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**“Democracy promotion East and South after the Arab Spring:
Re-evaluating the EU's Engagement with Authoritarian Regimes”**

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**Re-evaluating the EU's engagement with the Central Asian republics
in light of the Arab Spring**

Fabienne Bossuyt¹

The recent wave of popular uprisings and political upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East has sparked a lively debate among commentators and practitioners on whether an Arab-style Spring could also occur in Central Asia. As political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010 indicated, Central Asia is not immune to popular contestation resulting in leadership change. The causes of the popular uprisings in Kyrgyzstan may well be very country-specific, it adds to the observation drawn from the unfolding events in the Arab world that even the most apparently resilient authoritarian leaders risk removal from power as a result of democratic yearning. Still, opinions are divided on whether an Arab-style Spring is likely to take root in Central Asia. Some analysts see sufficient similarities between MENA and Central Asia, and believe that the similar mix of hopeless economic circumstances, deficient governance, endemic corruption and relentless repression could equally backfire on the incumbent Central Asian regimes. Others, however, see little scope in the region for popular contestation (leaving Kyrgyzstan aside), arguing that Central Asia is too different from MENA. From this perspective, the ongoing wave of democratic revolutions is considered a unique situation, which constitutes the culmination of region-specific drivers, and could not be repeated in Central Asia, not least given the countries' lack of a democratic background in their political culture. Some observers contend that the unfolding events in the Arab world may even serve the authoritarian rulers in Central Asia as a cautionary warning to their citizens against political upheaval and social unrest.

This policy brief offers an analysis of the paradigms and strategies that have guided EU engagement with the five Central Asian republics. It also gives attention to the EU's democracy promotion agenda, highlighting the factors that explain the limited impact of EU democracy promotion activities in the region. Based on theoretical and empirical reflections on how to improve EU engagement with

¹ Assistant Professor at Ghent University, Department of Political Science, Centre for EU Studies, Belgium.

the countries in Central Asia, the policy brief concludes by presenting some concrete policy recommendations for the EU's democratisation policy towards the region.

From invisible donor to strategic player

Situated at the most outward point of the EU's eastern periphery, the Central Asian republics triggered only little interest from Brussels *throughout the 1990s*. The EU considered Central Asia as the most backward region in the former Soviet Union, and as the least inclined to adopt European norms and values. Indeed, while the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek leaderships were enthusiastic about forging stronger relations with the EU when signing the EU-initiated Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), their enthusiasm was only marginally reciprocated, especially as the EU's political engagement with the region remained low-key. Replacing the 1989 Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the Soviet Union, PCAs were concluded with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995, and with Uzbekistan in 1996. A PCA was signed with Turkmenistan in 1998, but the agreement is not yet enforced as the ratification process remains frozen. Although the PCAs with the Central Asian countries provide for the establishment of political dialogue, covering human rights, constitutional reform and regional issues, they are primarily economically and technically oriented, with their political and institutional framework being less elaborate than that of other PCAs, particularly those with Russia and Ukraine. Still, the PCAs with the Central Asian republics provide the legal basis for cooperation across a wide range of sectors, including trade, economic cooperation, legislative approximation to EU norms and standards, and improvement of the business and investment climate.

European aid provided to the five Central Asian states was considerably lower than the means given by the EU to the other countries of the former Soviet bloc. In 2001, the Union even intended to reduce its assistance to Central Asia. However, following the terrorist attacks of 11 September and the launch by the United States of its large-scale military operation in neighbouring Afghanistan, the region was suddenly put in the spotlight, revealing its geostrategic importance. This therefore provided an initial trigger for increased European political interest in this peripheral zone. Nevertheless, until the first half of the 2000s, the EU's engagement with the region remained low in terms of visibility and effectiveness. As the other post-Soviet countries, the Central Asian states benefited from *European aid* under TACIS. As an instrument introduced shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, TACIS was designed to promote the transition to a market economy and to reinforce democracy and the rule of law in the partner states. However, reform in the Central Asian states was slower than in most other CIS countries, amongst other things due to limited administrative and technical capacity. Crucially, this indicated that the Central Asian states faced problems that went beyond matters of 'transition', for which TACIS was not adequately equipped.

The terrorist attacks of *11 September* and the subsequent launch of the military campaign against the Taliban in *Afghanistan* were a turning point in how the EU viewed Central Asia. In granting a new geostrategic importance to the Central Asian states, these events mobilised the political will in the EU to increase funding for and enhance engagement with the region, including in fields related to the EU's security. Yet, it took until the *EU's eastern enlargement in 2004* and the inclusion of the three South Caucasian countries into the ENP before the EU as a whole woke up to the fact that relations

with Central Asia needed to be intensified and that it had to become a more visible actor in this geostrategically significant region. A final incentive for stronger ties with Central Asia emerged from the gas conflict between Russia and the Ukraine in early 2006, which revealed the need for the EU to scale back its energy dependency on Russia. The EU's *search for alternative oil and gas suppliers* quickly led it to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which were viewed as potential partners in the EU's attempt to diversify its energy supplies. Related to this, enhanced EU involvement in the region was also necessary in order to *counterbalance* the strong influence of the region's big neighbours, Russia and China. A monopolisation of Central Asia by both states was to be avoided, because it would jeopardise not only the EU's chances of getting direct access to the region's energy resources but also the Central Asian countries' - already slow - progress towards genuine democracy and political pluralism. At this point, the EU came to acknowledge the need to devise a strategic document that would support and enhance the EU's role in Central Asia in line with its interests, which culminated in the launch of a political strategy for the region in June 2007. Simultaneously, TACIS in Central Asia was replaced with the 'Development Cooperation Instrument' (DCI), the Commission's new development aid instrument.

Reflecting an attempt to develop a comprehensive and long-term approach to upgrade relations with Central Asia, the EU's *Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia* provides a framework for enhanced cooperation, building *inter alia* on the existing PCAs and outlining joint goals to foster closer relations in the political, economic, and trade, as well as cultural and educational spheres. More specifically, the strategy identifies seven priority areas for enhanced cooperation, i.e. promotion of human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratisation; facilitation of education of Central Asia's youth; promotion of economic development, trade and investment; enhancement of energy and transport links; fostering of environmental sustainability and water management; border management, drugs and human trafficking; and development of intercultural dialogue. The Strategy presents both a bilateral and a regional dimension of cooperation. The *regional* pillar aims specifically at cooperation on cross-boundary issues, including anti-drugs trafficking, water management, energy and transport. The *bilateral* dimension, in turn, allows for a more 'tailor-made' cooperation with the five republics, which considers the countries' individual needs. A distinction between a regional and bilateral pillar of cooperation is also included in the Commission's Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007-2013.

To implement its assistance to the region under the new strategy, the Commission more than *doubled its budget* for Central Asia, allocating EUR 750 million for the period 2007-2013, and released plans to have a fully accredited delegation in each of the five countries. Additional funding comes from a number of EU member states, which committed themselves to launch new projects under the framework of the strategy. France and Germany, for instance, are the lead coordinators of the 'EU Rule of Law Initiative for Central Asia', which aims at supporting reforms and sharing experiences between the EU and the Central Asian republics in the area of legal and judicial reforms.

Dialogue and engagement appear to be the key instruments underpinning the political strategy, suggesting that the EU seeks to enhance its socialisation efforts in the region. In the past four years, the EU has indeed significantly upgraded its institutional links with the Central Asian countries across a wide range of areas. Apart from the annual regional political dialogue at Foreign Minister level and

the existing dialogue under the framework of the PCAs, the EU now also holds regular dialogue under the 'European Education Initiative', the 'EU Rule of Law Initiative' and the Environment Initiative. Moreover, the EU now maintains a regular 'Human Rights Dialogue' with each of the Central Asian states, which includes a civil society forum. In addition, there is also regular dialogue on energy issues, mostly in the framework of the Baku Initiative and the bilateral Memorandums of Understanding on Energy signed with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. These dialogue forums are not limited to the level of senior officials, but also involve the participation of civil servants. The 'European rule of law initiative', for instance, is designed to foster judicial reform by dialogue at a political as well as an expert level and long-term cooperation projects between Central Asia and European institutions. The dialogue on energy between the Central Asian states and the EU involves both technical discussions at expert level and political consultations over the development of new pipeline routes and transportation networks to transport Kazakh and Turkmen energy resources to the EU market.

However, while the initiatives outlined above point to a considerable enhancement of relations, several of these initiatives have their *deficiencies*. With respect to the human rights dialogues, for instance, it remains unlikely that such 'superficial' discussions with ruling elites in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan can effectively increase EU influence in the area of democracy and human rights in the highly authoritarian countries. Indeed, despite the regular human rights dialogue, the regimes in these two countries have proved to excel at outwitting the EU on important issues such as the monitoring of human rights. This problem joins up with the main challenge that the EU faces in implementing the strategy, that is, *finding the right balance* between its interest-based goals, relating to its security and energy interests, and its goals in the normative sphere, including democratisation and human rights. The question remains whether the seven priorities designated in the strategy are sustainable. In addition, the implementation has so far focused predominantly on cooperation at the level of government officials and has not yet sufficiently allowed for an active involvement of civil society, national Parliaments, local authorities and other important stakeholders. Another final important shortcoming is that the implementation of the strategy - despite the considerable increase in funding - still *lacks the resources* required to have a major tangible impact on the ground in Central Asia, commensurate with the ambitious goals set out in the strategy.

The main challenge in implementing the strategy is the *unavoidable clash* between the EU's interests in enhanced engagement on security and energy issues and its goal of increased cooperation on human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratisation. This problem is inherently linked to the fact that the *EU is divided* over its approach to the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, divided between those who favour a values-based approach, geared towards the prioritisation of normative objectives, and those who favour an interest-based approach, oriented towards reaching security and/or energy goals. The question of how to approach the leaders of the Central Asian states does not only divide the EU member states but also the EU institutions, with the Commission, the Council and the Parliament each holding a different view on how to deal with the authoritarian rulers of the countries.

Central Asia: Challenging Terrain for EU Democracy Promotion

Democracy promotion in Central Asia has been on the EU's agenda since the very beginning of its engagement with the region in the early 1990s. However, despite the lofty rhetoric in EU policy documents and statements, democracy promotion in practice has appeared to be modest in scope and only of secondary importance in the EU's portfolio of policies towards the Central Asian republics, which has concentrated primarily on trade, security and (economic) regulatory issues. Only recently, and especially in light of the EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia, has the EU started to bolster its democratisation efforts. Even so, the EU's democracy promotion policy remains subject to strong criticism, with many arguing that the strategy presents too much of a trade off between normative goals and strategic interests and, hence, that it does not go far enough in pressing for genuine democratisation.

Overall, observers appear univocal in claiming that the EU has had little impact on implementing a general transition in the region towards political liberalisation and democracy. In explaining the limited scope and impact of the EU's democracy promotion in Central Asia, most analysts provide interest-based explanations, contending that the EU's democracy promotion agenda is *undermined by its energy and security interests* in the region, reflected in the inability to pursue a consistent and credible democratisation policy. EU self-interest calculations undoubtedly shape aspects of its democratisation policy in Central Asia. However, there are two other - interconnected - points that need to be considered in understanding the limited scope and impact of EU democratisation activities in the region.

Low resonance of western-style liberal democracy:

The EU's calls for democratisation hardly resonate within the region, not only at leadership level - with the regimes relentlessly clinging to various forms of authoritarianism -, but also at societal level, as ordinary citizens tend to be apathetic towards and/or ignorant of the notion of democracy and civil society is largely apolitical. This is closely linked with the fact that these countries lack a democratic background in their political culture, and are more familiar with different forms of kinship and patronage networks than with whatever form of democracy. Still, there is variation between the five countries, with resonance being markedly higher in Kyrgyzstan - once touted an 'isle of democracy' in the region - than in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Attraction of alternative models of democracy:

Situated at a highly strategic location at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, the Central Asian states engage with multiple external agents, each seeking to wield influence, including normative influence, on the countries' actions and behaviour. From this perspective, Central Asia has increasingly become a site of competing externally promoted ideas and values, where the EU, alongside other Western donors, is placed on one side of the continuum of value systems and templates for governance, and Russia and China, among others, on the other side. The EU's democracy promotion agenda is thus faced with competition from alternative models of democracy and governance available to the Central Asian states. Crucially, these competing models find better resonance with the local leaders. Indeed, Russia's and China's views on security, sovereignty and order are more compatible with the Central Asian ways of thinking. Their views on strong leadership and strong state resonate with the

interests of the Central Asian regimes in reinforcing the existing state structure, in contrast to the Western goal of reforming and weakening it. Therefore, apparent signs of rapprochement towards the Western ideological space need to be approached with caution rather than with cheer. As Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship has shown, such gestures are intended to serve the regimes' public relations agenda. Their memberships and chairmanships in international organisations serve to gain international legitimacy and to show audiences at home that the countries' leaders enjoy widespread international support.

Towards a more effective EU democracy promotion policy: some policy recommendations

Given the considerable limits encountered by the EU's democracy promotion agenda in Central Asia, it is useful to re-evaluate the approach and instruments used so far by the EU to advocate democracy in the region, and to look for new or additional instruments that may be better suited to facilitate transition in Central Asia towards political liberalisation and democracy.

From conditionality to 'constructive engagement'

Although the EU continues to incorporate legally binding essential elements clauses in its cooperation agreements with third partners, this practice appears to have become little more than a standard procedure rather than as part of a deliberate approach aimed at promoting democracy and respect for human rights. Indeed, political conditionality seems to have lost significance as a distinct EU foreign policy tool in managing its relations with non-candidate countries. This applies not least to the EU's relations with Central Asia, where conditionality has proved to be inefficient to promote liberal norms. To begin with, as evidenced in the case of the EU sanctions imposed on Uzbekistan in the wake of the Andijan massacre, even in the face of strong punitive measures in response to norm violation, the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia appear too concerned with safeguarding their own survival for agreeing with democratic reforms, which they perceive as too great a risk, as they would erode their domestic power base. In addition, interest-based considerations tend to undermine a consistent use by the EU of political conditionality. This was clearly the case in Central Asia when the EU decided to lift the sanctions imposed on Uzbekistan over German military security concerns, despite the regime's refusal to comply with many of the conditions attached to lifting the sanctions. Apart from the need to keep the German military base in Uzbekistan, the EU also needed to be on good terms with the country in view of the planned implementation of the EU strategy, which simply could not work without participation of Uzbekistan. In fact, the strategy itself strongly reflects the EU's growing belief that a more positive engagement with the region's authoritarian regimes is required if the EU is to reach its strategic goals in the region. Four years into the implementation of the strategy, the approach of 'constructive engagement' with the region seems to have become common practice. While this approach has paid off to some extent in the security and energy spheres, e.g. with Turkmenistan, it has so far failed to deliver substantial results in the normative sphere, as exemplified by the limited results of the bilateral human rights dialogues.

Democratic governance through functional cooperation

In a 'difficult' region such as Central Asia, where there has been limited impact of traditional top-down mechanisms for norm diffusion, including political conditionality, but also of bottom-up instruments, such as direct civil society assistance, the EU might achieve better results by resorting to

a more indirect way of transferring democratic principles, notably through transgovernmental cooperation at the sectoral level. In the context of the ENP, EU functional cooperation with authoritarian regimes has revealed the potential of inter-administrative cooperation to trigger processes of democratic socialisation, which have positively shaped civil servants' attitudes towards democratic governance. A particularly adequate instrument for this kind of indirect democratisation through sectoral cooperation are Twinning projects. Twinning between EU and third country administrations typically serves to export parts of the *acquis* and thus to approximate domestic legal and administrative standards to those of the EU. However, in doing so, as has been evidenced in the case of the ENP, they can also serve to expose lower-ranking officials and bureaucrats to democratic modes of governance common to administrative policy-making practices in Western liberal democracies, including accountability, transparency and participation.