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The EL-CSID project is coordinated by the Institute for European Studies (IES)



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 693799.

The New EU Strategy for Central Asia: A Case for Cultural Diplomacy

Domenico Valenza
United Nations University Institute on Comparative
Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS)

Issue 2018/6 • April 2018

Executive Summary and Key Recommendations

In June 2017, on the tenth anniversary of the first **Central Asia** Strategy, the Council of the European Union invited High Representative Federica Mogherini and the European Commission (EC) to draw a proposal for a **new Strategy** by late 2019. The Council's decision provides a pivotal opportunity to review the significant **shortcomings** of the previous Strategy and to assess the evolving **regional environment**, in which Russia and China have consolidated their influence.

By presenting **four possible strategies** for future EU engagement, this policy brief argues that rather than increasing or reducing 'hard' commitments or keeping the same agenda, the new Strategy should **enhance EU cultural diplomacy in the region**. In line with the increased emphasis on the role of culture in European external action, EU cultural diplomacy should meet **local citizenry's aspirations and demands**, and give Brussels a **comparative advantage over other regional powers**.

To bring positive change, a number of **recommendations** are proposed:

- As a kick-off event, the EU should organise a **high-level meeting with EU and Central Asian Ministers of Culture**, similarly to what the Latvian Presidency of the EU Council did in June 2015, when Riga hosted the first meeting of European and Central Asian Ministers of Education.
- High-level meetings should be coupled with **regional and national events for cultural operators**, with at least two objectives: reaching out local stakeholders, and tailoring an approach to their needs.
- Financial support to local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) operating in the field of culture should be provided both at bilateral and regional levels. Where EUNIC clusters are present (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), they could serve as **implementing partners in consortia recognising and involving local actors as crucial agents**. Where they are missing, emphasis on EU member states' (EU MS) institutes should be added.
- Creating an **EU national delegation in Turkmenistan** should be indicated as a critical objective of the new Strategy, also for cultural cooperation.
- At the educational level, the EU should provide increased support to the **participation of Central Asia's higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Erasmus+ programme**.
- In line with other experts' views, an **initiative on technical education**, focusing for instance on oil and gas technology and IT sectors should be promoted and led by those EU MS that are more engaged in regional cooperation (i.e. Germany and Latvia).
- Finally, the new Strategy should provide **clear indicators** against which EU policy-makers and relevant stakeholders could review the proposed policies. This should include the **creation of EU-funded barometers**, analysing perceptions of EU broader policies in the region, and EU cultural action in particular.

1. Yesterday. The Strategy for a New Partnership: achievements and shortcomings

Long perceived as a *terra incognita* in Brussels, Central Asia grew in importance after 9/11 and the Western intervention in Afghanistan, when its closeness to the theatre of operations raised some security concerns. In 2007, under an initiative of the German Presidency of the EU, the Council adopted the '**Strategy for a New Partnership for Central Asia**'. As the first-ever comprehensive approach to the region, it identified **seven priorities**: aside from 'harder' engagements on trade, border management, energy, and transport, it also mentioned human rights, education, and inter-cultural dialogue.

Throughout the four reviews, the regional approach has been progressively balanced by a stronger bilateral dimension. In the 2012 Progress Report, the focus on security was increased by introducing, among others, a regular High-Level Security Dialogue. At the same time, the report downgraded other priorities such as energy and inter-cultural dialogue, with the latter receiving close-to-zero attention in the document. In the new cycle 2014-2020, bilateral funds have been allocated to four out of the five countries, with Kazakhstan receiving funding only within the framework of regional activities.

Despite the emphasis put on official documents, Central Asian education has received mixed attention over the past years. The 2012 Progress Report provided very general action points, supporting among others vocational training reforms and promoting cooperation between EU and regional research institutions. To enhance dialogue, between January and July 2015, the Latvian EU Presidency engaged in the fourth review process of the Strategy and organised some high-level events. In this regard, Riga hosted the first meeting of EU and Central Asian Ministers for Education in June 2015. Bilateral educational initiatives have targeted only three out of five countries: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

Overall, eleven years after its adoption, **pro and cons** of the Strategy are clear. On the one hand, the document allowed the EU for the first time to delineate its primary interests in the region and to create some institutional mechanisms to enhance relations at both regional and bilateral levels. Similarly, the strategy offered Central Asian countries a window to Europe, leading political elites to get first-hand knowledge of EU institutional mechanisms. Within this framework, the EU managed to establish delegations in four out of five countries, Turkmenistan being at present the exception.

If the achievements of the Strategy are evident, so are the shortcomings, and the major one seems to be the existence of an overwhelming gap between the objectives outlined in the document and the resources allocated in the two cycles. This **resources-objectives gap**, so to speak, was coupled with the absence of a detailed action plan simplifying the review process and of clear benchmarks against which EU policies could be assessed. In particular, while mentioned as a critical priority, **the cultural dimension was never explored** throughout the eleven years of implementation of the Strategy, and the overall impression was that 'culture' was just an appealing and zero-cost catchword in the document.

2. Today. A Changed Political Environment and Competing Regional Powers

In June 2017, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Strategy, the Council invited the High Representative and the EC to circulate a **proposal for a new Strategy** by the end of 2019. After more than a decade, this course for a renewed document provides a significant opportunity to all European and regional actors that have been involved in various ways in the design and implementation of the previous Strategy. Together with the achievements and the shortcomings discussed in the last section, a serious review process should also take into account both the **domestic trajectories** of

Central Asian countries, and the **changed role of the major external actors** in the region, namely Russia, China, and the United States (US).

Internal and regional challenges: between new leadership and constitutional changes

In general terms, EU visibility in the region has decreased over the past years. Elites have gradually reinforced political control over the population, and Central Asian authoritarian path has clashed with the EU's value-driven agenda¹. On top of that, both the financial crisis and the instability in the European Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods contributed to the feeling that EU MS would pay more attention to the domestic situation and their closer borders, and so neglect 'the neighbours of the neighbours'. Against this background, some major domestic developments have taken place.

Firstly, after the **2010 Revolution**, and the ethnic tensions involving Kyrgyz people and the Uzbek minority, **Kyrgyzstan** has worked to enhance its parliamentary democracy. As a response, Russia has worked to tighten control over the country's domestic and foreign policies by adopting a number of measures, including Rosneft's and Gazprom's investments in energy projects. Today, Kyrgyzstan remains both the EU's and Russia's most crucial aid recipient country in the region.

Secondly, 2016 marked a new opportunity for cooperation between **Uzbekistan** and both the EU and Central Asian states. Following the death of Islam Karimov, the new elected President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has abandoned the long-established isolationist path and promoted good relations with neighbours. One could refer, for instance, to the recent consultative meeting held in Astana on 15 March, gathering the Heads of Central Asian states. During the opening speech, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev acknowledged Mirziyoyev's input to hold regular working consultations and solve regional problems in a coordinated framework². Recent developments were also welcomed by High Representative Mogherini, highlighting progress on borders delimitation, economic cooperation, and remarking "an overall improvement in terms of working with partners in the region"³.

Finally, recent constitutional changes in **Kazakhstan** should not be neglected. Under Nazarbayev's initiative, a reform was approved to enact some changes in the distribution of powers between the Presidency and a number of different players, including the Government and the Parliament. While the President remains the key actor indicating the major domestic and foreign policy objectives, these changes increase the government's role in policy implementation and provide new checks and balances.

Russia, China, and the US: competing actors with different goals

Eleven years after the adoption of the European Strategy, and following Brussels's decline in visibility, have major regional powers deepened their presence in the region? As a whole, it appears that **Russia's** and China's efforts have been successful in this. Moscow remains today the key foreign actor in Central Asia as a result of a strategy relying heavily on the Russian diaspora and combining hard and soft tools. At the military level, most of the Central Asian states have kept 'bandwagoning' with Russia

¹ See HUG, A. (Ed.), Sharing Worst Practice. How countries and institutions in the former Soviet Union helped create legal tools of repression. *Foreign Policy Centre*, May 2016. <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/sharingworstpractice/> Retrieved on 13 April 2018.

² KAZINFORM, *Leaders of Central Asian countries meet in Astana*, 15 March 2018. https://www.inform.kz/en/leaders-of-central-asian-countries-meet-in-astana_a3185658 Retrieved on 4 April 2018.

³ DAVLETOVA, N., Mogherini: Recent developments in Central Asia open new perspectives for EU's cooperation with it, *Astana Times*, 9 November 2017. <https://astanatimes.com/2017/11/mogherini-recent-developments-in-central-asia-open-new-perspectives-for-eus-cooperation-with-it/> Retrieved on 4 April 2018.

in security structures such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)⁴. This only partially applies to Uzbekistan, which withdrew for a second time from CSTO in 2012, while Turkmenistan has so far refused any prospect of regional integration with or without Russia.

Aside from military might, Moscow has also promoted its 'Eurasian way' through trade and soft power tools. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are today full members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while Tajikistan is considered a prospect member. Emphasis on the EAEU should also be seen as part of a broader soft action in the region. In the past years, Moscow has in fact restructured its developments assistance, increased its bilateral financial aid in the region, and created a number of public, mixed, and private agencies working on cultural diplomacy. Favoured by territorial contiguity and the prominence of the Russian language and media in the region, Moscow's culture and education remain highly attractive among the general populations and the political elites.

While Russia remains key in the region, overemphasis on its influence should be avoided for a number of reasons. As a first point, Moscow's achievements have been fragmented, depending on the country and the targeted sector. For instance, at both security and economic levels, Russia failed to secure solid partnerships with all Central Asian states. Perhaps most importantly, even in consistently Russophile countries (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), political elites have become less accommodating with the Kremlin and promoted when possible balanced exercises with other regional powers, including the EU.

Together with Russia, **China** occupies a very high position in Central Asian states' agenda. In the last decade, Beijing's engagement has covered an increasing number of sectors, ranging from trade and energy to multilateral cooperation at the security level within SCO's framework. Following Central Asia's position at the heart of the continent, it is not surprising that the success of the Silk Road Economic Belt, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will also depend on the positive involvement of the 'five countries. As such, it has been argued that the region is a test for Beijing: integrating poorer countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are heavily dependent on aid and foreign investment, could eventually lead to the creation of "a new kind of international order in which China plays a leading role"⁵.

Chinese regional engagement is not without risk. Scepticism around Beijing's interest arose clearly in May 2016 when in Kazakhstan, talks on changes of the land code to attract Chinese investors led to the most significant dissent movement in recent years. The episode also allowed protesters to voice environmental concerns on Chinese presence of polluting industries in the country. Distrust does not only concern trade presence but also people-to-people initiatives, which China has been developing over the past years. Despite increased efforts, China's cultural attractiveness remains lower when compared to that of Russia or EU MS.

As for the **US**, regional engagement has changed in the past years. The withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan has reduced Washington's logistical needs to support military activities. This also came at a time of more pressing geopolitical priorities across the world, ranging from the Ukraine crisis and Russia's unexpected re-assertiveness to the emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

⁴ For a more detailed analysis, see VALENZA D. and BOERS. E., Assessing the Effectiveness of the EU's and Russia's Cultural Diplomacy towards Central Asia. *United Nations University on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS). EL-CSID Working-Paper*. 18(9), 2018. <http://cris.unu.edu/assessing-effectiveness-eus-and-russias-cultural-diplomacy-towards-central-asia> Retrieved on 8 April 2018.

⁵ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries*, Report n° 245, 27 July 2017. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/245-central-asias-silk-road-rivalries> Retrieve on 8 April 2018.

Furthermore, it should not be neglected that, although since the collapse of the Soviet Union part of US strategy in Central Asia has focused on democracy promotion, Washington's security needs have been finally prioritised. Perhaps the most striking example of this is offered by the agenda of the C5+1, a platform for dialogue and cooperation established in 2015 by the US and the five Central Asian States to complement bilateral relations. In the first ministerial meeting held in Samarkand in November 2015, the three areas of cooperation designed included security, trade, and environment, with no mention of the rule of law, human rights, or people-to-people contacts. Contrary to Russia and China, which have tried to work on culture (even with contrasting results), the US has de facto withdrawn from this field.

3. Tomorrow: EU cultural strategy for Central Asia

If one tries to summarise the main findings from the regional scenario, it appears clear that the past decade witnessed Russia's and China's consolidation in Central Asia, with Moscow focusing on security and softer measures, and Beijing rising to a position without equal when it comes to trade and energy. Also, western political influence and democracy-based agenda appear to be severely downsized, with the US focusing on harder matters. Under the following scenario, it seems that the EU could pursue *four main strategies* to review its current plans on Central Asia.

Strategy A. 'Retreating'

In this approach, the EU would decide to reduce its engagement in the region drastically. With Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan classified as upper middle-income countries according to World Bank classification, Brussels could narrow its focus on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which depend significantly on Western bilateral aid. Based on their modest results, initiatives on Rule of Law and Education would be removed from the future strategy.

In pursuing this strategy, the EU would end the resources-objectives gap by reducing the latter. Also, this would acknowledge a basic fact: Brussels is not a principal geopolitical actor in the region, and it is not destined to rise and compete with Russia and China in the long run. Such a shift would also give the opportunity to increase the focus on the closer neighbourhoods, where instability and crisis-management have become the rule rather than the exception.

While a 'retreating' option could suit some needs at the EU level, it is maybe the least appropriate approach to target Central Asia. In spite of some general improvements, ***Central Asia remains insecure and problematic***, with risks of terrorism and other forms of violence, which could be home-produced or stemming from neighbours such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also, uncooperative postures of political elites cannot help but deteriorate the already delicate regional environment. Given that retaining a role in Central Asia would ultimately be in Brussels's core interests, other options should be envisaged.

Strategy B. 'Keeping' (things as they are)

In the light of Central Asia's strategic significance, the EU could be better advised by keeping the holistic approach of the 2007 Strategy and combining hard and soft priorities. As such, the new document would be a review rather than a revision, perhaps with a new balance between regional and bilateral engagement, based on Uzbekistan's renewed multilateral engagement. The Strategy would reaffirm the role of dialogue with Central Asian countries and stress the success of the format of cooperation of the last decade.

If keeping things as they are would better serve EU interests rather than the retreating option, **it would also lack foresight**. The shortcomings of the 2007 Strategy explained in this brief require a clear re-orientation at the EU level and in particular, a simplified strategy demonstrating to its regional stakeholders that the EU is willing to close the gap between objectives and resources.

Strategy C. 'Hardening'

To seek a concrete policy impact, the EU could follow Washington's example and come up with a renovated interest-driven agenda. This would include priorities in the areas of security and stability, trade, and energy, with a combined bilateral and multilateral approach. In principle, as emphasised in the 2017 Council Conclusions, Brussels would target enhanced cooperation on border management and the extension of the Southern Gas Corridor. Other points of the future agenda could be defined in collaboration with Central Asian countries, which might welcome the reduced focus on democracy promotion and human rights. Following the path of the last decade, the intercultural dialogue would be virtually or practically removed from the priorities of the new Strategy.

There is no doubt that in such a scenario, the EU and Central Asian elites may speak the same language. Scepticism of Brussels's too broad and badly-defined agenda would wane, and the EU would become part of those interest-oriented regional actors that seem to have a more strategic long-term vision: China, Russia, and the US. If it is true that the EU should narrow its focus and better define its priorities, playing a great-power game would be a step in a minefield for a number of reasons.

Firstly, contrary to Russia and China, **Brussels lacks leverage**: Moscow has a well-defined security role and retains control over media infrastructure, while Beijing is the key trade actor. Secondly, Brussels is not a major geopolitical player and should not develop ambitions to become one, also to **avoid great-power competitions and regional tensions**. Where possible, the EU should instead favour cooperation with other regional powers and design a more unpretentious and discreet way to engage Central Asia.

Strategy D. 'Softening'

Finally, among EU options in Central Asia, this brief argues that one could provide a significant added value and genuinely renew the approach to the region. Rather than increasing or reducing hard engagements, or going down the same route, **a new direction should enhance EU cultural diplomacy**. Such a choice would be in line with other broader policy declarations, such as the 2017 Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations', advancing cultural cooperation with third countries and mainstreaming culture in European external action. At least at the discursive level, the Strategy aims to signal that EU MS are ready to combine cultural efforts abroad.

Based on these developments, the EC, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the European Union National Institutes of Culture (EUNIC) have agreed on a number of arrangements for future activities. The document signed by these actors in May 2017 promotes a **cross-cutting approach to culture**, which embraces a "wide and inclusive range of policies and activities"⁶, ranging from arts and literature to inter-cultural dialogue, research, and education. A reinforced engagement on culture in Central Asia would also be in line with **EUNIC's strategic framework for 2025**, planning to make the network a key partner for EU cultural diplomacy. As a strategic objective, the framework aims to

⁶ EEAS, EUNIC & EC, *Administrative arrangement for activities to be developed by the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) in partnership with the European Commission Services and the European External Action Service jointly referred to hereinafter as "the two Sides"*, 16 May 2017. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2017-05-16_admin_arrangement_eunic.pdf Retrieved on 4 April 2018.

enhance clusters' capacities to design and implements cultural projects both within and outside the EU. At present, Central Asia hosts two clusters in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

There are at least **two solid reasons** why investing in cultural diplomacy in Central Asia would be a success. Firstly, **EU MS cultural attractiveness in the region is doubtless**. Data from EDB Integration Barometers prepared by the Eurasian Development Bank's Centre for Integration Studies and the Eurasian Monitor reveal that, while Russia remains the major 'soft' actor in the region, EU MS cultures are significantly attractive in Central Asia and especially in those countries that show a stronger degree of openness (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan)⁷. European culture and education opportunities are part of Central Asian citizens' aspirations and generate a demand that the future Strategy should meet. Secondly, **European cultural expertise gives Brussels a comparative advantage**, allowing the EU to distinguish itself from the other regional powers. In the long run, one could not exclude that, in a functionalist vision, enhanced and successful cultural cooperation may lead to a more structured dialogue in other harder spheres.

To bring positive change in the cultural sphere, this brief recommends a number of measures. As a first point, and as a kick-off event of the New Strategy, a **high-level meeting between EU and Central Asian Ministers of Culture** should take place, similarly to what Latvian EU Presidency did in June 2015, when Riga hosted the first meeting of the 28+5 Ministers of Education. As a complement and to strengthen ties between European and Central Asian cultural operators, high-level events should be coupled with regional and bilateral initiatives with at least two objectives: **reaching out local stakeholders** and **tailoring an approach to their needs**. For instance, in Kazakhstan, increased attention should be paid to the work of European ethno-cultural centres, which could facilitate cultural exchanges through their ties to the government and both 'homeland' and 'host land' communities⁸.

In the light of increased support to cultural actors, the new Strategy should **strengthen funding to local CSOs** operating in the field at both bilateral and regional levels. Where EUNIC clusters are established, their collaboration with European delegations should be promoted. **Clusters could thus operate as implementing partners in consortia recognising and involving local actors as key agents**. Where clusters are missing, EU MS institutes should have a more active role. This could be the case, for instance, of the **Institut français** in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, where an EU Delegation is still missing. This last point should also be targeted by the Strategy as a shortcoming to be addressed.

Given the attractiveness of European education, and in line with other experts' positions, emphasis on this area should be reinforced, enhancing in particular the **participation of Central Asia's higher education institutions (HEIs) in the framework of Erasmus+**⁹. For instance, at present KIMEP University is the only regional educational institute involved in an Erasmus Mundus International Master, that is, the 'Central & East European, Russian & Eurasian Studies' (CEERES)¹⁰.

Furthermore, a more specific **initiative on technical education**, focusing among others on oil and gas technology and IT sectors could benefit Central Asian students and allow the EU to compete smartly

⁷ EURASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK – CENTRE FOR INTEGRATION STUDIES, *EDB Integration Barometer*. 2016. Fifth Wave Of The Survey, 40, 2016. <https://eabr.org/en/analytics/integration-research/cii-reports/integratsionnyy-barometr-eabr-2016/> Retrieved on 8 April 2018. For a more precise analysis of EU cultural acceptance in the region, see VALENZA & BOERS, *Assessing the Effectiveness...*, *op.cit.*, 2018.

⁸ See COLLINS, N., and BEKENOVA, K., European cultural diplomacy: diaspora relations with Kazakhstan, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23(6), 2017, p. 732-750.

⁹ LARUELLE, M., Focusing on higher education and professional training in BOOSTRA, J. (Ed.), *Towards a new EU Strategy for Central Asia*, *EUCAM Watch*, 18, February 2018. http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM_Watch_18.pdf Retrieved on 4 April 2018.

¹⁰ As a 2-year programme, CEERES offers mobility periods in Partner Universities across Europe, Russia, and Central Asia.

with Russia's educational institutions¹¹. Germany and/or Latvia, which have been the most active EU MS when it comes to cooperation in Central Asia, should take the lead.

Finally, a renewed Strategy with a heavy focus on culture should also provide **clear indicators** against which EU policy-makers and relevant stakeholders could review the proposed actions. This should include the **creation of Brussels-funded Central Asian barometers** in cooperation with local survey institutes, analysing EU more comprehensive policies in the region, and EU cultural action in particular.

¹¹ LARUELLE, Focusing on higher..., *op.cit.*

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About the author



Domenico is Academic Assistant at the College of Europe in the European general studies programme, and Visiting Researcher at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS). Domenico holds an MA in European Studies from Université Paris 8 Saint Denis and Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), and an MSc in “Russia in Global Systems” from King’s College London (KCL). Prior to joining the College, he worked at No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ) as Gender and Human Rights Program Assistant in Brussels, Belgium and Dakar, Senegal. His main research interests include Russia’s foreign policy, EU-Russia relations, NATO-Russia relations, and the EU neighbourhood policy.

The EL-CSID project
is coordinated
by the
Institute for European Studies (IES)
www.el-csid.eu

Institute for European Studies
Pleinlaan 5
B-1050 Brussel
T: +32 2 614 80 01
E: ies@vub.ac.be
www.ies.be



This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 693799.