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## New EU Strategy for Central Asia: All About Balance

The new strategy reflects a more accurate understanding of the region and of the EU's comparative advantages.

By Fabienne Bossuyt  
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The European Union (EU)'s much-awaited **new strategy for Central Asia** did not come a moment too soon. Initially launched in 2007, the EU's previous strategy for Central Asia was arguably an outdated and ineffective instrument for pursuing the EU's interests in the region and leaving a sizable impact on the ground. After several attempts to revamp the strategy, the EU came to the realization that it was time to design a new strategy, one that would put it in a stronger position to contribute to the development of the Central Asian countries and better represent its interests in the region in line with the fast-changing geopolitical and domestic contexts in and around Central Asia. Under the aegis of the EU's special representative for Central Asia, Peter Burian, a long and intensive consultation process was initiated, which saw the EU solicit the views from a very wide range of European and Central Asian stakeholders over a period of more than two years. If anything, this significantly raised the expectations of the new strategy, which has faced the daunting challenge of meeting those expectations.

Although Central Asia is in many ways a challenging terrain for the EU, which at best can only expect to play second fiddle to the dominant external players, Russia and China, the current dynamics in Central Asia leave an important opening for the EU. As the United States has diverted its attention away from Central Asia, the EU is now the main Western power with an outspoken interest in the region. While the authoritarian leaders of the Central Asian countries need the EU to counterbalance the influence of Russia and China, the domestic societies are increasingly assertive in expressing their dissatisfaction with their countries' leaders. This creates a historic momentum for the EU to put its weight behind a reform agenda for the region.

### A Game-Changer or Same Old, Same Old?

The question is whether the new strategy is up for the challenge. What immediately strikes the eye in the new strategy and in the rhetoric used by EU officials to present it is the emphasis on the positive developments and dynamics in the region, which the EU claims have created new opportunities for taking the EU-Central Asia partnership forward. Among these positive developments and dynamics, the EU refers to the domestic reform processes (in Uzbekistan and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan), the new momentum in regional cooperation, and the development of connectivity initiatives between Asia and Europe. This does not mean that the EU is ignorant of the negative developments and challenges in the region, such as the shrinking space for civil society, increasing radicalization, and resilient authoritarianism. The reason why the EU is using this positive narrative is because it believes this is the best way to rally the five states behind further engagement with the EU. Starting from this positive narrative, the EU seeks to present a new agenda for cooperation, focused on liberalization, reforms, and modernization.

Another striking feature is the aspiration to forge what the EU labels a “nonexclusive” partnership with the countries of Central Asia. The reason why the EU stresses the notion of a partnership that is nonexclusive is two-fold. On the one hand, the EU wants to show to the Central Asian leaders that it endorses their preference for multivectoral foreign policies but that it is also aware of the difficult geopolitical balancing act that the Central Asian states are in. Hence, the EU formally envisions its engagement with the region to be open to cooperation with third partners, including **Russia and China**, but also with other neighboring countries, like-minded international organizations, and multilateral development banks. The idea of a nonexclusive partnership also reflects the goal to establish synergies between Central Asia, the Eastern Partnership countries, and Afghanistan. On the other hand, the EU wants to signal that it does not want to enter into geopolitical competition and rivalry with Russia and China, and instead prefers to cooperate where possible. That said, again, the EU is not naive; it perfectly knows that as an external actor with a strategic interest in Central Asia, it is automatically caught up in the geopolitical games that are taking place in the region. The idea is mainly to give a positive signal to Russia and China rather than antagonize them by using polarizing language.

### **Boosting Resilience and Prosperity**

In forging this nonexclusive partnership the EU aims to help the region develop as a “more resilient, prosperous and closely interconnected economic and political space.” These aspects are singled out as the main priorities of the new strategy. By seeking to promote the resilience of Central Asian states and societies and taking on what the strategy calls an “ambitious agenda for prosperity,” the EU is putting forward priorities that it believes capture the niche areas where it has comparative advantages compared to other external actors.

However, it is clear that these two priority areas are actually rather broadly defined and encompass a wide range of niche areas for cooperation. One quickly gets the impression that the two key priorities are just a new branding (closely following the discourse and priorities in the EU’s **Global Strategy**) for a very wide range of areas, many of which were also covered in the previous strategy. It remains to be seen whether the EU can pull off this ambitious agenda, but considering the limited resources that the EU has at its disposal for Central Asia there is a risk that the ambition of contributing to so many cooperation areas will undermine the EU’s potential to deliver.

Nevertheless, compared to the **previous strategy**, the new strategy does a better job at identifying how the EU can make a difference and in which ways it stands out. In this regard, it is clear that the EU has tried to take on board the recommendation of making sure that the key areas to be covered in future EU-Central Asia cooperation reflect a match between the EU’s comparative advantages (namely areas where the EU can provide real added value and achieve concrete results) and the vital needs of the Central Asian countries.

Given that the EU is considered a role model for modernization and regional cooperation throughout the region, the EU now takes advantage of this by stressing that it is uniquely placed to offer support and share its experience in specific soft policy areas like education and the environment.

### **A Mature and Principled Foreign Policy Actor**

If anything, the new strategy testifies to the EU having matured as a foreign policy actor. The EU has redefined its interests in Central Asia — perhaps not as prominently and explicitly as it could have, but at least it is clear that in redefining its interests the EU is taking into account the new global realities as well as the new dynamics in and around the region.

Back in 2007, the EU was mainly drawn to Central Asia by the region’s strategic location, vast energy resources, and market potential. As it now stands, the EU seems to be drawn mostly by the goal of maintaining stability and security in Central Asia, as well as the goal of tapping into the connectivity potential of the region.

The strategy also reflects a more accurate understanding of the region and the different realities and aspirations of the five countries. On this point, the EU explicitly states that it respects the national trajectories, aspirations, and interests of each of its Central Asian partners and it will seek to deepen its engagement with the interested countries of the region that are willing and able to step up cooperation on shared goals. In this respect, it should be noted that the risk of the EU compromising its fundamental values under the guise of “principled pragmatism” did not materialize. In contrast, the EU is seizing the recent wind of change in some Central Asian countries, in particular Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as an opportunity to uphold its commitment to promoting democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

*Fabienne Bossuyt is Assistant Professor at the Centre for EU Studies at the Department of Political Science, Ghent University. She was involved in the development of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia as rapporteur for the EU Special Representative for Central Asia during the consultation process.*

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