

**PARTNERSHIP
BETWEEN
THE EUROPEAN UNION
AND UZBEKISTAN**

The Cooperation Council

**Brussels, 17 October 2025
(OR. en)**

UE-UZ 4502/25

DRAFT MINUTES

**Subject: 17th meeting of the EU-UZBEKISTAN COOPERATION COUNCIL
(Luxembourg, 23 April 2023)**

SUMMARY

Agenda

1. Texts presented to the Cooperation Council:
 - Agenda of the 17th EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council
 - Minutes of the 16th EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council held on 16 November 2021
 2. General and political matters (*including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues*)
 3. Trade, economic and investment issues (*including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy*)
 4. Regional and international issues
 5. Any other business
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ANNEXES:

1.	List of participants of the delegation of Uzbekistan.....	7
2.	List of participants of the EU delegation.....	8
3.	Opening remarks by Mr. LIPAVSKÝ	9
4.	Opening remarks by Mr. SAIDOV	10
5.	Additional opening remarks by Mr. LIPAVSKÝ	12
6.	Remarks by Mr. LIPAVSKÝ (item 2).....	13
7.	Remarks by Mr. DEVIGNE (item 2)	15
8.	Remarks by Ms. ADRIAEN (item 2)	16
9.	Remarks by Mr. LIPAVSKÝ (item 2).....	19
10.	Remarks by Mr. SAIDOV (item 2).....	20
11.	Remarks by Mr. IKRAMOV (item 2)	24
12.	Remarks by Mr. TILLABAEV (item 2).....	27
13.	Remarks by Mr. SAIDOV (item 2).....	31
14.	Remarks by Mr. SAIDOV (item 3).....	32
15.	Remarks by Mr. KHAMRAEV (item 3)	33
16.	Remarks by Ms. EICHHORN (item 3).....	36
17.	Remarks by Mr. RINALDI (item 3).....	39
18.	Remarks by Mr. DEVIGNE (item 3).....	43
19.	Remarks by Mr. KHAMRAEV (item 3)	45
20.	Closing Remarks by Mr. LIPAVSKÝ	46
21.	Closing Remarks by Mr. SAIDOV	47

The Cooperation Council between the European Union and the Republic of Uzbekistan held its seventeenth meeting on 24 April 2023 in Luxembourg.

The meeting was chaired by H.E. Jan LIPAVSKÝ, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, on behalf of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in his capacity as President of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council.

The Uzbekistan delegation was led by H. E. Bakhtiyor Odilovich SAIDOV, Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Mr. LIPAVSKÝ opened the meeting and made the opening statement contained in Annex 3.

Mr. SAIDOV made the opening statement contained in Annex 4.

Mr. LIPAVSKÝ made additional comments in Annex 5.

1. Texts presented to the Cooperation Council

The Cooperation Council approved the agenda, as set out in document UE-UZ 4501/23, and the minutes of the 16th Cooperation Council, as contained in document UE-UZ 4502/23.

2. General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues)

Mr. LIPAVSKÝ introduced this item with the remarks contained in Annex 6.

Mr. DEVIGNE made additional remarks contained in Annex 7.

Ms. ADRIAEN made the additional remarks contained in Annex 8.

Mr. LIPAVSKÝ made the additional remarks contained in Annex 9.

Mr. SAIDOV made the remarks contained in Annex 10.

Mr. IKRAMOV made the additional remarks contained in Annex 11.

Mr. TILLABAEV made the additional remarks contained in Annex 12.

Mr. SAIDOV made the additional remarks contained in Annex 13.

3. Trade, economic and investment issues (including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy)

Mr. SAIDOV introduced this item with the remarks contained in Annex 14.

Mr. KHAMRAEV made the additional remarks contained in Annex 15.

Ms. EICHHORN made the remarks contained in Annex 16.

Ms. RINALDI made the additional remarks contained in Annex 17.

Mr. DEVIGNE made the additional remarks contained in Annex 18.

Mr. KHAMRAEV made the additional remarks contained in Annex 19.

4. Regional and international issues

This agenda item was discussed in the restricted session.

5. Any other business

There was no other business.

Closing remarks

Mr. LIPAVSKÝ made the closing remarks contained in Annex 20.

Mr. SAIDOV made the closing remarks contained in Annex 21.

List of participants of the delegation of Uzbekistan

Mr. Bakhtiyor Saidov*	Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, head of delegation
Mr. Muzraf Ikramov*	Deputy Minister of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan
Mr. Oybek Khamraev*	Deputy Minister of Investment, Industry and Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan
Mr. Mirzatillo Tillabaev*	First Deputy Director of the National Center for Human Rights of the Republic of Uzbekistan
Mr. Dilyor Khakimov*	Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the Benelux countries and Head of the Missions of Uzbekistan to the EU and NATO
Mr. Oybek Shahavdinov*	Head of Department for cooperation with European countries and the EU Institutions
Mr. Akhror Burkhanov*	Head of Public Relations and Mass Media Department, Press Secretary for the Minister
Mr. Sardor Sirozhov	Deputy head of the Secretariat of the Minister
Mr. Bobir Sabirov*	Director of Bureau of Translators (interpreter)
Mr. Golibjon Abdukarimov*	First secretary of Department for cooperation with European countries and the EU Institutions
Mr. Shukhrat Yigitaliev*	First secretary of Consolidated Information and Analytical Department
Mr. Nursulton Rakhimov	First secretary of State Protocol Department
Mr. Anvar Muminov	Counsellor on Trade and Economic Issues of the Embassy of Uzbekistan to the Benelux countries
Mr. Muzaffar Mukaramov*	Second secretary of the Embassy of Uzbekistan to the Benelux countries
Mr. Bakhtiyor Turaev	Third secretary of the Embassy of Uzbekistan to the Benelux countries

* Participant in the restricted session

Delegation of the European Union**Presidency of the Council:**

H.E. Jan LIPA VSKÝ*	Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
Jitka Láta l Znamená čková*	Czech Ambassador to the Political and Security Committee of the Council (PSC)
Leoš Javů rek*	Czech delegate to the Council Working Group for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (COEST)
Ms Eva Kratochvilova*	

European External Action Service:

Luc DEVIGNE*	Deputy Managing Director, EURCA
Charlotte ADRIAEN*	Ambassador, Head of EU Delegation, Tashkent
Dietmar KRISSLER*	Head of Division, Central Asia Division, EURCA
Chris KENDALL*	Uzbekistan Desk, Central Asia Division, EURCA
Eugenia FABBRI	Central Asia Division, EURCA

European Commission:

Sarah RINALDI*	Head of Unit, DG INTPA
Nele EICHHORN*	Head of Unit, DG TRADE
Arunas VINČIŪNAS	Policy Coordinator, DG TRADE
Silvia PIETROPAOLO	Uzbekistan Desk, DG INTPA

General Secretariat of the Council:

Zoltan MARTINUSZ*	Director, Directorate-General Foreign Affairs, Enlargement and Civil Protection, RELEX
Assen INDJIEV	Political Administrator, DG RELEX, Unit 2A

* Participant in the restricted session

OPENING REMARKS BY MR. LIPAVSKÝ

On behalf of the European Union, let me welcome you and your delegation to this Cooperation Council. Let me also wish you a belated happy birthday, Minister, as I believe you celebrated your birthday this past weekend. Welcome also to colleagues from the European Union's institutions and from EU Member States.

We are very happy that we have this opportunity to discuss relations between Uzbekistan and the EU. It is nearly eighteen months since we last met in this format, and a lot has happened in the world since then. Today's meeting is well timed, coming so soon before your country's constitutional referendum, and we look forward to discussing Uzbekistan's ambitious reform programme and the progress achieved since the last Cooperation Council.

Before we continue with the discussion, I would like you to agree with the agenda of the 17th Cooperation Council and the minutes of the 16th meeting of the EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council. Over to you, Minister.

OPENING REMARKS BY MR. SAIDOV

On behalf of the Uzbek delegation, I would like to welcome the participants of the 17th meeting of the EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council.

It gives me great pleasure to take part in today's event, to meet with my colleagues, representatives of the European External Action Service, EU Council and European Commission and discuss a wide range of issues of interest to us.

I am confident that today's work will be productive, that we will discuss all the items on our agenda in detail and outline concrete steps to further expand mutually beneficial Uzbek-European cooperation.

Our meeting today is held against the backdrop of a profound crisis of trust at the global level, of increasing challenges to stability and security, as well as the escalation of geopolitical confrontation.

I am convinced that through joint efforts we will be able to overcome the challenges of our time and give a qualitative impetus to relations between Uzbekistan and the European Union for the further development of our multifaceted co-operation.

Let me introduce the members of our delegation, which consists of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade, the National Centre for Human Rights and the Mission of Uzbekistan to the EU.

Dear colleagues, Uzbekistan considers the EU as one of its key international partners. In recent years, we have managed to establish mutually beneficial co-operation in a wide range of areas. Intense political dialogue, inter-parliamentary, cultural, and business exchanges have been established, which are comprehensive in nature. Every year our mutual understanding reaches a higher level. We welcome the close cooperation with the European side on the topics of the promotion of the universal values of democracy, the protection of human rights, rule of law, peace, stability and sustainable development.

In our view, it is important to exchange views on the prospects for further enhancing bilateral cooperation in the context of the large-scale transformations under way in our country and the formation of an entirely new atmosphere of trust and constructive regional cooperation in Central Asia.

As you know, we have been working on a visit of the President of Uzbekistan to Brussels for a long time. We expect the Uzbek-European bilateral summit to take place before the end of this year. At the same time, I would like to particularly note that within its framework we will surely sign the Agreement on Extended Partnership and Cooperation between the parties. In our opinion, the signing of this document will raise our bilateral relations to a qualitatively new level, open up entirely new prospects for the further development of our mutually beneficial relations.

In this regard, we express hope that the European side will make every effort to complete its internal procedures toward the signing of the aforementioned document.

All these and other issues of interest to both sides we will be able to discuss in detail during our meeting.

Within the framework of the working dinner, we are ready to exchange opinions on the prospects for cooperation in the EU-Central Asia format, the situation in Afghanistan and other topical items on the international agenda.

ADDITIONAL OPENING REMARKS BY MR. LIPAVSKÝ

Thank you very much, I consider the agenda to be agreed and adopted. We now move to general and political matters, which will also include an exchange of views on internal and constitutional reform, justice and home affairs, human rights, and rule of law issues. I would like to also be broad in the beginning, since 2022 was a very busy year for EU-Uzbekistan relations and we can congratulate each other on some important achievements. Most notably, we concluded negotiations for the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, a great step forward for our relationship. Let me congratulate you and your colleagues across the whole of Uzbekistan's government for helping us to get to this point. The new agreement will reinforce our cooperation across a very broad range of areas and set us on a solid footing for the future. We also saw a number of high-level visits between Europe and Uzbekistan, I will mention in particular the visit of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, to Tashkent in October, and the visit of High Representative/Commission Vice-President Borrell to Samarkand in November, for the EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting and the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference.

Let me briefly introduce the other members of our delegation: Ambassador Jitka Látaľ Znamenáčeková, the Czech member of the EU's Political and Security Committee; Ambassador Charlotte Adriaen, the Head of the EU Delegation in Tashkent; Deputy Managing Director Mr Luc Devigne of the European External Action Service; and Mr Zoltan Martinusz, Director in the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union. Let me also present Mr Dietmar Krissler, who is Head of the Central Asia Division in the External Action Service; Ms Sarah Rinaldi, Head of Unit for Middle East and Central Asia in the Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships; and Ms Nele Eichhorn, Head of Unit for the EU's Southern Neighbours, Middle East, Turkey, Russia, and Central Asia in the Commission's Directorate-General for Trade. Also in our delegation are Mr Leoš Javůrek of the Czech Permanent Representation to the EU; Mr Chris Kendall of the EU's External Action Service; Mr Arunas Vinciunas of the European Commission's DG TRADE; Ms Silvia Pietropaolo of the European Commission's DG for International Partnerships; and Mr Assen Indjiev from the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU, and also Eva Kratochvilova, European correspondent of our Political Director.

REMARKS BY MR. LIPAVSKÝ**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

We have seen some important developments since our last meeting in this format, in November 2021. We are very conscious that our meeting comes only one week before the referendum in your country on the reform of your Constitution, and we look forward to hearing more from you about this important political milestone.

However, let me begin by observing that 2022 was an important year for EU-Uzbekistan relations in several ways. As already mentioned before, the first point to flag is the completion of our negotiations for a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). This is a major achievement and I offer my mutual congratulations.

During the next agenda item, we will discuss the steps needed now for finalising the agreement to allow for its signature, focusing on the trade part of the agreement. The ‘legally scrubbed’ text of the political and sectoral parts of the Agreement were transmitted to your ministry at the end of March for your review and we look forward to receiving your confirmation so that we can move on to the next phase of the process. So, the work is ongoing, and we hope that we will be able to sign the new EPCA by early next year.

In 2022, we were also able to maintain our rhythm of regular meetings of the Cooperation Committee and its Sub-Committees under the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The Cooperation Committee met on 6 July in Brussels, and the Sub-Committee on Justice and Home Affairs, Human Rights and Related Issues met in Tashkent on 29 March. The Sub-Committee on Development Cooperation met on 15 December 2022 and the Sub-Committee on Economy, Trade, and Investment Relations met on 26 January 2022.

I have already mentioned the busy high-level agenda, with visits to Uzbekistan by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and by High Representative Josep Borrell, in October and November respectively. And this year you have already hosted our EU Special Representative for Central Asia twice, last week with the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore. This shows the importance which the EU attaches to its relationship with your country. We see Uzbekistan as an important regional and international partner for the EU and a significant actor on the international stage.

I know that Uzbekistan was very active last year in the field of international diplomacy, and that you hosted several major international events including our joint EU-Central Asia Sustainable Connectivity Conference in Samarkand in November. We saw this conference as a major success, and the EU institutions are working actively to turn the political appetite for deeper connectivity between our two regions into reality through the EU's Global Gateway.

I also want to refer to another event that you hosted in Samarkand last November, the Summit of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) which took place on 11 November 2022. As you will be aware, the EU is profoundly concerned that this Summit chose to open the door to granting observer status to the secessionist entity in occupied Cyprus. This would run contrary to two UN Security Council resolutions – 541 (of 1983) and 550 (of 1984) – and against international law. We would therefore call on you to refrain from proceeding with the ratification of the amended statute of the OTS. For the EU, this is about respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one of our Member States and all the other EU Member States stand in close solidarity with Cyprus on this important question.

Also, under this agenda item we cannot fail to mention the major geopolitical event that has taken place since our last meeting, namely Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. Of course, this tragic development has significantly altered the geopolitical landscape. The EU condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine as illegal, unprovoked, and unjustified, targeting a free, independent, and sovereign state. I would appreciate hearing your perspective, and of course we will have the opportunity for a more detailed reflection and discussion later over dinner when we come to item 4 of our agenda.

Let us turn to the reform process that is underway in your country. On this, I invite Deputy Managing Director Devigne to take the floor.

REMARKS BY MR. DEVIGNE**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

Good evening, Minister Saidov, Ambassador Khakimov, it is good to welcome you here in Luxembourg. Welcome to all the friends from the Uzbek delegation. We have followed very closely the opening and the reforms in Uzbekistan over the last year, and we know that in a few days the citizens in Uzbekistan will have the opportunity to vote on the government's proposal for a new constitution. This is a significant development, and the EU commends your government's bold decision to put this directly to the people. We also see it as an important positive step that you have invited the OSCE to observe the referendum. We regret however that you chose not to submit the text to the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, but we certainly agreed that there are many positive proposals, particularly regarding human rights, in the text. We have one question mark regarding Article 21, referring to the fundamental freedom and human rights, where there is reference that they can be limited in order to protect 'public morality'. We of course always are worried that public morality could be open to a wide interpretation.

Talking of the reforms of the constitution and the freedoms, we have profoundly regretted the violence that took place in Nukus, in Karakalpakstan. We acknowledged the swift steps taken by your President to respond to public concerns. We would like to know where things stand in terms of investigating the events, and whether the findings will be made public?

One element that we will keep following as well in terms of public freedoms is the recommendations that were made by ODIHR following the last presidential election regarding the freedom of the media, and we would be interested to hear whether there is any development in this regard. We continue to encourage you and support you in your reforms in the fields of human rights, rule of law, good governance, fight against corruption, and good administration. We of course are also interested in the business climate being developed, because we want to take part in the economic development of the country. We in this regard attach great importance to the independence of the judiciary.

REMARKS BY MS. ADRIAEN**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

Let me start by thanking you for the successful visit of our EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, last week. During his visit, he had the chance to meet you and the Minister of Justice, the General Prosecutor, Speakers of both chambers of parliament, and the President. He also met representatives of civil society, who described to him the continued difficulties they experience in carrying out their work. We would like to urge Uzbekistan to take further steps to ease what is still a restrictive environment for civil society. During the last Cooperation Council, we welcomed your plan to create a friendlier legal environment for civil society. But since then, we have observed with considerable concern that the Cabinet of Ministers issued a resolution in June 2022 introducing greater controls and constraints on NGOs seeking foreign funding. In our view, this goes against President Mirziyoyev's expressed wish to establish a vivid civil society. This could also put at risk the EU's support for civil society in Uzbekistan, and we strongly encourage you and the Ministry of Justice to explore the cancellation of this resolution from June 22.

From the meeting with President Mirziyoyev last week, we also understand that there is a very positive development, which would be a move toward the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment (OPCAT). This is very encouraging, and in the same context we would also encourage Uzbekistan to proceed with the ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. As we have often discussed, in this format but also in other formats, it is necessary to sustain efforts to eradicate torture and to improve prison conditions, including by taking further measures.

We would also like to say that we have seen in recent months a number of limitations to the freedom of expression, sometimes linked to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, or using an extensive definition of defamation. Several bloggers and journalists have been subjected to pressure or intimidation, and others have been sentenced by the courts.

We definitely hope that this is something that you will be working on in the future. We also want to stress the importance of protecting LGBTI persons and defending their human rights. We would like to encourage you to combat discrimination in all its forms, including discrimination against

persons belonging to sexual minorities. We would also like to talk about the importance of gender equality and women's and girls' human rights, including the economic, political, and educational empowerment of women and girls.

We warmly welcome the adoption of the law criminalising Gender Based Violence which was signed by the President some 10 days ago. This represents a major step forward for the protection of women. To stop Gender Based Violence, as well as a determination to educate and explain, it is also necessary to bring perpetrators to justice.

With his major step forward, is there perhaps also a plan from Uzbekistan to join the Istanbul Convention?

We welcome the revised Labour Code which comes into effect this month. While the revised Labour Code closes several gaps in aligning legislation with International Labour Standards, we understand that the issue of equal pay for men and women for work of equal value, and non-discrimination in employment, are not covered in the revision. We encourage a full analysis of the gender pay gap and for the information to be easily accessible and visible for transparency purposes. We definitely welcome efforts made by your government in accelerating the elimination of discrimination against women, in particular, the adoption of the 2020-2030 Strategy of Achieving Gender Equality.

We also welcome, as was also mentioned by our EU Special Representative Eamon Gilmore, the achievements in tackling forced and child labour. The success achieved in the cotton industry is absolutely noteworthy, and we are now looking also at the silk industry which is very important for Uzbekistan. We saw that the President has just signed into law a prohibition on the use of teachers in the cotton harvest. We see that this is something that needs to be monitored in the future, and we are ready to support if necessary.

We understand that Uzbekistan has never conducted a National Child Labour Survey and we would definitely encourage you to do so. This is a way forward in terms of looking at, possibly, an Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings and Forced Labour, and that could be used also for a specific Action Plan to combat Child Labour.

Let me also ask you about the measures taken by Uzbekistan to fight and prevent violent extremism. Do you see this as a growing problem, or as less of an issue than it has been in the past? What insights can you share regarding its origins, if you see it is as a problem? We remain

interested in exploring opportunities for strengthened cooperation in this field, also at the intersection of preventing violent extremism and protecting human rights. In this respect we look forward to the upcoming visit to Uzbekistan of the EU's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Ilkka Salmi, with EU Special Representative Hakala at the end of May. We look forward to having the opportunity to prepare his visit so it can be as fruitful as the visit of EU Special Representative Eamon Gilmore.

REMARKS BY MR. LIPAVSKÝ**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

Let me close our intervention under this item by welcoming Uzbekistan's close cooperation with the OSCE in all three dimensions. For the EU, the OSCE remains a key pillar of the security order in its area of responsibility and a guardian of the fundamental acts and values governing security in our shared space. We encourage you to continue to cooperate actively with the OSCE Project Coordinator in Tashkent.

Thank you very much, Minister. I hand the floor back to you and we are happy to respond to any questions or comments you may have on the points we have raised.

REMARKS BY MR. SAIDOV**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

Uzbekistan has entered a new stage in its development. The country is undergoing radical changes in all spheres of life.

At the beginning of last year, the "New Uzbekistan" Development Strategy for 2022-2026 was approved. It pays particular attention to a pragmatic, balanced, and proactive foreign policy and economic diplomacy of the New Uzbekistan.

It is based on our country's commitment to the principles of international law and its aspiration for peace, good-neighbourliness, comprehensive cooperation and the strengthening of regional stability and international security.

Unprecedented and far-reaching constitutional reforms are currently under way in Uzbekistan.

Their main objective is to build a humane, democratic, law-based and secular welfare State, and to establish an open and fair civil society. The human, his honour and dignity are at the heart of the reforms. Protecting human rights and fundamental legal rights is our top priority.

These reforms require the improvement and strengthening of the constitutional framework.

In just one week, as was already mentioned by you, Mr. Chair, there will be a national referendum in our country to amend the constitution.

The updated Constitution will further strengthen the solid legal framework and the guarantee of the long-term development strategy of Uzbekistan.

We welcome the participation of international observers in this important event for our country, including those from the European Union, ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

I will not dwell on those processes in detail. My colleagues from the Ministry of Justice and the National Centre for Human Rights will tell you about them in more detail.

Dear colleagues, Uzbekistan attaches priority importance to developing cooperation with the EU and its member states. We value highly the current level of cooperation, and we are in favour of a

continued dialogue on the basis of trust. Allow me to briefly dwell on the important and priority areas of Uzbek-EU cooperation. Firstly, a close political dialogue has been established between Uzbekistan and the EU. Close political dialogue has been established and is being maintained. In recent years, Uzbek-European relations have intensified substantially and acquired a multidimensional character. The parties maintain contacts at all levels. In particular, in recent years, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has had three opportunities for contact with PEC Michel. Contacts are developing on different levels between Uzbekistan and the EU. We welcome regular high-level contacts, in particular with the EU HR, the SR for Central Asia, and other EU representatives.

In 2022, a new page was opened in relations between Uzbekistan and the EU. An important development was the initialling of the EPCA. We call on our European partners to assist in completing the internal procedures as soon as possible to prepare the document for signing during the forthcoming high-level visit to Brussels. I am confident that this agreement will not only open up new areas of cooperation but also provide a modern basis for intensifying our mutually beneficial partnership.

Secondly, it is important to make effective use of existing cooperation mechanisms in the "Uzbekistan-EU" format.

A regular meeting of the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee was held in Tashkent early in April. The Sub-Committees on Justice, Home Affairs and Human Rights, Economy, Trade and Investment, and Development Co-operation are scheduled to meet before the end of this year. Next year, we will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of our diplomatic relations. We are ready to organise a number of joint events for the celebration of this significant occasion.

Thirdly, the inter-regional dialogue between the EU and Central Asia is consistently developing. We welcome the success of the first EU-Central Asia Heads of State summit in Astana. We support for initiative of the Kyrgyz side to organise the second meeting in June in Cholpon-Ata, and we are ready to consider holding the next summit in Uzbekistan. We hope that during the forthcoming summit in Kyrgyzstan, the European side will propose organising a third summit in Uzbekistan. Last November, the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference was held in Samarkand with the participation of the EU High Representative and the heads of Foreign Ministries of the countries of our region. A delegation of Uzbekistan headed by the Prime Minister will take part in the second meeting of the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum in Almaty on 19 May. We are in favour of effective implementation of the updated EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2019. However, we note

with regret that many of the initiative in the political, economic and cultural-humanitarian spheres have not been fully implemented. This is particularly the case when it comes to building up investment and trade-economic ties.

It should be noted that the full implementation of the Strategy is impossible without appropriate financing. We consider it important to timely and effectively use the financial and technical assistance allocated to Uzbekistan for 2021-2024 in the amount of 76 million euros for bilateral projects, as well as to start working on the priority areas for 2025-2027.

Fourthly, the protection of human rights and fundamental legal rights is our priority and one of the main areas of our cooperation with the EU. In 2007, Uzbekistan was the first Central Asian country to hold a Human Rights Dialogue. At present, our bilateral interaction in this important area is taking place within the framework of the regular meetings of the EU-Uzbekistan Sub-Committee on Justice, Home Affairs, Human Rights and related matters. We welcome the outcome of the 18th meeting of this Subcommittee, held on 4 April 2022 in Tashkent. We are working on organizing the next meeting in June this year in Brussels. We recently held jointly in Tashkent the 4th EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, with participation of the EU Special Representative for central Asia. We welcome the outcome of the visit to our country of EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore. As was already mentioned, during his visit, he held very productive talks with the leadership of the ministries and agencies involved and was received by the President of Uzbekistan. I personally took part in this very productive meeting.

Fifthly, the expansion of trade and economic, financial and technical cooperation remains a priority. We are pleased with the significant intensification of bilateral ties in this sphere. We will discuss these issues in more detail under the next agenda item.

Sixthly, tourism remains one of the promising areas of our cooperation. As you know, in October, Samarkand will host the 25th jubilee session of the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization. We are ready to hold an EU-Central Asia tourism forum in this context. We consider it necessary to start preparation for this important event in a timely manner, including agreeing on the agenda and other organizational issues.

Seventhly, in view of the fundamental reforms undertaken in our country in the field of education, science and innovation, we are interested in expanding cooperation with the EU through the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes.

I would like to pass the floor to Mr. Ikramov, Deputy Minister of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan. He will give you a detailed briefing on the ongoing reforms in the sectors of the judiciary, internal matters and rule of law, and will also respond to the questions raised in your speech.

Afterwards, Mr. Tillabaev, First Deputy Director of the National Human Rights Centre of the Republic of Uzbekistan, will talk about ongoing reforms in the field of human rights in our country.

REMARKS BY MR. IKRAMOV**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

Respected ministers, respected members of the meeting, as Minister Saidov correctly remarked, I will now discuss shortly ongoing reforms and respond to the questions raised by the European side. On 30th April of this year, for the first time a national constitutional referendum will be carried out. The new document takes into account the requests of our people - there were about 222,000 requests. Foreign experts' opinions, specialists and the experiences of third countries have also been taken into account. A legal status for the State is introduced, the guarantee of human rights, the guarantee of the inviolability of property and other items. I want to draw your attention to the fact that the new constitution increases the number of articles related to human rights by three and a half times. And by four times - the protection of the health of the population. Human rights and human freedoms are being strengthened, the rights of children, youth, families. Care for youth, children, families and women is strengthened as one of the key tasks of state and society. Administrative reforms in the country continue. Until the end of 2023, the number of state organs will have reduced from 61 to 28, considerably reducing the tasks, functions and powers of state entities as a result of the optimisation of ministerial departments. State functions transferred to the private sector will increase by not less than three times. Bureaucracy related to public services rendered to the population is constantly decreasing. A total of 105 previously required permissions are no longer necessary to be requested.

An independent judiciary remains a priority for Uzbekistan, as does access to justice in the framework of rule of law. A complex set of measures for the strengthening of the independence of judges is being implemented, and we are working towards a system of rule of law in line with international standards. Within the last 2 years, a judicial strategy and more than 20 normative legal acts in the judicial sphere have been adopted, which allowed to strengthen the rule of the law and social justice. The financial independence of courts and the social protection of judges - all this is fixed at the constitutional level, as is the introduction of modern technology in the activities of our courts. Now citizens can fully address and participate in courts online.

A strategy of counteracting corruption in the country has been implemented in state policy. Currently, more than 80 legal acts are being introduced in line with this anti-corruption policy. The law about civil service has been adopted, which contains a standalone article on the prevention of

corruption. Government organs are implementing a system of 'compliance control', as well as a rating system aimed to reduce corruption.

In the recent years, in the sphere of support for civil society organizations, positive changes have come in, and a lot of work has been done to solve problems.

For the first time, Uzbekistan has adopted a concept for the development of civil society for the years 2021-2025. Work on the establishment of an Institute for the permanent representation of NGOs in the legislative chamber, the Oliy Majlis. More than 20 representatives of New Uzbekistan are involved in the development of a draft code on the activities of NGOs. In general, the ongoing reforms on NGOs has allowed to accelerate the removal of most remaining restrictions.

These conditions are being further complemented by close cooperation with foreign countries in the field of freedom of religion and belief. More than 20 memoranda on cooperation on religious issues have been signed with foreign countries. A new law on religious organisations has been adopted, where international standards have been taken into account - the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and also the recommendations of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

Measures undertaken in the area of the protecting the rights and freedoms of religious citizens were recognized by Uzbekistan's removal from the US' so-called list of "Countries of Particular Concern" in relation to the provision of religious freedom.

In Uzbekistan, a solid legal framework is being created for the guarantee of the freedom of speech, the freedom of information, and the work of media as well as the rights of journalists. More than 10 legal acts have been adopted, taking into consideration international expertise. The development strategy "New Uzbekistan" for the years 2020-2026 foresees the further strengthening of the role of media and journalists.

A legal act for a new information law has been prepared, which is now being put up for public debate. This law foresees the reduction of the tax burden on media by up to 50%. The registration mechanism for media is being simplified, registration times are being shortened. This work has allowed Uzbekistan to improve its position in the 2022 World Press Freedom Index by 22 points.

In the sphere of the rights of workers, Uzbekistan continues to work actively with international labour organizations. At the present time, Uzbekistan has ratified 19 conventions and one protocol of ILO. On this foundation, a new labour codex is being adopted. A national action plan for the

implementation of ILO conventions and the further alignment of national legislation with ILO conventions has been adopted. Systems of safe labour migration are being implemented, with particular emphasis placed on the diversification of labour migration target countries. Currently, we cooperate on this matter with over 40 countries of the world, including with EU countries.

We are ready for long-term cooperation with the EU, including through national and regional projects. Finally, I would like to respond to two questions. Firstly, you have mentioned the June resolution, the 328th resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers.

It should be noted that this resolution regulates the issue of social partnerships, issues of public control, and in this regard, I would like to draw your attention: it regulates also interaction with the FATF on the issue of attracting grant funds. When we talked with many NGOs, 95% of them, when it comes to their interaction when attracting grants, this is in some form, or another connected to the state organs. So, this resolution aims at the close cooperation, or even help from the government organs, in attracting grant funding and the realization of projects. I myself met with the Civil Society Institute in the Ministry of Justice, and there were some nuances precisely regarding the mechanism of the application of these norms.

Now, I can tell you, that this resolution - we only adapted it in June of 2022, it has been in effect for about half a year, we are now working on improving it even further. This is the first thing.

Secondly, you asked about individual cases regarding bloggers. I would like to note that first of all, these bloggers drew upon themselves criminal liability as provided for by the Criminal Code, and not because of their activities as media outlets. And at the same time, it is important to note that the initiators of this criminal case were ordinary citizens that had been slandered by these bloggers through media and social networks. On the one hand, we protect the bloggers, but we also have to protect the rights of other persons. Those who impede on the rights of others - who slander others, who put out false information about others, how are they going to look into the eyes of their family, their colleagues? That is why the court decisions that have entered into force are the most important thing. And in Uzbekistan, just as in Europe, when a court decision enters into force - it has legal force, and no doubts should be raised about this legal decision that has been made. Thank you.

REMARKS BY MR. TILLABAEV**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

Good evening, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. Our meeting today is international diplomacy in the name of peace. This year, the global community marks the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration on human rights. Uzbekistan actively takes part in these international campaigns. As Minister Saidov noted, the development strategy "New Uzbekistan" is precisely aimed at implementing these international obligations of Uzbekistan, including sustainable development and the principle of "no-one left behind". Uzbekistan, in its role as a member of the Human Rights Council, has taken a number of related initiatives, on the international, national and regional level. In particular, on the initiative of Uzbekistan, UN resolutions on the role of parliaments in the achievement of the SDGs, and also two resolutions of the Human Rights Council related to the rights of youth, have been adopted. We thank the European side for its cooperation in passing these resolutions. We are strengthening our cooperation with the UN structures. In March of this year, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mr. Türk visited us.

Uzbekistan has extended a standing invitation to seven Special Procedures mandate holders of the Human Rights Council. This year we expect the visit of UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Alice Edwards. Over the last few years, Uzbekistan is becoming a place for international discussion for human rights issues. We hosted the Samarkand Human Rights Forum, a global conference on the rights of youth, and also a global UN conference related to child education related to the implementation of the UN Conventions on the rights of disabled persons. We have taken a number of legal and institutional measures to further improve our support systems for individuals with disabilities.

Responding to the call of the UN General Secretary, we took measures to limit statelessness. Within the last five years, more than 76,000 individuals received citizenship. We have also adapted and are putting into practice a programme related to Security Council resolution 1325, that is, related to violent extremism, which Madam Ambassador already mentioned. As a result of five operations in this regard, more than 530 women and children have been returned from conflict zones, who are now receiving all necessary help from the government and from civil society institutions.

Last year, the special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism, Ms. Ni Aolain, presented her report to the Human Rights Council. We carefully studied her report and prepared a National Action Plan, now in parliament, and this plan also contains items that aim at the improvement of our legislation aiming at support for the UN resolution about the right to a clean and healthy environment. Uzbekistan joined the Declaration on Children, Youth, and Climate Action and is preparing a project for an ecological codex, which is now being widely discussed with participation of environmental groups. We pay a lot of attention to the question of education in the field of human rights, and we express our gratitude to the European side in this context, particularly to those European universities that took part in the Global Forum on Human Rights Education in Samarkand last December.

In this year, in the context of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, Uzbekistan actively implements campaigns on the topic of human rights. In February, we carried out the "Week of Human Rights". When it comes to the issue of the fight against torture, and the improvement of national mechanisms, our measures aim in three directions: firstly, the improvement of national legislation, the question of education, and monitoring measures. In February, we began educational courses for the staff of penitentiaries and law enforcement institutions. Until the end of the year, we aim to have trained more than 1000 employees of law enforcement institutions in this regard, and we hope for the cooperation with the European side. The Council of Europe is already actively involved in the procedure. In addition, the Nelson Mandela Rules are implemented in national law and are applicable practice in all investigation rooms in penitentiary facilities, which are equipped with CCTV cameras. Employees are equipped with body cameras to prevent torture. As a result of the reforms, we have drastically reduced the amount of prison violence. We have also significantly reduced our prison population. Acts of pardon are carried out annually, the last one was adopted on April 20 by the President, pardoning more than 540 citizens. In terms of the prison population, Uzbekistan has the smallest per capita prison population among the CIS states at 68 per 100,000. This indicator is even better than in some countries of the EU. In addition, we have an ongoing monitoring system, the National Preventative Mechanism in the form of the Ombudsman Plus. In the last year, 400 visits to penitentiary institutions were carried out. We are currently working on the development of a new draft law on this national preventative mechanism in regard to the prevention of torture. We plan to ratify in due course the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture.

You asked about two other conventions, the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the Rome Statute. These questions are on our agenda. Uzbekistan is

actively considering these conventions in the context of the ongoing constitutional reforms, which establishes the principle of non-extradition of citizens, and so on. These questions require thorough analysis, taking into account also the European experience.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as Madam Ambassador has mentioned the importance of the law on protection of children and women from violence, which was also highlighted by Mr Gilmore during his visit to Uzbekistan - Uzbekistan was the fifth country amongst countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia to adopt such a law. The Istanbul Convention is relevant but considering that only 21 countries in the EU have adopted it, and the EU itself has not yet ratified it, we are still studying the Convention. The Minister mentioned the importance of the constitutional reform in Uzbekistan and the active participation of civil society. To respond to your question about Article 21: it is important to take into account also other articles of the new constitution. In particular, Articles 15, 16, and 19. I will allow myself to quote from Article 15 - it mentions that international agreements, together with generally recognized principles, are an integral part of the Uzbek legal system. On top of this, no law can contradict the constitutional norms. Uzbekistan recognizes and guarantees human rights in line with generally recognized principles of international law and the Constitution. So, the norms that you mentioned, those restrictions - they are in line with our international obligations, including with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. So, these three articles will be organically interconnected.

Furthermore, the constitutional reforms of Uzbekistan are aimed at the sphere of human rights. They are fully in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Generally recognized principles such as the principle of the naturalness and inalienability of are being strengthened on the constitutional level, as are Miranda Rights and habeas corpus. The prohibition of the death penalty is becoming a constitutional norm as it is in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the Czech Republic.

In addition, the provision of pro bono legal assistance will be given constitutional status. A new institution is being established on the constitutional level - the Institute for Constitutional Complaints, which will allow citizens to appeal directly to the Constitutional Court. Particular attention is paid to the strengthening of labour, social and environmental rights, as well as the rights of children, women and individuals with disabilities. We carefully studied the experience of European countries, in particular that of Austria, Germany, France, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and others. We have translated the Constitutions of these countries into Uzbek to allow for a wider circle of readers. We are grateful to our European colleagues for their comments and

suggestions and their assistance with a number of international events and conferences, in which took part a great number of experts and international organizations. We studied the comments of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and we learned from experts from the OSCE and the Venice Commission, who took part in our events. So, we have had the chance to profit from this international experience of cooperation.

Dear colleagues, to reply to the question regarding the events in Nukus. I want to note that we had a visit of a delegation from the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which in October met with regional representatives and presented its recommendations. The ongoing court sessions are transparent and open. Currently, a stage of appeal procedures is underway, and next week appeal proceedings on the first court session will begin with 16 out of 22 defendants, who already filed their appeals. Furthermore, an independent commission with the Ombudsman at its head is in place, which consists not only of members of the Parliament, but also of civil society representatives and two foreign NGOs from Slovenia and Switzerland. I think that very soon this commission will present its results. The principle of openness and transparency of these proceedings is; hence, I believe, guaranteed fully by Uzbekistan.

Dear Colleagues, the Minister noted that we are seeing a very active month of international cooperation with the European side. We count on the support of the European side for a number of initiatives of Uzbekistan, including the establishment of a Special Rapporteur on the rights of youth in the Human Rights Council. We plan to hold an international forum on youth rights and invite our European counterparts to this event. Thank you for your attention.

REMARKS BY MR. SAIDOV**(Item 2: General and political matters (including internal and constitutional reforms, justice & home affairs, human rights and rule of law issues))**

Thank you. Dear Mr. Minister, I would just like to add a couple of words. I want to say that these reforms are being carried out in Uzbekistan not in order to get some kind of rating or have some kind of position on an international rating. We are doing all of this in our country to ensure, first of all, human rights, that is, the rights of the citizens of Uzbekistan - this is why we are here. These reforms we are carrying out are irreversible. What was started by the President of Uzbekistan in 2012, about the development strategy of Uzbekistan, in which the interests of our citizens take centre stage - these things are irreversible. We are going ahead - and we will never leave this path. I will repeat: We don't do this to gain favour with other parties, but we do this for the welfare and wellbeing of our own population. Thank you. If you do have any commentary, we are ready to respond. I will move to the second point of our agenda, with your permission.

REMARKS BY MR. SAIDOV**(Item 3: Trade, economic and investment issues (including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy)).**

Ladies and gentlemen,

In recent years, our trade and economic cooperation has intensified and reached a new level.

In April 2021, the European Union granted "GSP+" status to Uzbekistan, which opened the opportunity for our companies to export more than 6200 commodity items to the EU duty-free. As a result, the volume of Uzbek exports to European countries has increased significantly. Our bilateral trade turnover has almost doubled over the last 5 years. Similar growth is observed in Uzbek exports, which rose from \$420 million in 2017 to about \$800 million in 2022.

The number of enterprises with European capital in Uzbekistan has more than doubled.

We are grateful to Europe for supporting Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organisation and for providing technical assistance in this regard. We believe that this is fully in keeping with the interests of both sides. We look forward to continuing mutually beneficial cooperation in this sphere.

Uzbekistan is ready for an open and constructive dialogue with the European Union in the framework of the EU restrictive measures against Russia. We have already held three rounds of consultative talks on this subject by videoconference. In this context, we welcome the forthcoming visit of EU Special Envoy on Sanctions D. O'Sullivan to Uzbekistan on 27-28 April this year.

We expect the visit of the Executive Vice-President of the European Commission Valdis Dombrovskis to Uzbekistan on 17-18 May this year to participate in the 32nd meeting of the Board of Governors of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Samarkand.

Mr. Lipavsky, please allow me to pass the floor to Mr. Oybek Khamraev, Deputy Minister of Investment and Industry and Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan, for more information on questions of economy and trade.

REMARKS BY MR. KHAMRAEV**(Item 3: Trade, economic and investment issues (including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy)).**

It is gratifying to know that for the last several years, relations between Uzbekistan and EU have intensified in a number of areas. This tendency proves that both sides pursue similar goals, such as the creation of all the necessary conditions for the business circles to expand and strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation with each other. We are continuing to maintain strong contacts and communications at the highest levels of the EU Institutions, which reflects the intention of both parties to strengthen our cooperation. Some of these contacts have been already mentioned, such as the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference, the visit of the President of the European Council. Moreover, I would like to add that last year, the President of Uzbekistan visited several European countries such as France and Hungary and investment contracts for around EUR 7,5bn have been signed. It is also expected to visit European countries this year on different levels to bring multilateral cooperation to a qualitatively new level. We are planning to organize the annual meeting of the EBRD Board of Directors this May in Samarkand. We hope to see all of you among the participants.

It is important to note that regular visits and joint events have led to concrete results. As of last year, for example, mutual trade between Uzbekistan and the EU has been expanding by more than 15 years, and in recent years the number of joint ventures with participation of European companies has reached almost 1000. In Uzbekistan, we have many success stories in different sectors with European companies. I will not mention them - there are so many success stories. We also have had the first meeting of the Foreign Investment Council under the President of Uzbekistan last November, where several European companies and the EBRD President participated. We formed a solid investment portfolio with the EBRD, French Development Agency, EIB, and many others. We also believe that the ratification of the EPCA with the EU will create a new milestone and serve to strengthen trade and investment collaboration between business circles of Uzbekistan and the EU.

Dear colleagues, since 2017, our country stands on the path of irreversible reforms, as mentioned earlier. Improving the welfare of our citizens by conducting decisive measures - including ensuring the rule of law, introduction of favourable investment conditions, poverty reduction and employment creation. The Government's declared policy prioritises the attraction of direct investment through the improvement of Uzbekistan's business climate and the liberalization of

foreign trade. Due to these concrete actions, we were able to achieve positive results in our economic development. First of all, Uzbekistan was among the few countries that preserved their economic growth during the Covid pandemic. In the last year, it demonstrated exceptional resilience in the face of strong geopolitical headwinds. According to the World Bank, our economy expects to rise by around 5% this year. After receiving beneficiary status GSP+, granted by the EU, export of Uzbek products to the European market has increased by almost 45% last year.

Last but not least, the collective cotton campaign from NGOs, trade unions and apparel brands has ended its global call for a boycott of Uzbek cotton after the elimination of forced and child labour in the cotton sector. In order to save time, I will not go into details about our recent success stories but want to emphasise our new policies and approaches in our foreign agenda.

Today, we continue our dynamic development from a great past to a great future. We are building the new Uzbekistan. In this regard the "New Uzbekistan" development strategy 2020-2026 was adopted. Let me briefly enumerate the main directions of this strategy, which aims to further extend attraction of private capital, strengthen investor protection, liberalise foreign trade. Firstly, reduction of ministries and agencies as well as optimization of work processes in the system of public administration. Starting from this year, the number of executive bodies has been reduced from 61 to 28. We are outsourcing a number of individual government functions to the private sector. Expanding the public-private partnerships and moving towards digitalization within the government. We are also following the decentralization of public administration and ensuring openness of activities of government bodies. Secondly, reliable protection and inviolability of property rights and limitation of legal interference of state bodies in property relations. Strengthening guarantees of strict protection of private property including rights to the ownership of land. Thirdly, accession to the World Trade Organization is an utmost priority in our foreign trade policy. After a 13-year break, Uzbekistan has resumed its negotiations on accession to the WTO. We are ambitious and hope to become a member state as soon as possible. We intend to do so through the creation of appropriate proposals to bring national legislation in the areas of technical regulation, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and intellectual property protection in line with the requirements of the WTO agreements. Fourthly, continued implementation of the industrial policy and ensuring the stability of the national economy. Increasing the share of industry in our GDP as well as the volume of industrial production by 1,5 times. We intend to achieve these goals through widespread implementation of programs to increase labour productivity in industries.

It should be mentioned that we still have huge potential in exploring new opportunities for investment with our partners from the European countries. With an estimated population of over 36 million people, Uzbekistan has the foundation needed to become a regional economic powerhouse. A dynamic, literate and entrepreneurial population - the largest in Central Asia with a proper infrastructure as well as the biggest potential consumer market in the region. At the same time, our EU colleagues have cutting edge technologies, advanced experience as well as the best conditions for R&D as a way to introduce new products and services. We need to synchronise our competitive advantages and continue implementing joint initiatives and projects. We can propose a different number and types of sectors for cooperation, among which are green economy, IT, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, textiles, and many other spheres. We are interested in creating a full-fledged high-tech production with EU companies, signing off-take agreements, and exporting finished goods to third markets. Uzbekistan, thanks to its strategic geographic location, has access to the Commonwealth of Independent States, with a population of over 300M, which is united by a free trade regime. All this opens up great opportunities for European business communities to expand their presence around the world.

The time available will not be enough to discuss all the promising areas of our cooperation. In conclusion, I want to underline that we have all the necessary tools to ensure the successful implementation of any joint venture or project. We possess great potential in infrastructure, technology, resources and human capital. Most importantly, we have the political will and strong support from the leadership of our state. I urge to everyone to use all existing opportunities and rely on the European side to assist in bringing more European companies, we are confident that together we can expand our mutually beneficial relationship to a qualitatively new level.

REMARKS BY MS. EICHHORN**(Item 3: Trade, economic and investment issues (including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy)).**

After the successful conclusion of EPCA negotiations last year in July, we are now in the process of preparing the agreement for signature. Unfortunately, we are falling behind schedule as we were not able to conclude the legal scrubbing process before Easter. It should be emphasised that this is a technical process in nature. Let us hope that we will be in a position to finalise this process now in a very short time indeed.

There are still many steps to be taken before the Agreement can be signed and ratified: we have to translate the text into all 24 official languages of the EU, and we have to consult our Member States and the European Parliament. This will still take some time. Grateful if we could finalise the legal scrubbing as soon as possible.

On WTO accession, as you know, the EU strongly supports Uzbekistan's WTO accession within the shortest timeframe possible, and our support includes financial assistance to this end. We very much acknowledge the political importance that Uzbekistan places on its WTO accession.

We are looking forward to the next steps. In particular we expect that Uzbekistan will present substantially improved revised market access offers for both services and goods before the next WTO Working Party meeting. As the WTO process moves ahead, Uzbekistan will also need to clearly formulate its commitments to bring its domestic rules in line with the WTO and phase out incompatible measures such as export subsidies.

Thirdly, Minister, you were referring to the work on sanctions. As you know, the EU, in response to Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the European Union has imposed 10 packages of restrictive measures against Russia to date. We did this in close cooperation with the US and other like-minded partners.

We designed the restrictive measures in a very careful and calibrated way: as far as EU trade sanctions are concerned, they target trade – both export and import – in goods, technologies and services. Our restrictive measures seek to undermine Russia's ability to conduct and finance the war; to deprive Russia of critical technologies and markets; and to weaken its economic base in the short and medium term.

The sanctions are far reaching but we have made sure to exclude medical, agriculture and food-related products and to safeguard global food security.

Our sanctions are having an impact. However, Russia is trying to work around them. The EU is therefore focusing more and more on preventing the circumvention of sanctions.

Combating sanctions circumvention is a top priority for the EU, and in that spirit, we are liaising with third-country relevant authorities and businesses to strengthen cooperation in fighting sanctions circumvention and to maximize the impact of sanctions imposed by the global coalition of like-minded partners.

David O'Sullivan, the EU's newly appointed Special Envoy for Sanctions, already had a productive discussion with Ambassador Khakimov in March and he will be travelling to Tashkent later this week for a series of high-level meetings. We are happy to be able to offer a two-day training course in Tashkent to provide additional information on EU sanctions to Uzbek officials and representatives of businesses. We really hope that a number of businesses and civil servants will take part in this training.

Let me say a few words about the GSP+. Indeed, the European Commission notes the positive trends in Uzbekistan's exports to the EU. We appreciate your continued engagement on GSP+ - there was a monitoring mission to Uzbekistan. We are grateful that you have followed up on our recommendations. There are some key concerns that are outstanding, most notably the shrinking space for civil society, the worsening of the environment for NGOs. We hope that this trend can be reversed. We are encouraging Uzbekistan to address these shortcomings, as raised by EU monitoring bodies, and reflected in the EU's recommendations in our upcoming GSP report which we expect to be published later this year.

We encourage Uzbekistan to address the key shortcomings as raised by UN monitoring bodies and reflected in the EU's recommendations and in our upcoming GSP report, which we expect to publish later this year. It is important that Uzbekistan continues to implement effectively the international conventions specified under GSP+.

It is particularly important for GSP+ that new and revised legislation, such as the Labour and Criminal Codes, and the upcoming reform of the Constitution, are fully in line with Uzbekistan's international commitments.

Like other GSP+ countries, Uzbekistan will have to re-apply for the new GSP+ by the end of 2025. During this period, and while the application is being assessed, Uzbekistan will continue to benefit from GSP+ tariff preferences. This implies that the Commission, following an examination of Uzbekistan's application, can decide to grant the new GSP+ status to Uzbekistan, unless the European Parliament or the EU Member States object.

The final shape of the new GSP+ regime is subject to the outcome of negotiations between the co-legislators in the EU, so this process is ongoing, and we count on Uzbekistan to continue demonstrating its clear commitment to the implementation of all 27 international conventions under GSP+ and we stand ready to support you in this process.

REMARKS BY MS. RINALDI**(Item 3: Trade, economic and investment issues (including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy)).**

Uzbekistan is a key partner for the EU in Central Asia. We are pleased to have developed a solid cooperation portfolio with you.

The current programme for the period 2021-2027 is well on track with two thirds of the EUR 76 million for the first four-year period being allocated to programmes in all priority and new actions under preparation this year.

I would like mention in particular our project with UNDP to digitalise public services – for example for the issuance of birth certificates - and the set-up of one-stop-shop for public service delivery, which has been highly successful. It provides tangible benefits for citizens and the government alike.

We are currently drafting a second phase of this project. The objective is to continue supporting the public service reform in Uzbekistan, for a more efficient, coherent, and people-centred service delivery model.

We are pleased that the EU's longstanding and prominent role in the development of Uzbekistan's agri-food sector has been acknowledged by the Strategic Reforms Agency and that the EU was designated 'lead development partner' in the Country Platform and associated agriculture working group.

While we are wrapping up our first budget support operation in the agri-food sector (worth EUR 40 million), we are now starting a new budget support operation (EUR 27 million) aimed at accelerating reforms on land management, food security and nutrition, and on the Agriculture Knowledge and Information System.

I would like to insist that it is crucial to reach a timely agreement with your government on the set of indicators and targets for this budget support operation. We have proposed them, and it would be the basis to make this budget support operation a success.

We thank you for welcoming our experts' team last week and we now count on the full cooperation from the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs in the last steps of design of this budget support operation and then throughout the budget support operation.

In the agri-food sector, we are joining forces with both EU Member States and European Financial Institutions through a Team Europe approach and a Team Europe initiative on support to a modern and sustainable agri-food sector and resilient rural livelihoods.

We are notably preparing a blending operation with the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) to improve access to drinking water in the regions of Tashkent, Kashkadarya and Fergana. And another one with the European Investment Bank (EIB) and AFD to restore degraded lands in the Aral Sea region.

In 2024, we plan to invest more in digitalisation, as a driver for economic growth, an opportunity for reducing inequalities, and to further enhance efficiency of the public and private sectors alike.

Looking ahead, we will start preparing later this year a mid-term review of the multi-annual indicative programme (MIP) taking into account the results achieved so far, the needs of Uzbekistan in dialogue with you, and our political priorities.

When it comes to regional cooperation, we are also keen to increase our cooperation through a Team Europe approach in two sectors: digital connectivity on one hand, and water, energy and climate change on the other.

This is why we launched, as you know, two dedicated Team Europe Initiatives in November last year in Samarkand in these fields, and they are part of the EU's Global Gateway Strategy: the EU's positive and sustainable investment strategy to connect people by investing in both hard infrastructure and human capital.

Through the regional TEI on Digital Connectivity, we are planning to address the lack of a high-capacity transnational backbone network by contributing to the implementation of satellite connectivity in the region.

Thank you for the opportunity given to our team of experts visiting Uzbekistan at the end of February to explain the concept and benefits of the proposed initiative. I am glad to tell you that following this mission, it was decided to include an element of Earth Observation into the offer, to leverage the European excellence available through the EU's Copernicus programme.

This is why we are currently working on refining our proposed initiative, while taking into account this new element. We will very shortly send you a letter of intent to outline our plans, which we will invite you to answer possibly before the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum (18-19 May) so that we can move forward concretely together but also to make it a deliverable for the event.

In the field of water and environment, we thank you for the active participation in the 7th High Level Conference of the EU-Central Asia Platform for Environment and Water Cooperation that took place in Rome on 22-24 February this year.

In particular, we appreciated your delegation's constructive approach during the preparation of the Conference conclusions. It is a useful document to guide our priorities in the coming years in this domain.

In addition to the two regional TEIs, we are exploring possibilities for future investments on sustainable transport connections between the EU and Central Asia, as you know a study is being carried out by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the results will be presented in Almaty. There are many other regional projects, but in the interest of time I will only mention two related to Afghanistan.

Finally, I want to thank you for helping us to find solutions to support the Afghan female students, within the framework of the regional programme. Thanks to your efforts, they will finalise their studies in Tashkent in May. We are actively looking for solutions for their future, in particular five of them, avoiding exposing them to risks when they finish their studies. I would also like to inform you that we will extend the support to the Afghan Training Centre in Termez, in order for us to continue the support the many young Afghans who are living in Uzbekistan.

Thank you also for hosting the 4th EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum on 9-10 March in Tashkent. We are looking forward to the following one, that will take place most likely in Kyrgyzstan next year.

We look forward to the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum which will take place in Almaty on 19 May to continue our discussions to deepen and operationalise our engagement and partnership. Prime Minister Aripov has been invited to the event and we hope we can count on an active high-level participation from Uzbekistan.

Back to water, we also welcome Uzbekistan's proactive and constructive approach to transboundary water management in the region and in particular regarding the IFAS and its reform process to be agreed by the Central Asian Heads of State in the September summit.

The EU fully supports this process for IFAS to become a financially independent regional institution with a strong mandate on transboundary water management beyond irrigation, including on hydropower.

As a final point, I would like to mention that you are involved in a number of transboundary hydropower initiatives, namely Rogun, the Zarafshon hydropower plant, and Kambar-Ata.

On Rogun (Tajikistan), it was discussed with COM Urpilainen, but we would like to enquire what the state of the Power Purchase Agreement (PPAs) negotiations with Tajikistan is? This will be key to ensure the feasibility of this mega project. We are looking into options to support a possible EIB loan for the project.

On the Zarafshon hydropower plant, we received the request from the Uzbek and Tajik governments to finance feasibility studies for the project. We are glad to see opportunities for joint transboundary water management facilities in the region. We are studying the possibility to be involved in this project together with our Team Europe partners and we will keep you updated. For now, we can already say that we are financing the elaboration of the Terms of Reference for this feasibility study, which is a very first step.

On Kambar-Ata, we understand that you have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan for a possible joint management of the dam. We find this a very interesting development. How do you see the feasibility of the project and its relevance in the wider regional energy market?

REMARKS BY MR. DEVIGNE**(Item 3: Trade, economic and investment issues (including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy)).**

First of all, on the energy transition and our cooperation with Uzbekistan. We certainly welcome Uzbekistan's efforts to pursue a transition to a sustainable energy system, although the two crises of this past winter suggest that there is still a lot to do to improve energy efficiency, modernisation of energy infrastructure, and reduce the losses of electricity. Uzbekistan has a big potential in renewables, in solar and wind particular. We encourage Uzbekistan to realise this potential, which is also developing resilience in respect to third countries, you are self-sustainable when you are renewable. In this regard, we are very willing to help and support and share our experiences. We have a new program called 'Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia' (SECCA) project which was launched in Samarkand during last November's Connectivity Conference. This program aims to strengthen national policies of transition and develop sustainable energy, and also increase investment.

We know that you have plans for a nuclear power plant, I think a Russian one. We are always interested in updates regarding these plans. In this regard, we encourage you to join international conventions on nuclear safety and to continue seeking assistance from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

On methane emission reduction, we are very pleased that Uzbekistan has joined the Global Commitment to Reduce Methane emissions, which 150 countries have already joined, hoping to reduce global methane emissions by 30%.

We encourage Uzbekistan to consider reaching out to the International Methane Emission Observatory, managed by the United Nation Environmental Programme (UNEP), for support. And of course, we want to cooperate closely with you on methane emission, we do that also with other Central Asian countries.

On climate change more widely, we continue our target of reduction of emissions by 2030 by at least 35% compared to 1990. We believe that to accelerate the energy transition to a net zero emission we need to invest - a lot - this is the best way to ensure independence from politicised energy exports, as we have seen in the case of Russia, both for our Member States and neighbours. I would also like to underline that from our experience, there is no contradiction between reducing

greenhouse gas emissions and developing economic growth. The EU has succeeded in decoupling emissions from economic growth over the last three decades, with net GHG emissions falling by 30% between 1990 and 2022 while GDP grew by 62%.

REMARKS BY MR. KHAMRAEV**(Item 3: Trade, economic and investment issues (including aspects related to Uzbekistan's GSP+ status, WTO accession, connectivity, and energy)).**

For EPCA, we are looking forward to accelerated legal scrubbing. We expected to be ready by end of April, but we are late - we look forward. Regarding WTO, of course, we continue our cooperation. We are cooperating quite well with the EU assisting on this, we look forward to continuing our cooperation in this direction. GSP+ - it is also very important, as I mentioned. Because of this, we could raise our exports. We hope for a positive decision. Recently, there was a first monitoring mission which took place in March last year, and we sent our answers late in October 2022. The European Commission has published new requirements, as you mentioned, such as adoption of 6 international convention. I would like to point out that Uzbekistan has already ratified all of them, and we hope for your support in prolonging the GSP+ status towards our country, as it really helps to diversify our exports.

Regarding the EU Multiannual Indicative Programme for Uzbekistan, we really appreciate the launching of the Multiannual Indicative Programme for Uzbekistan for 2021-2024, it is important because it includes different directions - green economy, effective governance, support of agriculture and others.

On sanctions issues, of course - as mentioned several times, we express our gratitude EU readiness to support Uzbekistan in avoiding negative consequences of secondary sanctions. We look forward to hosting Mr O'Sullivan, EU Sanctions Envoy and hope to have fruitful and effective meetings.

Shortly, I would like to comment on the energy sector. We identify the EU as one of our key partners in realizing projects aimed at the transition of Uzbekistan to a green economy by 2023. For example, we already have success stories in this direction with the French company Total Eren and many others in the construction of solar power plants. Taking this opportunity, we would also like to express our gratitude for the EU side for their support within the framework of sustainable energy and connectivity in Central Asia, as it was mentioned by Luc Devigne. We are fully committed to continuing our close cooperation with our European partners and open a new chapter in this area.

REMARKS BY MR. LIPAVSKÝ**(Closing remarks)**

Thank you very much. As we will take the next point of our agenda over dinner, shall we now to any other business before we conclude this plenary session. I do not have anything for AOB, so we can move to closing remarks.

Thank you again for coming to Luxembourg, Minister, and for your contribution to this afternoon's meeting. Thanks also to your team both here in the EU at your Brussels Mission and those who have travelled with you from Tashkent.

We have had a useful exchange on a wide range of issues during this plenary session. The discussion we have had today demonstrates the breadth and depth of EU-Uzbekistan relations. I look forward to our discussion on regional and international issues shortly over dinner.

As is customary, we will send draft minutes of this afternoon's meeting to you for your comments.

Finally let me also thank the colleagues here for their work in preparing this meeting, and the interpreters for their valuable work in making sure that we understand each other.

REMARKS BY MR. SAIDOV**(Closing remarks)**

Respected friends, respected colleagues.

I am impressed by the fact that our talks today have been open and constructive and have taken place in a friendly atmosphere. For this I would like to sincerely thank all members of the European delegation. We had an opportunity to thoroughly discuss a wide range of issues related to our bilateral relations, to identify specific steps for their further development.

We hope that today's fruitful exchange of views will contribute to strengthening mutual understanding and promoting comprehensive relations between the parties.

We have reached a common understanding on all issues on the agenda, which demonstrates the willingness of the sides to embark on joint efforts to further expand the Uzbek-European cooperation, I would like to reiterate the importance of consistent and steady cooperation in the EU-Central Asia format. I would like to reaffirm the importance of consistent implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia. I am confident that this important document will further contribute to deepening partnership ties between our regions.

I would like to express my appreciation to our European partners for their support for the early signing of the EPCA between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the European Union. This document is designed to give a powerful impetus to raising our mutually beneficial relations to a qualitatively new level. I am confident that the continuation of the positive momentum recently established in our relations will help to make full use of the potential of Uzbek-European cooperation.

I would like to reaffirm our principled position and note that Uzbekistan is interested and ready to strengthen and further develop our relations with the European Union on all levels of cooperation.

We are convinced that establishing lasting relations with the European Union is essential.

We are convinced that establishing long-term and sustainable bilateral co-operation, based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit, respect and consideration for each other's interests, is clearly in the interests of both Uzbekistan and the European Union.

I am confident that by the next meeting of the Cooperation Council we will jointly discuss concrete results of work already done.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to all who have been involved in the preparation and holding of today's event. Thank you also to our interpreters for their excellent work. Thank you, dear friends.
