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EU-Central Asia: a new strategy in a reshaped geopolitical landscape

In June 2017, the European Council agreed to renew the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia by the first half of 2019, in order to redefine its policy towards the region following the developments that modified the regional scenario in the last decade.

The renovated EU-Central Asia strategy should be based on a realistic and coherent approach aiming at achieving not only Realpolitik goals (energy diversification and regional security) but also to promote a greater commitment in the fields of education, healthcare, borders, civil society, good governance, rule of law (J. Boonstra, M. Laruelle, A Marazis, T. Tsertsvadze, *A new EU-Central Asia Strategy: Deepening relationships and generating long-lasting impact*, EUCAM Working Paper, No.20, November 4, 2018, <https://eucentralasia.eu/2018/11/a-new-eu-central-asia-strategy-deepening-relationships-and-generating-long-lasting-impact/>).

At the beginning, the EU strategy envisaged to combine the bilateral and the regional dimension of cooperation. If the bilateral dialogue focussed on meeting the national needs of the Central Asian republics by means of tailored policies, the regional cooperation approach was elaborated to manage transnational issues and challenges as drug trafficking, water management, security. However, the EU was not able to extend a real influence in the region, due to several hindrances that have hampered the achievement of long-term goals. Two of the main factors against were the resistance of some Central Asiatic political leaderships towards the adoption of reforms as well as the economic and military influence of China and Russia.

The new EU strategy will act in a regional scenario that is very different from 2007. Russia and China have started their ambitious geopolitical strategies in the region (respectively the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative). Nevertheless, some regional developments could support

EU's ambition to become a reliable and alternative partner for Central Asian republics.

Undoubtedly, Uzbekistan's new regional foreign policy represents a positive signal for the EU initiative to promote a regional dialogue: EU intention is to extend the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to Tashkent (until now only Kazakhstan signed EPCA), recognizing Uzbekistan as an important partner for its effort to improve cooperation with neighbours to manage and solve traditional regional disputes, such as border demarcation and water management.

Furthermore, after the agreement on the Caspian status, the EU could have the opportunity to involve Turkmenistan - holding the fourth largest gas reserves in the world - in the Southern Gas Corridor project, building the underwater Trans Caspian Pipeline (TCP) as a concrete alternative route for European gas imports. Turkmenistan's engagement remains one of the main challenges for the EU revised strategy: in fact the Partnership Cooperation Agreement is still pending. On the other hand the EU Commission should find a way to follow a step-by step policy to involve gradually Turkmenistan in a framework of cooperation with the EU without yielding on good governance promotion and human rights protection (Fabio Indeo, *Revitalizing the EU-Central Asia strategy*, ISPI Commentary, March 14, 2018).

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