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# The EU Strategy for Central Asia: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights

## About FRIDE

FRIDE is an independent think-tank based in Madrid, focused on issues related to democracy and human rights; peace and security; and humanitarian action and development. FRIDE attempts to influence policy-making and inform public opinion, through its research in these areas.

On 19 November 2007 FRIDE organised a seminar entitled *the EU Strategy for Central Asia: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights*. The event featured speakers from the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, key international organisations dealing with Central Asia as well as NGO representatives from the region. The seminar was organised with the generous support of the Human Rights Department of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation while FRIDE liaised closely with the Open Society Institute (OSI) in New York and Brussels.

The European Union (EU) is a latecomer to Central Asia. The war on terrorism and the importance of energy security have increased the profile of Central Asia in Brussels. The five former Soviet republics are governed by authoritarian regimes (except Kyrgyzstan that is doing better but has weak state institutions). Together they present a complex challenge for the EU in areas such as energy interests, security concerns, human

rights and democratisation in a region that is also subject to the geopolitical interests of Russia, China and the US.

The rationale behind the FRIDE event was to assess the EU position after a Strategy for Central Asia was published this summer under the German EU Presidency. Moreover, the seminar aimed to provide policy recommendations for increased cooperation and EU assistance to Central Asia. Lastly, the OSCE's role in Central Asia was debated since all the Central Asian states are members of the organisation and it has been involved in the region for a longer time through its field missions. There are clear opportunities to coordinate OSCE and EU efforts, especially in the field of democratisation and human rights.

The informative and frank discussions produced a few tangible conclusions and recommendations which are detailed in the following summary:

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## The EU Central Asia Strategy: From rhetoric to substantial steps

The EU strategy, commissioned and drafted by Germany – the only EU country with embassies in all five Central Asian countries – is a framework rather than a strategy. It lacks analyses on the individual countries or the region as such. Furthermore, it is unclear what the strategy aims to achieve. Nonetheless, the document is an important step

forward because EU engagement was almost nonexistent beforehand. Progress on implementation will be reported by the Commission to the Council next summer. It is however clear that EU member states have different stakes in the region and also that differences between the opinions and ways of working of EU institutions (Council, Commission and Parliament) might impinge negatively on the strategy's implementation. The document covers many areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, such as energy, countering drug trafficking and fundamentalism, along with economic issues and good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The main challenge is to proceed from inspirational language to concrete policy and assistance. Despite the criticism, the EU Strategy is a step in the right direction as it includes a strong commitment to democracy and human rights, outlines EU energy interests in Central Asia and aims to increase the EU's diplomatic presence in the region.

A rough list of current EU interests and concerns in the region would be as follows:

- Energy interests top the list (and this mostly relates to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and to a lesser extent Uzbekistan, all of which have large oil and gas reserves);
- Engagement in Turkmenistan. The country underwent a change of leadership in December 2006 and it is unclear if new President Berdimuhamedov will follow the authoritarian line of his predecessor Niazov or open the country up to outside influence;
- Determine a clear-cut policy towards Uzbekistan, involving (further) sanctions in the aftermath of the Andijon events;<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In May 2005 Uzbek special forces brutally suppressed a popular uprising in Andijon; a town in the Ferghana Valley in the East of

- Further develop relations with Kazakhstan. This country is the most important energy exporter in the region. It has put in a bid to lead the OSCE, through the 2009 Presidency, and might be included in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), given that it is the most Europe-orientated of the five republics;
- Support the further democratic development of Kyrgyzstan;
- Try (albeit carefully) to build further links with Tajikistan.

The EU has to react to the challenges in Central Asia without getting lost in geopolitical games with China and Russia. It should uphold its values of democracy and human rights in its dealings with Central Asia. The EU should support a larger debate engaging all stakeholders in order to give the strategy concrete substance at the levels of both policy and assistance. While energy projects are viewed by Brussels as a form of engagement with the governments of the region, the EU should learn a lesson from the long-term OSCE presence there; it should stand up for what it believes, or lose its credibility. With this in mind, the EU should not offer further legitimisation to the Central Asian leaderships in order to serve its energy interests, but should try to engage with these governments through institutional support for good governance while trying to foster an independent civil society. Such a path would not only distinguish the EU from the other geopolitical actors, but would also provide better access to the people of Central Asia.

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Uzbekistan. According to official Uzbek sources the military operation ended a revolt by Islamist extremists, but most of the victims were unarmed civilians including children. The exact death toll is unclear. Whereas various international sources claim 750 people were killed, the Uzbek authorities state that 170 people died. Until now the Government of Uzbekistan has successfully rejected any international investigation.

## Issues discussed and recommendations made

- *The issue of priorities.* Despite the growing interest in Brussels towards the region, the EU should further clarify what its main priorities are in Central Asia and how these relate to other regions/topics in the East, such as the policy towards Russia and the ENP.
- *Regional versus bilateral approaches.* EU regional approaches have not proven to be the most successful option in other regions and are unlikely to succeed in Central Asia due to the significant differences between the five countries. Some issues might be dealt with within a regional approach (border controls, organised crime and trafficking) but most issues (including democracy and human rights) need a bilateral approach.
- *Stability versus security.* The EU's policies should differ from those of Russia and China, which aim to create stability by maintaining the status quo. The EU should assist the republics in building institutions that are stable while taking a broader perspective on security through cooperation with Western regional organisations (the OSCE and NATO) along with "local" regional bodies, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).
- *Engagement: elites versus people.* The current EU policy mostly focuses on the elites. Four of the five Central Asian republics have authoritarian leaderships and are interested in working with the EU in order to increase their profile and thus legitimacy. Next to careful engagement with these governments the EU should look for ways to reach the people of Central Asia. The EU could focus on

education and help establish a future generation of young professionals.

- *Energy versus democracy.* The EU should be more transparent about what it hopes and plans to achieve in the energy field and how this relates to the EU's values of democracy and human rights. Energy revenues are mostly used by Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to strengthen the regimes and do not benefit the population at large. The EU should aim to work on democratic institution-building in these countries. Also energy companies from EU member states should be transparent and adhere to the rules they normally obey when working in the EU. Lastly, the EU should prioritise environmental issues, since these are closely linked to the energy sector.
- *Conditionality.* Although stability is important to the EU it should not override principles of democracy and especially human rights. The EU cannot consent to Uzbekistan's (and Turkmenistan's, under Turkmenbashi) numerous human rights violations for the sake of stability. Similarly to the ENP, the EU should use conditionality and work only with those countries that show at least a basic commitment to democracy and human rights. Such a differentiated, country-by-country approach would further bolster the EU's positive image among the general populous in the region.
- *Raising the EU profile.* The EU should be more visible in the region. Russia currently dominates the media in the Central Asian republics, and uses it to create a misleading picture of EU intentions. Awareness could be raised through meetings aimed at the underdeveloped civil societies of the region, so that they learn what Europe is all about. Vice-versa, the EU should also raise awareness on Central Asia in Europe itself; there are not enough people in the EU that are familiar, let alone knowledgeable, about Central Asian issues. This would help elevate the debate from purely geopolitical discussions to dialogue on concrete issues of what the EU can and should do in Central Asia.
- *Rewarding through assistance.* EU assistance should reward steps taken towards reform and engage with those countries that show political will. The focus should be on topics the EU is good at and to which it can add value: education, fostering cultural change and strengthening the rule of law. Europe has relevant experience in assisting many East European countries to engage in successful transitions to democracy and prosperity. It should not allow apathy and indecisiveness to stop it having a similar impact in Central Asia.
- *Who to fund?* Funding should be increased and presented in a transparent way. The limited resources available (750 million euros over the coming six years) should mostly be used to engage with people instead of unwilling governments. If there is political will there should be EU institutional support. If this will is absent the emphasis should be on civil society, and where it is impossible to work with civil society the EU should be careful about engaging at all.
- *Setting benchmarks.* The EU would be well-advised to create a list of benchmarks that would enable the Commission (and civil society) to monitor progress made and setbacks suffered. Conditionality should be used because the amount of assistance is too limited to be a serious incentive for reform. When reputations are at stake conditionality might help persuade governments to change. This should be done on a country-by-country basis where each country is judged on its own merits, without comparisons being made between different partners.

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