

**EU-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR A STRONGER PARTNERSHIP?
INTERVIEW WITH PETER BURIAN**

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About the Author

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Introduction

In June 2019, the European Council adopted the new EU strategy for Central Asia “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, has presented the new strategy to the Central Asian partners at the occasion of the 15th EU-Central Asia Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on 7th July 2019. In light of these new developments, Dr Susann Heinecke, senior programme manager at CIFE, has conducted an interview with the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Peter Burian¹, to receive his assessment of the new EU Central Asia strategy and its implementation.*

Which significance does Central Asia have for Europe? Are there external factors that shape that significance?

PB: I think we have started fully appreciate the significance of the region only recently when many important processes began, including a more active approach of other players such as China and its Belt and Road initiative. We have been engaged in the region and with the region with individual countries since when they emerged as independent countries, supporting their state-building, institution-building, and supporting their strategies for sustainable development. We wanted to strengthen the resilience of the region for addressing its own problems and challenges, which, in the end, might also have consequences for our own security and stability if not properly addressed. So, first of all, the region is very important from the point of view of security, and we clearly realize that security is very much interlinked, and there

1 Born in former Czechoslovakia, Peter Burian graduated in Oriental Studies at the St. Petersburg University in the USSR and entered the service of the Czechoslovak foreign ministry. Following the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993, he was appointed chargé d'affaires at the newly independent Slovakia's embassy in Washington, D.C. and, shortly after, deputy chief of mission. In 1999, he became the Slovak Ambassador to NATO, and was Slovakia's permanent representative to the UN from December 2004 to November 2008. He became the Slovak Ambassador to the US in December 2008. He also served as the State Secretary at the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Peter Burian was appointed EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia on 15 April 2015 and holds this office to date.

are no distant places that are far from Europe. The region is of significant importance for Europe in terms of security of neighbouring Afghanistan that is, of course, a security threat for the region, but also for us, including threats like violent extremism, migration and many other important things. In this regard, Central Asia and Europe share many challenges, starting from illicit drug trafficking, illegal migration, ending with threats of violent extremism and terrorism. When facing these threats, we are in one boat. From this point of view, Central Asia is even a closer neighbour of the EU than it seems, and in case of any major security crisis in the region, the EU will be one of the first to face the consequences.

Nevertheless, we want to have a positive approach of addressing those challenges, which are connected with security and stability, and promote a more comprehensive approach that binds support and understanding in the region. Of course, and very closely connected with security, Central Asia is a very important link between Europe and Asia. Security and stability of the region is an important element of building connectivity between Europe and Asia, where Central Asia should and will play a very important role. Last but not least, and here is a very practical interest of the European Union, we look to the region as a young and growing market with potential for transport, for business, for trade, and also connectivity. These are several aspects, which make the region very attractive and important for us from many points of view.

Let us come to the new EU Central Asia strategy. Why was there a necessity to update the previous strategy? What were its main deficits or shortcomings?

PB: First of all, the previous strategy was developed in 2007, and since then, many changes have occurred in the region. In addition, certain geopolitical processes started influencing the region. Also, there are developments in individual countries—they progress with nation-building, they strengthen their identity, and so on. So, we felt the necessity to reflect these new developments in our new strategy, a better focused strategy on a specific role of the EU as a supporter for modernization and transformation in individual countries.

Further, the EU wants to play a role in promoting regional cooperation as a factor of stability and, possibly, as the only way for addressing issues and challenges like security—in particular border security, or the impact of climate change and connectivity—in an efficient manner.

Moreover, our partnership with Central Asia has matured and progressed since 2007, and has developed into a true partnership where we not only appreciate the willingness of our partners to learn from our experiences and best practices in transformation processes, but also see how they are more and more prepared to work with us in addressing existing global and regional challenges. In particular, they work with us in helping Afghanistan to stabilise and find a solution to its protracted conflict. So, I believe we are moving with our partnership to a qualitatively new level where we benefit from each other's knowledge, experience, and contribution to addressing problems together rather than individually.

Critical voices say that the new strategy—as the previous one—covers a broad range of areas of cooperation and activities, which can be negatively assessed as a kind of 'Christmas tree'. Which policy fields are really priority?

PB: One important thing connected with the development of the new strategy, and how it differs from the previous one, is that the strategy of 2019 was developed in close consultations with our partners. We wanted to avoid an approach, which might be considered sometimes paternalistic—that we develop our own strategy and present it to our partners in a form that it is the best way of addressing their problems. Maybe we took that approach in 2007. Later, we realised that the strategy of 2007 was too large, too ambitious, and in some areas, we were not able to fully implement what we actually wanted to. This was due to a limited understanding of specific needs, priorities, and ambitions of our partner countries. We also promoted some issues for which the countries were not fully ready yet.

The 2019 strategy was prepared in a very large consultative process where we wanted to hear from our partners how they see their

own priorities, needs and challenges, and how they see the role of the European Union in helping them addressing those challenges, also benefitting from our experiences and technologies. I have to say that this approach was very much welcomed by our partners. They see more elements of their contribution that are reflected in the strategy. In addition, we approached civil society, businesses, and the like. As a result of this process, I believe, that the new strategy better reflects realities in the region, needs and priorities of our partners, and possibly better identifies the niche or the role of the EU that it can play while working closely together with other partners, in particular international organizations, but also big neighbours and actors which are present in Central Asia. So, this would be my assessment of distinction of the previous strategy and the new one, which not only gives a perception of ownership of the strategy when it was created, but also gives ownership and more responsibility to our partners when it is going to be implemented.

Speaking of 'ownership': It is nice to hear that the new strategy is welcomed by the Central Asian states. How is the situation on the EU side—is the strategy supported by all EU member states? How do you see its perception in Europe?

PB: I agree, the strategy was welcomed very much by our partners as a new, fresh vision. You probably heard that assessment by many partners. What was also very important in the process of preparing the new strategy was involving the member states of the European Union. It brought a better and clearer picture of our interests in the region, created a better understanding of opportunities among the member states, and gives them a bigger role and the opportunity to use their comparative advantages in the whole process of implementation. So, because of this consultative process involving the member states of the EU, the process was quite smooth.

What is also very important is that the institutions within the European Union, including the European Commission and the European External Action Service, stand very firmly behind the strategy, which is a certain

guarantee that the strategy does not only look good on paper, but will be fully implemented. Immediately after the strategy was launched, we started the discussion how to implement it, and how this priority should be reflected in the future budget of the European Union, in the multi-annual indicative programme for the region.

What are the next steps for implementing the new strategy?

PB: The first step was taken in Bishkek last weekend where the—already—15th EU-Central Asia ministerial meeting was held, where we presented the strategy and immediately started the discussion how to implement it. We heard very positive comments from our partners, and they were already coming with concrete ideas.

In the area of security, we agreed on the expansion of our programmes BOMCA and CADAP, which will be more robust. BOMCA for instance, will combine two aspects, border security on both the Afghan and on the Central Asian side. We are entering a next stage of our anti-drug trafficking programme CADAP. And we are looking to new areas such as education, which was very much viewed as a core priority. Our partners highlighted the importance of education for their transformation and reform processes in terms of capacity building.

And, last but not least, a focus on economic cooperation and promoting the potential and opportunities for trade and business cooperation between the region and the European Union was very much in the focus of our discussion in Bishkek. The Kyrgyz side came with an idea to organise a first EU-Central Asia economic forum for identifying opportunities for trade and business cooperation, but also for discussing the conditions, which need to be created: For businesses to feel secure with their investments, and for access to justice and many other elements which are actually in the focus of our strategy like rule of law, good governance, fight against corruption, and other aspects. We have probably promoted them in an abstract manner so far, but now, with this very practical focus, I believe that

our partners better understand our approach, its elements, and their practical significance for attracting businesses. One of the products of our dialogue in those key areas promoting our values and principles was that these principles are now quite well reflected in the national development strategies of our partners based on the sustainable development goals. But the biggest challenge will be to translate them into concrete action in practice. And here, once again, the EU wants to be a reliable and strong partner.

For the implementation of concrete actions, of course, a budget is needed. Can we expect an increasing, a decreasing or a stable budget for the next period of implementation?

PB: I would be very happy to preserve what we have. In the end, we are reaching now 1.2 billion Euros for the current budget cycle until the end of 2020. I see that we manage within the existing allocations to strengthen the focus on regional cooperation. We are very efficient in utilizing all these resources allocated, which is actually the main issue. I think, rather than looking to an expansion of the budget, we need to look at how we spent the money in addressing the priorities identified together with the partners that also takes our partners to a certain degree of accountability when implementing those projects.

Second, I believe that there is a good prospect that we manage to preserve the size of the budget as it is because of these positive developments and the rather good performance of our institutions in implementing the programmes. Also, we are supported by a commitment of our member states to increase the allocations for the External Action Service—regardless of Brexit or non-Brexit—by 30 %. It's really an important indication that the EU wants to play a very active role in the world based on its global strategy, and that regions, which want to cooperate with us and are ready to take significant steps for stabilisation, will be supported.

It is also important to mention that we are preparing now a single instrument called 'instrument for neighbourhood, development and international cooperation'. The difference will be that this instrument will be available also for upper middle-income countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. This is quite important as we have concluded quite ambitious Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Kazakhstan, we are finalising these negotiations with Kyrgyzstan and we have started the process of negotiations with Uzbekistan. We need to underpin them, so, the new and more flexible instrument will possibly also reflect the 'more for more' principle in our approach. We need to be more flexible reacting to new developments. I hope that the new European Parliament—based on the strategy, which will be promoted within the European Parliament—will have no difficulties to endorse the budget and allocate sufficient resources for implementing the strategy.

What is also very important to mention—it is also something new in our approach though it should be the practice—we have now fully accommodated the principle that you first develop a policy and principles for future action (which is the strategy), now will be discussing how it can be translated into concrete actions, and have sufficient allocations in the new budget. I think that this kind of approach, supported by the member states, will give us even a better grant for asking for money, but also then implementing it in an efficient manner with clear priorities.

You mentioned that the EU wants to play a global role. We would like to know if and how you see the EU's actions in Central Asia being complemented—or complements—the other external actors in the region, in particular Russia and China?

PB: Our approach to the region is that we want to develop a stronger, more modern, and non-exclusive partnership with the region, which does not leave our partners with binary choices between us or somebody else. We very clearly stress this, and we continue stressing it when we present our strategy to our partners, but also to other actors and players in the region, including Russia. I visited Russia recently to

present the strategy and discuss possible areas of cooperation that we can imagine. We want to pursue cooperation with everybody who is able and ready to work with us based on internationally accepted and recognized principles, especially sustainable development and support to cooperate. We believe, and that is not a cliché, that Central Asia could become an area of this kind of positive cooperation of different actors. The major prerequisite is that we respect the interests of our partners in Central Asia, that we respect the principle of sustainability, economic viability, and environmental sustainability.

So, once again, we want to be positive. We believe we can play a certain facilitating role in bringing different actors together. We already inspired many other players and actors in the region. Our Central Asia 5+1 approach is a format being spread to the United States, to Japan, or to South Korea. Now, India has recently established it, and we see that Russia and China are establishing this format for communication. Our partners in Central Asia clearly stated that they see our influence, our kind of role as very positive, turning the approaches of all the players into more positive and constructive postures. We want to—at least try to—bring those actors together in supporting the needs and ambitions of the region, and in reflecting something, which is especially connected with the young and growing market, but also with the young and growing population, which needs to have jobs. I think that providing jobs, providing economic stability and diversification is the best way how to secure stability and future prosperity of the region.

EU-Central Asia relations have a strong touch of development cooperation. Which future scenario for EU-Central Asia relations would be ideal in your view?

PB: I would say that there are all prerequisites to move the partnership to a new qualitative level. There needs to be shared responsibility for shaping the strategy, but also shared accountability for its implementation. There are also suggestions of our partners—which we very much welcome—that they are ready to contribute financially to joint projects, which, I think, would be a very good guarantee

of ownership and mutual accountability. If we manage to grasp this and reflect it in our approaches, we will have strengthened the feeling and not only the perception of such joint ownership, and we will have a much more efficient implementation of these aspects.

Second, this partnership, as I mentioned in the very beginning, is now turning into a really mutual partnership for addressing regional and global challenges. We want to use all the experience and knowledge about the regional developments, and here, I mean in particular understanding the realities in neighbouring Afghanistan. We see a very positive potential of countries in the region to not only help to move the process of negotiations reaching a potential political solution, but also economically and in terms of support of connectivity, help Afghanistan to see clear benefits of this political process translated into economic benefits. This may be something that could bring the different fractions in Afghanistan closer together and see a dividend of the political process. We are looking to a very practical use of this geographical language closeness and understanding of the region, which are already translated into trilateral pilot projects for education of Afghans, in particular women and girls, using universities, professional education, and training facilities of our partners Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

These are new forms of cooperation with very much reliance on multilateral approaches, and on international law as the basis, which is common for EU and Central Asians. This could help us to move the partnership on in addressing different issues together rather than in parallel.

*** The interview was held on 11th July 2019 at Brussels during the recommendations workshop of the H2020 project "SEnECA - Strengthening and energizing EU-Central Asia relations".**

