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**NOTE**

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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia

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## **Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia**

### **Introduction**

Since the adoption of the EU Central Asia Strategy in 2019, cooperation between the EU and Central Asia has further advanced in many areas and serves as an example of a multilateral partnership for resilience, prosperity and sustainability. Both sides have shown interest in intensifying their engagement. New initiatives, including the EU's Global Gateway and the Green Deal, provide a framework for the green and digital transitions while increasing trade, investment and connectivity.

In the current geopolitical context, new challenges have arisen for both the EU and Central Asia, as well as new opportunities for deeper and closer cooperation between the two regions. Against this background, it is more important than ever to uphold commitment to the UN Charter and the principles of international law, particularly the principles of respect for the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity of all countries, non-use of force or threat of its use and peaceful settlement of international disputes.

This Roadmap builds on the discussions between the leaders of both regions and aims to help advance dialogue and practical cooperation in selected five key areas to enhance overall EU-Central Asia relations. Its implementation will contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goals, and be complementary to further cooperation on strengthening the rule of law, democracy, good governance, gender equality, and respect for the key role of civil society, and universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, as outlined in the framework of the EU Strategy on Central Asia of 2019. EU-Central Asia relations and their strengthening rest on the mutual respect of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) as well as Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCAs) increasingly provide a legal basis to strengthen the bilateral relations between the EU and the Central Asia countries. This includes among others, the coordinated principled positions in defence of international law within international organizations, the promotion of human rights, including labour rights and the rights of persons with disabilities, democracy and rule of law mutual trade and investment opportunities, and the nexus between trade and sustainable development, intellectual property rights, cooperation in justice and home affairs, security, economic and financial cooperation, prevention of sanction circumvention, energy, critical raw materials, transport, environment, climate change, sustainable agriculture, employment and social affairs, culture and tourism, education and research. Reforms aiming at strengthening the rule-of-law and democracy in Central Asia create a solid basis to deepen our political and economic relations. Such bilateral partnership and cooperation frameworks also support EU-Central Asia regional cooperation.

### **Key area 1 - Deepening the inter-regional political dialogue and cooperation**

The EU and Central Asian countries meet annually at foreign affairs ministerial level (on the Central Asian side) and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as well as the European Commissioner for International Partnerships (on the EU side). A new format of high-level interaction has recently been introduced. At their second meeting in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, on 2 June 2023, the Heads of State of Central Asia and the President of the European Council reaffirmed their commitment to continue the high-level dialogue for the development of the EU- Central Asia partnership in line with the priority areas and shared goal of a prosperous and secure Central Asia and re-iterated the joint commitment to work towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals also stressing the importance of further expansion of mutual trade and investment mechanisms to advance socio-economic development. The holding of the first meeting in this format on 27 October 2022 in Astana, Kazakhstan, has already taken inter-regional relations to a new level. Joint meetings at the level of heads of Central Asian states and the president of the European Council are of great importance. Continuation of these encounters on a regular basis will facilitate political dialogue, taking stock of existing cooperation and setting strategic direction for new joint actions. In addition, enhanced cooperation between the EU and Central Asia benefits strongly from deepening relations among the Central Asian countries themselves. In this respect, the EU welcomes the strengthened regional cooperation through the holding of Consultative Meetings of Central Asian leaders, including the recent Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia held in Dushanbe on 14 September 2023, contributing to the enhanced new atmosphere of friendship, good neighbourliness, mutual understanding and trust.

## **Actions**

1. Hold regular meetings between the EU and Central Asia at the highest political level with the first summit in 2024, which will be held in Uzbekistan;
2. Hold high-level meetings between the Central Asia partners and the EU including Member States;
3. Continue holding the annual EU-Central Asian ministerial meetings at the level of Foreign Ministers and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) as well as the European Commissioner for International Partnerships. Support the Turkmen proposal to hold the next ministerial meeting in Turkmenistan;
4. Support the rule-of-law and good governance in Central Asia, notably through key relevant programmes, and through the Generalised Scheme of Preference Plus (GSP+), in participating countries;
5. Seek foreign policy convergence in defence of international law within international organizations (UN, OSCE);
6. Explore joint EU-Central Asian thematic initiatives in multilateral fora (UN, OSCE, etc.);
7. Consider the further strengthening inter-parliamentary ties between the EU, including its Member States, and Central Asian countries;
8. Setting up a dedicated dialogue on labour standards (as foreseen in the 2019 EU Central Asia Strategy) between the EU and Central Asia countries.

## **Key area 2 - Enhancing economic ties, trade and investment**

The biennial meetings of the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum, at the level of Central Asian Prime Ministers and the Executive Vice President of the European Commission, offer valuable opportunities for high-level political and business-to-government dialogue. In order to enhance further the economic ties, trade, transport and investment relations between the EU and Central Asia, beyond the arrangements under the bilateral PCAs and EPCAs, regular dialogue at senior officials level on economic cooperation issues, including with the participation of EU Member States, should be established. Such close cooperation is essential for the investment climate and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and to deepen the bilateral and regional cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. This includes close exchanges on sanctions regimes and further efforts, including continued commitment to prevent the circumvention of sanctions. As appropriate, experts should regularly meet on specific topics such as economic governance, connectivity, digitalisation, trade and economic issues, prevention of circumvention of EU sanctions, removal of trade barriers and promotion of economic exchanges, sustainable and diversified agriculture, including on phytosanitary and veterinary measures, business environment, investment climate and FDI, intellectual property rights, cooperation on critical raw materials, and the social and environmental sustainability of those policies. Their work will contribute to the political discussions and decisions, and inform the design of concrete cooperation programmes also taking into account the Team Europe approach, i.e. including European IFIs (EIB, EBRD) and EU Member States.

## **Actions**

9. Organise regular expert and senior official meetings on economic cooperation issues, including in a Team Europe approach;
10. Continue holding the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum—on a biennial basis with a focus on Global Gateway, connectivity and a strong business-to-business component;
11. Explore opportunities for holding industrial and technological exhibitions within the framework of the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum;
12. Support investment operations by European leading companies in Central Asia;

13. Support the creation of European Business Associations in Central Asia and Central Asian Business Associations in EU countries;
14. Support events aimed at raising awareness of European companies about trade opportunities in the Central Asian region;
15. Support the development of skills and potential of Central Asian exporters to work in the EU market;
16. Give political support to the opening of an European Investment Bank offices in the countries of Central Asia;
17. Work together to promote high-technological, climate-neutral investments based on the principles of non-discrimination and creation of favourable conditions with a focus on responsible sourcing, creation of value chains, and human capital development;
18. Work together to prevent the circumvention of EU sanctions and to strive to minimise unintended negative consequences of the sanctions on the economies of the Central Asian countries, including through the adoption of mutually acceptable risk mitigating measures to build a safe and dynamic business environment for trade and investment;
19. Continue to promote EU activities within the framework of the implementation of EU “Central Asia Invest” Programme and other relevant initiatives, in order to mobilise the private sector and improve the access of private companies to financing, developing young people’s entrepreneurial abilities, unlocking commercial potential in undervalued sectors such as tourism, introducing green solutions across the value chain, and promoting digital transformation of the economy;
20. Explore options to enhance the capacity of the participating Central Asian countries to better utilise the General System of Preference (GSP) and promote regional trade;
21. Continue to take the necessary measures for the promotion and for the full implementation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) and the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs), including providing technical assistance on agreed areas in this regard;
22. Support the creation of a network of modern laboratories, standardisation and certification centres in the Central Asia region, in accordance with EU requirements and capable of fulfilling official tasks under oversight of the respective governments;
23. Explore the possibility of developing, jointly with EU experts, comprehensive programs to support exporters and importers of the Central Asian countries, including the provision of the necessary technical information, regulation and requirements for increasing Central Asian exports to the EU;
24. Explore opportunities for closer cooperation on agricultural sector enhancing inter and intra-regional trade in agri-food products;
25. Consider encouraging the use of the capacity of IT and technology parks, Free Economic Zones and Free Industrial Economic Zones in the countries of Central Asia.

**Key area 3 - Engaging on energy, climate neutral economy, connectivity under the Global Gateway and cooperating on the European Green Deal**

A regional vision of sustainable connectivity is of crucial importance for the EU and Central Asia. The EU’s Global Gateway strategy offers the appropriate framework for exchanges and concrete action in this area, e.g. to promote the planning and development of sustainable transport connections, including the Trans Caspian Corridor, strengthen existing energy links, reinforce sustainable supply chains and strengthen cooperation on critical raw materials, as well as the potential for aviation connectivity. At EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference on 18 November 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the sides confirmed their readiness to cooperate closely in all connectivity sectors, and their strong interest to develop concrete cooperation and connectivity projects.

## Actions

26. Follow-up on the key actions and investment needs identified by the Study on Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia through regional and bilateral exchanges among relevant stakeholders, such as the Investors' Forum (January 2024, Brussels);
27. Encourage further transport connectivity through a sustainable Trans-Caspian Transport Network. Increasing regional cooperation will be essential in this regard;
28. Convene meetings at expert level on transport, digital and energy connectivity in order to develop and advance cooperation and harness the potential in these areas, with a focus on potential projects in Central Asian states;
29. Continue supporting intra-regional connectivity projects in Central Asia;
30. Foster EU-supported investment within the framework of the Global Gateway Initiative;
31. Explore possibilities of expanding cooperation on digital connectivity through joint engagement on satellite connectivity and Earth Observation, in the context of the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) on Digital Connectivity in Central Asia;
32. Develop a conducive framework for digital connectivity in Central Asia within the framework of the Team Europe Initiative;
33. Explore developing linkages with Eastern Partnership countries in the Southern Caucasus and with like-minded and other partners in key connectivity areas such as transport, energy and digital, including support to promote a free, open and secure digital environment;
34. Promote cooperation in the field of energy, as well as climate neutral energy, including working towards establishing a regional energy association, comprising representatives from the energy sector of EU Member States and Central Asian countries;
35. Build on the Regional Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity to support the EU's connectivity agenda in Central Asia, and the Central Asian states' digital policies, such as technology awareness and the digital safety rules;
36. Within the framework of "Global Gateway Strategy – Digital Interconnection" and Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity in Central Asia, work towards providing broadband Internet access to rural areas in Central Asia;
37. Promote increased participation of Central Asian research organisations in the research and innovation opportunities offered through the EU Framework Programmes. Explore synergies between existing cooperation programme in research and innovation, and corresponding Central Asian initiatives;
38. Following the results of the EU Study on sustainable transport connections with Central Asia, develop further a regional Strategy for the transport and logistics cooperation in Central Asia to support stronger connections with the EU;
39. Promote cooperation among the Central Asian countries aimed at aligning the transport network of the region with the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) approach where applicable.

Similarly, the European Green Deal aiming at boosting the efficient use of resources by moving to a climate neutral and circular economy and mitigating the negative effects of climate change, offers an opportunity for Central Asian countries to further progress on the path to more digital, green, circular economies and sustainable agriculture. Enhanced cooperation should focus on climate neutral energies and hydrogen, critical raw materials, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, in particular methane emissions and venting and flaring in the oil and gas sector, energy efficiency, energy security, and regional integration of energy systems. Given the Central Asian region's particular exposure to the negative impact of climate change, and environmental degradation, including rehabilitation of uranium tailing dumps, integrated water resources

management, the development of a water infrastructure resilient to climate change and water saving technologies will be crucial, as well as continued cooperation on the conservation of the environment and biodiversity, and combating pollution.

## **Actions**

40. Assist Central Asian countries in the implementation of the Regional Green Agenda Program by seeking synergies with the objectives of the European Green Deal, the Team Europe initiative, as well as existing and future EU projects;
41. Continue working towards integrated water resources management at national, regional and international level including through sharing knowledge and experience in sustainable water management, efficient and sustainable energy generation and use, and mitigation of climate change risks through climate neutral energy production, facilitated by the regional Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate Change;
42. Explore additional opportunities for sustainable mining, raw materials, batteries and hydrogen value chains;
43. In this context, continue engaging in policy exchanges on different topics, such as water, energy, climate and environmental protecting, including through the EU-Central Asia Platform on Environment and Water Cooperation, building on outcomes of the February 2023 Rome Conference;
44. Engage to address climate change, including to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – most notably methane emissions, and through carbon pricing;
45. Strengthen EU cooperation with Central Asian countries in combating desertification and protecting biodiversity, including supporting the implementation of the UN Conventions on Biological Diversity and Combating Desertification;
46. Identify and tackle barriers for investments by European IFIs and private sector in sustainable energy and water and in energy infrastructure;
47. Identify areas where knowledge exchange and capacity building could take place, including linkages with Eastern Partnership countries in the Southern Caucasus;
48. Support increased cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries in the energy sectors, including in the field of climate neutral energy sources, in view of implementing joint projects for the production of hydrogen, exchanges of experience for regulatory practices in the energy sector, modernisation and expansion of energy infrastructure;
49. Explore the possibility of supporting the training of specialists and entrepreneurs of Central Asia in the EU in the field of climate neutral technologies;
50. Consider possible support to the construction of infrastructure for the development of climate neutral economy in agriculture, transport, climate neutral energy and digitalisation;
51. Expand interaction on addressing the problem of the Aral Sea, including in but not limited to the framework of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), and support the development of new socially significant projects in this ecologically vulnerable region, as well as support the process of improving the organizational structure and legal framework of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea;
52. Following up on the EU Water Initiative (EUWI-CA), continue supporting safe water supply, sanitation and integrated water resources management in Central Asia through activities under the Team Europe Initiative;
53. Within the framework of existing programmes, encourage the development of the potential of scientific and technical cooperation in the fields of energy, environment and climate change, including support

for the transition to a sustainable energy system and with regard to the anticipated implementation of CBAM.

#### **Key area 4 - Addressing common security challenges**

The EU and Central Asia face common security challenges. Current EU cooperation with Central Asia in this area includes regional programmes in capacity building in border management (e.g. BOMCA) or in drug demand reduction (e.g. CADAP) to counterterrorism programme (e.g. LEICA; support to citizens returning from conflict zones), as well as specific EU-Central Asia Dialogue on Drugs. Recalling shared views on the importance of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, both regions are also committed to strengthen cooperation on preventing and countering cybersecurity and hybrid threats and are long-standing partners of the EU's Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Centres of Excellence Initiative aiming at mitigating both natural and man-made CBRN risks and threats. As of late 2023, the EU extended CBRN risk mitigation to include cooperation on strategic trade controls of sensitive dual-use goods and technologies to contribute to the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Both regions have a strategic interest to support the people of Afghanistan to prevent Afghanistan from becoming again a source of instability, violent extremism and terrorism. In this regard, it is important to build up an inclusive and representative system of governance in Afghanistan where human rights are respected, especially for all women and girls and persons belonging to ethnic and religious groups. The EU stands ready to engage with Central Asia and other regional partners to promote long-term stability and security in Afghanistan. By continuing to provide principled humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. The existing cooperation, inter alia through the regular meetings of the Special Representatives and Envoys for Afghanistan of both the EU and Central Asia, the latest of which took place on 25-26 of May 2023 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, will be intensified and new areas of cooperation be possibly identified. This could include preventing and countering trafficking in human beings, arms, and drugs as well as preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism. The EU is also ready to continue contributing to strengthening cross-border cooperation between Central Asian countries and to fostering the resilience of communities living in border or other high- risk areas.

#### **Actions**

54. Explore new possibilities of engagement between the EU and Central Asian countries, based on respective requests, interests and needs including through the European Peace Facility;
55. Continue support to address the effects of the crisis in Afghanistan, including through strengthening borders and improving border control systems to prevent terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking, by means of appropriate EU's Central Asia regional programmes;
56. Continue regular consultations of the EU and Central Asian special representatives on Afghanistan to develop common approaches for a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan;
57. Strengthen the dialogue, promote strategic information exchange and ensure increased interaction between Central Asian countries and the EU as foreseen by the European Counter-Terrorism Action Plan on Afghanistan;
58. Organise and hold an expert workshop including with existing EU cooperation projects, aimed at developing new capacity building activities to combat organised crime, in particular drug trafficking, and strengthen border security;
59. Explore the opportunity for strengthening dialogue at expert level, with a view to support enhanced cooperation between EU and Central Asian countries;
60. Strengthen engagement on cybersecurity, CBRN threats, counter violent extremism and terrorism, countering radicalisation and related online propaganda, border security, drug trafficking, trafficking in human beings and smuggling through additional concrete activities at community, policy and expert level and policy dialogue;
61. Strengthen engagement on tackling threats in the sphere of disinformation and information security by developing a concrete dialogue on these issues and strengthening support for independent media;

62. Continue conducting regular annual meetings of the EU-Central Asia High Level Political and Security Dialogue (HLPSPD);
63. Explore the opportunity for countries in Central Asia to share expertise and experience in countering hybrid threats;
64. Explore possibilities for Central Asian countries to participate in selected courses at the European Security and Defence College (ESDC);
65. Consider possibilities for strengthened cooperation between Central Asia and the EU in the area of illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs;
66. In accordance with the UN General Assembly Resolution 77/273 initiated by Turkmenistan on the Role of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia adopted in 2023, strengthen the cooperation between the UNRCCA and the Central Asian countries in implementing initiatives towards a stable and prosperous region, and to overcome challenges to peace and stability through preventive diplomacy and dialogue.

### **Key area 5 - Strengthening people-to-people contacts and mobility**

The EU and Central Asia will benefit from more cultural diplomacy initiatives to support people-to-people contacts and mobility, including through mutual exhibitions and cultural events, exchange opportunities in education and science, or developing tourism. Opportunities and impact of ongoing programmes, including Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, should be made more visible. EU Member States will be more involved, building on cultural heritage efforts successfully developed in other regions.

#### **Actions**

67. Raise visibility of the potential and the impact of people-to-people contacts developed through existing EU programmes and initiatives, and those managed by EU Member States;
68. Develop concrete initiative for joint training programmes for Central Asian diplomats including in the EU;
69. Promote initiatives to develop sustainable tourism;
70. Undertake initiatives and organize events to connect European travel agencies with Central Asian tourism industries;
71. Share experiences on the EU concept of “EU Cultural Capitals” - Encourage Central Asians to consider following the EU model (annual rotation), the nomination of “Central Asian Cultural Capitals” and connect the respective Central Asian and European Cultural Capitals;
72. Resume regular meetings of education ministers and university rectors in the EU-Central Asia format;
73. Explore possibilities to strengthen interaction in the educational sphere building on the Erasmus+ Mobility partnership and Horizon Europe programme, as a catalyst for further bilateral cooperation, twinning or spin-offs between the two regions.

The EU – Central Asia Civil Society Forum, held in 2019, 2021 and 2023, is a platform for a dialogue involving representatives of civil society from Central Asia and the European Union contributing to the implementation of the EU Strategy on Central Asia. By jointly organising this Forum, the EU and the Central Asian countries seek to promote the role of civil society with a particular focus on youth and women, with the effective interaction and dialogue between governments, civil society and private sector in contributing to the advancement and development of societies. Civil societies have an important role to play to strengthen resilience and prosperity of societies, as well as regional cooperation. The ideas and outcomes from the Forum can be a useful contribution to the discussions at the EU – CA Ministerial meetings.



## **Actions**

74. Discuss and develop strategies to strengthen the annual EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum as a platform for facilitating meaningful participation and engagement of civil society and think tanks in decision-making;
75. Explore the idea of developing opportunities (contacts, mobility with the EU interlocutors and trainers) for representatives of the press and the media sector in Central Asia;
76. Strengthen cooperation between Central Asia and EU on preventing gender-based violence, enhancing the role of women in innovation and the empowerment of women;
77. Promote dialogue in formats such as the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum and enhance support to local civil society, including youth-led initiatives, and exchanges between civil society organizations (CSOs) in the European Union and Central Asia;
78. Explore and promote the development of “Young European Ambassadors” network based on the experience of Eastern Partnership countries;
79. Consider developing of a youth-related focus under the platform of the Civil Society Forum.