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Italy and Central Asia: moving towards a new framework of cooperation

The 13th of December 2019 the Italian Government organized in Rome the international conference “Italy and Central Asia: Strengthening Mutual Understanding, Cooperation and Partnership”, involving high-representatives political delegations from the five Central Asian republics.

Italy appears to be the first EU country to adopt this specific dialogue format, attended by the Foreign Ministers of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan together with the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. During the conference, both parties examined key areas of cooperation highlighting a considerable potential for development on a mutually beneficial basis.

For the Italian government this meeting was significant in order to increase trade cooperation and investment opportunities in Central Asia: the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi Di Maio, stressed that bilateral trade with the region grew by 25% in 2018 and by 28% in the first nine months of 2019 (“Di Maio, Asia centrale regione chiave”, Ansa, December 13, 2019). Furthermore, Italy would like to enhance its clout in Central Asia not only at a bilateral level but in the wider framework of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, where Italy can play an important role mainly to promote dialogue and cooperation among parties in the regional management of water, one of the most sensitive issues complicating relations among post-Soviet Central Asian countries.

In the last years, Italy has showed a growing interest towards the region: the Italian Foreign Undersecretary Manlio Di Stefano visited all five Central Asian states, in order to enhance political and diplomatic relations in the region (“Il Sottosegretario Di Stefano in Missione in Kazakhstan e Kyrgyzstan”, MAECI, November 12, 2019, www.esteri.it). The leading idea of the Italian government is to further develop relations with the region, given its geostrategic relevance and centrality for the implementation of Euro-Asian connectivity, one of the current EU-flagship projects. The Italian position is that a long-term energy cooperation (due to the role of ENI in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) could be a useful for national interests. It is clear that a conducive geopolitical landscape

in Central Asia to Italian inroads would impact on China's dominant position and the attractiveness of the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union; it is too early to assess if both big powers will tolerate Rome or strangle its fledgeling influence.

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