'Central Asia has always been important for Europe'

The influence of political heavyweights China and Russia in Central Asia grows. Peter Burian on Europe's role in the region

Read this interview in German.

The EU has presented a new strategy for Central Asia. The first one has been adopted in 2007 and revised in 2015. Where do you see improvements?

Our new Strategy will aim to focus future EU action in the region on two key priorities. Firstly, we want to be partners for resilience. We want to strengthen the capacity of Central Asian states and societies to overcome internal and external shocks and enhance their ability to embrace reform. This should translate into closer cooperation on human rights and the rule of law. This will also imply closer cooperation in security, including counter-radicalisation and counterterrorism, but also new areas such as hybrid threats and cyber-security. We also want to cooperate with the countries of the region to turn environmental challenges into opportunities.

Secondly, we want to step up our cooperation to support economic modernisation, and there is a lot the EU can do to support the development of a stronger and competitive job-generating private sector in the region. We should also cooperate more closely to improve the climate for investment and the EU remains a leading supporter of the accession of Central Asian states to the WTO.

Where do the EU's interests lie when it comes to Central Asia?

Central Asia has always been important for Europe: for its history, for its culture and for its role in connecting East and West. Now Central Asia is regaining its historic role as a gateway between Europe and Asia.

Central Asia is a young and growing market with untapped potential

for trade and transport, but it also represents an important element of our energy security. EU has a strong interest that Central Asia develops as a peaceful, resilient and more closely interconnected economic and political space.

The region is of significant importance for the EU also in terms of security. Neighbouring with Afghanistan, the region shares many challenges starting from illicit drug trafficking and irregular migration and ending with threats of violent extremism and terrorism. When facing these threats we are in one boat. And from this point of view, Central Asia is even a closer neighbour of the EU than it seems. In case of any major security crisis in the region, the EU will be one of the first to face the consequences.

Besides Brexit and domestic conflicts, we see that the eroding transatlantic relationship remains high on the EU's agenda. How much attention can Central Asia therefore expect in the upcoming years?

I believe our member states and EU institutions helped me to answer your question by adopting the new EU Strategy on Central Asia, reconfirming the long term commitment to security and stability of the region.

I dare to say that also thanks to EU's contribution and support for sustainable development in the past quarter of a century the region managed to preserve a large degree of stability and countries of Central Asia strengthened their statehood, identity and sovereignty. In the light of existing challenges the region is facing this support will be needed in the foreseeable future. It is in our interest to keep the attention to Central Asia and help to strengthen its resilience. I believe that with our rather modest investments into human capacity building, education, job creation and strengthening the rule of law and good governance it is possible to create conditions for utilizing the potential of the region and prevent negative tendencies to materialize into major threats to stability of Central Asia.

Even when you look to the recent past when the EU member states were deciding on budgetary allocations for Central Asia's regional MIP for 2014-2020 7 years ago you would see that the EU managed to increase the funding for implementation of various regional and bilateral projects in Central Asia by more than 50 per cent.

With Russia and China two geopolitical heavyweights are very active in Central Asia. In contrast, how's the EU perceived as an actor in the region?

One of the reasons the Central Asian countries are seeking a closer

partnership with the EU is their natural interest to diversify their choices and options. Being located between such big political, economic and security players as China and Russia, our Central Asian partners see the EU as a balancing power in the regional equation. From our part, we want to forge a stronger, modern and non-exclusive partnership with the region so that it develops as an area of cooperation and connectivity rather than competition and rivalry.

The EU's partnership with the region is not directed against anyone. The Central Asians appreciate our ability to engage on a non-exclusive basis without imposing binary choices. The EU does not aim to be a "Great Game" player on a "Grand Chessboard" but rather a reliable and committed partner for the region.

We remain open for cooperation and synergies with everyone, including China and Russia, based on full transparency and fully respecting the Central Asian states' ownership and sovereignty.

The increasing indebtedness of countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Chinese creditors makes the population more and more concerned about their countries' sovereignty. What can the EU do concretely to offer less developed countries a real alternative?

The EU is providing to the countries of Central Asia a real alternative. EU cooperation with the region already amounts to over €1bn through both bilateral and regional envelopes. Together with other instruments this amount is even higher – around €2bn.

To fulfil the economic potential, there is the need for something more than big infrastructure projects or trains delivering goods that only run through these countries. There is a need to have real, long-term investments that bring benefits to local communities, based on sustainable and long-standing solutions.

We also share a mutual interest in developing and strengthening connections between Europe and Central Asia, whether that is transport links, digital infrastructure, energy networks, or contacts between people. This could create new jobs, promote innovation and modernisation, which allows Central Asia avoiding the debt trap and the trap of poor quality projects.

But at the same time the connectivity for us is not and should never be about creating spheres of influence. For us, connectivity always will be rather focussed on creating opportunities for everyone.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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