increase the attractiveness of Central Asia as a research location, *funding schemes for Central Asian researchers* to participate in international conferences and *joint EU-Central Asia academic journals* should be established.
- Prerequisite for all academic mobility is the *facilitation of visa application processes and requirements*, notably for poor students and researchers.

First steps towards a “Central Asian Higher Education Area” should include measures to increase the mobility of Central Asian students, researchers and lecturers within their region:

- A funding scheme, like Erasmus+ in Europe, for *student, researcher and lecturer mobility* in Central Asia should be established.
- An *expert network of researchers on European integration* in Central Asia could be founded with financial support by the EU’s Jean-Monnet-funding scheme.
- Central Asian *collaborative master’s and joint PhD programmes* will help to increase student mobility.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the recommendations see Julian Plottka/Ekaterina Smirnova: SEEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation, November 2019, forthcoming.

- EU financial instruments should *make a regional element compulsory* for all research and higher education projects in or on Central Asia.

For Central Asian Studies in Europe, *conducting field research in authoritarian regimes* is a crucial challenge, which is not adequately addressed yet. With regard to research methodology, researchers need to *overcome Eurocentrism* in theory and research concepts. This would allow for research cooperation between both regions on a truly level-playing field. Furthermore, specific practical measures need to be taken for secure field research:

- Researchers should *comply with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation* to secure research data and protect personal data of natural persons from the field.
- *Ethic committees* composed of researchers from different disciplines and institutions could conduct risk assessments and provide guidance for research in risky fields.
- Methodological requirements defined in tenders for research funding and the review processes have to *consider specifics of field research in authoritarian regimes*.
- *Young researchers need to be better prepared for field research in authoritarian regimes*, e.g. in methodological courses and risk awareness trainings.

Institutions should provide *insurances for students and researchers* conducting field research.

PRIORITIES

Some of the measures (section 3) to cope with the problems of Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia (section 2) address decision-makers in Europe and Central Asia, while others can be implemented by researchers on their own. Considering the relative importance of Central Asia to European external relations and the limited funding for the region, not all measures can be taken at once. The following three priorities for the EU's new Central Asia policy are recommended with regard to the idea of self-help. While direct effects of a measure are important, it is even more important that prioritised measures enable researchers to address additional challenges.

1. To establish a "Central Asian Higher Education Area", an Erasmus+ like *scheme for student, researcher and lecturer mobility in Central Asia* should be set up in due course. Special quotas should be reserved for Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek students to encourage their mobility. The EU can provide technical assistants for setting up the scheme and even initial funding. In the mid-term, the Central Asian states should fund the scheme on their own. The National Erasmus+ Offices in the region could serve as an initial management structure until the creation of a separate management system. Increasing mobility and balancing flows in the short-term perspective, such a scheme also functions as a networking tool in the mid-term perspective and builds trust between elites of the five Central Asian states in the long-term.
2. In order to strengthen both research areas, Central Asian and EU governments, complemented by EU programmes, should provide *institutional funding for a number of research hubs at universities*. These hubs should be active in three areas: (1) conducting independent research, including basic research as well as applied research; (2) non-research activities, such as networking, capacity-building for researchers and dissemination; (3) teaching in higher education. In order to better establish both research fields, additional research capacities are needed. By conducting research relevant to decision-makers these hubs can underline the importance of Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia. However, research activities may not be limited to applied science but focus on developing an own research agenda. If some funding is reserved for non-research activities, these hubs can implement a number of the other recommendations of this paper on their own. Most importantly, they should focus on becoming more competitive in attracting additional research funding. Finally, the researchers should engage in the first, second and third cycle of higher education in order to strengthen the research areas in the long-term perspective.

The EU legislators and member state funding institutions *should make a regional or cross-border cooperation element compulsory for all research and higher education projects* in or on Central Asia. In addition to the regional mobility scheme, projects which include regional or at least multilateral cooperation directly build trust within the region and serve a networking function. Bringing researchers together will most likely result in additional projects further deepening research cooperation within the region.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING	SEnECA Policy Papers No. 1 – 15 on mapping and on analysing the current relations between Central Asia and the European Union, other Asian states and other world powers; as well as forecasts for cooperation between the Central Asian region and the EU and recommendations for implementing the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia. SEnECA Stakeholder Analysis: Analysis of policy-makers and stakeholders on the EU and member state level. SEnECA Background Papers on the current state of affairs on Central Asian Studies in Europe and EU Studies in Central Asia SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation All SEnECA Policy Papers are publicly accessible at (under CC-BY-NC license): https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00047232