EU strategy on Central Asia

2023/2106(INI) - 17/01/2024 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 543 votes to 42, with 4 abstentions, a resolution on the EU strategy on Central Asia.

Central Asia is a region of strategic interest to the EU in terms of security and connectivity as well as energy and resource diversification, conflict resolution and the defence of the multilateral rules-based international order.

EU engagement with Central Asia

Members underlined that the EU and Central Asia are facing profound global and regional geopolitical shifts and challenges, which provide significant impetus for them to work towards long-term, structured and mutually beneficial cooperation in matters of common interest. They strongly encouraged the EU to **intensify its engagement with Central Asia**, given the geostrategic importance of the region, and to promote a strategic partnership with these countries by expanding cooperation at **political and economic level**. The resolution port encouraged the EU to continue **promoting political and economic reforms** that strengthen the rule of law, democracy, good governance and respect for human rights.

Members underlined the EU's interest in increasing economic relations and intensifying political ties with the countries of Central Asia, in part to minimise the circumvention of sanctions against Russia and Belarus. They invited the authorities of the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to cooperate closely with the EU, in particular its Sanctions Envoy, in order to intensify their efforts to prevent sanctions circumvention.

Parliament also considered that a review of the EU-Central Asia strategy is necessary in order to **update** it in the light of the geopolitical events that have taken place in recent years.

Regional cooperation

The resolution underlined the great potential of mutually beneficial cooperation on sustainable development, connectivity, energy, critical raw materials and security, with Central Asia being a key region for connectivity between East and West. The Commission is called on to investigate the possibility of the European Investment Bank's support for investments in infrastructure development in Central Asian states, especially in the Middle Corridor.

According to Members, the EU's policy towards Central Asia in the fields of energy, connectivity and resource diversification should be inspired by the European Green Deal and based on mutually beneficial strategic partnerships that take into account the peculiarities of each of the Central Asian states. Members are concerned, in this regard, with the creation of dependency on Russia as a result of the signing of the natural gas deal between Gazprom and Uzbekistan through Kazakhstan.

Parliament underlined the importance of a **positive investment climate** for the economic development of Central Asia and EU-Central Asian trade and cooperation. It highlighted that a positive investment climate leading to the creation of quality workplaces with adequate salaries and decent working conditions depends on stable democratic institutions, respect for human rights and the rule of law, as well as the capacity of businesses and civil society for due diligence application.

Members noted the Central Asian states', with the exception of Tajikistan, long-standing approach of maintaining relations with **Afghanistan** and their evolving pragmatic engagement with the Taliban, which they nevertheless do not recognise, since the takeover in 2021. They encouraged the EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan to continue cooperating closely with counterparts in the Central Asian states as part of the EU-Central Asia dialogue on Afghanistan.

Noting the increasing strain on **water resources** in Central Asia, the resolution stressed the need for closer regional cooperation on this matter between upstream and downstream countries in order to prevent conflicts over the distribution and use of water resources.

Democracy and human rights

Members insisted that respect for human rights and compliance with international obligations are important for the EU's relations with Central Asia calling for regular human rights dialogues with Central Asian states. They are also concerned about the lack of accountability for serious human rights violations on a large scale, including the employment of harsh measures by authorities to end mass protests. Members underlined the fundamental democratic shortcomings in Central Asia, with regard to democratic governance, the rule of law and human rights protection, which still persist and have worsened in several respects recently. The stressed the need to make election processes more transparent, open and fair for all political actors.

Moreover, the resolution noted the need to boost Central Asia's resilience against **disinformation** by promoting independent media and content in local languages, increasing media literacy and organising targeted courses for local journalists. It stressed the need to strengthen media independence and pluralism and freedom of expression in Central Asia in line with the highest democratic standards.

Lastly, Members are concerned that, even though **gender equality** is supposedly protected by law in all countries, gender-based violence, domestic violence, child marriage, discrimination and harassment of ethnic and religious minorities and LGBTIQ people are still widespread in Central Asia. The Central Asian governments are urged to prevent these human rights violations.