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# MODEST BUT CONSISTENT: EUROPEAN UNION POLICYMAKING TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

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*The European Union (EU) is a relatively new actor engaging with new states in Central Asia. Its engagement is modest but consistent. Because of Russia's war in Ukraine, Brussels seeks to become more strategic in its political, economic and security engagement. The EU is, however, unlikely to step away from soft power engagement or emphasising human rights. These and related matters are often discussed through the lenses of 'what' questions: What the EU seeks to achieve in Central Asia, or what Central Asian states' interests are in engaging with the EU. In contrast, this paper examines the EU's Central Asia policy through 'why', 'who' and 'how' questions, namely 'why' the EU engages with Central Asia, 'who' are the drivers of the EU's Central Asia policy and 'how' this engagement comes about.*

### WHY?

The European Union's ambitions are high, while its actual engagement with the region remains modest. European interests are centred on trade, stability, human rights, and development cooperation.

### Talking to neighbours of neighbours

The EU became a foreign policy actor in the nineties and especially the 2000s, mainly against the backdrop of the war in former Yugoslavia. After the 2004 and 2007 enlargements and getting actively involved in peacebuilding and promoting its integration and regional cooperation narrative in South East Europe, the EU also started to look further afield. It developed cooperation programmes with North Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, including the South Caucasus, bringing all together in 2004 in the European Neighbourhood Policy.

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Whereas the Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched in 2009, was built on a vast basis of engagement, the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia can be considered a start of cooperation with the region of Central Asia (bilateral ties already existed).

Because the Central Asian region is located in-between China and Russia and has few ties with the Caucasus, Europe started pitching Central Asia as ‘the neighbours of the neighbours’. The EU sees Central Asia still in the framework of ‘former Soviet republics’ and as an extension of Europe. This is why foreign ministries (and think tanks) often coin the term ‘Europe and Central Asia’, recognising that Central Asia is not Europe geographically but an extension of Europe due to its Soviet past.

### European interests

European interests in Central Asia are minor compared to other regions. Nonetheless, the EU as an institution is a formidable actor on behalf of Europe in Central Asia. In many areas, European foreign policies still rely on past colonial ties. Thus, Spain and Portugal actively shape EU policy towards Latin America, while France is a driver of approaches to North Africa and the Sahel. Because there is no European colonial past with Central Asia, no member state feels responsible for an approach on Central Asia-related matters. As a result, EU member states leave European policy towards Central Asia with the institutions. The exception is Kazakhstan, which hosts embassies from most EU member states, primarily reflecting trade interests.

At the time of the EU strategy development in 2007, energy security was a key driver to engage with Central Asia. Russia was nationalising its energy sector, curtailing European and American energy companies and using pipelines as a weapon to pressure European neighbours. When large-scale energy connections over land and via the Caspian Sea were deemed non-viable, attention shifted to security as the EU sought to step up ties with Central Asia while NATO withdrew from Afghanistan. Soon after, the security focus was replaced by a trade and transit focus as the EU sought to respond to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, the EU developed the ‘Connecting Europe and Asia’ strategy in 2018. The 2019 EU strategy for Central Asia sought to bring over a decade of shifts of interest together in an updated document by highlighting ‘resilience’ (including values and security), ‘prosperity’ (including energy and environment) and the mantra of ‘regional cooperation’ that the EU continues to promote.



## Around Russia

Russia's war in Ukraine has not fundamentally shifted the EU approach to Central Asia. Attention and funding remain modest. The most significant change is the strong focus on connectivity with Central Asia around Russia – the Middle Corridor. This focus on connectivity, applied to transport, energy, and digitalisation, risks the EU overlooking other areas it has invested in throughout the years - education, human rights, etc. With a focus on energy connectivity, the EU seems to return to its initial interest in the mid-2000s when the first strategy was developed. At the same time, the EU seeks to become a more 'strategic' actor worldwide, understanding it cannot entirely rely on United States (US) security support and needs to form its own relationship with China. In that sense, EU approaches to Central Asia are expected to become less comprehensive and more compact in addressing key interests.

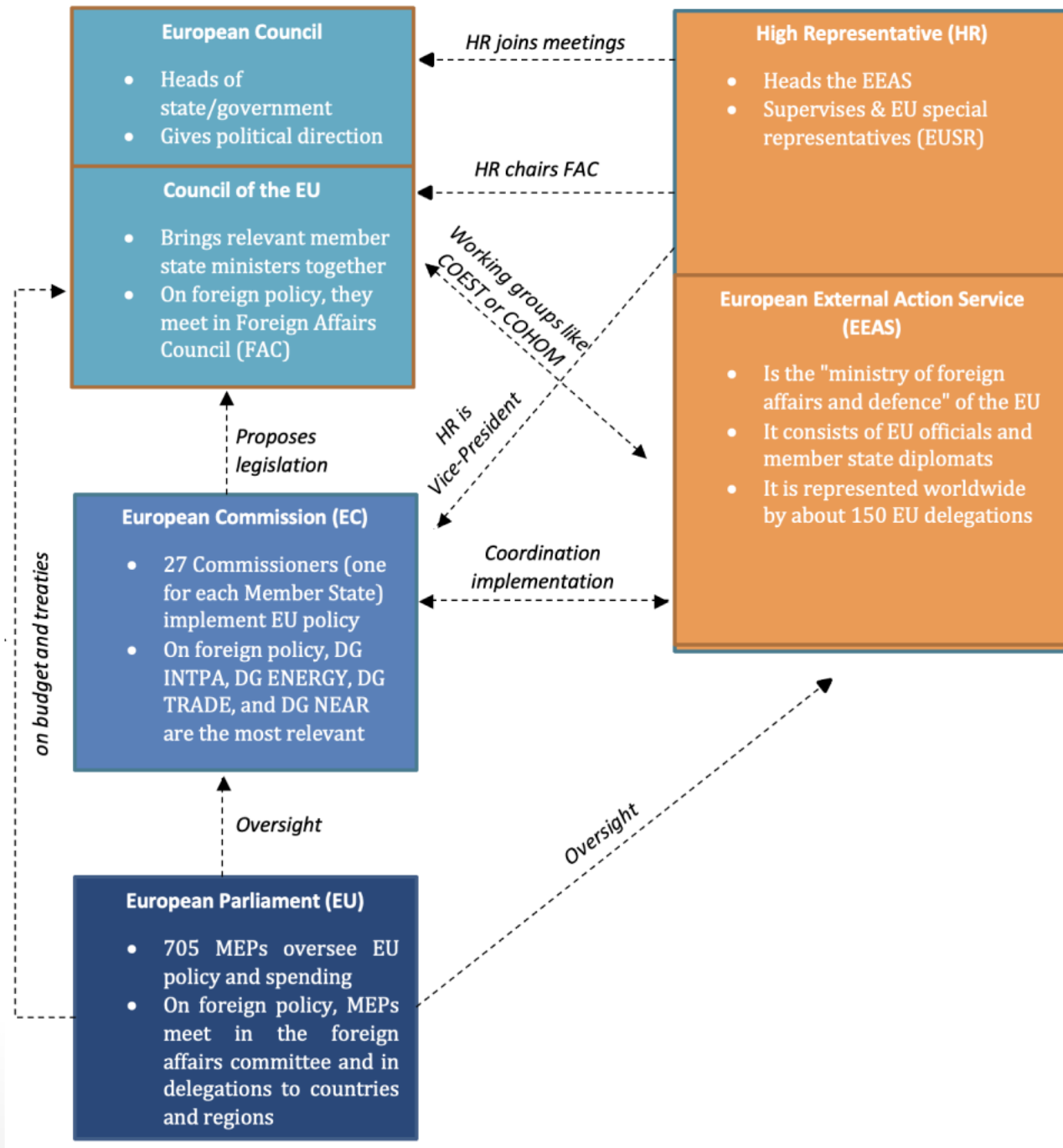
## WHO?

EU policymaking is complicated, also regarding relations with Central Asia. The three leading institutions in charge of policy development and implementation are the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament. On foreign relations, one could argue that the Council does policy (diplomacy) and the European Commission spending (development cooperation). See Figure 1 that visualises EU foreign policy making.

### The Council – The member states

Whereas the EU is a supranational international organisation, the most important decisions remain with national governments. The European Council is a collegiate body of heads of state or governments of member states whose decisions lay the foundations for EU policies that the Commission then implements. In the Council of the European Union (different from the European Council), the member states come together on specific subjects at the ministerial level. The Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) brings all European foreign ministers together as they set the Union's foreign policy. Important decisions are initiated and finalised here, for instance, on developing a new strategy. Often policy is initiated in the Council by the Presidency, a position that rotates annually among member states. EU member states have representations (embassies) to the EU that bring diplomats together in Brussels. Two venues where member states discuss Central Asia include COEST, the working party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and COHOM, the working party on human rights. Until recently, COEST meetings primarily dealt with EaP issues and barely with Central Asia.

Figure 1. EU Foreign Policy Making (designed by Saxon Wright-Casanova)



This has changed: Ukraine is discussed mainly at a higher level in the FAC now, allowing a greater space in COEST for deliberation on Central Asia.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the ‘foreign and defence ministry’ of the EU. It is headed by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell. He sits among the member state representatives in the Council and is Vice-president of the European Commission, the daily administration of the EU. The EEAS implements the policy of the Commission and the Council but is a separate entity in the EU, hovering in-between both institutions while speaking on behalf of the EU abroad. The EEAS has a Central Asia division with desk officers covering the five Central Asian countries. This policy unit is central to the EU's relations with Central Asia, and it is a place where Council, Commission, European Parliament, and civil society views come together.



*European Council President Charles Michel and leaders of Central Asian states at the EU-Central Asia summit in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, 2023 (from president.kg)*

The EEAS has delegations in all five Central Asian countries (the Delegation to Turkmenistan was opened in 2019). These delegations incorporate EEAS diplomats but also the staff of the European Commission, dealing, for instance, with development cooperation. Whereas in Brussels, the interests of the European Commission and the EEAS can collide, staff of both entities normally work as a team in the Delegation on the ground. EU Delegations are important to European foreign policy towards Central Asia as most EU member states do not have embassies in most Central Asian countries (only Germany and France boast embassies in all five states).

In the case of Central Asia, the EU has assigned a Special Representative for Central Asia. EUSRs fall directly under the High Representative and are not fully part of the EEAS. They are either focused on a region or a specific topic. The EUSR for Central Asia, currently Terhi Hakala, is the 'face' of the EU in Central Asia. Often EUSRs are based in the region that they cover. The EUSR for Central Asia has always been located in Brussels (currently next door to the Central Asia Division in the EEAS). The EEAS is the first EU point of contact in case of crisis, both for Central Asian leaders that want to reach out to the EU and for EU institutions that want to relate to Central Asia.

Finally, member states are important actors in the EU's Central Asia relations. Their roles are most visible in two ways. First, certain member states play a frontrunner role in bringing Central Asia to the EU's agenda. It was Germany that initiated the first EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2007. Indeed, Germany's role in Central Asia-related matters is substantial, not because it has a particular affiliation with the region but because it is a prominent actor in the EU. Moreover, member states choose a region or subject as a niche in developing EU foreign policy. Latvia stands out in the EU by its focus on Central Asia, both in terms of national programmes and its staff presence and activities regarding Central Asia within the institutions of the EU. The second way in which individual member states play a direct role is through coordinating the EU's work in Central Asia. In this case, Brussels seeks member states' capacity and expertise to coordinate and implement some of its initiatives. Thus, the BOMCA border management programme is implemented by agencies from Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Italy and Poland.

### **The European Commission – The Union**

The European Commission (EC), together with the Council, forms the executive power of the EU. Each member state assigns a European Commissioner. Commissioners do not represent their countries but lead a Directorate-General (an equivalent of a ministry) in the European Commission that Ursula von der Leyen heads. In relation to Central Asia, there are three Directorate-Generals (DG) relevant as most deal with internal EU policies. First and second, the DG on Trade and the DG on Energy are important for EU ties with Central Asia. DG Trade keeps track of European trade and investment worldwide, including Central Asia and is instrumental in EU agreements with partner countries. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) that the EU signed with Central Asian countries are based mainly on trade. The DG Energy developed Memorandums of Understanding with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and works with eleven East European and Central Asian countries through the EU4ENERGY and SECCA programmes.

The third is the DG on International Partnerships (DG INTPA), which covers the EU's development cooperation worldwide. Dispersal of funds to governments, civil society and other entities is managed by this DG together with the EU Delegations on the ground. In the 2021-27 budget cycle, the EU developed a new funding instrument called the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) that brings together objectives and regions under one umbrella (only pre-accession countries are addressed through another instrument). Funding for Central Asia, on a bilateral basis and regionally, goes mainly through the NDICI.

## The European Parliament – The people

The European Parliament (EP) does not have the legislative and oversight clout that national parliaments have. Nonetheless, it plays an oversight role, especially concerning international agreements that require EP consent. The EP's concerns over human rights were the reason why it did not ratify the PCA with Turkmenistan. The EP always assigns a rapporteur on Central Asia who closely follows relations between the EU and Central Asia and produces regular reports. The Committee on Foreign Affairs and the sub-Committee on Human Rights are most relevant to Central Asia. Next, the EP has a Delegation to Central Asia that manages the EP's relationship with the five Central Asian countries and Mongolia. The latter reminds us that the EP defines Central Asia differently from the other institutions.

Legislative oversight is weak in the EU institutional governance framework and, in part, relies on national legislative oversight by member states. Meanwhile, EU institutions play a strong role in determining and implementing foreign policy towards Central Asia since the member states have little interest and capacities themselves regarding Central Asia. As a result, oversight of EU policies is not the strongest compared to other foreign policy areas. This is why engagement, monitoring and oversight by civil society actors are essential to ensure that the EU carries policy towards Central Asia in an inclusive way. Illustrative is the active posture of NGOs that advocate human rights in Central Asia at the EU.

## HOW?

Since the first EU Strategy in 2007, slowly but steadily, a framework was developed for EU-Central Asia relations that consist of ministerial meetings, high-level political and security dialogues, human rights dialogues, an EU-Central Asia Economic Forum, a Civil Society Forum, and regional initiatives (now Global Gateway Team Europe Initiatives). Of course, member state interests lie at the basis for the engagement, but there is also



bureaucratic development that is spurred by the EU institutions themselves that create new mechanisms and procedures adding to the engagement.

### Growth in engagement and socialisation

As the EU built its policy framework for Central Asia, the latter started to get a grip on dealing with the EU as a partner. Whereas Central Asian leaders can quickly make deals with Russians or the Chinese, they learned that engaging with Europeans is more bureaucratic. While the EU is certainly not the region's primary actor, it demands its partners to engage in its institutionalised mechanisms, including those aimed at regional cooperation. This process of 'socialisation' in which the EU seeks to transfer its values through cooperation is a goal in itself as it is expected to build trust in each other. At the basis lie the PCAs that the EU is now upgrading to Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCA); initially only with Kazakhstan as the country that receives the most interest from Europe but now also with Kyrgyzstan, followed by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

### Developing strategy

Developing new policy approaches is a lengthy process that can lead to events outpacing documents by the time they are released. The 2019 strategy took a lot of time to develop. First, it was necessary to arrive at a shared understanding of the need for a new strategy document due to changed circumstances or outdated policies. After that, the process of developing a new strategy followed, led by the EEAS, Central Asia Division, in close cooperation with the EUSR's office. Whereas only a few policymakers draft the text that the institutions should agree on, a host of actors have been consulted: Member states, EU institutions, and civil society actors. The EUSR also actively and extensively engaged Central Asian governments and civil society actors in the process.

### Buzz wording

Often EU policies (as probably everywhere) are dominated by themes and concepts that are fashionable and easy to bring across to different stakeholders. For instance, the 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy introduced the notion of 'resilience' that was soon used in most policy documents and conversations. Not surprisingly, the 2019 Central Asia strategy takes up the objective of helping to develop a resilient region as a primary objective. Today the buzzword is 'connectivity'. The term stood central to the 2018 'Connecting Europe and Asia' document and is now used in most discussions on EU-Central Asia relations.

## CONCLUSION

The EU is a complicated actor to work with, but once cooperation is up and running, it is a reliable partner that is consistent in its approach and does not bring surprises to its partners. EU interest in Central Asia remains modest, and has not seen a spike as a result of Russia's war in Ukraine. Although the EU currently seeks to become more strategic in its engagement, it is unlikely to counter the ambitions of other substantial geopolitical actors in the region.

Understanding the EU's Central Asia policy requires greater awareness of key actors and processes that shape policy initiatives and implementation. The EU's engagement is an outcome of the interplay of institutions, foremost the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament. The EU's approach to Central Asia has evolved over time, initially driven by energy and security concerns, and later shifting towards trade and connectivity priorities. Reflecting the complex nature of the EU, the process of developing its Central Asia strategy and policies involves extensive consultations with member states, EU institutions, civil society actors, and Central Asian governments and civil society. While the EU's actual influence in the region may be modest, it has been consistent in terms of slowly building cooperation through engagement in many policy areas.

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