FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 10.02.2023 | Bakhrom Radjabov

How the EU can secure its position in Central Asia

The EU's partnership with Central Asia is growing but limited — understanding the regional political context and geopolitical reality can change this

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has impacted the country's stance and influence in its so-called 'near-abroad'. The countries making up Central Asia have frequently been considered to be in Russia's sphere of influence and have strong ties not only historically but also economically and militarily. Yet, the current geopolitical realities which the war in Ukraine has brought about, as well as the resulting sanctions against Russia and the weaponisation of the financial system have changed domestic political realities in Central Asia. The wish for partnerships outside of Russia has become strong and certain actors, such as the European Union, have shown a growing interest in the region.

The EU and Central Asian countries not only have a relationship with a strong legal basis but one based on the understanding of the need for joint work towards regional and global security and development. One of the most recent EU strategies, namely the EU Global Gateway Initiative, focuses on investments and infrastructure development across the world and is also relevant to Central Asian countries. But does the EU do enough to support this partnership or is it missing its opportunity to strengthen its position in the region?

A positive perception of the EU

Certainly, the EU-Central Asian relationship has its own history and dynamic, encompassing multiple factors and developments outside and inside the region. Mainstream policy analysis often highlights the competition for hegemony in the region. This analysis, however, ignores microlevel developments impacting the capacity for multilateral cooperation of Central Asia with external partners such as the EU, such as the growing geopolitical involvement of a multitude of different countries in the area and a lack of understanding of the local context.

Geopolitical tensions in the region as well as foreign involvement are growing unprecedently. While the EU and US emphasised that they will not convince Central Asian states to cooperate with them at the cost of cooperation with Russia and China; German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in 2022 stated that Germany does not want to see Central Asia 'being straitjacketed in Russia's front yard or dependent on China'. Simultaneously, Russian Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin argued that 'Uzbekistan is smart enough not to collaborate with the US', thereby fuelling Russian anti-Western rhetoric.

In Uzbekistan, relations with the EU have noticeably improved.

The perspectives of Central Asian countries themselves vary. There are numerous 'Central Asia plus EU' formats of cooperation, which have recently been called 'useless' and 'for the sake of pumping out information' by the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmon. While in Uzbekistan, relations with the EU have noticeably improved. A joint press statement of Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the President of the European Council Charles Michel states that: 'the parties welcomed the desire of the European Union to strengthen ties and interregional cooperation with Uzbekistan and Central Asia.' Kazakh authorities also 'reaffirm their ambition to establishing a strong and forward-looking framework for cooperation between the EU and Central Asia.' Based on these developments, it is clear that the relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries is dynamic and – apart from rare cases such as the statement of the Tajik President – is generally good.

Failing to understand the local context

The EU and other external actors are heavily focused on external threats to Central Asia such as from Afghanistan, but they lack an understanding of domestic issues in the region. Emerging Islamic sentiments in Central Asian societies, mixed with violent extremism triggered by a wide range of socio-economic factors (lack of education, insufficient social support, lack of economic opportunities, etc.) are, for instance, a growing issue. Nationalistic ideas (calls to communicate in Central Asian local languages, not accepting 'non-Central Asian' or 'non-Islamic' values), partly prompted by the increasing domination of ethnic Central Asians over a decreasing number of other nationalities communicating in

Russian, also play a role here.

In fact, the EU (and not only) is not ready to formulate a good response to the internal crisis situations in Central Asia, such as the unrest in Kazakhstan in January last year and protests in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan. Usually, the reason for this incapability and ignorance lies in insufficient knowledge of the local language and context and a subsequent inability to conduct evidence-based analysis. While it is difficult to grasp the full scope of information, segmented analysis limited to data from official sources or available solely in the Russian language causes the additional problem of missing bulks of important data, leading to misinterpretations of local realities.

Cooperation where possible

Despite the high dependency on Russia as the major trade partner for Central Asian countries and the biggest source of foreign currency generated from the inflow of monetary remittances of labour migrants, the region follows the EU and US's sanctions regime, being aware of the consequences of not doing so.

In 2021, Uzbekistan joined the EU's GSP+ (Generalised Scheme of Preferences) to be able to export 6,200 types of goods to the Union without a customs duty – a milestone in the history of EU-Central Asian cooperation. It is clear that for the EU, the GSP+ is, above all, a tool to compete with traditional trade partners for market access in Central Asian states. Certainly, for Central Asian countries, the GSP+ is economically beneficial and enables trade diversification to partly compensate for losses that occurred due to the sanctions against Russia and its following economic decline. Trade compensation remains only partial though since it is not realistic to fully diversify trade flows from Central Asia to Europe. Currently, the major trade route is the so-called northern corridor to Russia, though railway corridors through the Caspian Sea from Central Asia to Europe are already functioning.

Central Asian experts expect that in the next three years, the EU development cooperation and its Europe-Asia Connectivity Strategy will positively impact Central Asia.

At the same time, the EU tries not to jeopardise its relationship with Central Asian states by de-politicising their cooperation. By emphasising their common grounds and focusing on areas of co-operation, encompassed by the EU Global Gateway Initiative, the EU does not push for political reforms but instead focuses on other areas such as the digital sphere, climate and research.

Based on the study Central Asia Forecasting, conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and others, Central Asian experts expect that in the next three years, the EU development cooperation and its Europe-Asia Connectivity Strategy will positively impact Central Asia along with the EU's climate, good governance and human rights policies. Clearly, Central Asian countries are currently facing various challenges of economic, social, political and other nature, along with attempts to implement complex reforms. Therefore, national governments favour European investments, technical assistance and expertise. Yet, the partnership will always be limited until an understanding of the current complex political context in Central Asia and the geopolitical realities for the national governments is achieved. It is essential to enrich the general knowledge about the region with more specific nuances, put clichés aside and treat the countries of the region not as another geopolitical battleground but as valuable partners possessing opinions and deserving respect and understanding.



Bakhrom Radjabov
Tashkent

Bakhrom Radjabov is the Head of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's Office in Uzbekistan.