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Increasing the Effectiveness of EU Education Assistance in Uzbekistan. Revising the EU Strategy in Light of the New Regime

Abstract: The European Union has identified education in Central Asia as a key area of cooperation. However, the EU's engagement in this area, which has faced considerable difficulties since the fall of the Soviet Union, has so far not had the desired impact. Based on a case study of Uzbekistan, I argue in this article that the EU should revise its strategy by adopting a more targeted approach, consistent with the longer-term funding it is able to commit to Central Asia and better tailored to the local social context through strong engagement with local stakeholders. Instead of imposing broad concepts designed in Brussels – which have generally not been fully accepted or implemented by local political authorities – this new approach would involve setting up specific projects with local input, such as the opening of campuses of European universities, providing financial and logistical support for school infrastructure, and increasing the involvement of potential employers. With local ownership, EU education assistance will allow a new generation in Uzbekistan to breathe life into long-term reforms by drawing on the European concepts of their instruction, rather than viewing them as imposed from outside.

Key words: European Union, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Education, Western assistance, authoritarianism

The education sector in Uzbekistan was hard hit by the USSR's collapse. A quarter of a century after its independence, this Central Asian state, in which youths of less than 25 years of age make up 44% of the population (CIA World Factbook), continues to be seriously lacking in school and university infrastructure. Less than a quarter of children are enrolled in nursery schools, whereas in primary and secondary schools, hundreds of thousands of students attend school on a rotation system. Upon leaving secondary school, only one out of eleven are admitted to an Uzbekistani university. The state struggles to recruit teachers, a profession that is not highly esteemed in the country today. The low salaries and work overload demotivates many teachers, and, in certain classes, subjects as fundamental as mathematics are taught only partially or even not at all due to the lack of teachers. Lastly, potential employers disparage recent graduates' education, which they consider as rote and too based on state ideology, disconnected from labor market requirements, and possibly even purchased within the pervasive corruption of higher education. These challenges raise many questions about Uzbekistan's development: As Iveta Silova, Mark Johnson, and Stephen Heyneman have argued, "Facing declining educational access and equity, deteriorating education quality, unemployment, and poverty, young people are often characterized as a 'generation at risk'" (Silova, Johnson, Heyneman, 2007, p. 160).

Regarding these issues and based on every human being's fundamental right to education (Article 2 of the first Protocol of 20 March 1952 to the European Convention on Human Rights), the European Union has identified education as a key area of coopera-

tion. Considering that many other foreign donors have focused their assistance on primary and secondary education, the EU opted to prioritize tertiary education in its 2007 EU-Central Asia Strategy. It has included Uzbekistan in several educational assistance programs (Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, Central Asian Education Platform) and urged the Uzbek government to embark on reforms to make its higher education system compatible with the Bologna process and, ultimately, to integrate with it.

A decade later, a review by the EU Directorate General for External Policies made clear its disappointment over the EU's engagement in Central Asia being "of limited to no impact" (Directorate-General for External Policies, 2016, p. 4). In Uzbekistan, the reforms the EU has tried to initiate in tertiary education have either not been fully applied. They have been held back due to Central Asia being a lower political priority for the EU, and consequently limited EU financial and logistical support in Uzbekistan education; due to the authoritarianism of Uzbek political power, which is disinclined to implement any changes it sees as a threat to its authority; and due to local actors, who are both ignored and often unwilling to take on concepts they perceive as far from the local social and economic reality.

As the EU draws up a proposal for a new Central Asia strategy by the end of 2019 (*EU To Draw Up New Central Asia Strategy By Late 2019*), the coming to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in September 2016 and the reforms he has initiated may open new perspectives for improving the impact of EU assistance on the Uzbek education system. In this article, I argue that the EU should revise its strategy by adopting a more gradual approach, consistent with the longer-term funding it is able to commit to a state that holds little strategic value for it, and better adapted to the local social context by better engaging local stakeholders (teachers, pupils/students and parents). Instead of imposing broad concepts designed by institutions in Brussels which are rarely properly implemented by local political authorities or, if they are, by coercion, this new approach would involve setting up targeted, specific projects, such as the opening of campuses of European universities to increase the intake of Uzbek students, providing financial and logistical support for school infrastructure in Uzbekistan, promoting public-private partnerships, and increasing the involvement of businesses. The new generation in Uzbekistan are the ones that will breathe life into long-term reforms by drawing on the European concepts of their instruction, if they are perceived as not imposed from the outside, but locally owned.

The first part of this paper presents the main challenges facing the Uzbekistani education system since the fall of the USSR. This is followed by a presentation of European involvement in this sector, then a third part discussing proposed revisions aimed at contributing to sustainable and progressive reform in the Uzbekistani education system.

An Education System Undermined by Economic, Social and Political Challenges

Independent Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, made education an official priority. In 1996, the National Program for Personnel Training (Weidman, Yoder, 2010, p. 60) announced the development of school infrastructure, reforms of the curriculum and teaching methods, improvements to training for the teaching body, the renewal

of educational materials (school textbooks), and the installation of modern equipment (computers and laboratories). However, since the 1990s, education has been continually weakened by economic crisis, significant budget cuts, growing social difficulties, as well as the authoritarianism of the political regime, which has been very reluctant to changes that could threaten its authority.

The Damaging Impact of Post-Soviet Economic Crisis

Suddenly deprived after gaining independence of the subsidies it received as part of the Soviet structure which, despite its shortcomings, had guaranteed a social welfare system, the Uzbek state had to reduce by one third the percentage of GDP devoted to education at the end of the 1990s (Open Society Institute, 2002, p. 12). The budget for education, despite several increases over the last fifteen years, remains well below OECD standards for developed countries, and even for developing countries. In 2012, the average percentage of national revenue given to education was 3.4%, one of the lowest in the world (Education for All report, 2015: 10), although officially that had risen to about 7.5% of GDP in 2014 (BTI, 2016).

In 1992, the government partially offloaded funding for education by decentralizing it. The decentralization process was largely begun under the Soviet regime, in which many schools in rural areas were financed by collective farms (sovkhoz and kolkhoz). However, after independence, most of the agricultural cooperatives stopped financing schools, forcing them to rely on regional governments, i.e. the administrative divisions – oblasts and raions – that were also in financial straits. Yet, contrary to many states in the world where funding for education is provided through taxes on local households and businesses, few local taxes are redistributed to schools in Uzbekistan. The upshot of decentralization has thus been a significant cut in the funding allocated to schools and local universities, and in many cases has challenged their existence. Many schools across the country have been unable to pay for necessary maintenance and restoration works, or even for utilities such as water and electricity. As a result, since the end of the 1990s, many school premises have fallen into disrepair. To make up for budgetary shortfalls, principals have had to resort to extra-budgetary sources of financing from parents or sponsors such as local businesses. For many schools, this new mode of financing has become an essential means of survival. Nevertheless, some schools, in particular those located in major urban areas, have been far more capable of raising funds than have most schools in rural areas. These inequalities have produced disparities among schools, whether in the quality of their infrastructure, their ability to recruit teachers, or their standard of teaching.

Budgetary shortfalls have also led political authorities to prioritize secondary education at the expense of other levels. Several consequences have ensued. First, nursery schools have considerably declined. In the 2000s and 2010s, only 22 percent of Uzbekistani children had access to childhood care and education (Habibov, 2012, p. 800; World Bank, 2014, p. 3). Today, close to 1200 nursery schools require renovation, and close to 1000 others have fallen into disrepair (*Reforma Obrazovaniia v Uzbekistane: ot gorshka do studencheskoi skam'i*, 2017). Second, the cuts to school infrastructure have led the

government to establish a quota system for children aged six in order to partly delay their entry. In the middle of the school year, these six year old children are given a test. Those who fail are sent home and can enroll only the following year, when they are seven (Akramov, p. 19). Despite a high enrollment ratio close to 100%, for a variety of reasons, at the start of the 2010s, some 178,000 Uzbekistani children were not regularly attending a primary school, which equaled half of all Central Asian children outside the school system (Education for All, 2015, p. 3).

Although the government focused its efforts on secondary teaching, in 1997 it reduced the time of obligatory instruction from 11 to 9 years. Besides, many secondary schools operate according to a system of two or three rotations: the pupils are schooled for only a few hours per day in order to make space for other pupils. Classes continue to be overcrowded (as many as 40 pupils) and many school students must work three to a desk (Akramov, p. 18).

Lastly, at the tertiary level, the government has greatly increased the number of institutions, from 37 in 1991 to 59 in the mid-2010s and 75 in 2017 (BTI, 2016), by way of response to the steep rise in the number of applicants, which grew from 540,000 in 2014 to 729,000 in 2017. However the percentage of applicants for tertiary studies who manage to actually get into a university has significantly declined, going from 15% in 1986 to 9% in the mid-2010s, or only one applicant out of eleven (*Mirziyev poruchil usovershenstvovat' sistemu postupleniia v vuzy*, 2017; Melibaev, 2017), a low figure ranking Uzbekistan 144th in the world (Hurramov, 2016).

Besides the shortcomings of school infrastructure, the crisis has negatively impacted the teaching profession. The average salary of a school teacher or a professor is less than 200 dollars a month, a vastly insufficient sum to ensure a decent standard of living. Many teachers are obliged to have several jobs just to meet the basic needs of their family household. Their purchasing power is further reduced by several mandatory deductions from their salary, such as the obligation to subscribe to specific government-supported newspapers/journals, or to make “donations” to various state funds. Lastly, teachers criticize what they deem is an excessive work load: apart from the already heavy load of teaching, they are compelled to carry out additional duties such as the maintenance of school premises, and are regularly mobilized for *subbotnikis* (unpaid obligatory work on weekends), electoral campaigns or events organized by local townhalls (*Uroka ne budet, uchitelia net – zvuchit vse chasche v shkolah Tashkenta*, 2016; Interviews, Tashkent, October 2017). The difficult working conditions and meager salaries breed a pervasive climate of corruption among the teaching body, in particular at the tertiary level.

These conditions have considerably devalued the profession and demotivated a growing number of students graduating from teaching institutions. Many change their career path after graduation, or leave the profession after only a few years of teaching and go to more remunerative and socially esteemed professions, such as secretarial work or interpreting (Interview, Tashkent, October 2017). In 2017, it was estimated that Uzbek schools are lacking as many as 20 to 25% of teachers (*Skol'naia reforma v Uzbekistane: Chevo zhdai' ot novogo uchebnogo goda*, 2017). This deficiency within the teaching body has become particularly acute in certain subjects such as English, economics, and computer science. Lastly, the post-1990s emigration of the European-Slavic minorities (Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans), which made up a large part of the teaching body,

and the linguistic policy of Uzbekisation of teaching, undertaken in haste and at the expense of Russian, have had a notable impact on education. Many teachers have been employed more for their ability to speak Uzbek than for their professional competencies in the subject(s) that they teach.

Education Hampered by Social Difficulties and Political Authoritarianism

Since independence, the decline in living standards of a part of the population, the disappearance or disrepair of schools, in particular in rural areas, as well as the increasingly elevated school fees have led to a decline in enrolment. In 2006, only 5% of children from Uzbekistan's less advantaged families were enrolled in nursery schools, compared to 46% of children from the country's wealthiest families (World Bank, 2014, p. 4). Besides, children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be concentrated in low quality schools or overcrowded classes. The disparities are even more pronounced in tertiary education. 59% of university students belong to the quintile of the most well-off families (Riboud, 2016, p. 172). While 69% of students study on a fee basis at bachelor level, and 75% at masters level (BTI, 2016), many Uzbek households are unable to afford the enrollment fees, and sometimes cannot even pay for lodging or transport to university. These inequalities substantially impact the country's development since they contribute to increasing higher school dropout rates, reducing the development of the capacity of youths from underprivileged backgrounds, and maintaining the cycle of poverty.

In addition, since independence, a process of so-called retraditionalization of society, justified on the basis of patriarchal or religious principles, has increasingly emphasized distinct gender roles and confined a growing number of women to roles as stay-at-home mothers. The lowering of the average age of child-bearing has pushed a growing number of women out of the school system, and thus also out of university. From the 2000s on, more than one quarter of women have dropped out of school at age 15 or 16 (Open Society, 2002, p. 10), whereas in tertiary education, women represent only 39% of students (Riboud, 2016, p. 172). This gender discrimination is fed by social poverty. In increasing numbers of poorer households, parents give priority to educating their boys, who they consider better long-term investments, at the expense of their girls, who are pressured to live as stay-at-home mothers in the families of their future husbands. This discrimination has a substantial impact on the country's development. As Byrd has demonstrated, growing gender inequality is reflected in the workforce and has a notable impact on a state's economic performance, diminishing its capacity to compete with the economies of other countries (Byrd, 2012).

Lastly, economic and social difficulties have pushed several million Uzbekistanis (at least three million in 2017 alone) to work abroad, in particular in Russia, (*Za 9 mesiacov 2017 goda v RF pribyli 3,1 mln migrantov iz Uzbekistana*, 2017). While the remittances sent back home may contribute to financing the education of children living in underprivileged backgrounds, the absence of one or both parents can also negatively impact a child's parental guidance, and consequently his or her motivation and assiduity at school. Further, some household tasks that migrant parents cannot perform anymore

are taken over by their children, thereby reducing their amount of time they have available for school and for homework (Ahunov, Kakhkharov, Parpiev, Wolfson, 2015).

Last but not least, the Uzbek government's authoritarianism has for many years curbed education reforms considerably. According to the Law on Education passed on August 29, 1997, "democratic nature of training and education" is one of the "basic principles of State policy in the field of education" (article 3). The National Program for Personal Training, adopted the same day, is about "forming a free and independent person with the ability to participate actively in social and political life," and about "accelerating and promoting democratic principles in the country's socio-economic life." Yet, beyond this official rhetoric, the whole education system, from kindergarten to university, has remained highly based on national ideology and regime-centric. As the scholar Niyozov has argued, "Soviet *lies* have been replaced with new *truths*, which differ in scope and detail but not much in nature and purpose" (Niyozov, 2008, p. 56). From the 1990s on, late Uzbek president Karimov's personality cult heavily imposed itself on curricula, such that students were obliged to study his biography and some works of which he is the alleged author. School curricula remain largely imprinted by the Soviet conception of a unique truth, and students continue to be approached as merely recipients of knowledge rather than producers of original thought.

The social and economic difficulties endured since independence, coupled with the government's authoritarianism, the drop in the number and quality of teachers, as well as corruption have led to a discernible decline in the level of students and pupils. These conditions have had particularly deleterious consequences for the country's development. Whereas the demand for low-skilled workers has declined markedly in Uzbekistan over the last fifteen years (Open Society, 2002, p. 9), the increase in youth unemployment is due not only to a lack of jobs, but also to the inability of a growing number of youth to qualify, with their training and their competencies, for the needs and demands of markets and employers. For, as Miguel Nino-Zarazua argues, "a sound education policy that facilitates the advancement of knowledge and the process of technological and scientific innovation is essential for economic growth and the development process of nations" (Nino-Zarazua, 2016, p. 1). As is made clear by the EU Directorate General's review, if the EU wants to contribute to the development of Central Asia, to become more visible in the region, and to act strategically over the long-term, it should invest heavily in education.

A Long-standing European Commitment

Since the fall of the Soviet regime, EU assistance in Central Asia has had education as a particular focus. The European Education Initiative, launched in 2007 as part of the EU Central Asia Strategy for a New Partnership, aimed to help reform the region's education systems and adapt them to the needs of a globalized world. EU education assistance is intended to be led in cooperation with other major international partners and donors involved in supporting educational programs and institutions in the region. As many international donors to Central Asia have focused their assistance at the level of primary and secondary schooling, the EU has prioritized tertiary education, as well as

vocational education and training, through support of the European Training Foundation (ETF). It advocates a wide-ranging education and training policy within a lifelong learning perspective. This approach was made official in particular through the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 and its Education and Training 2010 Work Programme. Uzbekistan is involved in four EU education assistance programs.

In the 1990s, the EU set up a regional program, Tempus, which offers support for modernizing higher education in 27 countries though Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Western Balkans, and the Mediterranean region, mainly through university cooperation projects. Uzbekistan has been involved in this program since 1994. Close to one hundred European universities or organizations have cooperated with tertiary institutions in Uzbekistan (European commission country profile). For the EU, Tempus constitutes a cornerstone of higher education reforms, through the introduction of a learner-centered system for credit accumulation and transfer, and for the transition to the three-level degree system (bachelor, master, and doctorate). It contributes to establishing new curricula at the bachelor and master levels in many disciplines. Tempus has enabled the creation of some joint degrees with EU universities, and contributed to setting up new evaluation systems in universities. It is also intended to contribute to modernizing recipient university facilities by supplying information technologies and new textbooks. In the framework of its fourth phase (TEMPUS IV), the program also encouraged the modernization of tertiary education in Uzbekistan in line with the Bologna Process. Considered one of the cornerstones of reform of the tertiary education system, the Bologna Process aims at developing “a common higher education area in Europe, with a system of comparable qualifications (short cycle, bachelor, master, doctorate)” (European External Action Service, 2012). It supports the “modernization of education and training systems to make sure these meet the needs of a changing labour market” (European Commission, *The Bologna Process*). Five millions euros were made available for this purpose for Uzbekistan (*Uzbekistan: Education sector Plan*, 2013, p. 177).

A second pillar of EU education assistance, the Erasmus Mundus program, promotes student and academic staff mobility at all levels of tertiary education (bachelor, masters, doctorate), through joint higher education programs and individual scholarships. Initially aimed at member states, it was extended to non-European states in 2004, including Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states. 3,000,000 euros have been earmarked for Uzbekistan as part of this program (*Uzbekistan: Education sector Plan*, 2013, p. 177): All Uzbekistani students are eligible to apply for scholarships to all Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters Degrees and Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorates. In addition, in 2006 the EU Commission launched the Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window (ECW). This program supported cross-national partnerships and cooperation exchanges between higher education institutions from Europe and from other regions, including Uzbekistan (Axyonova, 2013, p. 2).

In February 2012 the EU-Central Asia Education Platform was created to support the entirety of the Central Asian education system, on the one hand through intraregional dialogue, on the other, through dialogue between the EU and the states of the region. This platform has resulted in series of seminars and workshops held in Astana in 2013, in Bishkek in 2014, and in Istanbul in 2015. Three overarching themes were laid down: teacher education and training, quality of higher education, and the interaction of VET

and higher education (Axyonova, 2013, p. 2). This platform's second phase, begun in March 2015 and due to go until March 2018, has been presented by the EU as the key pillar of the European Education Initiative for Central Asia. It aims to coordinate EU activities and discussions with its partners in the region as well as with the other international donors, and to contribute to regional cooperation among the region's states to promote reform in the sector.

Other European initiatives launched in the region have received a lukewarm reception in Uzbekistan. This has been the case for the Central Asia Research and Education Network (CAREN), the fourth pillar of European assistance in the region. Launched in 2009, CAREN seeks to connect some 1 million Central Asian students and researchers, as well as 200 universities and research institutions in the areas of telemedicine, distance learning, disaster risk management, water resource management, and geo-hazard potential of retreating glaciers. This program was largely hampered by late president Karimov's isolationist policy. Cooperation in the sector of vocational education and training, which the EU made one of its priorities in Central Asia, also proved hard to push forward in Uzbekistan, and ended up essentially focused on developing National Qualification Frameworks (ETF, 2011).

In the framework of the general policy of European assistance in the region, EU member states are supposed to coordinate with one another on the basis of shared objectives, benchmarks of joint Commission and Council of Ministers reports, and peer learning activities involving state and non-state actors. However, as the Directorate-General review pointed out, no member state has been willing to take up the education initiative (Directorate-General for External Policies, 2016, p. 8). Uzbekistani students are scarcely to be found in European universities, with the exception of Germany and Latvia where they allegedly number between 1,000 and 2,000.¹ The main bilateral initiative remains the opening of two satellite campuses of European universities. The main one is Westminster University in Tashkent (WIUT), which was founded in January 2002 in partnership with the University of Westminster (UK, London) and the UMID Foundation of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. For about 120 students, the university offers two degree programs, one for a Certificate of the International Foundation Studies and the other for a Certificate of Higher Education in Business Administration. WIUT opened a second campus in the city of Zaravshan in 2009, and a third in Urgench in 2013. Another significant bilateral initiative is the 2009 opening of a satellite campus of the Turin Polytechnic University in Tashkent, which each year welcomes some 500 students. It offers bachelor and master degrees in several areas of study, including mechanical engineering, civil architecture, industrial design, information technology, and power engineering.

Other initiatives have been far more modest. Several individual European states promote the education of their own languages as part of institutes or state organizations, such as the Goethe Institute for German, the British Council for English, or the Alliance Française for French. The Polish Embassy has provided assistance in the education sector specifically aimed at its diaspora in Uzbekistan. Bilateral cooperation has also been undertaken as part of broader European programs targeting scientific and technological cooperation. Between 2014 and 2016, the University of Giessen in Germany coordinated an EU educational proj-

¹ See the website of the Embassies of Germany and Latvia in Tashkent.

ect called Sustainable Agrarian Management Studies for Uzbekistan/SAMUz. The project's total cost, estimated to be around 750,000 dollars, was financed by the EU's Tempus project (*Uzbekistan and Germany to boost cooperation in education*, 2014). Apart from the University of Giessen, partnering institutions have included the Kent Institute of Irrigation and Land-reclamation. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) initiated cooperation with Tashkent State University to create 6 modules on professional didactics for agricultural professions, as an integral part of degree training for engineers. Cooperation in bilateral training on information and communications technologies at 32 vocational colleges has been strengthened through a German-Uzbek cooperation project that began in 2003. The German government's aid agency has pumped 2.28 million euros into the project, and Germany's KfW Bank Group has provided nearly 10 million euros in loans and grants (*Uzbekistan: From Russia, With Luck*, 2008). This scientific and educational cooperation, initiated mainly by Germany, is often easier to promote as the Uzbek authorities have proven more inclined to such exchanges rather than focusing on overall reform of the education system.

Revising European Policy on Education Assistance in Uzbekistan

While it has had some positive impact, the results of European assistance on the education sector in Uzbekistan in many ways have been below expectations, controversial, and lacking in visibility. First, European-funded projects, which have concentrated on fundamental reforms (revising teaching methods, redesigning curricula, and so on), have often been hampered by the authoritarianism of the government, which has no motivation to implement reforms perceived to be a potential threat to its authority. Second, these projects have been criticized for their ignorance about the local socio-political context, leading many local stakeholders to ignore or even reject them. We argue that by promoting more modest and specifically targeted projects, which would be both financially and logistically less demanding, EU projects would have a more concrete and effective impact, and thus enhance its image in the region and contribute, in the longer term, to realizing the reforms that it has been working on for more than fifteen years.

(Re-)considering the Risks and Consequences of Political Authoritarianism on European Projects

The success of foreign assistance strongly depends on incentives in recipient countries (Williamson, 2009). In Uzbekistan, the state has a record of keeping a tight grip on the education sector, which it has viewed as strategic for its independence and nation building. Like in other authoritarian states, reforms in this sector have also stumbled on the government's desire to control the productivity and capabilities of the population, which is the engine of a political activism and therefore potentially capable of threatening its authority (Williamson, 2009, p. 8). Despite stated openness to cooperation with the EU, Uzbekistani authorities have often proven unwilling to implement the agreements they have signed or to promote so-called western ideas, such as developing critical

thinking. They have consequently restricted foreign donors' access to local stakeholders and limited most European assistance to official dialogue at the highest level of state.

This has had a significant impact on the effectiveness of the European assistance. Foreign education assistance has imperatively to go beyond engaging with the Ministry of Education and instead also tap into local knowledge. In any society, knowledge is not a continuous flow that is transmitted from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top, but is decentralized, dispersed among individuals, as well as organizations, and often in unarticulated forms (Williamson, 2009, p. 11). Moreover, the government, despite its firm control over society, does not always have the technological and organizational resources at its disposal to evaluate the needs and difficulties of the sector, to define its priorities, or to implement reforms at the local level. Under both late President Karimov and current President Mirziyoyev, the base—that is, teachers, parents and students—have rarely been included in the process of reflecting upon and making decisions on reforms; as a result reforms have often been ill-received. Many government programs, whether supported or not by foreign donors, have thus remained simple declarations of intention. For the EU, this lack of local connection has considerably limited its ability to evaluate the needs of Uzbekistani society, and as a result to revise and adapt its projects to the local situation.

Further, by defining broad objectives that aim at fundamental reforms but that are nonetheless insufficiently connected to the local context, the EU has risked having its projects usurped and instrumentalized by the authorities to their own domestic ends. For the Uzbek government, subscribing to European reforms has more often been a PR policy rather than a real commitment to reforming the sector. Expected by part of the population, and reinforced by propaganda disseminated by national media completely controlled by the state, the rhetoric of reform has been extensively instrumentalized by the authorities to bolster political legitimacy, which has been undermined as authorities have found it increasingly difficult to guarantee the social contract. From the 1990s on, late President Karimov seized upon so-called western concepts such as democratization, human rights, and the integration of a student-centered approach in teaching (*Educated youth is the driving force for progress – Islam Karimov*, 2012), exploiting them through overuse both in his writings and his declarations, but without actually putting them into practice. On the contrary, Karimov worked to promote his own state ideology in education and its content, as illustrated by what became a growing cult of presidential personality in schools and universities, as well as the persistence of Soviet-style precepts with stock standard answers in school textbooks.

Moreover, the Uzbek government drew international prestige from its perceived cooperation with the EU. Through his commitment to the European project platform, Karimov sought to make a show of opening up the country to international and regional cooperation. In practice, beginning in the 1990s he isolated his country, closed the borders, and refused most foreign cooperation, in particular with his Central Asian neighbors. Despite official participation in the reform projects, Uzbekistan regularly engaged in empty chair policy in regional meetings, but elsewhere made declarations of intention that were seldom implemented. In addition, as has been observed elsewhere, governments sometimes make a show of their respect for international standards and of their commitment to improvements in a sector, but know these cannot be realized or are deemed to be unrealizable at local level (Samoff, Leer, Reddy, 2016, p. 76). In

Uzbekistan, the government's decision to prohibit teachers from working more than one and half time their regular workload so as to bring the profession more in line with international standards was considered unenforceable by many teachers. Such a measure would considerably decrease the number of hours of courses taught (*Pis'mo chitatelia iz Uzbekistana: Novaia metodika, chothy 'doit' uchitelei*, 2016; Personal interviews, Tashkent, October 2017).

In this context, the EU's insistence on quickly integrating several states from post-Soviet space, including Uzbekistan, into the Bologna Process raises questions. Rather than having the intended effect of fostering reforms, premature integration can slow down or even freeze reforms. The modes of implementation and the impact of this process in other authoritarian and nontransparent states have raised criticism. In Kazakhstan, the integration process was undertaken on the basis of false reporting and policy manipulations by the government so that the data were brought into line with targets and membership agreements. Kazakhstani President Nazarbaev boasted about the success of reforms supposedly undertaken in tertiary education, since they were supported and validated by the country's integration into the Bologna Process, even though many reforms inherent to the very principles of this process, in terms of the liberalization and democratization of education, were not implemented or even initiated. The Bologna Process brought into the European system – i.e. one in which the norms of democratic respect, of human rights, of transparency are fundamental – a state in which these very principles are not implemented (Tomusk, 2011, pp. 3, 13 and 17).

Pitfalls of a One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Following the example of most other foreign donors, the EU education assistance program opted to take a one-size-fits-all approach to the former socialist bloc, from the states of east Europe to those of Central Asia. It used a rhetoric stamped with fashionable terms – liberalization, pluralism, democratization, modernization – (Silova, 2011, p. 2) according to which European aid must help the region go from a Soviet-style school and university system to a western system. In so doing, the EU inadvertently created a dichotomy between a formerly Soviet system, said to be deficient and outdated (Niyozov, Dastambuev, 2013, p. 6), and a European-western system said to be modern, progressive, and a return to normality. For example, in the European Commission's five-page *EU and education in Central Asia factsheet*, some form of the word modern is used 17 times (Merrill, Dukenbaev, 2011 p. 127). On this basis, the refusal or incapacity of a post-socialist state to reform and follow this model is viewed as an abnormality, a decline, a crisis (Silova, 2010, p. 6).

In taking this approach, the EU did not fully take into account the diversity of the post-Soviet space, as well as each government's distinct policies and ambitions in the education sector, beyond their common authoritarian background. Secondly, simply transposing a European system on another region broadly ignored the very "loose coupling (or divergence) between global norms and local meanings" (Silova, 2010, p. 8), the Soviet and the foreign (western), as well as the tensions between the continuities and discontinuities resulting from the fall of the Soviet regime. The European assistance

programs were conceived and implemented above the heads of local stakeholders (local authorities, parents, students and teachers), without due consideration for multiple contexts, different historical and social backgrounds, values, aptitudes and aspirations, and the diversity among the states of the region and within each state. In Uzbekistan, there has been little sense of local ownership of European education programs, where they have generally been undertaken with only limited advance consultation with selected officials, a phenomenon that has been seen in many other cases of foreign education assistance (Samoff, Leer, Reddy, 2016, p. 78).

This lack of local ownership has led some Uzbekistani stakeholders to resist reforms suggested by the EU. First, for many teachers, concepts such as student-centered learning are unsustainable, and therefore unrealizable, unless there is a significant improvement in their social conditions, i.e. an increase in salaries, lightening of the workload, political liberalization, and so on. Second, the return to a “normality” imposed from outside through principles of student-centered learning, through decentralization of funding of schools and universities, and through the privatization of tertiary education, all of which invalidate the education system as hitherto practiced and run against the aspirations of many Uzbekistani teachers and parents who would like to hold on to, or reinstate, certain legacies of the Soviet regime. The EU’s radical undermining of the education system with which the Central Asian populations grew up and in which the teachers worked, is perceived as the loss of an education system – *obrazovanie* – that was respected by the local population for being tuition-free, universal, and despite its faults, of high quality. Besides, the EU programs have been perceived by a growing part of the population as an indictment of the Soviet regime’s moral values and behavior – *vospitanie* –, which it still values and contrasts with current decreasing moral values. For example, child-centered approaches or the promotion of critical thinking is sometimes perceived as an undermining of parental, familial and instructor authority, particularly at a time in which the latter are struggling to ensure their daily professional tasks. Several scholars have thus noted the very limited impact of European or other Western projects that have pressed teachers to switch from teacher-centered to child-centered learning. In the best case scenario, the practice of the teacher-centered approach has been somewhat softened (Niyozov, Dastambuev, 2011, p. 10). Besides, the privatization of tertiary education is interpreted as a “commercialization” of education that heightens inequalities; it hinders access for many students from underprivileged backgrounds to quality education and to university studies, and reproduces the privileges of wealthier families. The way the EU pushes for the “post-Sovietization” of education thus inadvertently turns the supposed normality of the so-called modern education system into an abnormality: the European model of education runs up against the incomprehension of some local stakeholders who would like to preserve what they perceive as the security and quality of the education system inherited from the Soviet regime.

The Impact of Corruption

Lastly, several scholars have argued that donor states have often made little distinction between the most corrupt regimes and those that are not (Williamson, 2009, p. 8).

This observation also rings true in the case of European assistance in Uzbekistan, where both the state and its education system, in particular at the tertiary level (Yun, 2016) to which the EU gives priority, are especially corrupt. This raises questions about ethics and impact. In Uzbekistan, as local NGO's are subject to strict monitoring and often unable to receive foreign funding, foreign aid disbursement is by and large sent through the government. European assistance, based in part on such financial support, thus risked of having part of the funds misappropriated. In a neopatrimonial state (Markowitz, 2013), in which the political and economic circles are tightly intermixed and are often the same, transferring funds in the framework of large programs to the country's highest authorities runs the risk of unintentionally supporting a regime whose corruption constitutes a main cause of the deficiency of the education system. Besides, some European programs designed to contribute to reducing corruption have sometimes unintentionally worked to increase it. For example, as part of the Bologna Process, the obligation of each doctoral candidate to publish articles in journals with a high impact factor has resulted in – sometimes successful – attempts to corrupt teachers in exchange for their help with publication, or via arrangements whereby the professor-advisors' names are used to head an article to which they have not contributed or contributed only a little, but from which they draw an easy prestige, possible advancement, and a salary increase (Interviews in Kazakhstan).

Putting the Cart Back Behind the Horse...

The European Union thus undermined its own goals by seeking to impose fundamental reforms from the outside and over the short-term, as well as by not taking enough into account the difficult local political (authoritarianism and corruption), economic (smaller budgets and economic crisis) and social conditions, and the considerable financial, human, and logistical investments that such reforms require. In Uzbekistan, these reforms cannot be effectively implemented without significant prior economic progress, which is necessary to enable the considerable investment required in the education sector. Without a notable improvement in the social conditions of local stakeholders, i.e. the teachers, as well as the large number of households for which access to education has become a heavy financial burden, or without any real political will from the government to turn from ideologized instruction to the training of students with a more free and critical mind, such programs are not likely to succeed. These issues are ones over which the EU has little means of influence over the short term in a state which is neither strategic nor a priority for it.

However, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's arrival in 2016 has opened new perspectives. He has initiated many reforms in this sector. A Ministry for Preschool education and a specialized training (*V Uzbekistane sozdano Ministerstvo doshol'nogo obrazovaniia*, 2017) were created in 2017 with the goal of increasing by 1.5 times the enrolment of children by 2021 (*Reforma obrazovaniia v Uzbekistane: Chego zhdat' ot novogo uchebnogo goda*, 2017). Regional centers for the continuing education of teachers will be opened and financed by the state (*V Uzbekistane reformiruiut sistemu podgotovki uchitelei*, 2017) in order to raise the standard of teaching. In addition, Mirziyoyev has

decided to increase the years of obligatory schooling from 9 to 11 years (*Uzbekistan: Prezident Shavkat Mirziyev vystupil za 11-letnee obuchenie v shkolah*, 2017), a positive decision that will require the addition of some 22,000 teachers, but which nevertheless risks exacerbating the existing teacher shortage (*Reforma Obrazovaniia v Uzbekistane: ot gorshka do studencheskoi skam'i*, 2017). Many of the reforms therefore provide new opportunities for the EU to contribute, either directly or indirectly. Through more limited and gradual projects, consistent with its capability to invest in Uzbekistan, the EU can bring effective aid, provide alternative models and stimulate change, but without being judged as paternalistic or disconnected from local reality; as a result it can also enhance its generally poor image in the region.

Since the EU has decided to concentrate on tertiary education, one of the primary ways it could take advantage of these possibilities is by allowing more Uzbekistanis to study in European universities as well as at European satellite universities in Uzbekistan. It would contribute to counteracting the considerable dearth of places in Uzbek universities, strengthen people-to-people contacts between both regions, and provide an alternative vision to the local education system as well as to the ones proposed by Russia or China. In 2016–2017, less than 2,000 Uzbekistani students were enrolled in European universities, a low figure as compared to Russian and Kazakhstani universities, which in 2016 accepted respectively close to 22,000 and 3,400 Uzbekistani students (Hurramov, 2016; Eniseev, 2017). Besides, the Erasmus Mundus program, despite its goals, allows students to stay in Europe only for a few months. The ability to stay longer to take an entire course, or to complete a supplementary and/or specialized education would contribute to building Uzbek human capital in many sectors where education is lacking in Uzbekistan and where the EU possesses important educative capacity.

The two satellite campuses of European universities in Uzbekistan, Torino and Westminster, are very popular today and illustrate the potential impact of an increased European university presence in Uzbekistan. First, the education models they offer do not suffer from the corruption that is pervasive in the Uzbek university system. For many parents, the relatively high enrolment fees are offset by the knowledge that they will not be unexpectedly increased during the year by added fees linked to corruption. Second, the reliability of a quality education makes these universities particularly attractive to students and their parents, and contributes to responding to the serious problem with the qualifications of graduate students from Uzbek universities of which employers are critical of today. Lastly, European education concepts, both in form and content, could be carried by the graduates of these universities into their professional lives, into their school or university establishments, companies, or into the government administration.

Beyond tertiary education, the EU can intervene through targeted support to school institutions, including building schools that, until now, have often been funded in an opaque manner by parents in an often unsustainable burden for them (Estafeev, 2016). The EU can also contribute to redacting or revising textbooks, in particular in European languages and in scientific subjects (mathematics, physical sciences, biology). Since President Mirzoyoyev came to power in 2016, the question of textbooks has become especially acute as the new president has made updating textbooks a priority, but has sometimes demanded it be done in an extremely short period of time, sometimes as little

as two weeks. Some of the redactors interviewed as part of our research asked specifically for greater support from the EU.

Through support for cultural centers and NGO's, the EU can also support the development of private tutoring, which has since the 2000 advanced considerably in Uzbekistan. Many parents turn to tutoring to compensate for the low number of daily course hours due to the rotation system, the mediocre quality of education (Interviews, Tashkent, 2017), and sometimes the lack of teachers in certain subjects. EU member states can also contribute bilaterally to training teachers, as in Uzbekistan thousands of local English teachers have not passed the qualification tests (*Okolo 3 tysiach uchitelei angliiskoro iazyka ne proshli kvalifikaciiu*, 2017), and the level of French teachers, in particular outside the capital, also remains extremely low (Personal interviews, 2017).

Lastly, at a time when we are seeing a diversification of donors and innovative financing methods, corporations are playing an increasingly important role. However, these corporations currently invest mainly in the energy and technology sectors (Van Fleet, 2011, p. 2). Less than one fifth of the philanthropic resources of large companies given to developing countries are targeted at education. Nonetheless, a public-private partnership could constitute an effective way of mobilizing resources for education. As Van Fleet as shown, corporate philanthropic resources can be more resilient than traditional sources of foreign assistance. Corporations often also have the advantage of existing connections to governments, and above all to the local communities. With their insights, they also can contribute to evaluating the competences that are missing but that would be required by a given society to advance economically. Finally, they traditionally do take an interest in philanthropic investments (Van Fleet, 2011, pp. 5 and 20). While local businesses decry the lack of qualifications among young Uzbekistani graduates, European companies can contribute to improving the situation through greater involvement in professional training, which will also improve their own future conditions of investment. Furthermore, supporting local education would be a means of establishing the necessary contacts to penetrate new markets. Lastly, those who wish to invest over the long term understand that they must be seen locally as trustworthy and reliable social partners. Contributing to the development of local education is an obvious way to make this happen.

Education assistance, its modalities, and its impact continue to be intensely debated. As Riddell and Nino-Zarazua have argued, "there is no 'set' and established blueprint of what to do that can be applied generally to all countries" (Riddell, Nino-Zarazua, 2016, p. 26). The paths proposed here are therefore not without their own criticisms and potential pitfalls either. Targeted, one-off projects, which are sometimes very dependent on donors, are not systematically sustainable. It has been shown elsewhere that project leaders do not always remain long enough in their positions to both initiate them and ensure their follow-up (Samoff, Leer, Reddy, 2016, p. 99). Students educated in Europe do not always live up to expectations, at least not in the short term. For example, while many such students may wish to inspire changes in their countries of origin, suggest new approaches to education, or new work methods, many come up against incomprehension and even resistance from local employees to so-called foreign ideas. In the education sector, some teachers educated abroad have, for their part, refused to accept working conditions they consider unfavorable and local salaries they deem too low, and have abandoned their profession to take up other jobs, in particular in the more lucrative pri-

vate sector (Personal interviews, Tashkent, October 2017), a phenomenon also observed in some other post-Soviet states (Campbell, 2017).

It would also be important to ensure that European university programs are accessible to average Uzbekistanis. Despite their potential for positive impact, the campuses of foreign universities currently are mostly attended by students from privileged backgrounds, which can contribute to perpetuating inequalities. Lastly, having a solid education in a European university does not necessarily overcome the need to have connections in local networks in order to get good employment, nor do away with the scourge of corruption in a state in which many positions, both in the public and the private sectors, are bought, and as a result in which the financial capacity of the applicant often counts as a higher criterion of selection than his or her intellectual knowledge or technical know-how.

However, with regard to the limited financial, logistical and human capacities of EU assistance in the Central Asian region, and to the difficult economic, political and social context in Uzbekistan which negatively impacts the development of its education system, the fundamental reforms the EU has so far undertaken cannot be more effective unless carried out more gradually, through measured steps and together with local stakeholders and with the development of a feeling of local ownership. Although conducting more modest cooperation projects might make it possible to work only in a more restricted field of action, it would make those fields more accessible, in accordance with the space allowed by the local political authorities. There also could be more focus on specific concrete measures, such as assistance in the redaction of textbooks or contributions to building or restoring schools, which would strengthen the image of the EU as an engaged actor, able to respond to difficult local social and economic contexts. Such projects could also further enhance Uzbekistani population's opinion of the EU. Last but not least, it will be local actors, trained in EU institutions or according to European standards and then integrated into the higher echelons of the administration, who will be the source of real change, and who will overcome the defects and corruption of the current system and initiate new approaches and substantive reforms.

Conclusion

A sound education policy is essential for economic growth and development of nations (Nino-Zarazua, 2016, p. 1). Increased access to schooling and better quality of education results in higher lifetime incomes and well-being. Education generates growth in human capital, which makes real, long-term development possible, for example through advances in health, agricultural innovations, efficient public administration, and private sector growth. Scholars like Paul Collier (Oxford University, UK) and Lisa Chauvet (IRD, France) have demonstrated that in countries exhibiting weak rule of law, poor protection of human and property rights, high levels of corruption, and high inflation, variables that reflect lower levels of education are associated with an increased risk of destabilization or even radicalization and terrorism, and have a significant effect on the duration of state failure (Chauvet, Collier, 2008). Twenty years after the fall of the Soviet regime, education in Uzbekistan continues to face many significant challenges. As new President Sh. Mirziyoyev has said, "youth education is one of the most important issues" for the country

(Samadov, 2017). For the EU, which is understandably concerned about possible destabilization in a region neighboring Afghanistan, the stake are therefore high.

Despite two decades of well-intentioned commitment and work, the impact of European assistance on the education sector in Uzbekistan has been limited, and some of its tenants even rejected by political authorities and local stakeholders. European ambitions to promote major education reform, including through Tempus or the Bologna Process, have come up against several key obstacles. First, the authoritarian Uzbek regime up until recently has hindered European assistance, which it worried could spread democratic values it perceived as incompatible with local standards and capable of causing so-called “color revolutions.” Secondly, the EU is unlikely to be able to provide the large-scale commitment necessary to allow a quick transition from a Soviet education system to a Western European system would require, among other things, a huge financial, human and logistical commitment in order to respond to the very many difficulties in Uzbekistan education. Central Asia is not a strategic region for the EU, and in view of the political and economic crisis that the EU has been going through for the last ten years, it is unlikely to have the capacity to make large-scale investments in Central Asia.

As we have argued in this article, impacting the education sector in Uzbekistan requires a revision of European ambitions over the short or medium term to focus on more gradually-administered and concrete projects, whose effects, while admittedly slower and more progressive, will in the long-term be more visible and effective. Finally, it is essential to go beyond cooperating mainly with the ruling elites, which is risky for both the donor and the intended recipients. As Joos Boonstra et Neil Melvin have argued, by addressing needs that have been defined by ‘cliques’ at the top, marked by their exclusivity, authoritarianism and corruption, the EU may actually contribute to increasing the risk of instability in the country. However, changes initiated under the government of President Mirziyoyev have opened up unprecedented new possibilities for assistance. His own reforms – including the redaction of textbooks – provide opportunities for the EU to provide direct assistance where there is already a demonstrated political receptivity. Mirziyoyev’s overall reforms also can provide more access for cooperation with local stakeholders, which had been largely restricted under late President Karimov, as well as possibilities for engagement with nongovernmental organizations, local government, and the private sector. It is these very stakeholders who will be able, if the EU manages to convince them to put into practice the ideas of European reforms and concepts. In this context, the EU decision to revise its strategy in Central Asia by 2019 is a chance to refocus its approach, and make it more effective by not repeating the unintentional mistakes that have negatively impacted twenty years of European commitment in the Uzbekistani and, more broadly, the Central Asian education sector.

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Zwiększenie skuteczności pomocy edukacyjnej UE w Uzbekistanie. Zmiany strategii UE w nowej sytuacji politycznej

Streszczenie

Unia Europejska określiła edukację w Azji Środkowej jako kluczowy obszar współpracy. Jednak zaangażowanie UE w tej dziedzinie, które napotkało znaczne trudności od czasu upadku Związku Radzieckiego, jak dotąd nie przyniosło pożądanych efektów. Opierając się na studium przypadku dotyczącym Uzbekistanu, twierdzę w tym artykule, że UE powinna zrewidować swoją strategię, przyjmując bardziej ukierunkowane podejście, które będzie spójne z długoterminowym finansowaniem, jakie jest w stanie przeznaczyć dla Azji Środkowej i lepiej dostosować je do lokalnego kontekstu społecznego poprzez silne zaangażowanie interesariuszy lokalnych. Zamiast narzucać szerokie koncepcje opracowane w Brukseli – które nie zostały w pełni zaakceptowane lub wdrożone przez lokalne władze polityczne – nowe podejście wiązałoby się z tworzeniem konkretnych projektów obejmujących udział lokalny, takich jak otwieranie kampusów europejskich uniwersytetów, zapewnianie finansowania i logistyki dla infrastruktury szkolnej i zwiększenie zaangażowania potencjalnych pracodawców. Dzięki lokalnej odpowiedzialności unijna pomoc edukacyjna pozwoli nowemu pokoleniu w Uzbekistanie tętnąć życie w długoterminowe reformy, wykorzystując europejskie koncepcje ich nauczania, zamiast postrzegać je jako narzucone z zewnątrz.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, Azja Środkowa, Uzbekistan, edukacja, pomoc zachodnia, autorytaryzm