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The EU and Central Asia: new opportunities for a stronger partnership

After two years of work and consultations, the EU Commission has finally adopted the new EU strategy towards Central Asia. The main rationale of this new strategic document appears to be the need to recalibrate EU approach in Central Asia after 12 years from the launch of the first EU strategy.

Key priorities of this renovated engagement of the EU in Central Asia are: partnering for resilience, partnering for prosperity and working better together. The main aim is to allow Central Asian republics to address the challenges related to their socio-economic goals and security. Consequently, the promotion of democratisation, reforms, rule of law, modernisation are the main field of mutual cooperation (European Commission, *The EU and Central Asia: new opportunities for a stronger partnership*, Joint Communication to the EU Parliament and the Council, Brussels, May 15, 2019).

Compared to 2017, the EU currently has the great opportunity to take advantage of the new scenario of improved regional cooperation, based on an ongoing political dialogue among Central Asian presidents. Twelve years ago, Western sanctions against Uzbekistan (after the Andijan massacre in 2005) hampered a full engagement with this strategic country. At present, Uzbekistan appears one of the main EU partners for the EU, following the adoption of socio-economic reforms and the implementation of a regional policy based on cooperation promoted by the President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. EU's intention is to extend the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and maybe Tajikistan (until now only Kazakhstan is signatory) in order to bolster economic and trade cooperation relations.

One of the mainstays of this strategy is the promotion of the interconnectivity, a key driver for Central Asian countries, allowing them to benefit of modern infrastructures, to promote economic diversification and regional integration. In addition to a profitable increase of trade between EU and Central Asia, as well as among Central Asian republics, it is relevant to highlight that both the EU and Central Asia are also involved in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, that aims to enhance interconnectivity along the

East-West geo-economic corridor. Furthermore, the EU strategy recognises the need to involve Afghanistan in this regional interconnectivity framework, also because the development of economic relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian republics could support regional stability. The involvement of Afghanistan in the Lapis Lazuli economic corridor (from Afghanistan to Turkmenistan and then, after crossing the Caspian Sea, to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey) clearly shows the huge potential of Central Asiatic interconnectivity projects.

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