

PhD Support Programme
The EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus in the International System



**Report on the
International Conference**

“Central Asia and the South Caucasus in Transition: International Perspectives”

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In a first panel on “Prospects for the EU-South Caucasus Relations and the Role of Frozen Conflicts”, the importance of the different international players in the South Caucasus region has been discussed. While the US’ engagement and interest was estimated as modest, and other regional players as Turkey and Iran were assessed as—at least temporarily—not significant to the region’s developments, Russia’s and the EU’s role were the main topic of this panel discussion.

Russia was predominantly assessed as a challenge to the region that exerts its “limited sovereignty doctrine” by manipulating and destabilising it. On the other hand, the EU was widely perceived as a—or even the only—real partner to the South Caucasus countries. Nevertheless, the association process was blamed to be very bureaucratic, whereas a real membership perspective could serve as a carrot to the region. In addition, the question was raised how the EU Global Strategy would be aligning with the South Caucasus states within the next years.

Concerning the security situation in the South Caucasus, it has been recognised that the region is strongly apprehended as a security challenge. It has been critically asserted that the EU is a consumer but not a provider of security in the region. On the other hand, the EU was outlined as the main partner for the Caucasus region in terms of development. With regards to the so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ of the region, it has been proposed to better regard them as ‘protracted conflicts’. Russia was considered part of all of these conflicts—in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh— and therefore shall also be part of their solution.

It has been controversially discussed whether Russia and the EU could be complementary cooperation partners to the region where the EU engages in the field of development and Russia was engaged in the field of security. On the other hand, it has been underlined during the panel discussion that one has to be aware of the different discourses that lead to contradicting perceptions in the different regions of

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conflict. As an example, it has been described that the discourse in South Ossetia is on unity with Russia as the “main and only ally”, whereas in Abkhazia, aspirations after independence make the EU be perceived as a potential ally and partner for achieving that goal. It has been mentioned that it is a positive achievement of the EU’s and other actors’ engagement in the region that, since 2008, no open conflict has been breaking out. Finally, as a main challenge for the solution of the region’s ‘protracting conflicts’, identity issues and nation-building have been mentioned.

In a second panel on “Novel Developments in Central Asia: Opportunities for Democratic Transformation and (inter-) regional Cooperation”, the experts discussed whether the recent political developments in Central Asia, especially under the new Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev, hold opportunities for democratic transformation for the country. Also, the newly arising regional and interregional cooperation that came with the new Uzbek president was evaluated.

Does participation lead to democratisation?

Since the new Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took over office in December 2016, numerous domestic reforms so far have touched the country’s social, economic and political sphere, while a very positive achievement would be connectivity between the government and the people which the country had not seen before. Uzbekistan, just like neighbouring Kazakhstan, joined the global trend to administrative participation. The experts were discussing the question whether these developments would be a sign for a democratisation process or not. They argued that the context in which participation takes place in democratic states would differ from participation in autocratic states, and the motifs leading to it would be manifold. While administrative participation could be used to 1) create substitutes for structural shortcomings of autocratic systems, it could also be used for 2) window-dressing towards the international and domestic audience, or 3) to individualise or atomise an otherwise collective political expression. Although Uzbekistan’s development would be going in the right direction, administrative participation itself should not be mistaken for democratisation. New forms of civil participation would often be framed as democratisation. But as the experts argued, there is no link between participation and democratisation. If effective, participation would increase the state’s capacity and legitimacy and thus contribute to the legitimation and consolidation of the authoritarian system. Democratisation, on the other hand, would depend on other factors than just participation.

Modernisation processes in Kazakhstan

Not only Uzbekistan, also Kazakhstan is in a state of transition recently. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s plans for a modernisation of Kazakhstan include a “spiritual modernisation” of the Kazakh nation that will be carried out through the modernisation of education, language development, culture and a script reform. By shifting from Cyrillic script to a modified version of Latin script, the country is aiming at “preparing the country for the future”. This decision sparked off huge debates on social media platforms. The experts stated that the debate highlighted unresolved issues of the nation building processes that are ongoing since 1990. While the script reform could be seen as a move to leave behind a Russian dominated intellectual and cultural sphere, it triggered discussions on Kazakh identity and national history and made Kazakh nationalism visible, which takes digitalisation and globalisation into account and also trends among the educated Kazakhstanis. The experts warned that if the issue of national identity would be politicised too much, it might become a new frozen conflict and would have the potential to divide the nation. Further, by focusing on national Kazakh identity, the development of statehood would fall behind.

The recent developments in Kazakhstan are another proof that although the country’s citizens actively

engage in a nationwide debate, the political system is not expected to shift to one resembling western democracies.

Towards regional and interregional cooperation

According to the experts, Mirziyoyev's presidency marks the beginning of a new connectivity of the Central Asian states. Uzbekistan's closed borders and the unwillingness of the Uzbek government for cooperation were the main hindrances to regional connectivity for years. While the relations between the five states were rather tense during Karimov's presidency, Mirziyoyev made intra-regional relations a priority.

According to the experts, Tajik-Uzbek relations saw the biggest transformation. The relations between the two countries had a long history of animosity. Under the new Uzbek President, visa policies were tremendously simplified and connectivity between the two countries revived both in form of a direct flight route and the *Galaba-Amuzang-Khushadi* rail connection. The long-running dispute over the Tajik *Rogun* dam was resolved in July 2017, which is hoped to resolve electricity sufficiency in Tajikistan. Agreements on electricity trade contracts between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were reached. The improved connectivity led to a boost in trade between both countries.

Significant for the further regionalisation of Central Asia were joint textbooks and academic cooperation, among others to prevent nationalist ideas that hinder cooperation and provoke conflicts. New routes would have to be established for regional transport and tourism, the experts stated. To increase international tourism and to facilitate travel would now be under the top priorities of the Uzbek government.

Further, a strong political and economic dialogue in Central Asia and a gradual development of an institutional framework of trans-regional cooperation is needed. A huge step to increase the regional dialogue was marked with the meeting in Astana on 15th March 2018, where the Central Asian state leaders discussed regional challenges. The delimitation and demarcation of borders between the five countries was declared a priority to strengthen security and stability in the region. Concerning inter-regional trade, Central Asia has to overcome Karimov's legacy, which left Uzbek trade routes in a bad shape. Though, Central Asia has made progress in connecting itself via trade and power transmission lines.

Central Asians should further diversify their economies, expand their private sectors, attract foreign investment and adopt renewable energy. To attract foreign investors, the convertibility of the Uzbek *Som* is a huge issue which was discussed by the experts. Since September 2017, the currency's convertibility is implemented step by step and will hopefully reduce the isolation of Uzbekistan and increase foreign investments.

Although Central Asia seems to be on the way to consolidate itself as a region, the role of external actors should not be underestimated. Afghanistan's security situation is of high importance for Central Asia, and the international community should have a joint project with Afghanistan, Central Asia and neighbouring countries, the experts claimed. At the moment, the Central Asian countries have stronger relations to Russia and China than to each other. Chinese projects tripled in the last three years only in Kazakhstan. And although Russia's impact in Central Asia would still be huge, the experts stated that there were a lot of anti-Russian sentiments among the society, especially in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where high numbers of citizens live as guest workers in Russia.

The EU as a model for Central Asia?

Although many steps were taken towards Central Asian connectivity, the five countries still have a long way to go. The experts stated Central Asian views on the EU, according to which the EU could serve as a model for a future Central Asian Union.

The cooperation between the EU and the Central Asian countries changed since the fall of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, the EU laid emphasis on humanitarian and technical assistance with programmes like TACIS, TRACECA and INOGATE. Since the 2000er years, the cooperation would follow a strategic normative approach. In 2007, the EU launched their Strategy Towards Central Asia, which was reviewed in 2015, and a new strategy is about to come in 2019. Nowadays the EU's policy towards Central Asia would aim at establishing a political dialogue, democracy development, secure human rights and the rule of law, strengthen civil society and build resilient societies. The experts raised the question whether although the EU would be active in Central Asia, it would be visible beyond workshops and programmes. Single projects and debates so far would not aim at the future. The idea to open a European University in Central Asia, taking the OSCE Academy as a role model, was presented. The stronger the human dimension, the stronger the EU's impact would be. As the EU's strongest asset, its appeal as a democratic, norm-driven community and as a prosperous and secure area was mentioned, which it should continue to emphasise.

In a third panel on “Socio-Cultural Dialogue between the EU, the South Caucasus and Central Asia”, the experts reviewed the path of civil society development and the promotion of human rights in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as the role of the EU in this process.

Georgia's European Project

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgia was looking for a political model to bring peace and stability. Because Europe managed its transition after the Second World War rather well, the country sees Europe as a role model for democratisation and stabilisations processes. Georgia's European aspiration would not only be a foreign policy, but also a domestic policy. Georgia needed European norms, standards and values as a framework of reference on its path to state building and democratisation after the independence. Being a member of the EU would be seen as a model for democratic transformation of Georgia. The EU played an important role in reinforcing domestic agents of reform, including the civil society and promoting human rights, rule of law and good governance. Georgia needed expertise and financial support from the EU, and the EU needed to ensure stability and prosperity on its boundaries. Contrary to some critics who argue that European norms and values are alien to Georgian traditions and culture, the experts argued that Georgia used the partnership with the EU for its urgently needed political, economic and social transformation. The Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia further intensified the harmonisation of the Georgian legislation and public policies with the EU's ones which are intended to lead to higher living standards, equality and the protection of human rights.

In terms of human rights, it has been stated that Georgia was still be in a learning process. The country implemented different legislative and institutional changes to strengthen human rights and would be able to focus on issues like gender equality, social and educational problems as well as environmental politics. According to the experts, the Georgian civil society would have learned to be very sensitive for the violation of human rights but is opposed by conservative groups calling civil society organisations “grant eaters” and often oppose campaigns for LGBT rights. Institutional, cultural, social and economic

transformation would be needed in Georgia, and therefore the country would need further support from the EU.

Civil Societies and Nationalist ideologies

The experts criticised the definition of civil society as a space that is between the political, the market, and the private, since this would neglect the human factor. Civil society would be mostly defined by NGOs, social movements and volunteers. Although NGOs are currently very influential in the South Caucasus, the basic problem of shaping the political space is the need of an own identity which has not been given from a governmental institution and which needs to be shaped in each South Caucasian and Central Asian state.

With the Karabakh movement, a mass nationalist movement that advocated for the transfer of the Autonomous Oblast Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan to Armenia and in which nearly every adult Armenian would have been involved, Armenia had seen its own form of civil rights movements which differ from NGOs. In 2008, Armenia saw a re-emergence of informal groups and civil initiatives that campaigned for specific issues. Therefore, the experts argued, the Armenian civil society which was close to non-existence after the fall of the Soviet Union became much more diversified. Although there are various institutional and organisational barriers that prevent Armenian civil society organisations to become key actors for the promotion of democracy, civil society organisations grew in number and prominence over the last couple of years.

Like in Armenia, there are nationalist and far right extremist ideologies developing in Georgia. The experts identified a lack of structure for informal civil society groups as one reason for the development of nationalist ideologies. At the moment, the problem tends to get externalised, but the experts demanded wider discourses in the society about the reasons behind the development of extremist ideologies amongst Georgians. Further, the government would need to ensure that the expression of extremist ideologies stays within reasonable limits, and ensure policies that promote human rights.

Georgia would be in need of the European model to ensure state building and democratic processes. Nationalist ideas and EU-scepticism would derive from a limited idea of what the European model meant, also in government circles. The experts analysed that although the Armenian civil society in its beginnings relied to a large extent on US funding is now mostly funded by the European Union, but the EU would still struggle with engaging with the country's civil society. The Armenian civil society played a crucial role in the 2018 Velvet Revolution, to which it contributed ideas, strategies and mobilisation networks as well as "revolutionary personnel". Since the Velvet Revolution, civil society groups would have the chance to grow and to develop an own identity and agenda. Nevertheless, the experts demanded more social rights and their protection as well as social benefits as a basis. Also, education would be key to a strong civil society, and therefore, the experts argued, high education would need to reach a critical mass to form critical opinions. Trade unions, as partners for civil society, could be a guarantor for social security, intensify the cooperation between civil rights organisations and increase gender equality.

In addition to the panel discussions, some topics were deepened in **working groups** where the research of EUCACIS programme fellows was presented and discussed. A first working group on the role of international organisations in the post-Soviet space was focusing on issues as the Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia, Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization, the Tajik commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement, and the relations of the EU

towards Kyrgyzstan. It was argued that China would see the SCO as an experiment in implementing an international organisation. Nevertheless, due to their landlocked position, many states would be dependent on such projects, and trade liberalisation should not be confused with democratisation. A second working group on “Peace and Stability in the South Caucasus” dealt, among others, with Georgia’s European project, with the problem of non-recognised states in the post-Soviet space, with the military cooperation of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey; and with Iran’s cultural diplomacy in the region. Several aspects that touch the region’s stability have been discussed controversially, including the role of NATO, the question of how to integrate Russia in the efforts to stabilise the region, as well as the impact of external aid and influence. A third working group on state building in the South Caucasus and Central Asia was covering topics as the challenges for parliamentary democracy in Armenia, the role of foreign media for political developments in Kyrgyzstan, a comparison between political systems in Central Asia, and the conceptualisation of political oppositions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The participants assessed the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia as a struggle against a single person instead of a struggle against a political system and were concerned about future of the Armenian state. For Kyrgyzstan, they stated that social media formed a political opposition that may lead to policy change. Finally, a fourth working group on “Heritage and Modernity in Wider Central Asia” included issues as pasture management in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border region, radicalisation in Afghanistan, and the challenges of higher education reform in Kazakhstan. It was realised that demographic and social aspects—mainly a lack of wealth and perspectives—promote conflicts in the region in the one or other way.

The **conference was concluded** with the insight that, due the enormous mixture of subject-specific and national perspectives during the conference, many topics could be discussed in a fruitful way which also strengthens the idea of dialogue and compromise necessary for the solution of conflicts and problems at the political level. The conference has revealed many facets of the developments in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, a process that will be continued within the frame of the EUCACIS PhD Support Programme and its upcoming conferences and beyond.