



**CANADA-EUROPE TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE:  
SEEKING TRANSNATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PROBLEMS**

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**The EU Strategy for Central Asia**

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Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) has been a part of the European Union's (EU's) greater projects such as Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) and Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the new independent states of Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus, and Central Asia including Russia. However, until recently the region, almost twice the size of Western Europe, has been left out of the EU's main policy agenda. Europeans came late to Central Asia as the EU had first to deal with the normalization of its post-communist neighbours (Efegil 2010). The war against terrorism and the growing significance of energy security has made Brussels consider the region more seriously (FRIDE 2007). In 2007, the European Council adopted a new Central Asia Strategy and for the first time Central Asia, as a region, received special attention from the EU. Moreover, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the EU strategy, the EU-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) was launched in 2008.

Europeans have been critical of the democratization process led by Central Asian leaders. Despite the adoption of a western style constitutional system, violation of human rights, the use of child labor, lack of rule of law and widespread corruption are still major issues that have not been addressed seriously by Central Asian governments. Hence, it was not an easy step for the EU to adopt a single strategy since Europeans have been divided about Central Asia. While Germany pushed for an "interest-based approach focusing on energy and security," the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden were hesitant about Germany's position and instead supported "a value-based approach that stressed the importance of human rights and democratization" (Graubner 2008). Despite this division, the EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership was adopted in June 2007 under the German Presidency of the EU.

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That document outlines security and stability as strategic interests of the EU in the region and highlights that this cooperation aims to be mutually beneficial. As means of achieving its goals, the EU uses different types of cooperation agreements and initiatives, and intends to engage in political dialogue with individual states. Most importantly, Brussels, through the new strategy, supports the improvement of human rights, rule of law, good governance, and democratization in Central Asia.

The proponents of a value-based approach stress that “the EU should not offer further legitimization to the Central Asian leadership regimes in order to serve its energy interests, but should try to engage these governments through institutional support for good governance while trying to foster an independent civil society” (FRIDE 2007). On the other hand, I argue that the continued neglect of Central Asia might be costly for the EU, given the fact that China and Russia are taking advantage of the region’s natural resources without engaging in serious discourse about democratization and human rights. Instead of being skeptical about the region, it might be fruitful at this point to start short-term cooperation in order to create room for long-term value-based partnership.

Another beneficial option may include the adoption of different types of partnership in a variety of areas. For instance, it is obvious that economic cooperation with Central Asia requires a regional approach since the import of energy resources demands cooperation of several countries at a time. However, as pointed out by a German expert, Michael Laubsch, a strategy in relations with the region is a good thing, but a unified strategy that would put Kazakhstan (soft authoritarian) and Turkmenistan (hard authoritarian) in the same category would be short-sighted and hardly productive (Deutsche Welle 2009). Thus, when dealing with Central Asia in terms of human rights, rule of law and democratization, it is more effective to cooperate on a bilateral basis rather than multilaterally, given that the level of willingness for reforms in each country varies.

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