Implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia strategy

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The European Parliament adopted by 605 votes to 66 with 25 abstentions, a resolution 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, Parliament welcomed the review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy conducted by the EEAS, the Commission and the Council in 2015. Nevertheless, it 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. The objectives 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 that the **disbursement of EU funds** is based on measurable progress with regard, in particular, to the fields of democratisation, preventing and fighting corruption, free and fair elections, human rights, ending drug trafficking, respect for labour rules, good governance, the rule of law, development, human security and good neighbourly relations.

Members welcomed the **re-establishment of the post of EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia** 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: Parliament stressed that respect for human rights and democracy must be at the core of the EU strategy. It regretted that overall respect for democratic standards, human rights and fundamental freedoms has **not yet reached an acceptable level**. It 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.

Parliament 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**.

Members considered 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: Members underlined the growing importance of trade relations between the EU and Central Asia, with the EU now the **first trading partner in the region**.

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 were 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.

Parliament 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: underlining the need for energy supply and diversification to be a key element of the EU-Central Asia strategy, Parliament stressed the need for more intensive dialogue on infrastructure development, including energy and transport networks as well as high-capacity internet connections. It regarded 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. It called for renewed efforts to cope with and tackle the dramatic consequences of the environmental disaster of the drying-up of the Aral Sea.

Regional cooperation, security challenges and border management: Parliament supported the EU's long-term goal of transforming the nascent EU-Central Asia High- Level Security Dialogue into a genuine forum for cooperation in addressing common security challenges in the region and beyond its borders. It highlighted the need to closer interlink the EU's approach to Central Asia with Afghanistan and adapt existing policies to the post-2014 strategy for Afghanistan.

Stressing the importance of cooperation between the EU and the countries of Central Asia in preventing and combating terrorism, Members were 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 recognised 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.

Parliament 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, Parliament 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.