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THE NEW EU STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA ONE YEAR LATER: FEARS AND WISHES

The EU adopted a new strategy for Central Asia and that was adopted in July 2019 in Bishkek. One year later it is necessary to evaluate what is written there and if it is useful or not. Although the states of that region are very different among them, as the impact of the EU strategy, it is possible to depict a general outlook. This can be useful for the authorities in Brussels whether to reorient the strategy or to maintain the course. In the following pages, there is a description of the main goals set by the EU strategy and an analysis of the results during this strange year affected by Covid-19. Besides that, it is necessary to talk a little bit about the role played by the other main competitors at that area (China, Russia and the USA) and about the economic and political developments in the region. As a resolute, the conclusions of this research are very clear: the EU wants to promote stable political systems and Human Rights friendly as well as developed economies in its neighbourhood and beyond for security and trade reasons. Some researchers and politicians accused EU of revive the colonialism as the EU speaks about its “economic leverage” for democratisation purposes or about its normative power.

Key words: Central Asia, European Union, New Strategy, Security, Energy, Human Rights.

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Бір жылдан кейін Орталық Азия үшін ЕО-ның жаңа стратегиясы: қорқыныш пен тілектер

Еуроодақ Орталық Азияға қатысты жаңа стратегияны 2019 жылы шілдеде Бішкекте қабылдады. Бір жылдан кейін құжатта көрсетілген стратегиялық қадамдардың қайсысы пайдалы, ал қайсысы жұмыс істемейтінін бағалау қажеттігі туындап отыр. Орталық Азиядағы мемлекеттер бір-бірінен қатты ерекшеленеді және мұны Еуроодақтың аймаққа қатысты стратегиясын қабылдау мәнерінен көруге болады. Бұл Брюссель билігіне және оның аймаққа қатысты стратегиясының бағытын өзгерту немесе алған бағытын жалғастыру үшін пайдалы болуы мүмкін. Келесі беттерде Covid-19 әсер еткен осы ерекше жылдағы нәтижелерді талдай отырып, Еуроодақтың стратегиясында белгіленген негізгі мақсаттар сипатталған. Сонымен қатар, осы аймақтағы бәсекелес негізгі сыртқы акторлардың (Қытай, Ресей және АҚШ) ықпалды рөліне аз көңіл бөлінеді, сонымен қатар Орталық Азия аймағындағы экономикалық және саяси оқиғалар сипатталады. Бұл зерттеудің тұжырымдары айқын: Еуроодақтың қауіпсіздік пен сауданы дамытуға негізделген тұрақты саяси жүйелер мен адам құқықтарын, сондай-ақ жақын маңдағы және одан тыс дамыған экономикаларды қолдағысы келеді. Еуроодақты отаршылдықты жандандырды деп айыптаған кейбір еуропалық зерттеушілер мен саясаткерлердің көзқарасын көрсетеді, өйткені Еуроодақтың демократияландыру мақсаттарын немесе оның нормативтік күшін алға жылжытатын «экономикалық тұтқасы» туралы айтады.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Еуропалық Одақ, жаңа стратегия, қауіпсіздік, энергетика, адам құқығы.

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Новая стратегия ЕС для Центральной Азии год спустя: страхи и желания

ЕС принял новую стратегию для Центральной Азии в июле 2019 года в Бишкеке. Через год необходимо оценить, что из намеченного в документе является полезным, а что не работает. Несмотря на то, что государства этого региона сильно различаются между собой, по восприятию стратегии ЕС можно представить общую картину. Это может быть полезно властям Брюсселя

для переориентации стратегии или для продолжения взятого курса. На следующих страницах приводится описание основных целей, поставленных стратегией ЕС, анализируются результаты в течение этого необычного года, затронутого Covid-19. Кроме того, уделяется немного внимания роли, которую играют основные внешние акторы, конкурирующие в этом регионе (Китай, Россия и США), а также описываются экономические и политические события в регионе ЦА. Выводы этого исследования предельно ясны: ЕС хочет поддерживать стабильные политические системы и права человека, а также развитие экономики по соседству и за его пределами, исходя из соображений безопасности и развития торговли. Показана точка зрения некоторых европейских исследователей и политиков, которые обвиняли ЕС в возрождении колониализма, поскольку ЕС говорит о своих «экономических рычагах» для продвижения целей демократизации или о своей нормативной власти.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Европейский Союз, Новая Стратегия, безопасность, энергия, права человека.

Introduction

When the EU adopted its New Strategy for Central Asia in June 2019, few expected that the following months would take such an unexpected turn of events. One year later the grand presentation of the Strategy during the 15th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting in Bishkek (July 7th, 2019), Central Asia, the EU and the whole world have changed a lot and major changes are still expected. However, some of the basic assumptions of the document presented by Mogherini are still valid and work to achieve the main objectives established in it. This article will talk about the fears and desires that underlie the relationship between these two large neighbouring regions (although they are not neighbours *strictu sensu* now).

In a year focused on the crisis caused by the coronavirus, few have analysed the impact of the Strategy for Central Asia, so this article makes a small contribution in this field, opening a debate on the validity of that document.

The starting hypothesis of this article is that the EU wishes to establish a relationship between equals with Central Asia, while other actors have neo-colonialist aspirations. It is true that the EU has its own economic interests and cultural influence, but with claims that are very different from those expressed by Russia or China. On that field it is possible to see the confrontation between very divergent views of the world. The question here is whether it is a zero-sum game, where one wins everything and the other loses everything, or is it rather a cooperative scenario where very different models can be built by combining elements of both proposals to varying degrees.

This article describes the objectives of the New Strategy, explains the main events in Central Asia over the last year and assesses whether the role of the EU has been strengthened or reduced, especially

in relation to other traditional competitors in the area (Russia, China and the United States).

Fundamental keys to understand the New Strategy

According to the New Strategy itself, it “aims to forge a stronger, modern and non-exclusive partnership with the countries of Central Asia so that the region develops as a sustainable, more resilient, prosperous, and closely interconnected economic and political space” (European Parliament and Council, 2019). Besides that, this document is coherent with other strategies, fundamental for the foreign action of the European Union: “It will build upon the lessons learnt from EU engagement in the region, take into consideration other relevant strategies including the Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, the New European Consensus on Development, the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia and EU Strategy on Afghanistan, and be guided by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (SEn-ECA recommendations, 2019).

The main purpose of this Strategy is to set the legal base to finance the development of that area, following the EU traditional asset of values and principles, what is usually called “the EU’s *acquis*”. The “*acquis communautaire*” or the EU’s ‘*acquis*’ is the body of common rights and obligations that are binding on all EU countries, as EU Members. It is constantly evolving and comprises: the content, principles and political objectives of the Treaties; legislation adopted in application of the treaties and the case law of the Court of Justice of the EU; declarations and resolutions adopted by the EU; measures relating to the common foreign and security policy; measures relating to justice and home affairs; international agreements concluded by the EU and those concluded by the EU countries between themselves in the field of the EU’s activities. Since the inception of the Common Market during the ‘50’s of the

20th century, peace and economic development are intertwined goals; if that is good for member States, it should be also good for their neighbours. This is how the process of enlargement started and there are 27 member states and 5 candidates (Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey are candidate countries), apart from the special relationship with the neighbouring countries through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), supported by the Eastern Partnership (EP) and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (now, the Union for the Mediterranean or UfM) (EUCAM Working Paper, 2019).

The EU employs its normative power and its economic leverage. Later on, it will be discussed if that is useful or not. For now, it is enough to say that this is a strong belief in Brussels: they really think that they can influence the political culture of the masses and the behaviour of the leaders as they offer a great market for their goods and services and they can extract raw materials from those countries. Of course, non-European countries may be attracted to EU political stability and economic well-being. This is not an opinion, it is objective: there was no war inside the European Union countries for more than 75 years, something that it is an exception in European History as our ancestors were involved in continental wars in every generation during the past centuries. Of course, the European Union has its own political and economic problems, such as the rise of populism and racialism, the failure of the migration and integration policies, the lack of knowledge and confidence on EU institutions the public opinion has, the crisis of Euro, the global economic crisis of 2008, the “coronacrisis” (the health, social, political and economic crisis triggered by the coronavirus and the inadequate political management), the wars emerged around the continent, the problem created by jihadism and the Islamic State, the misunderstandings with Russia and China (and sometimes even with the United States) among others.

In any case, the EU is offering always “carrots” to attract the partners, never “sticks”. The only “stick” they use is the threat of not investing more funds wherever. On the other hand, when is the EU stopping the flood of funds to any country or project? There are three inalienable fields to respect for: Human Rights, Liberal Democracy and Trade Market. It is possible to say that they are red lines for the EU in its relationship with third countries. In fact, it should be noted that during the negotiations of this Strategy and the subsequent EPCA, which stands for the new-generation of bilateral Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs),

the European institutions and representatives insisted very much on the necessity of a stronger involvement of Central Asian leaders to improve their democratic records. Step by step, at their own pace, but without any delay (Manners, 2009).

As in any political system, there is much to do to improve the situation. The OSCE recommendations after every election observation mission deployed in those countries, comprise a to-do-list compatible with the EU standards for democracy or even Human Rights. The EU institutions pay attention to the electoral process, the competitiveness among candidates, the pluralism of political parties, the freedom of speech and expression the candidates enjoy or the existence of two legislative chambers. Besides that, some European countries expressed their grave concern regarding the situation of minors, children of mixed couples (European and Central Asian citizens) kidnapped by Central Asian partners; those concerns are shared by many EU member States as some Kyrgyz women don’t let their fathers to see to their children.

Talking about kidnappings, the old tradition of *ala kachuu* or bride abductions, where young women are kidnaped to get marriage, mainly in Kyrgyzstan, are also worrying for EU institutions. Generally speaking, they pay a lot of attention to the role of women in society and the rate of women empowerment.

It is obvious that the political life is very different in Europe or in Central Asia. Very probably because History is also different and the political developments were divergent in both sides. For example, political parties are fundamental for political life in Europe but in Central Asia are more important the clans (parties are Western inventions). Accountability and corruption are also delicate topics when EU is talking to Central Asian partners.

Besides that, there has been an evolution of the concept of “Human Rights” in Europe and another very different in Central Asia as EU defends the “gender ideology” as a main driver at their Foreign Policy, which is a set of “new rights” related to sexual identity disconnected to Biology (objectivity, Science) but stick to self-perception (subjectivity). According to some authors, people have no biological, binary sex (male-female), but there is a set of different genders, depending on the feelings and self-perceptions, disregarding the sexual organs. This is a logical consequence of the relativism, so appreciated in Western countries. This relativism has other negative impacts on moral ethics and values, as there is no objective support for Human Rights on human nature, but they depend only on the be-

nevolence of the Governments. If the States want to recognise those rights, they exist; otherwise, they do not. So, the EU is pressing to other Governments to accept the so called “gay rights” instead of focusing on improving the women’s lives. Feminism is part of the “gender policies”, but not part of the “gender ideology”. However, the term “gender” appears at this document only two times, always referred to the improvement of the role of women in society.

The earlier version of the strategy from 2007 has been updated to focus on resilience (covering areas such as human rights, border security, environment), prosperity (with a strong accent on connectivity), as well as regional cooperation. The 2019 Strategy established three main goals (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019):

1) Partnering for Resilience. According to this objective, EU and Central Asian countries are partners, placing them at an equal level, looking for promotion of “democracy, human rights and the rule of law, intensify cooperation on implementing the Paris climate commitments and tackling trans-regional environmental challenges”. This is a political objective clearly. Thus, this is the most concerning objective for the EU, more interested on spreading their concepts on democracy and Human Rights than on trade or economic cooperation (in any case, EU is the biggest trade partner for Kazakhstan and is among the first in the rest of the Central Asian countries). In this section, such topics as environment or climate change are at the top level of the political agenda and the EU invests in many projects to help this region to stop the global warming and the negative impact of that in Central Asia (Sahajpal, 2019).

2) Partnering for Prosperity. Both players would seek to unlock “their significant growth potential by fostering the development of a competitive private sector and promoting a sound and open investment environment” (Gubaidullina, 2014). This is clearly an economic objective, so the most interested partner here should be, a priori, Central Asian countries, which seek the development of their landlocked economies. These countries received and will receive a huge amount of money to invest in projects via programs such as the INOGATE Energy portal, the TRACECA Transport Corridor, the Baku initiative on energy and transport and the BOMCA (EU Border Management Programme). Adding to these programs, the region will receive EUR 124 million as a solidarity package from the EU. As part of that solidarity package, the EU created the Central Asia COVID-19 Crisis Response (CACCR), a 2 years-long regional programme for Central Asia, launched in July 2020 (European News, 2020).

3) Working Better Together. Here it is clear that the EU doesn’t want to impose its plans or perspectives, but it seeks to improve the general environment in that region as it is aware of the many advantages it brings for Europe, that is why EU wants “to strengthen the architecture of the partnership, intensifying political dialogue and opening up space for civil society participation”.

Central Asia one year later

Future is always uncertain and indefinite, sometimes is also unpredictable. However, this year 2020 was completely unexpected. Of course, there were pandemics previously in History, but this time no Government was ready to face the challenge of this strange influenza.

To summarize, it is possible to list some of the main political events in the past five years. In Uzbekistan, there was a peaceful change in the leadership of the country in 2016 (the EU recognises the key role played by Shavkat Mirziyoyev. He started a new era in Uzbekistan and changed the regional dynamics, too. In domestic policies, opened a communication channel with citizens, liberalised the economy, opened its borders to improve the touristic sector, fought corruption, warranted the religious freedom, diminished the forced labour during the cotton harvest time, among others. In the region, he solved problems that were stuck for years; suddenly, they just disappeared. He showed a new kind of leadership, not showing strength but ability to communicate and efficiency), as it was in March 2019 in Kazakhstan. The situation in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan remained unchanged, but there were rumours on the health condition of Berdimukhamedov and on Rakhmon’s continuity (even, it was said that he was preparing his son, mayor of Dushanbe and Chairman of the Majlisi Milli at the same time). Unexpectedly, the situation worsened in Kyrgyzstan, where the former President, Atambáyev, was in jail accused of corruption; after the Parliamentary elections on October 4th there were claims of unfairness and some people (hundreds, maybe thousands) occupied the streets of the capital, stormed the houses of Parliament and the office of the Prime Minister and some did selfie. One of these was the current interim President and Prime Minister, Sadyr Zhaparov.

During the previous years, with the rubble crisis and the decrease of the oil price, there were some problems for Central Asians as their economies depend heavily from the migrants remittances and, generally speaking, on the economic situation in Russia. The GDP per capita decreased and the

state failed to their citizens in some aspects. When the pandemic started, most of the countries couldn't face it properly and they failed again. Some people are angry but there is no great opportunity to show it, only in Kyrgyzstan (with the usual result, as it was in 2005 and 2010) and Kazakhstan (where some rallies took place in Almaty and other cities).

In these years, Russia increased its presence there; it seems Putin wants to be more and more influential. Even he said on an interview that those nations around Russia (*id est*, Former Soviet Union countries) are not States really. China has improved its situation in that area too; even after the economic crisis of 2008, it is possible to see how their GDP grew up every year around 10%, sustained for 20 years, which means that they have created a big mass of consumers and even rich people (Boonstra, Tsertsvadze, 2016). China has shown its interest on participating at the Premier League, not as a secondary player. They are feared because they are a nuclear power, advanced technologically, strong economically, offering the rest of the world an investment plan in their infrastructures, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), supposedly to export their products to the open markets, apart from solving the endemic problem of a landlocked region such as Central Asia. What can we say about the Chinese Human Rights records? Not very good things. For instance, it is well known there are re-education camps for Uyghur people in the Western region of Xingjian, where more than one million people needs to learn how to improve their "citizen knowledge", how to be a good citizen. European Union is worried about the so-called debt trap due to the BRI; although some experts underlined the falseness of such idea, some others are warning about the danger of having a huge debt with China; the Tajik case is eloquent. Some Chinese scholars asked the Communist Party to review historical territory claims of China in Tajikistan during the summer of 2020. It seems is a clear gambit to squeeze on Tajik authorities, as Tajikistan already ceded 1% of its territory to China in 2011. Besides that, some Asian countries have serious unsolved border problems with China, such as Nepal, India or Pakistan.

This is a fundamental point for the White House in Washington. One of the main issues Mike Pompeo talked about while his visit to Central Asia in February 2020 was this topic regarding the Chinese impositions on Central Asia; after the outbreak of the pandemic, the American opinion on the role of China abroad worsened even more. It is useful to remind the words at the *USA National Security Strategy* (2017): "China and Russia challenge American

power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence" (Laumulin, 2019). It seems that Obama started to withdraw from war scenarios abroad (although the Peace Nobel Prize awarded had to begin some wars) and Trump (the first US President in decades who does not start any war) confirmed that trend. However, by the end of 2019, USA tightened China from many sides (trade war and North Korea among them).

Keeping an eye on violent conflicts, it should be noted that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan played a major role in trying to solve the problems in Syria and Afghanistan respectively, something well estimated by EU institutions. Although Central Asia is a model of religious tolerance and peaceful ethnic coexistence, EU pay attention to any event related to this problem as that remind them the '90's Balkan ghost. That was the case of the ethnic tension and violence in Masanchi, on the Southern border of Kazakhstan, near Bishkek. It seems that the tension wasn't based on ethnicity but it was problem among individuals.

Are all these interests compatible in this region? Is it possible for Kazakhstan to keep its traditional multivector policy? Regarding the exchange of goods, for instance it seems that Eurasian Economic Unity and EU are competing for the same space, so there is an underground fight among them. Moreover, the perception from Brussels is that Putin wants to restore the greatness of the Tsarist Empire, protecting its (Russian or supposedly Russian) minorities in the near abroad, promoting the use of Russian as *lingua franca*, remembering the wars they fought together (here, the military parade in Moscow on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Victory Day was an unavoidable appointment for the Central Asian leaders, even if that was delayed until June 24th 2020). Apart from that, it seems that the Chinese BRI is not compatible with the EU Strategy for Connectivity with Asia, as they pursue different rules for international relations.

Is there any EU Normative power or economic leverage there?

Looking at this region, it is possible to realize that the EU influence in this region has limits. Since the years of the independence, EU invested millions of Euro in different projects, but this Central Asia states are completely independent, so they decide

their future and the way they organise their social, political or economic life.

Of course, EU institutions are aware of the importance of keeping the cooperation with those countries while respecting their sovereignty. However, European countries would like to be more influential there, without any doubt. They would prefer getting more contracts with local Governments or State companies. In addition, they would like to find there real likeminded partners, with a similar conception on democracy and Human Rights (Savrovskaya, 2015). However, the actual political culture and public opinion/mentality of Central Asian peoples find their roots in Turk-Persian-Arabic and Russian-Soviet influence; academy, university, companies are ruled in that old style although some changes are introduced slowly. For instance, more and more women are filling positions in the political life (ministries, congress of deputies, regional governments, town halls).

For some years, Kyrgyzstan was considered “the most advantaged student” by EU institutions, but it is easy to see the disappointment present in their eyes as that experiment failed completely with Akayev in 2005, with Bakiyev in 2010, with Atambayev in 2011 (when he wasted the Constitutional reforms introduced in 2010 to reduce presidential powers and strengthen democracy) and with Jeenbekov (when he wasted the political impulse to improve the political and economic situation in Kyrgyzstan chasing his political adversaries).

The relationship between Europe and Kazakhstan is also stained by the Ablyazov case. The former powerful tycoon and politician fell in disgrace and he fled from his country to enjoy a luxurious life in Great Britain, France or even Italy. Several countries, Kazakhstan among them, requested the extradition of the entire criminal organised group he leaded to defraud at least 7.5 billion US\$, but European authorities (also the Spanish ones) failed in helping their good partner. He received the help of some Soros’ institutions (as the Open Dialogue Foundation), founded a political party (Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan) and sponsored the creation of the political platform *Zhana Kazakhstan* (“New Kazakhstan”), presented in Brussels in 2018. This frustrated extradition is not an example of lack of interest in cooperation between Europe and Central Asia but a division of powers one. Anyway, this wounded the relationship between the countries involved, as the main reason the courts adduced to reject the extradition was the political situation in Kazakhstan (they trusted the arguments of the accused, which means they believed that Ablyazov and company

were poor opposition politicians, they would receive tortures in their home countries, European countries should protect them, etcetera). This is what messed up the relationship between those countries, not the non-extradition in itself, as it was evident that EU member states thought the political progress in Kazakhstan was not real nor reliable. In other words, had the EU influenced political life in Kazakhstan, the EU would have sent back home those people (Ablyazov group) with some warranties of avoiding ill-treatment; but it happened the opposite.

The EU is the first trade partner for Kazakhstan, but this institution is not as strong as the USA are there. This happens for some reasons. First of all, because Kazakhstan sees that the EU is not a country nor a union of countries, but it is an addition, a group of divided (and sometimes opposed) members; that is why they negotiate on bilateral basis with everyone and not with the EU alone. Second, the EU is not a neighbour country, so they can think that the relationship exists today but who knows until when; that relationship is plenty of uncertainties. Third, Central Asian partners are prone to trust more on people who invest there; the establishment of offices (or embassies) there is for them a serious evidence of how trustable are those new partners coming from far territories. In short, it is easier to trust on those traditional partners you know better than the new ones.

Finally, it is necessary to understand what perception has the EU on every country, depending on the interests and the level of political progress and the rule of Law (regarding the confidence on the legal system to start or maintain business there, due to bad experiences suffered in other countries where European companies were expropriated).

Conclusions

As conclusion, it is possible to say that EU cannot change the mentality of those countries and, very probably, it doesn’t want to do that, but it desires to promote a stable and safe neighbourhood. According to EU mentality, reflected at the EU’s *acquis*, having in the near abroad a like-minded and stable partner is always better than having a problematic, unstable, underdeveloped environment.

The strength of other global players in that region, such as Russia, China or the United States, combined with the weakness of not very united European institutions and member states, makes more difficult to have a clear, strong voice in that scenario. Even more, the outbreak of the coronacrisis didn’t help to solve these problems or deficits.

Besides that, the last political developments in Central Asia show that these countries have not adopted the European concepts of democracy or Human Rights. Even more, the so-called “island of democracy”, a kind of European lab, it is not a good model for the rest of Central Asian countries because it is not stable at all. According to this example, it seems that it is better for

this region having all the power in the hands of one political party/ruler, combining it with dialogue with civil society (the Uzbek model) better than having useless pluralism of political parties (reflection of a huge division in society). Any political entity needs unity, not uniformity; it doesn't matter the way they express themselves this axiom.

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