

Euroviews. Central Asia – European Union: Towards a strategic partnership



On Thursday and Friday, Samarkand will host the first-ever high-level meeting between the European Union and the Central Asian countries.

This landmark event will open a new chapter in relations between the regions, marking a transition to a qualitatively new level of multilateral cooperation.

Organising such a dialogue highlights the EU's strong interest in developing cooperation and its commitment to strengthening partnerships with the Central Asian states.

As European Council President António Costa stated ahead of the event, "We live in a world of chaos and fragmentation, where the only possible solution for the EU is to strengthen partnerships for peace and prosperity."

"In a multipolar world, more active and targeted engagement is necessary. The first EU-Central Asia summit will contribute to strengthening our commitments to jointly ensure peace, stability, and sustainable progress," Costa explained.

Equally significant was the statement by European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas.

"The EU is taking Central Asia particularly seriously in the context of current geopolitical turbulence," Schinas said.

"At a time when the world is becoming increasingly unstable and insecure, Central Asia remains a region of positive changes. Our cooperation with Central Asia is not a one-time event; we are focused on a long-term perspective."

Commenting on the intensification of cooperation between Brussels and Central Asia, observers note that

in recent years, it has been acquiring a sustainable, systemic and mutually beneficial character.

Legal and institutional foundations of partnership

Since the emergence of new independent states in Central Asia, the European Union has begun working to establish bilateral partnership ties with them. From 1991, the development of the EU strategy in Central Asia has gone through several important stages, which are conditioned by changes in the international relations system, the dynamics of European integration, and the role of Central Asia in world politics -- including energy resources, transit, human resources and geostrategic location.

The first large-scale cooperation program was the "Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States" (TACIS, 1991-2006), which provided support to countries in the region in conducting political and economic reforms, transitioning to a market economy, and strengthening the rule of law. In total, over 3,000 projects were implemented under this initiative, totaling more than €7 billion.

A key achievement of TACIS was the conclusion of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Central Asian countries.

It is important to note that in the 1990s, the EU policy in Central Asia had a pronounced resource-oriented character. The EU viewed the region primarily as a source of energy resources, actively promoting transport and logistics projects (TRACECA) aimed at ensuring hydrocarbon supplies to Europe.

After 2001, the focus shifted towards security cooperation. The main priorities became combating terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan. During this period, the Border Management Program (BOMCA) and the Drug Precursor Control Program (CADAP) in Central Asia were also launched.

The next important stage was the adoption of the first EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2007 (a separate program - the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument - was developed for the Eastern European CIS states).

This stage was marked by the beginning of perceiving Central Asia as a single region. A mechanism for annual meetings at the level of foreign ministers of the EU and Central Asian countries was also created.

Within the framework of the strategy, various projects were implemented - from regional, environmental, and energy initiatives to projects in the areas of security, human rights, and the rule of law.

However, according to experts, the first EU strategy did not meet expectations, as it was comprehensive and contained numerous shortcomings, which prevented it from generating sufficient interest among Central Asian countries.

Moreover, the document was repeatedly modified to increase its effectiveness, but the implemented initiatives and joint programs remained limited. Although the strategy was initially designed for ten years, its replacement with a new program occurred only twelve years later.

Central Asia in a new dimension

The neighborhood and regional partnership policy implemented by the Republic of Uzbekistan under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has made a significant contribution to rethinking the European Union's Central Asian strategy.

As a result of joint efforts, a completely new political atmosphere has formed in Central Asia. Over several years, many problems that had accumulated over decades were resolved. Consequently, the region is becoming a space of mutually beneficial cooperation and sustainable development.

In other words, Central Asia is no longer just a bridge between East and West, as it was traditionally perceived, but an independent actor in international relations.

In this context, the statement by then-European Commission Vice President Josep Borrell at the EU-Central Asia Transportation Investors Forum in January 2024 is indicative.

"Central Asia was somewhere in the wilderness, and now you are at the center of everything," he said at the time.

This changed view of the region's role is also reflected in the EU's strategic approach. Building on previous work, when adopting the new Strategy for Central Asia in 2019, the EU was guided by the main principle of promoting regional cooperation.

This approach is evident in the implementation of all 10 areas of cooperation in the new strategy: human rights, democratisation, education, economic development, energy, transport, ecology, water management, intercultural dialogue and regional security.

This is also evidenced by the new terms used in the strategy text, such as "connectivity" (strengthening inter-regional interconnectedness), "inclusivity" (opening the region to all external actors), and "sustainability" (ability to prevent risks and threats), which fully correspond to the aspirations of Central Asian countries.

Today, the region's states, taking into account internal needs and the emerging geopolitical situation in the world, are interested in attracting European investments, technologies, and innovations to address priority tasks of ensuring stability and sustainable development in areas such as economy, industry, energy, transport, human capital and climate change.

Multifaceted cooperation

The European Union's recognition and consideration of Central Asian countries' interests have significantly intensified comprehensive cooperation in areas such as politics, security, trade, investments, and cultural-humanitarian relations.

In particular, the regulatory and legal framework for EU-Central Asia interaction is being strengthened. Brussels in recent years has been building relationships with the five Central Asian states through Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (CPCA).

To date, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have already signed such agreements with the EU. In March 2024, Turkmenistan signed a protocol to the CPCA, while Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are finalizing the document's signing.

An additional impetus to cooperation development was provided by the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia, adopted in October 2023. It covers key areas of interaction, including inter-regional political dialogue, expansion of trade and economic ties, energy development, formation of a climate-neutral economy, and addressing common security issues.

EU and Central Asian countries maintain active political dialogue at the highest and high levels. In October 2022 in Astana and in June 2023 in Bishkek, two leadership meetings were held, during which parties reviewed promising cooperation areas and confirmed commitment to further strengthening comprehensive partnership.

Additionally, a series of ministerial meetings took place, the latest of which took place on 27 March 2024 in Ashgabat. The meeting discussed preparation for the upcoming EU-Central Asia summit in Samarkand, as well as a wide range of issues, including regional implications of the current geopolitical situation, development of transport and digital connectivity, cooperation in energy, water resources, trade, education, and science.

Strengthening political dialogue opens new opportunities for expanding trade and economic ties and developing industrial cooperation.

The European Union remains the largest investor in Central Asia, providing over 40% of direct foreign investments over the past ten years (over €100 billion). Interaction covers key sectors, including pharmaceuticals, construction, energy, and agriculture.

One of the strategic partnership areas has been the development and processing of minerals. In the context of critical materials supply diversification, Central Asian countries are playing an increasingly significant role in the global market.

Memoranda of understanding signed with Kazakhstan (2022) and Uzbekistan (2024) allow European companies to intensify cooperation with regional countries in high-technology areas.

Implementing the "Global Gateway" strategy in the transport and logistics sphere is gaining particular importance. The Central Asian region is transforming into a key transit node of Eurasian communications, where the Trans-Caspian International Route plays a special role.

Among infrastructure projects aimed at developing the region's logistics potential, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway construction project plays a particularly important role.

A new impetus to cooperation development was provided by the results of the first investment and transport forum of Central Asian and EU countries, held in January 2024 in Brussels. During the event, €10 billion were announced for modernizing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route connecting Asia with Europe.

Another important partnership direction with the EU has been Central Asia's digital integration into the global economy. In March of this year, during EU Commissioner for International Partnerships Jozef Siekela's regional visit, the TEI Digital Connectivity project was launched, focused on developing satellite communications, expanding broadband internet access, supporting digital innovations, and enhancing cybersecurity. These initiatives contribute to forming a more inclusive and sustainable economic model and reducing the digital divide.

Another important aspect of EU and Central Asia interaction remains combating climate change and transitioning to sustainable development. Key initiatives in this area include the "SECCA" project within the "Team Europe" strategy, the Water and Energy Program CAWEP, and "Green Central Asia".

They aim at effective water resource management, developing environmentally friendly energy, and adapting to climate changes.

Strategic priorities for the future

Overall, the current state of relations between Central Asian countries and the European Union demonstrates a mutual desire to strengthen cooperation. The EU remains for the region not only an important trade, economic, and investment partner but also a key benchmark in sustainable development, digital transformation, and environmental agenda.

It is evident that a comprehensive dialogue between the parties is becoming a vital tool in shaping a new framework for interaction. Deepening this dialogue enables both adaptation to global challenges and the development of more targeted and substantive cooperation in priority areas—ranging from energy and digitalization to security and infrastructure development.

In light of the above, it seems appropriate to consider several proposals that could contribute to the formation of a long-term partnership.

For the EU, this means maintaining a strong commitment to supporting processes aimed at strengthening regional cooperation and developing flexible mechanisms for engagement with Central Asian countries, allowing the EU to adapt its strategy and policies to contemporary realities.

The EU should also focus on priority areas of cooperation, such as transport, energy, climate change, and human capital development, as these play a key role in the region's long-term growth.

And finally, Brussels should improve the institutional and regulatory foundations of the partnership, including finalizing the signing of Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with all countries in the region, facilitating their accession to the GSP+ program, increasing the representation of Central Asian countries in EU institutions, and supporting the opening of their branches in the region.

In turn, Central Asia should reaffirm a strong commitment to fulfilling all obligations within the framework of cooperation with the EU, strengthening the region's image as a reliable strategic partner, and continue policies aimed at deepening regional cooperation and constructive engagement with external actors, solidifying Central Asia's status as a space for partnership and shared prosperity.

It must also support the implementation of the EU's Central Asia Strategy, demonstrating the region's commitment to developing cooperation with Brussels and enabling the EU to better plan its actions and set priorities.

Also, the region should initiate cultural and humanitarian programs that promote public diplomacy and strengthen the positive image of Central Asian countries in the EU and vice versa.

Thus, the upcoming EU – Central Asia summit in Samarkand presents a unique opportunity that will undoubtedly give new impetus to the development of multifaceted cooperation between the regions.

This will elevate relations to a qualitatively new level, characterized not only by the expansion of economic ties but also by enhanced coordination in strategically important areas, laying the foundation for a sustainable partnership.

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