



www.civicsolidarity.org

The EU and consolidating autocracies in Central Asia: a dialogue of the deaf?

Pierre-Olivier Bigo and Jacqueline Hale*

October 2013

Pierre-Olivier Bigo has specialised for a number of years, both in academic studies and professional practice, on EU foreign policy and post-Soviet transitions, with a focus on Central Asia and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. He has spent extended periods in the region, including stints working in diplomatic bodies in Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

Jacqueline Hale is an expert on EU foreign policy, with a focus on Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. Over the past six years she has written extensively on EU human rights and democratisation policies toward these regions and has given evidence before the European Parliament, at Westminster and the Bundestag, as well as consulting for the Council of Europe.

Introduction

“No one has the right to prescribe us how to live and how to build our country”.¹ When President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev made this statement, standing next to British Prime Minister David Cameron on 1 July 2013 in Astana, he sent a clear diplomatic signal to Kazakhstan’s international partners as well as his national constituency about efforts by outsiders to support democratic change in the country.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Central Asian leaders have entrenched authoritarian systems over 20 years using formal and informal control mechanisms
- ▶ International actors such as the EU bolster this process by privileging security concerns over human rights
- ▶ The EU should clarify its ambitions in Central Asia and its expectations from Central Asian counterparts
- ▶ Greater policy coherence will enable the EU to make its values and interests mutually supportive
- ▶ The EU could consult a broader range of CSOs, introduce a structured consultation process, and include CSOs in discussions across a wider variety of sectors

The assertiveness with which authoritarian leaders such as Nazarbayev seek to construct their relations with international partners represents a challenge for policymakers who have identified interests in furthering relations, and who are also pursuing a values-based or transformative agenda. The EU’s 2007 Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia² sought to frame the EU’s objectives towards a distant, authoritarian and politically contested region. It laid out seven areas of engagement including human

* This policy brief reflects the personal views of the authors and does not necessarily represent the views of the organisations with which they are affiliated or all the members of the Civic Solidarity Platform.

¹ “Никто не имеет права указывать нам, как жить и строить свою страну”. Radio Free Europe, “Nazarbayev Defends Kazakhstan’s Rights Record To Visiting British PM”, RFE/RL, 1/07/2013 – URL: <<http://www.rferl.org/content/cameron-kazakhstan-nazarbayev-visit/25032617.html>>

² Council of the European Union, *European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, 2007 in Council of the European Union, *The European Union and Central Asia: the New Partnership in Action*, 2009 – URL: <http://eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/2010_strategy_eu_centralasia_en.pdf>

rights, rule of law, good governance and democracy; youth and education; economic development; trade and investment; energy and transport; environmental sustainability and water; and combating common threats and challenges. Six years on, the EU has established relations and built a policy premised on engagement and dialogue with Central Asian governments. Yet Central Asia remains far from any genuine positive democratic dynamic, rights abuses remain widespread and it is unclear what tangible outcomes the relationship is delivering for the EU.

Much has been written about the extent to which the Central Asia Strategy achieved its objectives, and over whether those objectives were the right ones.³ This paper takes a different approach. It aims to shed light on the ways in which governments in the region are consolidating their autocratic rule domestically, and the extent to which the assumptions, misperceptions and prejudices of the EU help them in this endeavour. It argues that paying closer attention to the nature of each of the regimes, and better understanding their weaknesses, will enable the EU to move beyond over-simplistic analyses such as the ‘Great Game’, which presumes that Central Asian regimes are mere pawns in a chess game played between competing external powers. A more nuanced understanding of how the regimes’ performance varies and how incentives are constructed to support regime stability can also offer fresh policy perspectives for dealing with these recalcitrant and distant partners across the full range of EU interests *and* values.

The first part of the paper provides a brief overview of the political environment in the countries of Central Asia, examining the ways in which local authoritarian systems of governance are being consolidated through systems of incentives and rewards. The second part stresses the responsibility of international actors, such as the EU, which inadvertently support the status quo through the assumptions guiding their policies towards the region and which remain reluctant to speak out about the deteriorating situation of human rights, nor take action in response to major abuses. The final part of the paper makes concrete policy recommendations as to how the current EU-Central Asia relations can be better framed towards fostering open societies.

Entrenching authoritarianism

More than twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, new generations have grown up in Central Asian autocracies. The majority of Central Asia’s population is under the age of 25,⁴ and has little direct experience of the Soviet Union. Yet they are familiar with a number of its tools of repression which have survived the stalled post-Soviet transition of the 1990s. Local leaders have consolidated power in neopatrimonial systems,⁵ misusing public resources for private purposes and bestowing favours on subordinates in return for loyalty. These systems – which vary from regime to regime as the five countries take increasingly divergent development paths – nevertheless share some recognisable features. Elites deploy formal and informal mechanisms of control and shape bureaucracy in view to perform in their interests and to reduce opportunities (and incentives) to challenge their rule. In the process they curtail citizens’ rights, notably freedom of association, assembly and expression.

New generations have grown up in Central Asian autocracies. Local leaders have consolidated power in neopatrimonial systems.

³ See notably: EMERSON Michael and Jos BOONSTRA (eds.), *Into Eurasia. Monitoring the EU’s Central Asia Strategy*, EU-Central Asia Monitoring, CEPS/FRIDE, 2010; BOONSTRA Jos and Michael DENISON, “*Is the EU-Central Asia Strategy running out of steam?*”, EUCAM Policy Brief, no. 17, May 2011 – URL: <http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/Policy_Brief_17.pdf> ; MELVIN Neil, “*The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy*”, EUCAM Policy Brief, no. 28, October 2012 – URL: <http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-PB-28-EN-CA-Future.pdf>

⁴ Council of the European Union, op. cit., p15

⁵ Neopatrimonialism is understood as “a regime headed by a single ruler, who controls access to public resources for private purposes, and distributes material and symbolic rewards in exchange for political loyalty and who segments any would-be elite opposition through the mechanisms of wealth rotation and power balance”. LARUELLE Marlène, “*Discussing Neopatrimonialism and Patronal Presidentialism in the Central Asian Context*”, *Demokratizatsiya*, vol.20, no. 4, Fall 2012, p306

Formal control mechanisms include shaping the administrative apparatus via appointments. This creates a relationship of reward and social dependency between elite officials and the leaderships.⁶ In Kazakhstan, for example, the President holds legal powers to appoint allies at key administrative levels, from *akim* (mayors) of major cities to ministerial positions and senators,⁷ while also choosing heads of national companies.⁸ Recent elections of *akim* of rayons, towns and villages (in line with amendments to the legislation on local self-governance) were more representative of a public relation exercise than a genuine loosening of political control. The latter resembles feudalism, whereby the king privatises local powers and material resources in order to gain loyalty.

Another control mechanism consists of manipulating the law and the judicial system to protect leaders' supremacy. The law is often used solely to idolise the regime and its leader's vision,⁹ often through a cult of personality. In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev is considered as the "Leader of the Nation" (*Elbasy*) and as such he has no formal presidential term limits and benefits from lifetime immunity from prosecution. In Turkmenistan, although studying the two volumes of Niyazov's *Ruhnama*¹⁰ may no longer be on the higher school curriculum,¹¹ it is still a prerequisite before sitting state exams, even for entering university or obtaining a driving license. In the more extreme cases, the autocrats' supremacy is regularly reasserted in order not to be challenged: Turkmenistan's dictator Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov frequently issues "public reprimands" to his ministers and other officials when results and expectations are not met. This method enables

Real opponents are barred from contesting elections or forced into Faustian pacts whereby they hold no effective power.

the man known as *Arkadag* or "protector"¹² not only to humiliate his potential internal competitors but also to avoid being held accountable for failed policy orientations and to keep control of a pyramidal hierarchy.

Since power rests on individual personalities, the issue of succession becomes ever more important. The impending successions of aging Presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two would-be poles

of power in the region, represent a litmus test for political development, extending far beyond the borders of their countries. The outcome will indicate the extent to which autocratic regimes can outlive their leaders, or conversely evolve in a democratic direction after the departure of the figurehead. By contrast, formal elections are a sham,¹³ with the possible exception of recent polls in Kyrgyzstan. They have been described as a "decorative element of a system of authoritarian and totalitarian rule" which fails to serve their most important function of providing an interface between state and society.¹⁴ Several critical OSCE/ODIHR reports on successive votes in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan bear witness to the fact that there has never been a free and fair election in the region. OSCE/ODIHR has never been invited to Turkmenistan and has refused to monitor some elections in Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan's formal shift to parliamentarism and elections

⁶ Ibid., p315

⁷ See: articles 44, 50, 71, 82, 87 and 97 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, available in English on the President's website – URL: <<http://www.akorda.kz/en/category/konstituciya>>

⁸ On 2 July 2013, a presidential decree signed by N. Nazarbayev reshuffled energy officials (Minister of Gas and Oil, Head of National Company 'KazMunaiGaz' and Head of Kazakhstan's Institute of Oil and Gas). This is an example of the power held by the president to control personal career trajectories. Radio Free Europe, "Kazakh President Shuffles Energy Officials", RFE/RL, 03/07/2013 – URL: <<http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-energy-officials-shuffled/25035555.html>>

⁹ KURTOV Adzhar, "Presidential Seat or Padishah's Throne? The Distinctive Features of Supreme Power in Central Asian States", Russian Social Science Review, vol. 48, no. 6, November-December 2007, p90

¹⁰ The two volumes of *Ruhnama*, or "Book of the Turkmen soul", were written in 2001 and 2004 by former Turkmenistani President Saparmurat Nyazov, also called "Türkmenbaşy the Great".

¹¹ SADYKOV Murat, "Turkmenistan: Schools to Scrap Late President's Holy Book", EurasiaNet, 02/08/2013 – URL: <<http://eurasianet.org/node/67336>>

¹² President Berdymukhamedov has been known by the title of *Arkadag* ("patron", "protector") since 26 October 2010.

¹³ Officially, all five Central Asian countries are multiparty systems. However, practices enable only likeminded political parties to access elective positions. In Uzbekistan, few political parties are allowed registration and all of them support the incumbent President Karimov. Although 2011 parliamentary elections re-introduced a multiparty system in Kazakhstan, 81 percent of representatives at the Majilis (lower House) belong to the President's party *Nur Otan*. In Turkmenistan, a constitutional amendment introduced a multiparty system in 2008. Yet, Berdymukhamedov's Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT) won the 2008 elections and holds 100 percent of the seat in the Mejlis (unicameral Parliament). It remains to be seen whether the two newly created parties could challenge DPT's dominance.

¹⁴ KURTOV Adzhar, *op. cit.*, p92

in late 2010 raised observers' hopes of future democratic consolidation, but the process remains fragile. Elsewhere in the region, presidents face phoney opponents during formal elections. For example, during 2012 presidential elections in Turkmenistan, the seven opponents to former President Berdymukhamedov praised his leadership during the campaign. He was subsequently re-elected with 97 percent of the vote. Real opponents are (de facto) barred from contesting elections;¹⁵ their parties denied registration (such as the "Alga!" party in Kazakhstan); or forced into Faustian pacts whereby they hold no effective power (Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan). When opposition figures such as Kazakhstani Vladimir Kozlov, Uzbek Mukhammad Salih, or Turkmen Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, or human rights defenders such as Uzbek Kyrgyzstani Azimzhan Askarov, speak out against authorities, they are silenced by heavy jail terms or forced to live in exile (or worse).¹⁶

	Status (2013)	FH rank (2013)	RWB rank (2013)
Kazakhstan	Not free	182	160
Kyrgyzstan	Not free	158	106
Tajikistan	Not free	172	123
Turkmenistan	Not free	196	177
Uzbekistan	Not free	195	164

Restricting, monopolising and using the media as a propaganda tool is a further mechanism of control. In most of the Central Asian states, harsh legislation hampers freedom of expression and penalties lead to self-censorship. Libel is still a criminal offense in Kazakhstan,¹⁹ Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Central Asian countries feature among the

poorest performers in international rankings for freedom of the press (see table 1). Media outlets are either closed or taken over by the state. In late 2012 in Kazakhstan, newspapers "Golos Respubliki" and "Vzglyad", website "Stan.tv" as well as TV-channel "K+" were banned for "extremist propaganda". In Uzbekistan, the government controls most of the 1,100 media outlets and 4 TV channels. Active censorship and self-censorship also extends increasingly to the Internet.²⁰ Even in Kyrgyzstan's relatively free media environment journalists are subject to pressure.

Central Asian authoritarian leaders also sit atop of informal power systems dominated by cronyism and clientelism as well as remnants of traditional clan structures.²¹ All of these can create opaque networks of power that hinder the rule of law. Clan structures remain, despite attempts by Soviet colonialism to transform these relationships into regional solidarities or corporate groups. Cronyism, fostered by the privatisation of state assets and the transformation of well-placed former apparatchiks into businessmen in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, has enabled local stakeholders to climb the socio-political ladder. Selective implementation of market economy principles and institutions has led to State capture by specific groups. The most important sectors of the economy are controlled by elites and their operations have an international dimension. Cases of embezzlement,

Central Asian authoritarian leaders sit atop of informal power systems dominated by cronyism, clientelism and remnants of clan structures.

¹⁵ During the 2007 presidential elections in Turkmenistan, electoral rules imposed that candidates must have held state office and must have been residing in Turkmenistan for 15 years. Since most independent candidates were living in exile, the rules de facto prevented any unwelcome candidates from running for the presidency.

¹⁶ On 18 July 2013, Salim Shamsiddinov's dead body was found by the police in Amu Darya River. Mr Shamsiddinov was a leading representative of the Uzbek minority in Tajikistan. See: CAMM George, "Tajikistan: Bad Week for President's Critics", EurasiaNet, 19/07/2013 - URL: < <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67274> >

¹⁷ Ranking out of 197 countries. Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2013 - Middle East Volatility and Global Decline*, 2013, pp13-18 - URL: <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP%202013%20Booklet%20Final%20Complete%20-%20Web.pdf>>

¹⁸ Ranking out of 179 countries. Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2013*, 2013, pp20-24 - URL: <http://fr.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/classement_2013_gb-bd.pdf>

¹⁹ On 10 July 2009, Kazakhstani President Nazarbayev signed several decrees amending existing legislation on the media and the internet. One of the decrees extended the libel crime to online content. Another decree broadened the scope of banned media contents to include political issues (elections, strikes, freedom of peaceful assembly).

²⁰ Uzbekistan is one of the most repressive countries in the world as regards the use of the internet. National security services use filtering, monitoring, intimidation and harassment under the pretext of protecting national values. See the extensive study: KENDZIOR Sarah, "Digital Freedom of Expression in Uzbekistan - An example of social control and censorship in the 21st century", New America Foundation, July 2012 - URL:

<<http://newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/KendziorFINAL7172012.pdf>>

²¹ Clientelism can be defined as the relationship between a patron who uses his dominant material and social position to materially and socially protect and promote a client in exchange with the latter's allegiance and loyalty.

tax evasion,²² or money laundering, such as the recent Karimova case,²³ reveal a system of oligarchy, nepotism and impunity in the highest spheres of power.

Populations are coerced into conforming to clientelistic rules. Economic, political and social protection comes at the price of loyalty and allegiance. In some cases Central Asian regimes literally pay off their populations (Turkmenistan supplies free fuel and water in a populist welfare measure). Meanwhile, in regions where the State has a mere formal presence in population's day-to-day lives (such as Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan, large parts of Batken and Osh in Kyrgyzstan, or Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan), local patronage networks operate according to a similar mixture of coercion and consent. Corruption is both a symptom and a cause of the system: systemic failures of state-controlled economy during the Soviet period led to practices such as outlawed entrepreneurship, black markets and criminal commercial activities. Today, Central Asian countries languish at the low end of international rankings according to Transparency International (see table 2). Corruption undermines the principle of rule of law at all levels of society and individual 'bribing power' depends on social position and economic capacity.

Table 2. Corruption perception in Central Asian countries (TI-CPI)²⁴

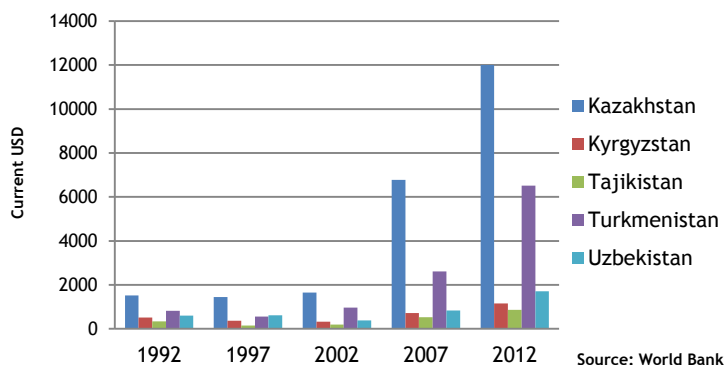
	Ranks (2012)
Kazakhstan	133
Kyrgyzstan	154
Tajikistan	157
Turkmenistan	170
Uzbekistan	170

More insidiously, Central Asian regimes rely through a mixture of coercion and consent on the silence of their populations, whose economic well-being may prevail over political claims, because the latter could lead to uncertainty. The significant growth of GDP over the last ten years (see chart 1) could be a factor in quelling widespread claims for more political rights and freedoms. At the same time, human rights records are among the worst in the world, and the region's human rights defenders continue to battle against constraints – at times paying a heavy price – to call attention to persistent abuses. These range from arbitrary detentions, torture and extra-judicial killings to denial of access to basic rights. Yet, this has led analysts to assert that as long as the social

conditions (mainly employment, public health and education) do not change significantly for the worse, Central Asia's regimes consider that they can get a free pass on democracy and human rights.²⁵

The extent to which this post-Soviet social bargain still functions and can be maintained is a key question for the policymaker interested in fostering democratic change. On the one hand, labour emigration, especially to Moscow, serves as a

Chart 1. GDP per capita (1992-2012)



shock absorber for regimes, sending unemployed and potentially unhappy people abroad while generating money in the form of remittances. On the other hand, the fact that the phenomenon

²² For example, global flight wealth leaving Kazakhstan currently amounts to about USD 138 billion (USD₂₀₁₀) – See: HENRY James S., “The Price of Offshore Revisited – Press Release”, Tax Justice Network, July 2012, p6

²³ In July 2013, French judiciary initiated a case against Gulnara Karimova, daughter of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, on charges of money laundering and corruption, following a previous investigation by the Swiss authorities in June 2012. Swedish IT company TeliaSonera had reportedly given kickbacks worth €320 million in 2007 to set up activities in Uzbekistan. See: POLLONI Camille, “La justice française s'intéresse à la fille du dictateur ouzbek”, Rue89.com, 02/08/2013 – URL: <<http://www.rue89.com/2013/07/31/justice-francaise-sinteresse-a-fille-dictateur-ouzbek-244641>>

²⁴ Ranking out of 176 countries. Transparency International, *Corruption Perception Index 2012*, 2012 – URL: <<http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2012/results/>>

²⁵ As human rights lawyer Evgeniy Zhovtis has put it: “sustainable development is, first of all, about economic development and the maintenance of security. If the ruling elites guarantee it to a greater or lesser extent, then it is possible ‘to forgive’ some deviations from fundamental ideas of democracy and human rights fixed in international obligations” – ZHOVTIS Evgeniy, “Democratisation and Human Rights in Central Asia: Problems, Development Prospects and the Role of the International Community” in MELVIN Neil J. (ed), *Engaging Central Asia – The European Union's New Strategy in the Heart of Eurasia*, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2008, p36

exists reveals the lack of socio-economic opportunities in Central Asian economies (in particular in Tajikistan). The riots in Zhanaozen in December 2011, although suppressed, pointed to a different kind of protest with socio-economic origins and political consequences. The relative difficulty experienced by the Kazakhstani government in managing the protests could be an indicator that it will be more difficult to contain political contestation when the socio-economic situation deteriorates and is mobilised by opponents of those in power.²⁶ For this reason, while Central Asia's immediate future may seem bleakly authoritarian, the extent to which the authoritarian status quo continues to be accepted by the population will be a key strategic question for international stakeholders, such as the EU, which are rhetorically committed to reroute the autocratic path of development of Central Asian countries.

International legitimisation

Central Asia's authoritarian regimes rely on external actors that perceive political change as too risky to their interests, the latter being largely security-led. This includes western powers which even so maintain a rhetorical commitment to democracy and human rights. In practice, the approach of external actors is driven by fears that upsetting domestic or intra-regional power balances could trigger instability that could spill over to undermine international security. Therefore, programming and cooperation focus on combating drugs, shoring up borders and fostering security coordination programmes. As we have seen, local leaders have an interest in perpetuating the status quo, upon which the entire power structure of their regimes rests. External actors actually shape and bolster Central Asian regimes through their engagement with them and their calculations about maintaining the status quo, as well as the assumptions they have about

External actors shape and bolster Central Asian regimes through their engagement with them and their calculations about maintaining the status quo.

their dependency on the local regimes. Three issues, commonly considered central interests for EU actors in Central Asia (energy supplies, containing Islamism and regional security after the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan), illustrate this.

Energy security and diversification is a key driver of the EU's Central Asia strategy and the EU has signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The strategic assumption is that the EU needs

Central Asia to reduce its dependency on Russia, and that one day the Central Asian supplying states could turn off the tap. Yet this perceived dependency ignores the fact that economies of Central Asian energy producing countries are, to a very large extent, dependent on energy rents.²⁷ Although governments are attempting to diversify the economy, especially in Kazakhstan and in Turkmenistan, the very financing of the diversification is based on prospective energy incomes.²⁸ The EU represents a large and lucrative market for Central Asian partners, and the relationship is asymmetric. For example, oil imported from Kazakhstan to the EU represents roughly 5.4 percent of the EU's total imports²⁹ whereas the EU's imports represent almost 80 percent of Kazakhstan's

²⁶ The Zhanaozen events of December 2011 underlined the sensitivity of the social balance, both for the rioters and for the Kazakhstani government, whose overreaction can be analysed as revealing their misgivings about social instabilities. Zhanaozen has since been politicised with the involvement of internal actors defending rioters (with Vladimir Kozlov as a figurehead), and international actors' criticisms.

²⁷ In 2011, the total natural resources rents (in % of GDP) were: Kazakhstan = 38.2 ; Turkmenistan = 43.9 ; Uzbekistan = 27.9 (source: World Bank).

²⁸ For example, in 2010, 46.5 percent of Kazakhstani government's revenues came from oil extraction and exports. See: International Monetary Fund, "Republic of Kazakhstan: Selected Issues", IMF Country Report no.11/151, Washington DC, June 2011, p28 - URL: <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2011/cr11151.pdf>>

²⁹ Kazakhstan holds the 6th rank in the EU's list of energy suppliers and is therefore the biggest supplier in the region. See: European Commission / DG Energy, *Monthly and cumulated Crude Oil Imports (volumes and prices) by EU and non EU country (2011-2012)* - URL: <http://ec.europa.eu/energy/observatory/oil/import_export_en.htm>

total oil exports.³⁰ Finally, the international energy market is characterised by an important reputational dimension. A reliable supplier attracts further investment, notably in terms of infrastructure. Sustainable development and modernisation will require Central Asian regimes to have the foresight to foster an environment conducive to international long-term investment, especially by guaranteeing the rule of law. Turkmenistan, seen as a potential long-term energy partner, is far from being reliable, but benefits from efforts to normalise relations in the framework of the Trans-Caspian pipeline.³¹ Maintaining autocratic rules in the name of energy stability is neither justified nor politically productive in the long run.

Islamism is another factor frequently cited as a major challenge in European policy debates. Central Asia is presented as a simmering hotbed of religious radicalisation. The mixture of post-Soviet societal frustrations, perceptions of growing economic inequalities, low democratic accountability and the fact that State-controlled forms of Islam are not considered representative, add to this misperception. In this regard, Hizb ut-Tahrir, IMU (Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan), Jaishul Mahdi or Akramiya³² are cited by governments and outsiders as major destabilisers. There are frequent court cases against alleged members of Islamist groups in provincial Courts away from the eyes of international monitors. Rights groups consider many of these to be trumped-up charges in politically-motivated cases.

Yet Central Asia is not a dormant Islamist volcano. Outsiders frequently overlook the fact that Central Asian Islam is in majority Hanafi, a generally tolerant form of Sunni Islam, and is also deeply steeped in Sufi tradition, which focuses on the individual's enlightened quest for *ihsan* (perfection in worship) but does not seek to control social behaviours and political life. Beyond the ideological aspect, Islam plays an important social role at the local level for some communities, including filling gaps in social provision. Notwithstanding concerns about Saudi Wahhabi involvement, the growth of *madrassah's* in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan can be grasped in this context. The return to faith as promoted by local religious groups is less about Islamism and terrorism than the retreat of the state from welfare provision.³³

The looming withdrawal of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) from Afghanistan in 2014 plays into fears of a spill over of Islamism, drug trafficking and related violent activities into the entire Central Asian region. In response, EU and US approaches to the region, already framed in security terms, have become even more security-led. Once again, the risk should not be simply set aside, notably in Tajikistan which shares over 1,000 km of largely porous border with Afghanistan. Yet it is far from clear that the state security services of Central Asia could meet international expectations as regards post-2014 regional security management without significant reforms tackling issues of corruption, non-transparency and acting in impunity.³⁴ Given the role of the security sector in fomenting violence (such as in Kyrgyzstan in 2010), external actors cannot afford to overlook the home-grown dimension of many disorders, and that focussing on Afghanistan deflects international attention from Central Asian domestic issues.³⁵

³⁰ KASSENOVA Nargis, "Promises and hurdles in EU-Kazakhstan energy cooperation", EUCAM/FRIDE, EUCAM Commentary, no.20, November 2011, p1

³¹ Turkmenistani efforts to persuade the European Parliament to ratify the PCA (Partnership and Cooperation agreement) can be seen in this context

³² The Hizb ut-Tahrir international Islamist organisation has been active in Central Asia since the early 1990s. Although members are primarily ethnic Uzbeks, the organisation is present in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Akramiya Islamist organisation, a breakaway group of Hizb ut-Tahrir, has been present in Uzbekistan since the mid-1990s. The very media-conscious IMU was formed in 1991 in opposition to President Karimov. Based in Tajikistan and Northern Afghanistan, members conducted attacks in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Ferghana valley) in the late 1990s. Jama'at Kyrgyzstan Jaish al-Mahdi (JKAM) has been active in Kyrgyzstan since the early 2010s when they reportedly pledged allegiance to the Taliban.

³³ See: LARUELLE Marlène, "Central Asian Islamism in the spotlight", EUCAM Commentary, no. 13, June 2011 – URL: <http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_ictcontent/Commentary_13-1_01.pdf>

³⁴ Amnesty International, "Cases of torture and abduction in Central Asia", Amnesty International Public Document, EUR 04/003/2013, 03/07/2013 – URL: <<http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/EUR04/003/2013/en/7bfe91df-0eb4-4841-b23c-6404fo44bc2e/euro40032013en.pdf>>

³⁵ See: GRAUBNER Cornelius, "Central Asia: A look at Sources of Violence and Instability", EurasiaNet, 07/08/2012 – URL: <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65760>>

External engagement which does not challenge the status quo allows partners to set the 'local rules'³⁶ and strengthen the autocratic regimes at the expense of democracy and human rights. Policies of external actors even provide political, material and rhetorical opportunities to consolidate the regimes. For example, coercive legislation against freedom of belief in Kazakhstan³⁷ and in Tajikistan³⁸ was justified by the claimed political will to participate in the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT). The fight against banned Islamist groups in Uzbekistan (another erstwhile GWOT partner) inspires acts of torture inside and outside prisons by the National Security Service (SNB). Several NGOs also warned that the manipulation of the extremism narrative in Central Asian states helped the ruling regimes preventing critical voices from airing their views in the media.³⁹ Regimes and external partners have tended to overlook the damaging impact of such measures, namely the radicalisation of banned and frustrated minority groups. Moreover, cooperation on counter-terrorism in the 2000s provided Central Asian security services with American, Russian, and Chinese training, military hardware, and surveillance instruments.⁴⁰ There are indications that the ISAF departure could lead to similar arms transfers⁴¹ in the framework of the NDN (Northern Distribution Network), which relies on Central Asian countries as an exit route from Afghanistan.

The assent of international partners to the security narrative distorts policy perceptions and renders them complicit in bolstering and legitimising Central Asian autocratic regimes.

In short, a confluence of factors has enabled Central Asian leaders to politicise the security issue and use it to their advantage at home and abroad. They have cited historical traumas,⁴² Islamism, drug trafficking and Afghanistan as justifications for tightening social surveillance of the population, strengthening security services and harassing state enemies domestically and abroad – including to EU territory. The Central Asian security narrative has influenced the setting of external actors' political agendas. The assent of international partners to this narrative not only distorts their policy perceptions but also renders them complicit in bolstering the power and external legitimacy of local leaders as they seek to make their political systems work. The granting of the OSCE chairmanship to Kazakhstan in 2010 and the country's subsequent attempts to position itself as a hub for regional security (in the context of the Iran-P5+1 talks⁴³ and the 'Heart of Asia' initiative⁴⁴) are an example of this. Nursultan Nazarbayev, cited at the beginning of this policy brief, self-confidently rejecting external interference with his vision of Kazakhstan's development, may not enjoy being told uncomfortable truths about the human rights situation of his country. Yet he is happy to contract the advisory services of international actors such as Tony Blair,⁴⁵ who conform to and support his own legitimising narrative.

³⁶ For a more comprehensive analysis of this idea, see: COOLEY Alexander, *Great Games, Local Rules*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, 229p

³⁷ In Kazakhstan, the law on religious organisations and activities seeks to harmonise Islam under the only Hanafi school. The Spiritual Board of Kazakhstani Muslims (DUMK), the Great Mufti Yerzhan Mayamerov as well as Chairman of Religious Affairs Agency Kayrat Lama Sharif control registration of religious groups, diffusion of religious literature and arrests on charges of illegal workshops. Minority groups, notably Ahmadi Muslims, are de facto prevented from worshipping

³⁸ See: EPKENHANS Tim, *Regulating religion in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Some remarks on Religious Association Law and (official) Islamic institutions in Tajikistan*, Security & Human Rights, vol.20, no.1, 2009

³⁹ See: International Media Support, The International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech ("Adil Soz"), Public Association "Zhurnalisty", *The examples of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Political extremism, terrorism, and media in Central Asia*, August 2008 – URL: < <http://www.i-m-s.dk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-political-extremism-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-2008.pdf>>

⁴⁰ COOLEY Alexander, *op. cit.*, p99

⁴¹ In February 2013, the UK provided Uzbekistan with about €524,000 of military kit to secure the passage of UK military equipment within the context of ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan.

⁴² For example: the Tajik civil war, the Afghan instabilities, the Andijan ethnic tensions or the Russian-Kazakh tensions in North Kazakhstan in the 1990s.

⁴³ P5+1 group for talks on Iran's nuclear programme gathered in Almaty in February and April 2013. Kazakhstan may host the next round of negotiations.

⁴⁴ The 'Heart of Asia' initiative, following the Istanbul process initiated in November 2011, aims to foster security, political and economic cooperation and coordination among Afghanistan and its regional neighbours in view of countering terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and poverty. In April 2013, Almaty hosted the third ministerial conference of the Istanbul process.

⁴⁵ In 2011, Kazakhstan paid £8 million to the Office of Tony Blair for consultancy on economic issues. In 2012, Kazakhstan signed a new contract worth £16 million.

Conclusions for EU-Central Asia policy: beyond the limits of a dialogue

The previous sections have shown how formal and informal mechanisms of control are used by Central Asian leaders to support their authoritarian rule against political transformation, and how corruption and clientelism stymie democratic development even where efforts are made to reform formal institutions (in the case of Kyrgyzstan). We have also seen how cooperation with external partners might enable local leaders to further entrench their regimes by providing them with legitimacy. All this has implications for the kind of dialogue the EU and European actors are seeking to promote with Central Asia. This creates room to reflect on the policy changes required for the EU to be a more consistent – and credible – stakeholder in terms of its strategic values agenda, aimed at promoting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the region.

The current EU policy relies heavily on cooperation and dialogue with governments. The dialogue is wide-ranging, and includes human rights dialogues and a rule of law platform. This policy is yet to deliver, in part because Central Asian partners circumscribe the limits of this dialogue, so it cannot tackle issues touching on regime security. This precludes real advances on human rights; for example, in the case of Andijan, the emphasis on dialogue led to a softening of EU sanctions against Uzbekistan even though key conditions set by the EU remained unmet and the human rights situation was deteriorating. Moreover, attempts by Uzbekistan to make human rights dialogues reciprocal undermine the EU's external transformative agenda given the weaknesses of the EU's own internal mechanisms of human rights standards monitoring and enforcement.

The efficacy of dialogue is not helped by the fact that the EU and Central Asia seek a partnership on the back of divergent histories since 1991. The EU has spent twenty years in a process of democratic consolidation, whilst Central Asia's leaders have engaged in entrenching their autocratic rules. This means the EU needs to take care over articulating concepts such as “common threats and challenges”,⁴⁶ since, as we have shown, a threat may look different to countries which define security by regime survival. Even the logic of regionalism and cooperation operating in the EU does not apply in Central Asia where concepts of ‘shared sovereignty’ and free movement of goods and services across borders are alien to feudal systems, designed to accrue wealth to the head of each regime as well as local patrons.

A general premise of this paper is that, to make its policy more effective, the EU needs to define its objectives more clearly and to rethink its focus on engagement through dialogue by questioning some of the key assumptions underpinning its approaches to Central Asian partners. The following are six key recommendations for EU policy towards Central Asia:

- *The EU should clarify its ambitions for Central Asia.* At present, by allowing Central Asian governments to call the tune, the EU plays largely a role of lenient fund and prestige provider. The lack of clear objectives in the 2007 Strategy feeds into this. The strategy pursues values (governance, human rights and the rule of law) and interests (security and stability) in tandem on paper, but policy practice has treated them as competing, rather than complementary.⁴⁷ Interests often prevail despite the fact that the EU's values agenda accounts for much of its ‘soft power’. EU activities and programmes in the region have increased significantly in the absence of an overall strategic vision or understanding of the EU's role and responsibility⁴⁸ as compared to other influential stakeholders, such as Russia

⁴⁶ Council of the European Union, *The European Union and Central Asia: the New Partnership in Action*, 2009, p27

⁴⁷ The narrative of the EU conciliating promotion of values and defending its (Member states') interests has been developed in EU statements and texts since 2007. Notably, the Strategy was adopted in 2007 because it “provided the necessary blend of interests and values”. Council of the European Union, *The European Union and Central Asia: the New Partnership in Action*, 2009, p9

⁴⁸ See: MELVIN Neil J., “*The EU needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy*”, EUCAM Policy Brief, no.28, October 2012, p3 – URL: <http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-PB-28-EN-CA-Future.pdf>

and China.⁴⁹ The EU will need to better communicate its intentions, based on consultation with a broader variety of partners including Central Asian civil society organisations (CSOs) and international CSOs.

- *The EU should specify that its approach to security is premised on rights and transparency and introduce measures to ensure that this features in its security cooperation with Central Asian counterparts. Although the EU's strategic interests of security and stability are presented as a mutual concern, the conflating by local leaders of the notion of security with regime survival risks undermining the values-based approach to which the EU is committed.⁵⁰ The most recent review of the Central Asia strategy, which emphasises security in response to the Afghanistan drawdown, risks bolstering authoritarianism in the region, unless the EU clearly insists on key principles, notably on security sector reform. Member states can support the EU's rhetorical commitment to human security,⁵¹ by taking measures to reduce the transfer of arms which can be used by Central Asian governments against their own populations. The EU can also introduce concrete mechanisms for the inclusion of civil society in debates – to a high-level, including at the recently launched High Level Security Dialogue – so as to bring greater accountability to the security sector and the security strategies of Central Asian governments.*
- *The EU approach should pay more attention to each regime, with its complex web of political and economic underpinnings, and differentiate further between these regimes based on their governance record. Even this paper's cursory overview of regional tendencies shows up national differences as Central Asian countries pursue increasingly divergent development paths. In policy terms, responses therefore need to be country specific, rather than addressing an undifferentiated region, a pitfall into which the present EU Strategy tends to fall. This implies that the EU will also need to take a more differentiated stance vis-à-vis the countries in the region by introducing clearer definitions of what success could look like in a given country. EU delegations, present in four of the five countries, can help in this endeavour. In addition, the EU should urgently establish differentiated benchmarks in order to measure successes and failures in the field of human rights and democratisation – as well as other sectors. As frequently called for by human rights groups, a concrete measure would be to make country human rights strategies public so that they can be measured and assessed during dialogues.*
- *The EU should extend its dialogue beyond governments. After six years of building government-to-government relationships the EU should create a more comprehensive platform for CSOs which continue to be under threat in the region. Limited consultation and follow-up with CSOs in the preparation of Civil Society Seminars (CSS) ahead of human rights dialogues and low attendance by government officials at these seminars reflects a failure of the EU to mediate between governments and local CSOs. The ENP's "partnership with societies" offers a framework here. The EU could consider supporting a Central Asia civil society forum and national civil society platforms gathering local CSOs*

⁴⁹ For a comparative study of the EU's, Russia's and China's involvement in Central Asia in the field of security and development, see: PEYROUSE Sébastien, BOONSTRA Jos and Marlène LARUELLE, "Security and development approaches to Central Asia – the EU compared to China and Russia", EUCAM Working Paper, no. 11, May 2012 – URL:

<http://www.eucentralasia.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Working_Papers/WP11.pdf>

⁵⁰ On the conceptual discrepancy between the EU's and local approaches to security, see: PEYROUSE Sébastien, "Human Security in Central Asia: Can the EU help out?", EUCAM Policy Brief, no. 21, October 2011 – URL:

<http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/PB_EUCAM-21.pdf>

⁵¹ In 2010, the Joint Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia called for enhancing efforts in "security broadly speaking" (p6) and for "expand[ing] the concept of security to include major international and regional challenges such as human security (...)" (p26). Later, in 2012, the EEAS Progress Report underlined that "the EU effort to promote broad-based reforms and modernisation is aimed at boosting the kind of political, sustainable economic and social development essential to provide human and state security and form essential complements to our co-operation efforts on more core security related issues" (p16). See: Council of the EU and European Commission, *Joint Progress Report to the European Council on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia*, 11402/10, 28/06/2010 – URL: <<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st11/st11402.en10.pdf>>; EEAS and European Commission, *Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia Implementation Review and outline for Future Orientations*, 11455/12, 28/06/2012 – URL: <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/20120628_progress_report_en.pdf>

together with European CSOs (particularly from Eastern Europe and Russia) and working on specific policies including human rights, social and economic rights, and public accountability. Along the lines of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum this would involve capacity building of CSOs to work on other pertinent themes (defined by the CSOs themselves), in sectors including water and rural development, energy and trade. In view of tackling issues which go to the heart of the systems of misgovernance in place in the region, the EU should empower a wider range of independent CSOs on the ground. These could include community-based organisations and ad hoc groups of citizens protesting on working and living conditions, advocating for greater public accountability, countering corruption, and monitoring budgets, alleged cases of embezzlements and conflict of interests. Led by delegations and the EUSR, the EU should seek to understand local realities and work on bottom-up processes to support democracy and human rights. This may also mean an end to investing in formally powerless institutions in authoritarian contexts, such as the parliament of Uzbekistan.

- *The EU should enhance institutional and political coordination.* It should look again at how programming and policy can better match up and how it can foster more effective coordination between its funding arm (DEVCO) and the EEAS, including in delegations.⁵² There is a need to encourage inter-institutional consultations and coordination between member-states to seek coherence among diverging national foreign policy agendas, which are often driven by national interest, while values-based efforts on human rights and democracy are left to Brussels. Member-states could take greater ownership of the values agenda concretely by leading on initiatives in-country for the EU on specific concrete thematic areas, such as court monitoring and torture prevention.
- *The EU should promote policy coherence and act consistently with its values.* It should also make sure there is greater coherence between the Central Asia Strategy, the human rights policy and relevant energy and trade policies. Taking advantage of the momentum created by the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI), the EU should implement the recently revised European Accounting and Transparency directives as a next step to encourage the disclosure of information relative to payments made to governments. In Central Asia, this could limit the involvement of European companies in cases of embezzlement and corruption and help developing systems of accountability with the view to hindering the process of state capture by local elites. The EU should also fully implement in Central Asia its Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, notably by “making trade work in a way that helps human rights”.⁵³ By promoting democracy and human rights, including socio-economic rights by its actions as well as words, the EU will retain an important part of its ‘soft power’ and establish an enabling environment for citizens to seek legitimate rulers and claim rights, which will be crucial for equitable development and an open society.

Authoritarian rule is not inevitable in Central Asia. We have shown the paradox that governance systems are both deeply entrenched and yet brittle. Authoritarianism rests upon visible personalities, repressive mechanisms as well as shifting incentives. By listening more to wider ranging voices to better understand those incentives and the demands of citizens towards their government, the EU can begin to interpret more than the governing party line. And by communicating its aims, objectives and redlines more clearly, the EU has the potential to turn its Central Asia policy from a dialogue of the deaf into something more productive for itself and the citizens of the region.

⁵² The division between EEAS and European Commission personnel leads to miscommunication and inconsistencies on the ground. More generally, the EEAS is not able to mobilise the negotiation weight that DG-Trade and DG-Energy represent in order to voice one political message with enough technical backup. In the field of human rights, dissonance occurs between COHOM positioning and the way leading countries reflect the issue in the field.

⁵³ Outcome no. 11 of the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. See: Council of the European Union, *EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy*, 11855/12, 25/06/2012 – URL: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131181.pdf