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EU Human Rights Promotion in Central Asia

Between the Dragon and the Bear

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Summary

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This policy brief argues that the EU risks negative consequences if it continues to let economic interests prevail over its stated aim of promoting human rights in its relations with Central Asia. The strengthening of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia has led to the growth of social tensions and an increase in the number of possible hotbeds of radicalisation in the region, both of which, in turn, pose direct threats to the EU in matters of security, the influx of migrants and the protection of investments. In order to address these challenges, and taking into account the influence of Russia and China in the region, the EU should increase the effectiveness of its projects in the fields of education, health care, civil and political freedoms, good governance, justice reform and support for local civil society. The EU must make it evident to Central Asian states that strengthening cooperation with the Union offers these countries significant socio-economic benefits which cannot be gained from cooperation with China or Russia.

Keywords Central Asia – Human rights – EU – Russia – China – Civil society



Introduction

Central Asia has a strategic position in the land transport corridor between Europe and Asia. According to the established political definition,¹ the region includes five countries of the former Soviet Union, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In the Soviet Union, these countries were considered a separate region for geographical and economic reasons. In December 1991, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, these states announced the creation of the Central Asian Commonwealth with the aim of further regional integration.

Central Asia has traditionally been considered to fall within Russia's sphere of influence. The economies of these countries were strongly tied to the centre of the former Soviet Union. For many years, other major geopolitical actors expressed very little interest in the region. However, in recent years, the geopolitical alignment in Central Asia has changed. China has become the leader in investment in infrastructure projects and the mining industry in the region, and continues to expand its economic presence there. This region is also of significant interest to the EU due to its geostrategic location.

The strengthening of the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, their corruption, and the low levels of civil and political freedoms there have led to increased social tensions, thus creating new hotbeds of radicalisation and terrorism. These not only threaten stability in the region, but also pose an immediate threat to EU countries.

Our study explains why the promotion of human rights in Central Asia is important to the EU in the context of the influx of migrants, as well as of preventing threats to security and protecting investments. This paper argues that fulfilment by the Central Asian states of their obligations in the fields of human rights and the rule of law should be a precondition for their subsequent economic cooperation with the EU, as the very security of European investments depends on this.

Currently, the Central Asian elites are more comfortable dealing with China and Russia, which, unlike the EU, do not raise the issues of democratisation and

¹ The geographic definition of the region is broader; see F. Tolipov, A. Mamadazimov and E. Nogoybayeva, *Пять государств и/или один регион*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Almaty (30 July 2015).



respect for human rights. However, the recent past has shown that the cost of close cooperation with Russia and China for the Central Asian states includes a loss of sovereignty, a loss of economic independence and increased social tensions. The EU and its member states must make it clear to the Central Asian states that there are significant advantages to cooperating with the Union, not least countering the influence of Russia and China in the region.

In this paper we argue that to achieve its long-term interests, the EU should commit to the implementation of its June 2019 Council Conclusions on a New Strategy on Central Asia² and the European Commission's Joint Communication, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*.³ It should focus on the promotion and protection of the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms of expression and association; support an enabling environment for civil society and human rights defenders; support the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda for fair globalisation; and strengthen political and financial support for local civil society. It should not shy away from using both the human rights tools—existing dialogues and funding under the human rights component of the newly established Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument—as well as the other political tools (e.g. trade agreements and Partnership and Cooperation Agreements) at its disposal to make sure these objectives are met.

The paper is divided into six main sections. The first section shows how Russia's position in the region has been squeezed out by China, and elaborates on how the Central Asian regimes have adopted human rights violations from Russia and China. The second section reveals how, with the help of military, political and economic cooperation, Russia is striving to keep the countries of the region in its orbit. The third section discusses how China encourages the dependence of its partner countries and has gained control of enterprises in the region; anti-Chinese sentiment in the region is also discussed here. The fourth section explains how, compared with China and Russia, enhanced cooperation with the EU offers the states of the region significant socio-economic benefits. The penultimate section offers policy recommendations on how to take EU human rights policy in Central Asia forward. The sixth and final section concludes the paper and summarises its main points.

² Council of the European Union, 'Central Asia: Council Adopts a New EU Strategy for the Region', Press Release (17 June 2019).

³ European Union External Action Service, 'Joint Communication on the EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership', Joint Press Release (15 May 2019).



At the junction of two spheres of influence

Mining is the foundation of the natural-resource-based economies of the countries in Central Asia. More than half of their exports are of extractable resources. In the case of Turkmenistan, almost 90% of its exports are gas and crude oil.⁴ This indicates the economic vulnerability of these countries. The stability of the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia depends, first, on global mineral prices, and, second, on the constancy of investment in developing and modernising natural resource deposits. Central Asian states are becoming increasingly dependent on the regional geopolitical hegemons—China and Russia.

Russia is forced to maintain friendly relations with China. This is due to the fact that, since the annexation of Crimea, Russia's relations with the EU and the US have become extremely tense. At present, Russia and China are strategic allies. Along with the states of Central Asia, they are members of large regional intergovernmental organisations, the most notable of which is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which brings together Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (India and Pakistan are also members).

At the moment, it is difficult for Russia to compete with China in terms of investments in regional infrastructure projects and mining. China is the leader in terms of foreign direct investment in Tajikistan,⁵ Kyrgyzstan⁶ and Uzbekistan⁷. In addition, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China is also actively investing in infrastructure projects, including the construction of roads, ports, gas and oil pipelines, and railway lines in Central Asia. This has led not only to the expansion of China's trade, but also to the destruction of Russia's monopoly on the supply of oil and gas from Central Asia to international markets.

The majority of imported goods in Kyrgyzstan (45%), Tajikistan (43%) and Uzbekistan (24%) come from China. However, it is noteworthy that China is not the main export destination for any of the countries of Central Asia (except Turkmenistan). The share of Chinese exports to these countries is also small—at

⁴ Observatory of Economic Complexity, 'Turkmenistan' (n. d.).

⁵ *Regnum*, 'Российский инвестор уходит из Таджикистана', 31 July 2017.

⁶ Kyrgyzstan, National Statistical Committee, 'Краткий анализ поступления прямых иностранных инвестиций в 2018г' (7 March 2019).

⁷ *Sputnik News*, 'Объем китайских инвестиций в Узбекистан превысил \$7,6 млрд', 24 March 2017.



approximately 0.5% of global Chinese exports.⁸ There is reason to believe that China is attracted not only to the Central Asian countries' resources and markets but, more importantly, to the ability to use the territory of these countries as a transport corridor to Europe and the Middle East.

According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index, the states of the region are strictly authoritarian, with only Kyrgyzstan listed as partially free. Turkmenistan is one of the most closed and non-free states in the world.⁹ Since the death of President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan has become slightly less isolated and the level of freedom there has increased marginally, but the regime remains authoritarian. In 2019, a transition of power took place in Kazakhstan. Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had been president for 30 years, announced his resignation. He became the Chairman of the Security Council of Kazakhstan, where he has been able to maintain leverage over all key government agencies. Following an early presidential election, Nazarbayev's protégé, Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev, took power. International observers noted the gross rigging of the elections in favour of Tokayev.¹⁰ He is maintaining Nazarbayev's policies, strengthening the authoritarian regime and suppressing civil liberties.¹¹

In Uzbekistan, several hundred people remain in prison on politically motivated charges. Likewise, in Tajikistan there are more than 200 political prisoners.¹² Most of them have been convicted of supporting the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (Hizbi Nahzati Islomii Tojikiston) and the Group 24 (Guruhi 24) opposition movement, both of which are banned in the country. There are known to be more than 120 victims of enforced disappearance in Turkmenistan.¹³ In Kazakhstan, the number of politically persecuted individuals is growing, primarily due to participants in peaceful rallies being subjected en masse to arbitrary detention and to accusations of 'supporting the extremist' opposition movement Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (Демократический выбор Казахстана, DCK). In its resolution on the human rights situation in Kazakhstan dated

⁸ Observatory of Economic Complexity, 'Kazakhstan' (n. d.); 'Kyrgyzstan' (n. d.); 'Tajikistan' (n. d.); 'Turkmenistan'; 'Uzbekistan' (n. d.).

⁹ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2019, Turkmenistan' (2019).

¹⁰ OSCE, 'Potential for Political Reform Left Untapped in Kazakhstan's Early Presidential Election Through Lack of Respect for Fundamental Freedoms and Widespread Voting Irregularities, International Observers Say' (10 June 2019).

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, 'Kazakhstan: UN Review Should Press for Reforms' (4 November 2019).

¹² US, Department of State, *2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tajikistan* (19 September 2018).

¹³ OSCE, Permanent Council no. 1239, 'EU Statement Marking the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances' (9 September 2019).



14 March 2019, the European Parliament noted the peaceful nature of the DCK.¹⁴ Finally, there are at least 15 political prisoners in Kazakhstan.

In addition, Russia and the countries of Central Asia have signed the Minsk Convention on Legal Assistance and work in close cooperation to implement unlawful extraditions. The Central Asian states, as well as Russia and China, misuse Interpol, extradition mechanisms¹⁵ and legal aid treaties in order to apprehend political opponents, including in Europe.

Central Asia and Russia

Even 29 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries maintain close cooperation with Russia in border control, joint operational and investigative activities, and strengthening the common security system. Russia has kept the countries of Central Asia under its geopolitical influence by uniting them into regional unions which it dominates, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan participate in the EAEU, which guarantees freedom of movement for goods, services, capital and labour. Despite this, there are regular Russian bans on the import of various categories of goods from EAEU countries. As a result of the imposition of sanctions on Russia by Western countries and the depreciation of the Russian rouble, Russian goods have become cheaper and flooded the markets of EAEU countries, which has affected the manufacturers in these states. Trade relations between EAEU countries clearly favour Russia, which is the largest importer to Kazakhstan (accounting for 38% of total imports) and the second largest importer (after China) to Kyrgyzstan (23%). Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's combined contribution to Russia's import market is only slightly over 2%.¹⁶

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan host Russian military bases and facilities. These countries, along with Russia, are also members of the defence

¹⁴ European Parliament, *Resolution of 14 March 2019 on the Human Rights Situation in Kazakhstan*, 14 March 2019 (2019/2610(RSP)).

¹⁵ Open Dialogue Foundation et al., *They've Come For You: Misuse of Extradition Procedures and Interstate Legal Assistance* (5 November 2019).

¹⁶ Observatory of Economic Complexity, 'Russia' (n. d.).



union the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Thus, Russia positions itself as a guarantor of regional security.

The presence of Russian military bases in Central Asia poses the risk of Russia making territorial claims, especially in relation to countries with a high percentage of ethnic Russians. The likelihood of such a claim being made was confirmed by the events in Ukraine in 2014. Russian President Vladimir Putin justified the use of the Russian army in Ukraine as being due to the ‘threat to the life of citizens of the Russian Federation, our compatriots and the personnel of the military contingent of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation’.¹⁷ The military operations that Russia has been involved in since the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War have put Central Asian countries at risk of becoming involved in Russia’s military adventures.

The results of some sociological studies¹⁸ indicate that, at the moment, there is no pronounced anti-Russian sentiment in the countries of Central Asia. This is partly due to their historical proximity to the former metropolis. Another reason is that, compared with China’s, Russia’s economic policy is less aggressive. Moreover, of all the countries of Central Asia, only Kazakhstan has a border with Russia, while three of the states border China—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The residents of Central Asia are frightened by the increasing presence of China in their lives. This is due to both the historically complex relationship with China and the expansionist nature of Chinese economic policy.

Central Asia and China

The most common condition for granting Chinese investment and loans is that Chinese companies be used to implement projects—so-called tied aid. This means that, as a rule, at least half of the materials, equipment, technologies and services should come from China.¹⁹ A striking example is the construction of the north–south highway in Kyrgyzstan, which has been labelled by the authorities as ‘one of the largest projects in the country’. Half of the funding for

¹⁷ President of Russia, ‘Владимир Путин внёс обращение в Совет Федерации’ (1 March 2014). Authors’ translation.

¹⁸ Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey Residents of Kyrgyzstan, November 19 – December 2, 2017* (n.d.). Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Opinion Poll: Image of Japan in the Central Asia Region’ (15 April 2016).

¹⁹ *Voices on Central Asia*, ‘China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia’ (19 January 2018).



construction (\$400 million) was borrowed from a Chinese bank and the work is being carried out by the Chinese company China Road.²⁰

Experts note that it is difficult to trace the real extent of lending by China to other countries, since approximately half of these loans are classified.²¹ For example, the debts owed to China by Tajikistan (\$3.3 billion), Kyrgyzstan (\$1.7 billion) and Uzbekistan (\$7.8 billion) constitute almost half of their external debt.²² Chinese loans often develop into overwhelming debt obligations for the countries of the region.²³ In exchange for investment and loans, China gains control of certain enterprises in the partner country and is able to enforce various other preferences. For example, in April 2018, a Chinese company obtained a licence to develop a gold-ore deposit as payment for the construction of the Dushanbe-2 Thermal Power Plant (TPS) in the capital of Tajikistan. In October 2019, it became known that the Tajik parliament had transferred ownership of a silver deposit to another Chinese company.²⁴

Due to their dependence on China, some Central Asian countries face the risk of losing influence in strategic sectors of the economy. Turkmenistan's main resource is natural gas, of which the country has the fourth largest reserves in the world. Almost all of this gas is exported to China. Based on agreements with China, Turkmenistan pays its debts in part with gas supplies. Similarly, China largely controls gold mining in Tajikistan, one of the country's key industries. More than 70% of the gold mined in Tajikistan goes to Zarafshon, 70% of which is owned by China.²⁵ Crude oil accounts for 45% of all Kazakhstani exports, and companies with Chinese involvement (in most of which the Chinese share is more than 50%)²⁶ account for approximately 25% of oil extraction in Kazakhstan.²⁷

Central Asian countries are becoming the production sites for Chinese companies. This is especially true for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which border China. This has become a factor in public discontent. In Kyrgyzstan protests were held in December 2018 and January and August 2019 against the expansion of Chinese influence and the activities of a Chinese gold-mining

²⁰ Y. Ulukbek, 'Сколько Кыргызстан должен Китаю и на что брал кредиты', *Radio Azattyk*, 16 May 2018.

²¹ A. Gurkov, 'Попали ли союзники России в долговую зависимость от Китая?', *Deutsche Welle*, 9 July 2019.

²² Z. Egemberdiyeva, 'Сколько страны Центральной Азии должны Китаю?', *Current Time*, 12 September 2019.

²³ D. Kliman et al., *Grading China's Belt and Road*, Center for a New American Security (8 April 2019).

²⁴ *Radio Azattyk*, 'Золото, затем серебро. Еще одно месторождение в Таджикистане отдано Китаю', 2 October 2019.

²⁵ V. Panfilova, 'China Gets Tajikistan's Gold', *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 3 September 2019.

²⁶ *Forbes Kazakhstan*, 'В РК 22 нефтяные компании с китайским участием', 12 January 2013.

²⁷ *Radio Azattyq*, 'Китайские нефтяные компании продлевают контракты с Казахстаном', 8 June 2017.



company in the country.²⁸ In September 2019, a series of anti-Chinese protests were held in Kazakhstan, leading to some 300 people being subject to arbitrary detention.²⁹

Fears of expansion have emerged in connection with the oppression of the peoples of Central Asia in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China (XUAR), which borders the Central Asian countries. As well as constituting the majority population in the XUAR, the Uyghurs live in significant numbers in the countries of Central Asia, which is a factor in the ethnic community links between the countries of the region and the XUAR. In 2018, information began to circulate in the world media about the existence of political ‘re-education’ camps in the XUAR, where ‘politically unreliable’ persons are held.³⁰ UN estimates suggest that more than a million people are being held in these camps.³¹

According to various sources, the camps are home to 22,000–50,000 Kyrgyz people.³² The Kazakhstan civil society organisation Atajurt Eriktileri claims to have documented more than 10,000 cases of ethnic Kazakhs being interned in China.³³ The Chinese language is forcibly taught in the camps, and those held are forced to repeat mottoes about the need to ‘think correctly’. Prisoners are subjected to ill-treatment and torture. The Chinese authorities use mass video surveillance and facial-recognition systems.³⁴

The authorities of the Central Asian countries have also adopted China’s approach for the purpose of conducting surveillance of their citizens and the use of censorship. Uzbekistan’s intelligence agencies use spyware for cyber-attacks against activists.³⁵ On 8 October 2019, the president of Kazakhstan assigned the government the task of introducing the technology of Chinese company Hikvision in order to establish video surveillance systems and ‘digitise’ the data held on its citizens.³⁶ This was the same company against which sanctions had

²⁸ N. Ryskulova, ‘В долгу у большого соседа. Почему в Кыргызстане боятся “китайской экспансии”’, *BBC*, 7 December 2019.

²⁹ Open Dialogue Foundation, ‘List of Kazakhstani Political Prisoners’.

³⁰ J. Sudworth, ‘China’s Hidden Camps’, *BBC*, 24 October 2018.

³¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Reviews the Report of China’ (13 August 2018).

³² *24.kg*, ‘Кыргызы в лагерях перевоспитания Китая. Их число достигает 50 тысяч’ (3 December 2018).

³³ J. Dorsey, ‘Kazakh Police Raid Raises Spectre of China’s Long Arm’, *Modern Diplomacy*, 12 March 2019.

³⁴ S. Burtin, ‘Заводной мандарин. Узники китайских лагерей рассказывают про будущее’, *Les Media*, 14 June 2019.

³⁵ J. Stubbs and C. Bing, ‘Uzbek Spies Attacked Dissidents With Off-the-Shelf Hacking Tools’, *Reuters*, 3 October 2019.

³⁶ Azattyq TV, ‘Токаев призвал перенимать опыт цифровизации Китая’, *YouTube*, 9 October 2019.



been imposed by the US just a few days earlier for its involvement in oppression and high-tech surveillance in Xinjiang.

Central Asia and the EU

Previously, Central Asia, with the exception of Kazakhstan, had not been a priority for the EU in terms of trade cooperation and investment. However, the relationship has been gaining in importance in recent years, and in 2007 the first EU–Central Asia strategy was adopted. A renewed and expanded strategy was approved by the Council of the EU in June 2019, containing provisions on human rights and rule of law.³⁷

There are several factors that make Central Asia of significant interest to the EU, namely the region's strategic position, which allows for the development of trade and transport communications and enhanced EU energy security; the region's proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan, on which countries' stability aspects of European security depend; threats of radical and terrorist movements in the region; the possibility of including this region in policies to prevent the influx of migrants into Europe; and the need to protect European business and investment in the region.

In May 2019, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted a Joint Communication on a new strategy for cooperation with Central Asia.³⁸ The EU approach is that connectivity between the EU and Asian countries must be financially, environmentally, socially and economically sustainable; comprehensive across sectors and financial frameworks; and rules-based. The EU focuses on key objectives such as creating transport links and energy and digital networks, as well as strengthening relationships between peoples.³⁹ Moreover, the EU does not officially consider its strategy a competitor to the Belt and Road Initiative but hopes for a synergy of the two approaches.⁴⁰

³⁷ Council of the European Union, 'Central Asia: Council Adopts a New EU Strategy for the Region'.

³⁸ European Union External Action Service, 'Joint Communication on the EU and Central Asia'.

³⁹ European Union External Action Service, 'Connecting Europe & Asia. The EU Strategy' (n.d.).

⁴⁰ European Commission, 'Explaining the European Union's Approach to Connecting Europe and Asia', Press Release (19 September 2018).



The EU has Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (with the latter, an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in 2015). Negotiations on an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement are also underway with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Between the EU and Turkmenistan, which is one of the most closed countries in the world, only a Temporary Trade Agreement is in force. Currently, among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has the closest relations with the EU. The possible historical rationale for this situation may include the present state of the economy in Kazakhstan following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the fact that there were attempts to carry out democratic reforms in the country in the early 2000s, although these were subsequently severely suppressed. The remaining countries of the region have closer economic ties with Russia and China.

The ruling elites in Central Asia are not interested in promoting liberal and democratic values, which they see as a threat to their authoritarian regimes. The only thing that interests them is the preservation of power. In accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, in its relations with the wider world the EU should uphold and promote its values, in particular, peace, security and the protection of human rights, as well as the strict observance and development of international law. However, the EU is often accused of giving priority to economic and trade cooperation with Central Asia and placing less emphasis on human rights requirements. This 'economy first' approach has contributed to the near complete destruction of independent civil society, opposition and independent media in the countries of the region.

The situation in Kazakhstan is a striking example. The EU is the main importer, and largest investor in and lender to Kazakhstan. This gives the EU influence over Kazakhstan, but the EU does not make sufficient use of this. Kazakhstan has long been perceived as the least harsh regime in the region, and has subsequently avoided strong criticism from the EU. This has freed the hands of the authoritarian regime and led to a significant deterioration in the rule of law. In the near future, the situation in Kazakhstan may be on a par with that of such closed countries as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The increasingly strict authoritarian regimes; gross violations of the freedoms of opinion, assembly and religion; social problems; and increasing corruption and poverty could lead to an increase in the numbers of migrants and refugees seeking asylum in the EU. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have shared borders with Afghanistan, which increases the risk of drugs, weapons and



irregular migrants, as well as radical movements, entering their territories. The borders between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are complicated by the Tajik and Uzbek enclaves in Kyrgyzstan, which often become hotbeds of conflict.

Central Asian countries have also seen an increase in radicalisation. According to the Soufan Center, the Central Asian region is a major supplier of human resources to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (mainly due to immigrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan).⁴¹ Over the past few years, immigrants from Central Asian countries have participated in several terrorist acts around the world (in the US, Russia, Turkey and Sweden).⁴² In Tajikistan, a terrorist attack was carried out in 2018 against tourists from the US and Europe.⁴³

The authorities in the region often have a rather distorted understanding of the fight against extremism. For example, in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan there has for several years been a practice of harassing bearded men. They are detained and taken to police stations, where they are forced to shave off their beards.⁴⁴ The authoritarian regimes of Central Asia also use the pretence of 'fighting extremism' to deal with their political opponents. This is evidenced by the ban on the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan and the ban on the opposition DCK movement in Kazakhstan.

In order to reduce the level of radicalism among the population in Central Asia, it is crucial to address its root causes: the lack of civil and political freedoms, persistent economic inequality, the poor quality of and lack of access to public services, and the lack of an independent and thriving civil society. The EU has a significant role to play in addressing all of these challenges by ensuring that its financial instruments address the socio-economic roots of these problems, while using its political clout to link its aid provision and trade allowances to the fulfilment of human rights and rule of law principles.

⁴¹ R. Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center (24 October 2017).

⁴² J. Donati and P. Sonne, 'New York Attack Underlines Central Asia as Growing Source of Terrorism', *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 October 2017.

⁴³ Tajikistan, General Prosecutor's Office, 'Statement of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Tajikistan' (21 August 2018).

⁴⁴ K. Kulujev, 'Никто не может насильно обривать бороду', *Current Time*, 27 August 2019.



Policy recommendations

Due to the outlined importance of the region, the EU should strive to expand its presence and role in Central Asia while balancing its economic, security and trade interests with its human rights and rule of law values. This can be achieved by doing the following:

- *Providing support to civil society.* The EU should strive to expand the space for the free activity of civil society in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and contribute to the development of civil society in the other countries of the region. It should also provide increased and more flexible funding for the activities of independent and democratic civil society through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument. This could take the form of providing project or core funding to human rights organisations or independent media, as well as financing programmes for the exchange of experience between civil society organisations from different Central Asian states and EU-based civil society. Organisations should also be supported in monitoring the implementation by Central Asian states of their obligations in the fields of human rights, democratic standards and the rule of law, and reporting on their findings to international mechanisms, such as UN Special Procedures. The EU and its member states should show political support for civil society representatives to increase their visibility and valorise their work. This could be achieved through invitations from EU diplomats to meetings at the local delegations or embassies, travelling to see their work, or funding their participation in EU and international events outside of their countries.
- *Monitoring the fulfilment of human rights commitments.* Demand that Central Asian states fulfil human rights obligations, democratic standards and the rule of law—this should be a strict condition for subsequent investment and trade relations. The EU delegations and member state embassies in Central Asia should monitor implementation of the recommendations of the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the UN, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concerning the countries of the region, and give a political assessment of the failure to implement these recommendations.
- *Being vocal about human rights or rule of law violations.* In cases of human rights or rule of law violations, the EU should denounce these at



the appropriate level: through a local statement at the delegation level, a statement from a spokesperson of the European Commission, a statement at the highest level from the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, a resolution of the European Parliament or a statement in the relevant regional or international fora, such as the OSCE or the UN.

- *Using the full range of political tools at its disposal.* The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements which the EU has signed with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan establish principles for building relationships based on respect for human rights and the rule of law. The EU should use negotiations around these agreements to convey its messages on human rights and the rule of law. The EU's leverage is especially great in the case of Kyrgyzstan, which benefits from the EU's Generalised System of Preferences scheme, which allows the country preferential access to the EU market on the condition of adherence to human rights standards. The EU should also strive to upgrade the annual human rights dialogues with Central Asian countries to create a more structured and accountable process, rather than a simple exchange of information.
- *Providing funding for key sectors of the state and the economy to address the root causes of radicalisation and security threats emanating from the region.* This could include funding for strengthening democratic standards, improving public services and access to healthcare and education, and fighting poverty and inequality, as well as providing expertise and recommendations on diversifying the economy, creating a more efficient tax and law enforcement system, and developing local self-government. In addition, conducting an audit of the use of the EU financial assistance allocated to Central Asian countries for the implementation of projects in the fields of justice, medicine, education and infrastructure development will promote the effectiveness of these projects.
- *Including Central Asian countries in external border management efforts.* The EU can assist the governments of Central Asia in border control efforts by providing funding or training for the relevant forces, with a focus on ensuring these operations are carried out in compliance with international law and human rights standards.
- *Introducing targeted sanctions on individuals in response to human rights abuses.* Following the example of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, the EU should consider introducing asset freezes or



individual travel bans against officials who are responsible for or involved in serious human rights violations in Central Asia. The mechanism of personal responsibility would ensure that human rights violators would be unable to evade responsibility and, at the same time, would not create barriers to trade relations between the countries.



Conclusion

The EU is not faced with the task of becoming a competitor to Russia and China in the big geopolitical game taking place in Central Asia. Rather, the EU is interested in the equal and mutually beneficial cooperation of all parties. However, such cooperation should be consistent with EU foreign policy principles, including with regard to the promotion of its human rights and democratic values. If the countries of the region ultimately move further towards Russia and China in terms of their policies and values, this will create a challenge to their continued cooperation with the EU.

Cooperation with the EU offers the Central Asian states a range of benefits: reducing their vulnerability to threats to their sovereignty, territorial claims or the risk of losing economic independence; a reduction in their dependence on natural resources and the chance to develop in innovative and high-tech areas; high social and environmental standards for infrastructure projects; assistance in the development of modern societies through economic, social, financial and environmental sustainability; and an improved image due to involvement in international dialogue.

To ensure that these benefits are recognised, and for its own long-term interest, the EU should ensure that its presence in the region is not merely limited to trade or geopolitical interests. The EU is the leader in financing projects in the fields of education, civil and political freedoms, and justice reform in the region. However, these projects are being implemented without the proper participation of civil society, allowing the authorities to create the appearance of reform.

In light of this, the EU must ensure that its influence in the region also delivers on its human rights commitments. Indeed, it would be beneficial for the EU to achieve democratisation and improve the human rights situation in the region, as democratic states are more stable and, therefore, more reliable as partners. Only if the EU commits to promoting human rights values in the region will the investments of European countries be protected and economic cooperation not go against the principles of EU foreign policy.



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