Implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia strategy

2015/2220(INI) - 08/03/2016 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Tamás MESZERICS (Greens /EFA, HU) on the implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy.

General provisions on EU commitments: Members stressed the strong strategic, political and economic interest of the EU in strengthening its bilateral and multilateral relations with all the Central Asian countries, on the basis of common shared values as stated in the existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements between the EU and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and in the agreement - albeit not yet in force - with Turkmenistan.

They pointed out, however, that the strategic approach adopted to date to shaping relations with Central Asian countries has demonstrated only **limited viability and success**. They called on the EU and the five Central Asian countries to make serious efforts to achieve the aims and goals of this strategy.

On the other hand, Members welcomed the review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy conducted by the EEAS, the Commission and the Council in 2015. Nevertheless, they took the view that the priorities, objectives and targets should be aligned more specifically to the interests, requirements and framework conditions of the Central Asian partner states, taking account of the differences between the countries of the region and of the uniqueness of each. It should be more precisely defined through individual, **tailor-made country action plans**, and accompanied by benchmarks and indicators with a reasonable timeframe for completion.

In this regard, the EU is called upon to:

- **cooperate more intensively** on an ad hoc basis with those Central Asian countries that wish to go beyond the EU Strategy for Central Asia;
- ensure that the disbursement of EU funds should be clearly incentive- and performance-based;
- **increase its political visibility** in the Central Asia region;
- adopt a **concrete action plan** with measureable benchmarks enabling proper evaluation of progress made in the future.
- cooperate with the aid and development projects of the US in the fields of human security, environment, education and climate policy.

Members welcomed the **re-establishment of the post of EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia** after a year-long gap, and expected that the newly appointed EUSR will make an important contribution to the implementation of the strategy.

Democratisation, human rights and the rule of law: Members stressed that respect for human rights and democracy must be at the core of the EU strategy. They regretted that overall respect for democratic standards, human rights and fundamental freedoms has **not yet reached an acceptable level**. The report recommended the EU to tailor its human rights policy and external financing instruments better, keeping a consistent long-term democratic reform as the guiding light.

Strongly condemning the continued persecution of human rights defenders, opposition political figures and journalists in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, Members called on the EEAS to use all means at its disposal to act swiftly in their defence.

The report noted that the EU must make it a priority to promote freedom of religion and belief and the rights of women, minors and minorities. More specifically, as regards **women**, the Central Asian countries are called upon to treat violence against women as a criminal offence, to properly investigate all reported cases and to implement measures to guarantee protection, assistance and access to justice for victims.

Education and youth: the EU is urged to devote more attention to the promotion of quality education among young people in the Central Asian countries, given the positive effects in terms of social inclusion, social cohesion and stability, and building sustainable democratic societies, and as the best form of prevention against violent extremism and radicalisation among youth in the region.

They consider that the EU's positive role in the region should be advanced via education and people-to-people contacts. In this regard, they recalled the importance of the EU's international exchange programmes, such as Erasmus +, Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus Tempus.

Economic integration, trade and sustainable development: concerned at the lack of socio-economic development, which is stalled and uneven, the lack of state transparency and the consequent corruption, poor governance, weak institutional framework, lack of respect for the rule of law and low participation of civil society, Members stressed the need for the EU to **further step up trade and investment relations** with the Central Asian countries and for these countries to tackle corruption and promote a stable environment in order to attract foreign investment.

As regards **development aid**, Members are of the opinion that development aid should be disbursed only in countries with a genuine commitment to the alleviation of poverty, equal and sustainable socioeconomic progress and respect for human rights, and that those countries must demonstrate that they have effective anti-corruption policies and allow the EU to monitor implementation of the corresponding efforts.

Members encouraged the **mainstreaming of the Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) in the EU's development agenda in the region and reiterated that including the SDGs will result in more comprehensive sustainable development in the Central Asia region.

Energy, environment, water, and transport: the report stressed the need for more intensive dialogue on infrastructure development, including energy and transport networks as well as high-capacity internet connections. It regards the region as an **additional potential source of energy security for the EU**, with particular reference to the potential for increased cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Regional cooperation, security challenges and border management: highlighting the importance of cooperation between the EU and the countries of Central Asia in preventing and combating terrorism, Members are deeply concerned about the activities of the extremist organisation Islamic State (IS) in recruiting growing numbers of Central Asian citizens to travel to the Middle East to fight or otherwise support IS, Al-Nusra and other terrorist and extremist organisations, prompted in part by political marginalisation and bleak economic prospects. They recognise that should a significant portion of radicalised Central Asian citizens return to their home countries, they risk challenging security and stability throughout Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, China and India.

Members called on the Council, the Commission and the EEAS to prioritise in their relations with the Central Asian states the **reform of the security sector**, including better funding and training, promoting religious freedom in the framework of the secular constitutions, preventive aspects of countering terrorism and efforts at rehabilitating former jihadists, as components of an overall strategy for dealing with the challenge of Islamist extremism.

Lastly, the report called on all international parties with influence in the region to encourage Central Asian states to make a concerted effort to better coordinate cooperation between their security services, including with respect to **intelligence-sharing**.