

Confronting problems in the EU's backyard: The EU's security interests in Central Asia in light of a worsening security situation

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On October 10, 2011 Kyrgyzstan celebrated the first anniversary of the parliamentary elections which has been seen as an important step in restoring stability after the overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiyev's authoritarian regime in April 2010 and bloody unrest in the south of the country which followed the revolution. The ethnic violence between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek minority claimed nearly 470 lives; 1,900 people were injured and more than 400,000 displaced. The incident in Kyrgyzstan, previously seen as an "island of democracy in Central Asia", took the international community unawares. In the meantime, Afghanistan has been the major hotspot in the region, receiving the most of the international attention. Suddenly, a threat of regional destabilisation coming from Kyrgyzstan raised a new alertness that, besides Afghanistan, more attention should be paid to Central Asia and its security.

The European Union reacted promptly by realising the June 2010 Joint Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, recommending broader engagement in the region, especially concerning the security tasks. Henceforth, concern about Central Asia's security, long time underestimated, has been intensified. Central Asian security matters started to be discussed more frequently within EU institutions, including new topics like the security of Central Asia in the context of the Afghan war, the threat of conflict spillover and the role of the Central Asian countries in the stabilisation process of Afghanistan.

Framework of cooperation

Cooperation between the EU and Central Asia was established immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the proclamation of new independent states. Subsequently, negotiations on Partnership and Cooperation Agreements for close political and mutually beneficial trade and investment relations (PCAs) were launched. In the beginning, most EU member states had no particular interests in the region and so the relations between the EU and Central Asian countries were of rather low intensity (the first PCAs came into effect in 1999). Cooperation was intensified in relation to the EU energy policy aiming at diversification of energy supplies in order to increase its energy security. While looking for diverse sources of fossil energy, the partnership with the Central Asian states with sizeable oil and gas reserves has gained in importance. Consequently, the Baku initiative between the EU, the Black Sea and the Caspian Littoral States, including all five Central Asian countries, was established in 2004. Moreover, a Memorandum on Energy was signed with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

In June 2007, a new coordinated framework for the cooperation between the EU and Central Asia has been set in the document EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, which defined seven key areas of engagement:

- Human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratization;
- investing in the future, youth and education;
- promotion of economic development, trade and investment;

- strengthening energy and transport links;
- environmental sustainability and water;
- combating common threats and challenges;
- building bridges: inter-cultural dialogue.

The adoption of the June 2007 Strategy for Central Asia was a reflection of the growing importance of Central Asian countries for the EU, notably in terms of security, governance and energy, whereas security and stability in the region were declared as a strategic interest. Nevertheless, in the EU Joint Progress Report evaluating the 2007 strategy there is a call for further intensification of EU activities in the security field, specifically: "all areas of the strategy remain important but greater emphasis is needed in key areas that have emerged as major challenges: human rights, broader security, water and energy security, and relations to Afghanistan."

Why security matters

There are two main reasons why the EU is interested in a secure and stable Central Asian region. First, with the enlargement of the Union and the new EU Neighbourhood Policy, Central Asian states have become the "neighbours of EU neighbourhood". A potential conflict in the region could therefore affect the EU. Furthermore, security and stability are also needed while pursuing the EU energy policy. Central Asia with its substantial energy resources may contribute to reducing dependence on the Russian supplies and so help to ensure the EU's energy security. Particularly Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan could constitute an important part of the Nabucco pipeline project since their sup-

plies have a potential to become a major component of the proposed Southern Corridor. Against this background there is no doubt that the strategic importance of Central Asia is going to rise in the future. Unfortunately, potentials of the region are counterbalanced with a number of problems that the EU has to face while pursuing its interests as described below.

Security threats

The destabilisation of Kyrgyzstan in 2010 was a consequence of a combination of problems which are interconnected, present at all national, regional and transnational levels and, so, more or less common for all Central Asian states. The crisis in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 will therefore be used as a model for understanding the complicated situation in the region.

The main source of the June 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan was the political instability in the country after the second Tulip revolution, which had caused the collapse of the Kurmanbek Bakiyev regime. The new provisional government was not able to ensure public order and so the unrest culminated in ethnic massacres in the south of the country. The revolution can be considered as a trigger but there are a number of root causes in the background. Osh and Jalalabad provinces, where the clashes principally took place, constitute part of the Fergana basin, a specific area shared by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan characterised by ethnic heterogeneity, extensive unemployment, endemic poverty, high crime rates and unclear porous borders. In the Kyrgyz part of the basin unemployment reaches 20 %; about 40 % of total population live under the poverty line and 13 % in extreme poverty. Both unemployment and poverty negatively affect the already tense relationship between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek minority. The state fails to tackle the social and economic problems whereas an authoritative form of government with extensive corruption is mainly to blame. The Kyrgyz society has a traditional clan-based structure that is reflected in the political system characterised by a strong central authority and

concentration of power within one clan. Economic stagnation, growing unemployment and corruption scandals increased dissatisfaction among the society and since democratic tools for political change are restricted, people were forced to use undemocratic means to change the political representation. Through the revolution and in the referendum that followed the Kyrgyz expressed not only their disagreement with the government but also the desire for changing the political system. As a result, a new constitution establishing a parliamentary democracy was introduced and the first parliamentary elections were held on the October 10, 2010. Although considered as fair and transparent, the elections showed that the traditional characteristics of the Kyrgyz society such as the clan structure are difficult to overcome. So it happened that a south-based nationalistic party Ata-Zhurt with strong ties to the former Bakiyev regime and a parliamentarianism opponent won the elections and established the government together with the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) and the Respublika party, all including the old political elites. So far, striving for political power has been superior to economic and social reforms crucial for the country's stabilisation.

The Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan, firstly, proved a rise of political and social dissatisfaction in Central Asia and, secondly, showed the possible consequences. A mass revolution in the region, such as the Arab Spring, could have a serious security impact due to the number of Islamic groups operating in the region. Currently, Tajikistan poses the most acute threat in this respect. Although Tajik President Rakhmon denies that the North African scenario of unrest could happen in Tajikistan, his inability to ensure public order during the 2010 Islamist uprising in Rasht (followed by negotiations with regional warlords after failing to defeat them militarily) worries the West. The powerlessness of the Tajik government disappointed especially the U.S., which cooperates with Tajikistan in the matter of transiting supplies and forces to Afghanistan. Also the EU raised its concerns about the worsening security

situation in Tajikistan. In June 2011, Tajikistan was the main topic of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs meeting where the report Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats by International Crisis Group was discussed. The report informs about increasing activities of Islamic groups in Tajikistan building bases in the mountain region or using Tajikistan as a transit country for fighters and drugs to Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan. The amount of drugs being transported through the country is enormous especially due to the advantageous position on the main drugs route to Russia and China and easily penetrated borders. Consequently, Tajikistan can be classified as a "narco-state". The combination of a very attractive geographical location with difficult mountainous terrain, endemic poverty and corruption has also created ideal conditions for Islamist and guerrilla groups in Tajikistan. By that time, members of the UTO, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, armed guerrillas from Afghanistan but also fighters from the North Caucasus have been monitored. Due to the government's inability to tackle the growing terrorists' activities, Tajikistan is considered as the most problematic country in Central Asia that could well become an outpost of militant Islamist guerrillas. A potential revolution and the collapse of the government, which has already proved its weakness, would play into hands of the Islamic militant groups that could have serious consequences for the whole Central Asian region.

The EU's activities to promote security and stability in Central Asia

In the June 2010 Joint Progress Report the EU clearly expressed its position and the future policy direction for the region, both with regard to the present situation and trends. The EU takes into account the complexity of the problems in Central Asia and, for that reason, activities within all seven areas defined in the June 2007 Strategy for Central Asia should be continuously pursued. Moreover, four areas of prime interests have been emphasized where reinforced efforts are needed: human rights, the rule of law and democracy; water and

energy; broad security and Afghanistan. The shift towards security matters is evident considering the selected points. Additionally, the Joint Progress Report reflects threats coming from deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan, connected with an alarming increase in Islamic groups' activities in Central Asia. Both currently pose a serious risk especially with regard to the political instability of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. For that reason, the EU emphasizes the need for tackling security in Central Asia on a broader scale, including Afghanistan, since the danger of the Afghan conflict's spillover and regional destabilisation is evident.

The foregoing overview of the situation in Kyrgyzstan revealed both the broadness and interconnectedness of the problems in Central Asia. On the transnational level, terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking pose the major problems the EU has to deal with. The majority of the activities are rather indirect, e.g. high level political meetings like ministerial EU-Central Asia Forum on security issues or EU-Central Asia ministerial conferences, summits and meetings or a political dialogue encouraged by the EU Special Representative. Nevertheless, the key role in promoting security is assigned to direct actions including initiatives aimed at border management and border staff training like the Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) and activities tackling drugs problems like the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) and the Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC). Insufficient training and a lack of resources are, according to the analysis of the Central Asian states' security sector, the most common problems and a complete Security Strategy Reform (SSR) would be needed. The main challenge, however, poses overwhelming corruption among security organs that facilitates the movement of drug smugglers and Islamists through the region. Counteracting drug trafficking and terrorism is therefore not solely a question of border management, but also of the struggle against corruption - one of the major problems on the national level.

Extended corruption is one of the consequences of the persisting authoritarian regimes in the region. Governments concerned with power preservation fail at ensuring the rule of law, economic prosperity and social needs. This consequently leads to a radicalisation of society and an inclination to terrorism on one side and demoralisation of the security bodies on the other side. For that reason, the EU stresses "promoting human rights and the rule of law as a guiding principle behind all actions and initiatives" and holds regular human rights dialogues with all Central Asian countries and organises annual official meeting and civil society seminars. Some stringent measures were also used in the past, e.g. imposing sanctions on Uzbekistan after the Andijan massacre. Regrettably, neither the sanctions nor other measures in line with the "carrot and stick policy" proved effective. Especially Uzbekistan but also Turkmenistan are too authoritarian and simultaneously aware of their strong negotiating position and, therefore, disregard the EU requirements in the field of human rights and rule of law that hinder the mutual cooperation. Fortunately, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, currently posing the major threat to regional stability, are open for engagement and willing to listen to external advice, preferably from the EU. For example, the Kyrgyz authorities preferred the EU to take over surveillance of inquiry into the ethnic violations in April 2010. Although the EU finally declined, the Kyrgyz offer implies that there are many opportunities for the EU to strengthen its position in the region as a facilitator or mediator.

EU as a conflict mediator and cooperation promoter

There are many unsolved disputes in Central Asia, particularly between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan on the one side and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on the other side. Tense relations endanger regional stability and hinder the cooperation, which would be desirable especially in the security field due to the supranational character of the threats. The major epicentre of conflicts lies in the Fergana basin

shared by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, characterised by unclear borders, ethnic diversity, social and economic problems as described above. A territorial dispute between Kyrgyz and Uzbekistan that led to mining the borders during the 1990s demonstrates how serious the problem is. Another source of tension is water management and sharing of water resources between downstream and upstream countries. Upstream states (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) lacking energy resources need to expand their hydro energy plants while downstream states (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) are depended on water for irrigation. Working out a solution for the problems related to water would be a chance for the European Union not only to improve its position in the region, but also to increase stability and security in Central Asia.

Good relations among the states are a basic condition for further regional cooperation, which is currently very limited. Central Asian countries, indeed, take part in several economic and political organisations, e.g. the CIS, the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). On the other hand, not only the latter mentioned inability to act during the clashes in Kyrgyzstan proves the stagnation of cooperation. The need for improving interstate relations is ongoing due to the rising role of Central Asian states in the Afghan conflict. Participation of Central Asian countries in the conflict resolution poses an opportunity for the presently blocked situation.

Against this background, a stronger role for the EU in the region as a conflict mediator possibly followed by enhanced cooperation, especially between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, could not only lead to strengthening security at the intra-national level but also at the international level in form of a joint fight against drug trafficking and terrorism. Reconciliation arrangements would therefore meet the EU security interests in Central Asia on the one hand and enhance the EU's reputation in the international arena on the other hand.

Opportunities for the EU in Central Asia

Many signs such as the inactivity during the 2010 unrests in Kyrgyzstan indicate a diminishing influence of the main external actors in the region. This, however, creates promising conditions for a stronger engagement of the EU.

Russia's strong position as an attractive economic partner with an attractive labour market has declined during the last years due to the economic crisis. Consequently, Russian-led integration initiatives are stagnating and its possibility to influence Central Asian states wanes just like the Russian language as a regional lingua franca. So it happened that Kazakhstan has remained the only loyal partner in Central Asia and Russia started to bolster cooperation with other neighbours, e.g. Belarus.

The U.S. interest in cooperation with Central Asia waned in connection with the decreasing lucrativeness of local energy resources. Moreover, most of the U.S. attention in the region is focused on Afghanistan and the war against terrorism and the partnership with Central Asian countries tends to be pragmatic and subordinated to this goal.

The third power – China – works, contrary to the U.S. and Russia, intensively towards strengthening the cooperation in the region in order to meet its energy, economic and security interests. Partnership with Central Asian states should help to satisfy China's growing need for fossil fuels and it also offers an opportunity to expand its market. Furthermore, the economic and security cooperation helps to strengthen the integrity and security of the country considering the problematic border region Xinjiang. Nevertheless, China's intention to become the major player in Central Asia is hindered by a deep-rooted distrust of local societies and elites.

To make the list of the actors complete, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and India must be mentioned. In comparison to the former, these countries are less visible in Central Asia; Pakistan and India due to the pre-

occupation with the Afghan conflict, Turkey due to a combination of insuperable historical differences, economic incapability and internal and external political problems and the cooperation with Iran, a diplomatic pariah, tends to be avoided by Central Asian leaders.

Abandonment of Central Asia by the international powers resulting from the vicinity of the Afghan war, decline in the lucrativeness of the energy resources, and other factors described above, opens an opportunity for the EU. The EU has a good chance to strengthen its influence in such a geopolitically important region especially as a conflict mediator. There are many disputes in Central Asia posing a threat to the regional stability. Stronger engagement of the EU is therefore not only of strategic importance, but also a question of its security. The EU disposes of highly qualified personnel and experiences in conducting civilian missions. Therefore, the EU tends to be preferred to take over conflict mediation in the Central Asian region as the Kyrgyz case proved. Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz appeal to conduct surveillance of inquiry into the ethnic violations was renounced especially due to disunity among EU members. This must be avoided in the future and more precise strategy and strong common position needs to be developed. Kyrgyzstan, a country of fragile stability but open for reform and international support, should be one of the priorities for the EU engagement. Even though the endeavour for democratisation in Kyrgyzstan is evident, deep rooted clan and regional identity obstructs cooperation of the political parties and so the implementation of economic and social reforms crucial for stabilisation of the country. Moreover, the government's control over the southern region remains weak and Kyrgyzstan fragile and potentially explosive. It is obvious that stabilisation of Kyrgyzstan can hardly be achieved without foreign assistance. Since the engagement of the U.S., Russia and China is problematic as described above, stronger activity of the EU would be desirable and also mutually beneficial. Besides Kyrgyzstan, there are a number of

other problems where a foreign involvement and especially the EU diplomatic skills would be needed, e.g. water and border disputes between the upstream and downstream countries and in the Fergana basin, etc. Furthermore, the assistance is essential while dealing with supranational problems like organised crime, drug trafficking and terrorism. Also in this respect the EU has developed a number of tools, e.g. the border management initiatives. Even though results of the EU activities, so far, have been rather moderate, the basis for an engagement has been laid and the future of the EU in Central Asia is open.

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