



POLICY BRIEF

The EU Central Asia Strategy and Its Impact on Migration

Yan Matusevich

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The new EU Strategy on Central Asia emphasizes the links between resilience, prosperity and connectivity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The release of the EU Strategy on Central Asia in 2019 opens a new chapter in EU-Central Asian relations, marking a move away from a narrow focus on regional cooperation and security to a broader and more flexible approach, which emphasizes the links between three key areas: resilience, prosperity and connectivity. Migration serves as a link between all three areas and must become the object of a renewed focus of the European Union as part of its broader engagement in the Central Asia region. The EU can no longer afford looking at migration and mobility solely through the prism of security and stability. The time has come to adopt a more comprehensive and active approach centred on promoting migration opportunities rather than containing migration challenges.

CURRENT CONTEXT

The much-anticipated recent adoption of the EU's new and expanded Strategy on Central Asia in 2019 provides a welcome opportunity to reflect on how EU-Central Asia relations have evolved over time and what new developments may yet appear on the horizon. More specifically, it is an opportune moment to evaluate emerging policy issues related to migration and mobility given their increasing relevance for both the EU and Central Asian states.

For several decades after gaining independence, the Central Asian states remained relatively peripheral to the geopolitical interests of the European Union (EU) and it was not until 2007 that the first ever EU Strategy on Central Asia was adopted. While the EU has actively pursued closer relations with neighbouring states as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, its influence in the former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has historically been much more circumscribed.

The 2007 EU Strategy on Central Asia stressed the region's pivotal location at the crossroads between China, Afghanistan and Russia with much of the focus revolving around questions of security, regional economic development and environment protection. In terms of financial assistance, almost two-thirds of the EU funds destined for Central Asia were distributed through bilateral assistance programs with individual Central Asian states with the rest of the funding going towards facilitating closer inter-state relations through multilateral projects.¹

Many things have changed since the initial strategy was drafted in 2007. While the EU remains a major foreign aid donor in the region, both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are no longer eligible for receiving bilateral financial assistance from the EU due to their recent change of status as upper-middle-income economies.² Moreover, Kazakhstan has transitioned from a recipient of foreign aid to instituting KazAID as the country's official development aid (ODA) program with a regional focus on neighbouring Central Asian countries and Afghanistan.³

Though the EU remains a prominent actor in Central Asia, there are clear signs that its political and economic influence in the region is diminishing. Within the span of the past decade, the EU went from being Central Asia's largest trading partner to losing its pole position to China in 2018.⁴ The emergence of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), while not a threat to EU-Central Asian relations, attests to the increasing influence of the Russian Federation on the region, particularly when it comes to trade and migration. Given Russia's and China's involvement in Central Asia, the EU is faced with the prospect of recalibrating its policy priorities in the region.

Overall, there has been little positive progress on the objectives established by the 2007 EU Strategy on Central Asia. Bright spots include the establishment of closer diplomatic ties at the highest level and the opening of EU delegations across the entire region, including the much-anticipated opening of a new EU delegation office in the capital of Turkmenistan in 2019. On the human rights front, the EU has also been successful at instituting annual human rights dialogues in all five Central Asian republics, an important and unique platform for the promotion of human rights in the region.⁵

¹ Council of the European Union, 2007

² World Bank, 2019

³ Sharifzoda & Temirov, 2019

⁴ Bhutia, 2019

⁵ Russell, 2019

Many things have changed since the initial strategy was drafted in 2007.

Looking at the past decade, the most successful improvements in the region have been linked to local political developments rather than EU efforts on the ground. The emergence of Uzbekistan from a long period of isolation is providing new opportunities for engagement and has had a positive effect on easing inter-state tensions and improving regional mobility. With the signing of the Strategic Partnership agreement between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2018, the long-awaited normalization of Tajik-Uzbek relations represents arguably the single greatest boost to peace, security and mobility in the region.⁶ Under President Mirzoyeev, Uzbekistan has reversed many of its draconian and isolationist policies, including putting an end to the use of forced labour in its cotton industry⁷ and the lifting of travel restrictions on its own citizens⁸. Moreover, Uzbekistan is seeking closer integration with the global economy and is well on its way to becoming a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO).⁹ While the EU had actively lobbied for the adoption of these kinds of policies in Uzbekistan, political changes within the country allowed these changes to occur rather than any EU-funded initiatives.

The recent uptick in the number of violent clashes and deaths along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border¹⁰ represents a worrying development that has the potential of escalating into a prolonged conflict.¹¹ Although the flare-up on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict is often perceived to be the result of a lack of proper border demarcation, researchers have pointed out that limited access to water and agricultural resources are the main drivers of conflict. Despite the EU's efforts to promote regional cooperation using itself as a successful model¹², these intermittent border skirmishes and political tensions in the Fergana Valley between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan show that there is ample room for more extensive engagement.

In Turkmenistan, the population is facing an unprecedented economic crisis marked by hyperinflation and increasingly limited access to basic food products.¹³ With unemployment estimated to be over fifty percent, many Turkmen citizens are attempting to leave the country to pursue employment opportunities in Turkey or neighbouring Kazakhstan.¹⁴ The worsening of conditions in the country could lead to a more disruptive and extensive exodus of Turkmen citizens – a development that would need to be adequately addressed by the international community, including the EU.

With the rise in the number of ISIS combatants originating from Central Asian countries, several EU member states began expressing concern about the threat of radicalization in the region.¹⁵ The supposed recruitment of Central Asian migrant workers by extremist organizations in Russia sparked a new interest in the subject. There have also been more calls for closer cooperation with Central Asian states in the fight against extremism and the recruitment of foreign fighters.¹⁶

The ever changing and complex situation on the ground in Central Asia has some important implications for EU-Central Asia cooperation on migration going forward.

⁶ Tolipov, 2018

⁷ Imamova, 2019

⁸ Putz, 2019

⁹ Tashkent Times, 2019

¹⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, n.d.

¹¹ Kurmanalieva, 2019

¹² Boonstra & Panella, 2018

¹³ Pannier & Hug, 2019

¹⁴ Baumgartner, 2018

¹⁵ Furstenberg, 2019

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, 2015

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Past Cooperation on Migration

Migration has generally not featured as a standalone priority in the EU's overall cooperation strategy with Central Asia. While it is mentioned as a challenge for the region in the EU's 2007 Strategy on Migration, the main focus with regards to mobility and migration has tended to be on security and effective management. It is indicative that the Central Asia multiannual indicative programme for 2014-2020 lists migration-related objectives as part of a sector entitled Regional Security for Development.¹⁷ This law-and-order approach to migration management places a strong emphasis on border security and law enforcement cooperation.

Security concerns have long taken precedence over other concerns due to the EU's approach to Central Asia as a buffer zone between Europe and Afghanistan. The European Union has made it clear that part of its primary agenda in Central Asia is to "address the possible threats of Afghanistan spill-over, increased flows of migration from Afghanistan, as well as the root causes of radicalisation of youth and terrorism" through several funding instruments, including the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP).¹⁸

Assessing the EU's 2019 Strategy

Whereas the 2007 EU Strategy on Central Asia concentrated primarily on issues of sustainable regional development and security, the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia shifts the focus to three broad and overlapping priority areas: resilience, prosperity and improved cooperation. Migration is nested within the resilience category with the need to "step up cooperation on migration" being listed clearly as one of the strategy's overarching objectives.¹⁹

Compared to its 2007 predecessor, the new Strategy provides more detail on the kind of cooperation on migration, mobility and border management in Central Asia that the EU aims to pursue in the future. The document attests to a new emphasis on working closely with Central Asian states to put into place national migration policies that align with best practices in migration governance and cooperation. Furthermore, cooperation on migration and mobility is embedded explicitly within the framework of the bilateral Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements that the EU has already concluded with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but is interested in extending to other Central Asian states. Whereas the 2007 strategy only very briefly touched upon issues related to migration, the EU's 2019 Strategy is more expansive and includes new priorities, including improving migration and mobility not only within Central Asia, but also with EU and partner countries. More attention is also paid to addressing the root causes of labour migration along with a continued commitment to promoting decent work conditions in the region in close cooperation with the ILO.

While these are all welcome additions to the strategy, the main migration and mobility focus of the new strategy remains on expanding integrated border management, fighting against human trafficking and combatting irregular migration.

¹⁷ European External Action Service, 2014

¹⁸ European External Action Service, 2014

¹⁹ European Commission, 2019

Assessing the impact of EU's policies on migration in Central Asia

Over the years, the EU has expressed concrete concerns with particular migration-related issues affecting Central Asia as a whole. With Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan being some of the most remittance dependent countries in the world, the EU and the international community more broadly have highlighted the pitfalls of being so heavily dependent on remittances and pledged to support efforts to develop economic opportunities in Central Asian countries with high rates of outward labour migration. Most of these efforts have been quite limited in nature since project-based interventions can hardly reverse such major trends, particularly since these migration flows are tied to much broader socioeconomic factors closely related to the situation in Russia.

POLICY OPTIONS

Moving away from security and towards mobility

A securitized approach to managing migration in Central Asia fails to take into account the aspirations of the region's increasingly global youth who are actively looking for professional and educational opportunities abroad. While the EU cannot compete with China and Russia in terms of economic and geopolitical influence in the region, the European Union can play an active role in the region in a number of key areas. The EU can and should actively seek to expand its programming in Central Asia when it comes to education, culture and conflict resolution.

In the context of the growing diversification of migration flows from Central Asia, EU member states have the opportunity to attract much-needed workers to fill existing gaps in the labour market. In the absence of official bilateral labour agreements between Central Asian and EU states, private companies and recruitment agencies are already bringing workers from Central Asia to Europe, but this often occurs without the necessary government oversight mechanisms. As a result, Finnish authorities recently deported 140 Uzbek construction workers over forged documents, a decision that threatened to "paralyse the domestic construction sector" according to Finnish employers.²⁰ There are also several thousand Kyrgyz labor migrants already working in the Czech Republic²¹, but more could be done to promote labour mobility on a bilateral level.

While Russia has remained the primary country of destination for Central Asian labour migrants over the past couple of decades, the worsening of the economic situation in Russia combined with rampant abuses against migrant workers have pushed Central Asian migrants to consider working in places further afield such as South Korea, Japan, the Gulf and potentially EU countries.²²

The EU should actively seek to expand its programming in the areas of education, culture and conflict resolution.

²⁰ https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finland_deports_140_uzbek_construction_workers_over_forged_training_documents/10873164

²¹ <https://fergana.agency/articles/107385/>

²² <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30133125.html>

Addressing the question of asylum seekers from Central Asia

The EU's approach to the question of asylum in Central Asia has so far been limited to supporting Central Asian states in their capacity to handle asylum seekers fleeing instability and violence in Afghanistan. Over the past couple of years, the EU for the first time has emerged as a destination for asylum seekers from Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan. The worsening human rights situation in Tajikistan has resulted in several thousand Tajiks applying for asylum in several EU member states, including Germany, Lithuania and Poland.

This new and rapidly changing situation requires the EU to increase its engagement with Central Asian states on issues related to migration, asylum and human rights while ensuring that asylum seekers from Central Asia have access to protection in EU member states. Several roadblocks appear to be emerging on the horizon, particularly when it comes to dealing with the increasing number of refused asylum seekers from Tajikistan. In August 2019, German officials held a preliminary set of talks with Tajik officials in Dushanbe to discuss the possibilities of adopting a readmission agreement for rejected asylum seekers between the two countries.

Cooperation on irregular migration

From the perspective of the EU, Central Asia has long been perceived primarily as a region of transit given its proximity to Afghanistan. Although concerns over the potential for large-scale transit migration through Central Asia never materialized, the question of ensuring secure borders with Afghanistan remains a primary objective of EU foreign policy in the region. Already in its ninth phase, the very successful Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA) project has acted as the poster child of the EU's engagement in the region. Whereas the promotion of Integrated Border Management (IBM) is perceived to be BOMCA's core mission, there is a growing consensus among EU policymakers that BOMCA can play only a relatively minor role in ensuring border security with Afghanistan.²³

Despite the success of the BOMCA project and its positive reputation among Central Asian states, other geopolitical actors are gaining in influence with regards to border security. With the United States actively disengaging in Central Asia and Afghanistan, China and the Russian Federation are investing both financially and militarily in securing Central Asia's southern border with Afghanistan. China has already concluded agreements with Tajikistan that allow Chinese border guards to patrol large portions of the Tajik-Afghan border independently.²⁴

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As an attractive destination for pursuing higher education, the EU has the potential to play a positive role concerning student mobility between Central Asia and Europe. Currently, the number of Central Asians studying at European universities remains low and pales in comparison with Russia and China.²⁵ While the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia explicitly invites European

²³ Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs, 2018

²⁴ Nelson & Grove, 2019

²⁵ Peyrouse, 2019

universities to expand partnerships with institutions of higher education in the region, it is also crucial to allow for an increasing number of Central Asian students to pursue their studies in the EU based on the positive example of student mobility as part of the Eastern Partnership.

It is important for the EU to do good on its promise to “create the conditions for enhanced people-to-people contacts between the citizens of Central Asian countries and those of the EU” by actively supporting the developing of new legal channels of migration and different forms of international mobility, particularly in relation to Central Asia’s growing young population.²⁶ Improving mobility between the EU and Central Asia can serve as a vital policy instrument for deepening cooperation between the two regions. Such an approach entails developing a wide portfolio of mobility measures and incentives, catering to the specific needs of EU member states and individual Central Asian states. In the case of Kazakhstan, for example, this could involve working towards visa liberalization whereas in other cases the EU member states could take a more active role in promoting temporary labour migration schemes between the EU and Central Asia.

Concerning labour migration, it is important for the EU to work towards ensuring legal channels of migration that are transparent, accessible and protected from potential fraud and abuse. Though still negligible in scale, labour migration from Central Asia to the EU is already a reality with several recruitment agencies from EU member states signing preliminary agreements with Central Asian states. In this context, it is essential for the EU to oversee actively that these forms of labour mobility comply with existing laws and regulations. Developing clear procedures for the recruitment and employment of labour migrants from Central Asia would not only protect future migrants, but also cement the EU’s reputation as a reliable partner.

More broadly, it is important for the EU to shift away from perceiving Central Asia as geopolitical buttress against violent instability from Afghanistan, but rather adopt a more nuanced approach to Central Asia that takes into consideration the significant differences in the needs and priorities of individual Central Asian state. With so many external actors – China, Russia and to a lesser extent the US - jostling over influence in the region, it is crucial for the EU to distinguish itself as a different kind of actor that places a greater emphasis on promoting human rights, supporting civil society and enhancing opportunities for younger generations.

In closing, it is important for the EU to make a concerted effort to pursue a more coordinated approach towards Central Asia that brings together member states and other European institutions. With several EU member states pursuing bilateral agreements with Central Asian countries, it is critical for the EU to ensure that these efforts feed into the EU’s overarching objectives in the region. Similarly, the EU should strive to strike a balance between deepening cooperation - including by means of technical assistance - with all Central Asian states and making sure that these efforts do not go against the EU’s commitments concerning justice, equity and human rights. Going forward the EU should not only work towards achieving its stated objectives, but also take into account the often-unintended externalities resulting from EU-led programs in the region.

²⁶ European Commission, 2019

Improving mobility between the EU and Central Asia can serve as a vital policy instrument for deepening cooperation between the two regions.



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Contact Information

Prague Process Secretariat
International Centre for Migration
Policy Development (ICMPD)
Gonzagagasse 1
A-1010 Vienna
Austria
www.pragurprocess.eu



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