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THE EU STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA: IMPERATIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE. A VIEW FROM KAZAKHSTAN.

- The European Union's Strategy for Central Asia is currently undergoing review, and should take into account major geopolitical changes occurring in Eurasia. Most importantly are Russia's aggressive assertiveness in the post-Soviet space and its "pivot to Asia" away from the West, and China's thrust into Central Asia and beyond. These changes create both challenges and opportunities for the EU to recalibrate its approach.
- The current EU strategy, underpinned by the geographical principle of proximity and shared borders, leaves Central Asia in the limbo position of being "neighbours of neighbours". This principle can be contested. The core interest of the strategy – promotion of security and stability in Central Asia – can be misleading, and the plethora of priorities and programmes to support this goal dilutes the EU's efforts in the region.
- A new policy could be developed around the long-term vision of a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok and from Oslo to Almaty, built on the basis of European values and identity. Russian revisionist policies may be a stumbling block, but this obstacle is not insurmountable. Gently yet consistently bringing the Central Asian states into the orbit of Europe could motivate a faster Russian return into the "European family" that it belongs to.
- To be effective, the EU should be very selective in its priorities and choose programmes that build on its comparative advantages, such as the EU's soft power. There must be clear benchmarks that are checked against the criteria of feasibility and visibility.
- Kazakhstan can play an even bigger role as a special partner of the EU, thanks to key shared interests and its European inclinations and identity. The opportunities opened up by the announced institutional reforms can be leveraged, but the EU should adopt a sophisticated approach that considers possible impediments, such as the possible hijacking of reforms by domestic lobbies. In its promotion of human rights and democratisation, the EU should find ways to counteract the state's enhanced capacity to resist such pressures.

Adopted in 2007, the European Union's (EU) Strategy for Central Asia has been praised for being the first political document to define common interests and enlist priority areas for cooperation. It introduced new mechanisms and helped to upgrade relations and increase the EU's visibility in the region. Lacking clear goals and ways to achieve them, it was not a strategy in the conventional sense of the word, yet it served the purpose of signalling the EU's special interest in Central Asia and articulating the agenda for its engagement.

Currently, the strategy is undergoing review. Apart from the standard process of analysing and learning from its implementation, it is recognised that policy must be aligned with the major geopolitical changes that are taking place. The most important of these changes are Russia's aggressive assertiveness in the post-Soviet space and "pivot to Asia" away from the West, and China's thrust into Central Asia and beyond. The situation is complicated both by the heated situation in the Middle East and the migration problem of the southern flanks, as well as the ongoing internal crisis in the European Union that threatens

to consume the attention of European policymakers at the expense of Central Asian policy.

As a result, the EU policy in Central Asia faces considerable challenges, but as it happens during times of crisis, this can create an opportunity to "shake up" conventional approaches, assess priorities and "shake off" the elements of engagement that do not work. It opens up a space for creativity and the redefinition of the EU's goals in the region while Eurasian politics are in flux. What does the EU wish to achieve in the region, beyond the generic wish list of a stable and prosperous, integrated, well-governed and democratic neighbourhood? Are these goals feasible, given the EU's resources and leverage? What are effective ways of achieving them?

Questions of feasibility and effectiveness are crucial if the EU wants to match major Eurasian actors in their dynamism and impact. While Russia's recent bold moves can be described as erratic and undermining its own interests, China's approach is systematic and forceful. Its presence and influence in Central Asia has grown progressively. China is a major trade partner and loan provider. The pillar of its regional security and economic cooperative efforts – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – garners considerable attention and is seen as promising by policy makers and experts. Beijing is also fast at implementing its own projects. While the EU's decades-old plans to bring Central Asian gas to Europe remain unfulfilled, the Chinese pipeline connecting Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Xinjiang was built over the period of two years. The TRACECA project, which was introduced in the early 1990s and consumed substantial amounts of EU funding, has been nearly forgotten. On the other hand, China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) unveiled in

2013 has announced its support by a USD 40 billion fund and has all the chances to roll out fairly quickly. The effectiveness of Beijing's focused, pragmatic and well-financed policy in Central Asia provides food for thought and poses a challenge to both Russia and the EU.

Sketching a new vision-based policy

A new, effective policy should reflect clearly defined goals, be ambitious and inspiring, and feasible enough to have a chance of success. It requires a careful calibration of goals and resources, an assessment of demands and resistance on the ground, and leverage that the EU can exercise. Importantly, it needs to build on the comparative advantage of the Union against other external actors.

One possible starting point for the development of a new policy is to examine how the EU relates to Central Asia and how it envisions its future relations, including desirable future options. At present, the states of the region are designated as "neighbours of neighbours". This is a strange position that signals both connectedness and remoteness, commitment and lack of commitment at the same time. The geographic principle underpinning such a designation and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) seems reasonable. However, to what extent is the Siberian part of Russia closer to Europe than Central Asia, or is Kazakhstan really that different and less European than Azerbaijan?

What could be an alternative organising principle? It might make more sense to place identity at the core of the neighbourhood policy, in contrast to a solely geographical understanding. The EU is based

on a set of values that constructs European identity on the basis of a common history and culture, and is shaped by European political thought. It is not a nation-state and its idea of borders is less determined, as demonstrated by waves of expansion. As a values-based community, it has the drive to disseminate these values, and the nearby areas or "neighbourhood" are prime candidates to do so. Given this principle, then the Central Asian states could be included in the neighbourhood due to their common history and long tradition of Europeanisation.

Ideally, Central Asia would become part of the common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok and from Oslo to Almaty or Dushanbe, based on shared European values. Such a state of affairs would truly create conditions for security, prosperity and regional integration. This vision could inspire a long-term EU strategy and progressive, pro-European forces in Central Asia. The undertaking would not be easy, but has a good chance of success in my view.

It is ironic that the main stumbling block to the implementation of this vision is revisionism and the anti-liberal agenda of the current government in Russia, a country that has historically been the conduit of European culture to Central Asia. How long will Russia's split with the West last? Prominent Russian expert Dmitry Trenin argues that Moscow's shift from Greater Europe to Greater Asia ("from Shanghai to St. Petersburg") is fundamental, and the remaking of Eurasia is underway. He acknowledges the possible symbiosis between the Chinese and Russian integration projects, the SREB and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, as Trenin himself points out, there are disparities of interest between Russia and China, including in Central Asia, and Moscow realises its weakness vis-à-

vis Beijing.¹ It can also be argued that Putin's policies and Putinism in Russia are not sustainable and that Moscow's shift from Berlin to Beijing is temporary, given Russia's strong European identity. I believe that the second option is more plausible, and if post-Soviet areas continue to be gently drawn into the orbit of Europe and display positive transformations as a result, this could motivate a faster Russian return as well.

China's expansion into Central Asia poses another interesting question for European policy makers. Is China a competitor or partner of the EU in the region? On the one hand, it helps to counterbalance Russia and its plans to reintegrate Central Asian states, and it is intent on building the transport corridors connecting Asia with Europe via Central Asia. On the other hand, such a rise in economic influence can translate into political influence at the expense of European influence. I would argue that the EU can benefit from Chinese connectivity projects, but that it also should make good use of its own comparative advantage: its soft power in the region, bolstered by the desire of Central Asian states to retain independence and thus their inclination to ally themselves with other poles of power.

Selecting priorities and instruments

The core interest expressed by the current EU strategy is the security and stability of Central Asia. The identified priorities – human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratisation, youth and education; promotion of economic development,

trade and investment, strengthening energy and transport links, environmental sustainability and water; combatting common threats and challenges; and intercultural dialogue – are all linked to the promotion of security and stability. A comprehensive and holistic approach is appropriate; however, it spreads the EU's efforts too thin, and risks minimising its achievements.

In reality, when it comes to the provision of security and stability, there is not much the EU can do if this security is breached. It could not and would not assume responsibility for security in the region. At the same time, making stability the top priority can send the wrong signals to Central Asian governments and societies who might take it as an endorsement of their authoritarian policies.

A new vision and core goal of creating a common space based on European identity and values can help select the priorities. It would imply a firm emphasis on the soft but formidable power of European culture, enhancing channels for transmitting culture and values. This could be achieved through educational and cultural programmes and other creative means. Educational cooperation is of crucial importance but should go beyond student exchanges and limited institutional cooperation. Knowledge about Europe can be fostered by establishing European studies departments and perhaps even a European university or college in partnership with leading European institutions. Central Asia could be better incorporated into the European information and media space, with the goal of fostering the European orientation and identity of Central Asians. Such efforts would draw on

¹ Dmitri Trenin, "From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente", Carnegie Moscow Center, April 2015. Available from http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Trenin_To_Asia_WEB_2015Eng.pdf

the attractiveness and appeal of the European project, European values and, most importantly, the European standards and quality of life and the recognition that this quality of life can be achieved only on the basis of certain standards of governance and rule of law.

Other priorities should be checked against the criteria of feasibility and visibility. The feasibility check is based on a serious and critical evaluation of the window of opportunity for pursuing a certain priority, rather than an assessment of needs and urgency from a European point of view or normative, “noblesse oblige” foreign policy considerations, which could result in well-meaning, but largely ineffective programmes. It is up to experts to decide whether EU flagship programmes should focus on the efficient use of energy, water management or the Virtual Silk Highway. What is important is that the implementation of these projects will bolster the EU’s reputation as an effective actor and agent of change, and provide for true visibility of the Union among the people of Central Asia.

Prospect of a special partnership with Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has already been designated as a special partner of the EU in the region. This position acknowledges that Kazakhstan is its prime trade partner and recipient of European investments. It has the strongest inclination toward Europe as evidenced by the “Path to Europe” state programme, the negotiated enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and the fact that Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state to prepare a non-paper on updating the EU Strategy for Central Asia.

The EU and Kazakhstan share key interests. Apart from economic interdependence, both find themselves in a similar predicament in their relations with Russia: they have a sense of connectedness and cultural closeness with Russia, but cannot accept Moscow’s current revisionism. These common interests create opportunities for geopolitical partnership and the chance to find softer ways of exiting the crisis. One such opportunity is related to the Eurasian economic integration project. Kazakhstan is the only member of the EAEU that is not a client of Russia, which lends credibility to the project. The idea floated by German policy makers to start negotiations between the EU and EAEU can help create some room for manoeuvre for Kazakhstan, although reinforcing the apparent effectiveness of Russia’s aggressive policies brings disadvantages that should be seriously considered. Prominent German expert Stefan Meister argues that if the EU accepts the EAEU as a platform for negotiations with Russia, “it would legitimise the Kremlin’s practice of placing other states under pressure and undermining their sovereignty.”²

The EU’s engagement with Kazakhstan, aimed at its evolution into a member of the European value-based space, can occur on two levels: intergovernmental and societal. At the government level, projects with a chance of success are those supported by the political will of Kazakh authorities.

There seems to be a window of opportunity created by Kazakhstan’s aspiration to join the 30 most developed states and improve governance as recommended by OECD. In spring 2015, President

² Stefan Meister, “Chasing a Chimera. Closer EU-EEU Ties Will Not Lead to a Rapprochement with Russia”, IP Journal, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), 2 March 2015. Available from <https://ip-journal.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/topics/chasing-chimera>

Nursultan Nazarbayev announced five institutional reforms covering the state apparatus, rule of law, industrialisation and economic growth, unified nation, and transparency and accountability. If the EU decides to support these reforms, however, it should consider the domestic lobbies that might hijack them, as could be the case with the announced reform of the judicial sector.

In areas where there is no or little political will, such as the promotion of civil rights and development of civil society in the country, the EU has more limited leverage and capacity to change the situation for the better. It should be noted that the state is constantly

learning, adopting sophisticated measures to counter democratisation and co-opt both international donors and the non-governmental sector that is not strong to begin with. Examples of this can be seen in the downgrading of the OSCE Centre in Astana to a Programme Office, partnership with the USAID and the draft law that regulates access to funding for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), making them more dependent on the government.

If the EU wants to foster a fruitful partnership with the Central Asian states aimed at the promotion of democratic values, then it needs to become more sophisticated in its approach as well.

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