What are EU’s Interests in Central Asia?

The European Union (EU) began to show interest in Central Asia fairly late for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it is worth mentioning the key one: the intensifying conflict in Afghanistan and a greater involvement of EU members, under U.S. pressure, in policies pursued in this region by Washington. Besides, from 2005 to 2006, the European Union began to more actively diversify the energy sources being imported into its territory, again due to pressure from Washington, which is intent on limiting Russia’s influence on the nations of the Central Asian region and on the EU’s energy market. As a result, the European Union became increasingly interested in Kazakh oil and Turkmen natural gas. In addition to this, the EU began to focus more of its attention on Central Asia due to its own expansion, which had brought its physical borders closer to this region.

In view of this, the EU started to pay much more attention to infrastructure projects in this area, as for instance, TRACECA (the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), which is meant to link China, Central Asia and Europe.

As for political and regional security issues, the European Union had long embarked on a course to limit its involvement in the region via ‘auxiliary mechanisms’ in support of Washington’s policy, aimed at establishing a pro-Western elite, and curbing Russia’s and China’s influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. However, this is why ‘democratization in line with the Western model’ remains a priority area for the EU in Central Asia, and so does the provision of tacit support of any radical nationalist and liberal organizations in the region. Incidentally, the United
States is quite actively engaged in such processes in Central Asia, which is an additional impetus for the European Union to act there.

The European Community’s Strategy on collaborating with Central Asian nations, which was implemented in 2007, did bear some fruit in the sphere of developing regulatory documents in comparison to the extent of similar progress in other regions. However, the 2005 unrest in Andijan served to highlight the lack of a unified policy on the part of the EU in this region. The inherent bureaucratic nature of the collaboration between the European Union and Central Asia was readily apparent: many of the programmes had not been implemented due to the EU’s unwillingness to make significant investments in the nations of this region. The strategy remained a tool for the European Union to further its interests in the region, which was readily apparent to the governments and populations of the Central Asian nations.

In order to reach its political and economic goals, the EU actively employed its ‘public diplomacy’ approach by establishing a number of European NGOs (non-governmental organizations), such as Amnesty International, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Transparency International, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Goethe-Institut, the Hanns Seidel Foundation, Acted and others. While organizing its ‘cultural and educational events’, the EU seemed to have found its strong suite in the region by engaging in dubious “historical memory” initiatives, which Western propagandists actively tried to use to cement an anti-Russian and anti-Chinese mood among local populations. For instance, representatives of PACE (the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) and of a number of European NGOs provided a suspicious and unfounded level of support to efforts promoting the openly anti-Russian themes of Holodomor and Soviet repressions in Kazakhstan as well as in a number of other countries of the region.

As a result, the policy pursued by the European Union was, first and foremost, directed at undermining Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space and supplanting it with that of the West, irrespective of what names were given to the programmes in question or how conciliatory the language accompanying them was towards Russia.

The Central Asian tour that Federica Mogherini, the Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, completed in July of this year and her participation in the 15th EU-Central Asia Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, held in Bishkek, all signaled the European Union’s intention to try and promote its Central Asian strategy, which was approved by the EU Council on 17 June 2019. The new EU strategy focuses on trade and economic collaboration; on an all-encompassing security agenda; on fostering cooperation with the countries in the region and within it; on improving the level of cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan, and on the European Union’s willingness to take into consideration the participation of Central Asian nations in other integration initiatives (including the EAEU (the Eurasian Economic Union) and the One Belt, One Road project). The EU representative quite enthusiastically talked about the future prospects of this regional cooperation, of energy security, of establishing a favorable investment climate and of jointly resolving environmental problems.

However, the aforementioned plans were met with cautious optimism in the region, as Central Asian nations and the EU still have different goals and agendas. The document describing the new strategy, presented by the European Union, openly demonstrated that the EU’s foreign policy was first and foremost shaped by its own interests, as the vagueness of language and absence of concrete statements in it are quite glaring. Based on assessments by regional observers, there is growing belief that the EU, with the aid of this document, simply wished to show its moral support to Central Asia, and its readiness to organize a series of educational talks on “the benefits of democracy and civil society” there, or to give a grant or cover expenses for a trip to an NGO seminar used primarily for brainwashing purposes. The European Union prefers that the nations of this region resolve any other outstanding issues either themselves or with the aid of the usual outside players: Moscow, Beijing and, to a certain extent, Washington, and not involve Brussels in this process. Once the EU’s strategy has been implemented, it aims to have its own representative offices in all five nations of the Central Asian region, which, the European Union hopes, will simplify the adoption of its centralized policy.

Nonetheless, the EU certainly did demonstrate its heightened interest in developing relationships with certain nations in the region. For instance, there has been a special focus recently on improving cooperation with Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The European Union remains one of Turkmenistan’s key trading partners. According to EU statistics, their bilateral trade was valued at approximately 700 million Euros in 2018. The EU’s decision to enhance its presence in this country by establishing a fully-fledged representative office there in 2019 marks a culmination in their bilateral relations, and clearly demonstrates the European Union’s interest in strengthening its cooperation with Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan is eager to have new sources of income on account of the current economic crisis, and
a balanced foreign policy course by fostering relations with the EU. The European Union took advantage of this fact and reciprocated by showing a mutual interest, mainly because Turkmenistan is rich in primary energy sources and has a potential to become an important transit hub (for, among other things, goods intended for Afghanistan and the long-talked-about Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline). The EU and Turkmenistan are working on a framework agreement on delivering Turkmen gas to Europe, and a bilateral agreement on nuclear energy has already been signed. It is quite noteworthy that European politicians, who have always demanded that Central Asian nations aim to follow the key European principles, i.e. defending human rights and promoting democracy, only resorted to political rhetoric when communicating with Turkmenistan, and seemed to ignore any violations there in order to reap benefits from cooperation with this nation.

The European Union has also shown an increased interest in fostering cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, especially because bars of gold account for the majority of exports to Europe from this nation. For the EU and its member nations developing ties with Kyrgyzstan is especially appealing because of the greater openness of this country to the outside world, in comparison to its Central Asian neighbors. This difference has already led to an implementation of a number of projects in Kyrgyzstan’s territory, and its use as a base for establishing contact and “working” with the other countries in the region. The nature of this “work” with Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian nations became even clearer in January of this year, when the European Parliament adopted recommendations that the EU facilitate diversification of Kyrgyzstan’s economy with the aim of decreasing its dependency on Russia and China, as stated in the document approved by the EU parliamentarians. The European Union recommends taking “into account the development of Kyrgyzstan’s relations with China and Russia; to encourage Kyrgyzstan to diversify its economy with a view to reducing its significant political dependence on these two external actors”. To a certain extent, the bilateral cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and the EU has been facilitated by this nation’s desire to receive long-term financial support to cover its state budget deficit; to attract investment, and to resolve a number of internal problems (including finding funds to finance the country’s education system and the reclamation of uranium tailing storage facilities).

However, most regional analysts are starting to believe that the role of the updated EU strategy in facilitating sustainable development in Central Asia has been exaggerated by the propagandists in Brussels. The strategy will, first and foremost, remain a tool to promote EU’s own interests in the region. It also serves to ‘fulfill the political order’ placed by Washington to facilitate this region’s disengagement with Russia and China by any conceivable efforts and means.

Valery Kulikov, expert politologist, exclusively for the online magazine ‘New Eastern Outlook’.