

Research Paper

YOUNG CENTRAL ASIA

Recommendations to the German Government for
the Implementation of the EU-Central Asia Strategy

ie Institut für
ip Europäische Politik

YVONNE BRAUN
JULIAN PLOTTKA
EKATERINA SMIRNOVA

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ABSTRACT

The research paper analyses the feasibility of a new youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations as a priority within the framework of the EU-Central Asia Strategy of 2019. The paper's recommendations on how to set up the youth policy dimension do not exclusively focus on German policy but propose an EU-wide task sharing to create synergies by means of cooperation. Against the backdrop of young populations in Central Asia, the research paper finds that youth policy is a mutually beneficial area of cooperation for the EU and its Central Asian partners, where the EU does not compete with China or Russia. Creating higher prospects for younger generations is a policy for the majority of Central Asian citizens and it is fully in line with the EU's objectives for youth policy and external relations. Defining youth policy in a broader sense, the research paper emphasises the legal, political, social, and cultural integration of people aged 14 to 30 years. Based on this broad understanding of youth policy, it analyses a total of seven challenges and reviews a total of six policy areas relevant to youths in Central Asia.

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I. Introduction

This research paper presents recommendations for the implementation of the new strategy “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019) in the area of youth policy. It was commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office to explore the potential of developing a youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations. [How can the EU contribute to creating high prospects for the younger Central Asian generations?](#) The recommendations do not exclusively focus on German policy but propose an EU-wide task sharing to create synergies by means of cooperation between EU-level actors and member state governments.

The renewal of the regional strategy for Central Asia in 2019 (Council of the EU 2019), in due time for the negotiations of the new multiannual financial framework and the funding instruments for EU development cooperation to be completed by the end of 2020, opens a [window of opportunity to readjust the EU’s relations with the Central Asian region](#). The focus is also timely with regard to the conclusions on “Youth in external action”, recently adopted by the Council of the EU (2020).

However, to pursue a more effective and targeted policy towards the region, the [EU institutions and member state governments need to define strategic priorities](#) in the first place. The joint communication of the European Commission and High Representative sets out a broad framework for action listing a large number of different policy areas as possible subjects of bilateral or regional cooperation with Central Asia but does not prioritise them (Böttger/Braun/Plottka 2019: 319-320).

The German Federal Foreign Office’s initiative to set a priority on the cooperation in [youth policy fits the broader geopolitical context of the new strategy](#), which is not directly addressed in the document itself. The EU “cannot and indeed should not try to compete for influence” (Sahajpal/Blockmans 2019) with China’s large-scale investment project, the Belt and Road Initiative (Brakman et al. 2019), or the Russian legacy of Central Asia. Being important to the Central Asian governments by enabling them to pursue their multi-vector foreign policies (Nitoiu 2018) in order to balance the influence of the dominant actors in the region, the EU has the opportunity to establish relations with Central Asia in priority areas, which are beneficial for both sides. This is even more important since the US Department of State published a revamped strategy for Central Asia in early 2020 (US Department of State 2020).

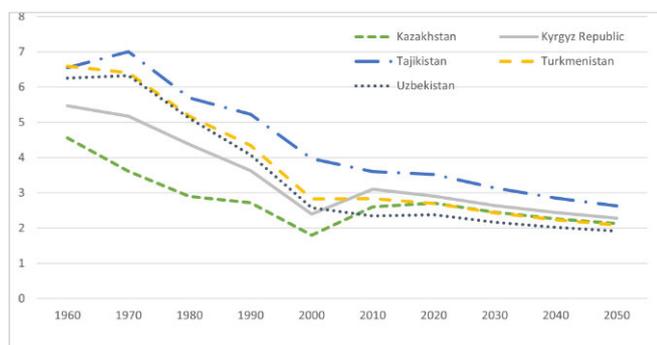
As the Biden Administration will most likely return to the Central Asian stage, the five governments get back an alternative partner to balance Chinese and Russian influence, which would allow them to put aside their European partners.

Youth policy is potentially such a mutually beneficial area which allows the EU to [spell out what the EU Global Strategy’s “principled pragmatism”](#) (European External Action Service 2016: 8) means exactly. Helping the Central Asian governments to create high prospects for their younger generations is in their own interest as it increases their legitimacy (for details see below). In addition to stabilising the situation in Central Asia, youth policy has the potential to contribute to achieving all of the overarching aims set out in the joint communication (“Partnering for Resilience”, “Partnering for Prosperity” and “Working Better Together”) as well as to the “Cross-cutting Priority [of] Investing in Regional Cooperation” (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 2). Moreover, complying with European values while working with young citizens has a potentially sustainable effect on them.

Youth policy also fits well the EU’s aim to “enhance [... its] strategic communication in Central Asia to enhance the visibility of the EU” (Council of the EU 2009: 7). Compared to other policy areas, such as security cooperation or trade, youth policy addresses a comparatively large target group within Central Asian societies. [Completing cooperation on youth policy with a targeted communication strategy](#) will considerably increase the EU’s visibility in Central Asia with a lasting effect as the target group’s future is lying ahead of them.

While youth policy is a promising area to intensify European cooperation with the Central Asian countries, increasing the effectiveness of the EU’s Central Asia policy requires an agreement on the EU’s internal task sharing (Böttger/Braun/Plottka 2019: 320). In their commonly defined division of labour, member state governments and EU institutions need to build on their established expertise and relations with Central Asia to carry forward the initiative in order to build synergies, increase the EU’s leverage in the region and achieve sustainable results.

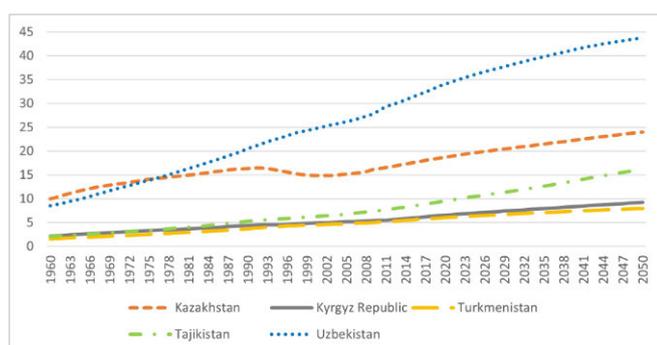
Table 1: Population Estimates and Projections in Mio. for 1960 until 2050¹



Source: Own table based on data from *The World Bank (2020b)*, Series: Population total.

But will a European initiative in the area of youth policy meet the need on the Central Asian side? Compared to other countries of the post-Soviet space, the Central Asian region shows exceptional patterns of continuous population growth² (see table 1). For the future until 2050, projections of The World Bank (2020) expect this trend to continue. One of the reasons for this development is the high fertility rate (see table 2). Although it has been in decline over the past six decades, it remains above the figure of 2.1 children per woman, which is considered the rate necessary for a stable population. Following a dip in 2000, the rate resumed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. Falling steepest in Uzbekistan, the country is expected to fall below the rate of 2.1 not before 2035 (World Bank 2020). Declining child mortality in the region further contributes to population growth.

Table 2: Fertility Rate and Projections for Central Asia from 1960 until 250

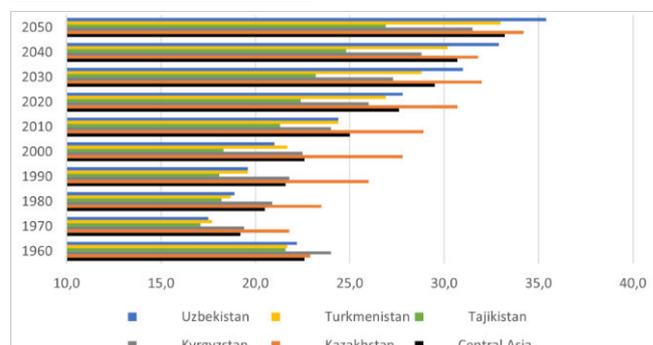


Source: Own table based on data from *The World Bank (2020b)*, Series: Fertility rate, total (births per woman).

High rates of population growth combined with the lowest life expectancy in the post-Soviet space (The World Bank 2020) result in a very young Central Asian population. In 2020, the median age of the Central Asian population is just 27.6 years. It ranges from 22.4 years in Tajikistan to 30.7 years in Kazakhstan.³ Table 3 also displays

that the median age will rise during the next years. However, it is estimated that the median age will be higher than 30 just around the year 2030.

Table 3: Median Age and Prospects for Central Asia from 1960 to 2050



Source: Own table based on data from *United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019)*, Series: Median age of the total population (years).

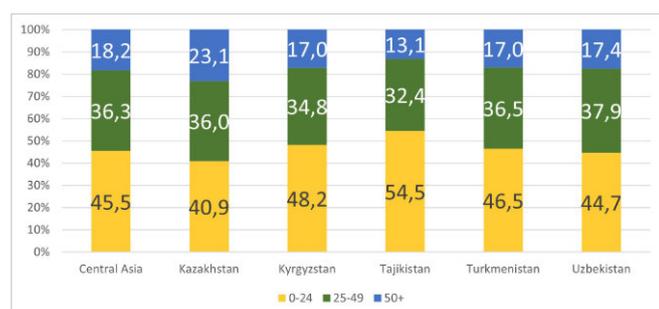
Looking at the relative distribution of age groups in the population of Central Asia in 2020, table 4 shows that the group of people under 25 years is the largest group in all countries. It ranges from 40.9 percent in Kazakhstan, which has the oldest population, to 54.5 percent in Tajikistan, which is the country with the youngest population. These data reveal that policies for the younger generations in Central Asia address the majority of the Central Asian population. Further considering that about 30 percent of the population (29.1 percent in Kazakhstan and 37.3 percent in Tajikistan) is 14 years or younger in 2020, the data make clear what consequences the demographic developments will have for the five Central Asian economies. However, a very young population can also present certain opportunities in terms of the “demographic dividend”. If countries with a high share of working-age population invest in sustainable human development and education, they open a window of opportunity for economic growth. All five Central Asian states could reap the benefits of their demographic transition (Cuaresma/Knerr 2014: 2-3).

¹ The latest population census in Kazakhstan was in 2009, in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2009, in Tajikistan in 2010, in Turkmenistan in 2012 and in Uzbekistan in 1989 (The World Bank 2020).

² The only exception was Kazakhstan between 1992 and 2002 (see table 1). Ethnic Germans and Russians were leaving the newly founded country after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

³ In 2020, the median age in Germany is 45.7 years (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Dynamics 2019).

Table 4: Percentage of Total Population of Central Asia by Broad Age Groups in 2020



Source: Own table based on data from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Population Dynamics (2019)*.

On the international level, the United Nations define “youth” as all persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (United Nations 2020), and children as persons under the age of 15. However, the five Central Asian states apply other age groups to define youth, although the minimum age to vote is 18 in all of them. In Uzbekistan (2016), Turkmenistan (2013) and Tajikistan (2004), national youth policies address those between the ages of 14 and 30, whereas Kazakh law specifies the ages between 14 and 29 (Government of Kazakhstan 2013). In Kyrgyzstan, the upper age limit is 28 years (Youth policy labs 2020). In four of the countries, the age of 14 marks both the minimum age of criminal responsibility (except in Uzbekistan where it is 13, Uzbekistan 1994) and the end of compulsory education after which young people can start vocational training.

Following the Central Asian approach, this paper defines youths as persons aged older than 13 and younger than 31 for two reasons: (1) it addresses the broader group of young people united by their transitional position in society due to their legal and professional status as well as their level of education. (2) It corresponds to existing national concepts of youth policy in the Central Asian states and thus provides a non-Eurocentric approach to this policy area.

While it is obvious that the target group of youth policy is of considerable size in Central Asia, it is necessary to precisely define the concept of youth policy in order to be able to judge whether an EU initiative meets the need on the Central Asian side. Youth policy in a narrower sense addresses specific tasks in the areas of youth protection and risk prevention and is concentrated on vulnerable youth and specific risks such as crime, drug consumption and radicalisation. The broader concept of youth policy – as applied in this paper – emphasises a legal, political, social, and cultural integration of young people (Hafenecker 2012: 26). It considers youth policy as an ensemble of measures, activities, and pro-

grams protecting young people against risks, and promoting opportunities, better living conditions and youth rights (Hornstein 1999: 411). This is a large cross-sectoral policy area, which includes human rights, education, social policy, family protection, public health, and democracy promotion. Consequently, it involves a wide thematic spectrum, broad target and stakeholder group. Youth is seen as a chance for political and societal transformation, which opens further possibilities for an inclusionary youth policy especially in development cooperation.

In all five Central Asian states, there are specific national youth laws that provide general aims and concepts for youth work. Only Kazakhstan emphasises a negative vision of youths. The national legislation mentions the decline of traditional values due to globalisation, consumerism, radicalisation and social marginalisation as characteristics of contemporary youths in Kazakhstan (Government of Kazakhstan 2013).

An initiative applying this broader concept of youth policy for the target group of Central Asians from 14 to 30 years is very likely to find support by Central Asian governments. In addition to the potential economic benefits, higher prospects for the younger generations strengthen the national governments’ legitimacy. Especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, countries which cannot rely on revenues from trade in hydro carbons, depend on a certain degree of output legitimacy of their political systems. Furthermore, a youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations helps them to address existing policy challenges.

Seven policy challenges most relevant to youth in Central Asia, including employment, education, social inequality, internet accessibility, societal engagement and the urban-rural divide, are discussed in chapter II of the paper. Chapter III presents an overview of youth policy objectives of the EU, Germany and other EU member states and discusses, how a new youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations fits into the existing European strategies. Chapter IV assesses existing initiatives in six relevant policy fields, including education, digitalisation, economic, and gender policy as well as democracy promotion, providing the basis for the policy recommendations at the end of each section. A comprehensive set of priority activities to establish a new youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations is proposed in the concluding chapter V.

II. Challenges for the Creation of Higher Prospects for the Central Asian Youth

This chapter discusses the challenges, which need to be addressed in order to create higher prospects for the Central Asians in the age group 14 to 30 years. As the paper applies a wider concept of youth policy, these are general challenges faced by Central Asian countries. They cannot be solved by youth policy alone. However, they are crucial obstacles ahead of creating new perspectives for the youth and a Central Asian youth initiative can contribute to tackle them. These challenges include:

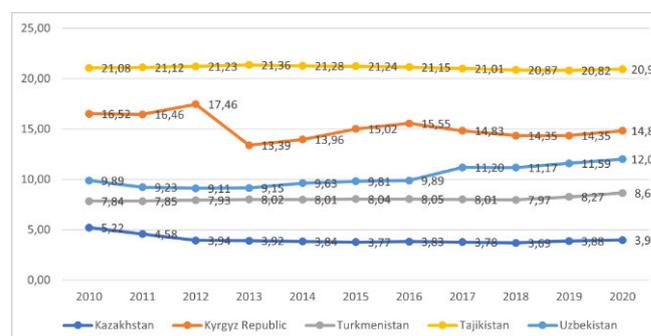
1. integrating the growing young workforce into Central Asian labour markets;
2. reducing incentives for labour migration, notably to Kazakhstan and Russia, but also to Asia and Western countries;
3. reforming the Central Asian education sectors to make education more demand-driven and the higher education systems more sustainable;
4. bringing Central Asian societies back on a track of reducing social inequality, which have stalled since the global financial crisis and the Russian economic crisis;
5. providing reliable and affordable internet access to Central Asians, developing a broadband internet infrastructure to open perspectives for digital economy;
6. giving citizens a voice and opportunities to become engaged, without touching the hot stone of democratic transformation;
7. reaching out to the Central Asians in rural areas instead of focusing only on flagship initiatives in the urban centres.

As shown in the following sections, the situation and trends differ considerably among the five Central Asian states. Some achieved progress in tackling these challenges, while others lack the political will of addressing the issues at all. Therefore, **youth policy towards the region needs to address the five countries in different ways**. However, these challenges exist to differing degrees in all five countries. Therefore, the paper presents them as shared challenges, which does not deny the existing differences in the region.

a. Integrating the Growing Young Workforce into Central Asian Labour Markets

The population growth, which is expected for all five Central Asian countries in the next 30 years – as shown in the introduction –, will put labour markets in the region under further pressure. Youth unemployment is already on high levels in four of the Central Asian countries (see table 5). The notable exception is Kazakhstan, for which the International Labor Organization estimates that the share of unemployed in the age group 15 to 24 years was just 3.88 percent of the labour force in 2019 (The World Bank 2020). **To create prospects for the younger Central Asian generations, the major challenge is to integrate them into labour markets**. If future generations do not have the opportunity to earn their livelihood, poverty rates will grow significantly, bearing the risk of destabilisation in the Central Asian region.

Table 5: Youth Unemployment as Percentages of the Work Force for the Age Group 15 to 24 Years according to Estimates of the International Labor Organization



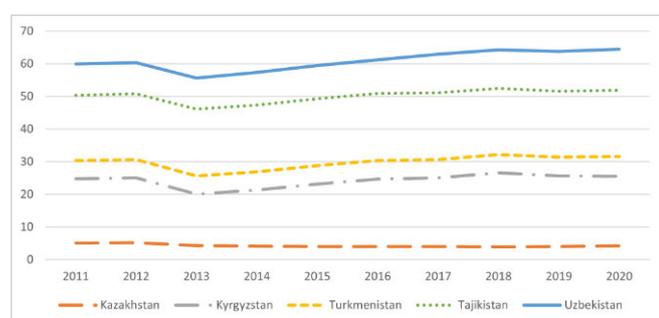
Source: Own Table based on data from *The World Bank (2020d)*, Series: *Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24)* (modeled ILO estimate).

A specific challenge for the Central Asian labour market is the integration of women, due to a high female youth unemployment rate compared to that of both sexes, especially in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (see Table 6). The legal, policy and cultural environment restrict women's contribution to the labour market and economic growth instead of allowing them to benefit from their qualifications.

Positive economic developments have stalled since the beginning of the global financial crisis starting in 2008 (Martin et al. 2019). The Russian economic crisis caused by lower oil prices and Western sanctions in the aftermath of Russian aggression in 2014 (Hanson 2017) put Central Asian economies under further pressure. Remaining highly dependent on commodity exports and remittances, industrial production is still under-

developed in all Central Asian countries (Martin et al. 2019). To attract foreign investments, long awaited reforms are required, most notably including the liberalisation of economic sectors, fighting corruption, guaranteeing the rule of law, closing regulatory gaps, and adapting to global trade standards. Despite having undertaken reforms in macroeconomic and fiscal policy since the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed once more the five countries' vulnerability to external shocks. The International Monetary Fund (2020: 146) projects a contraction of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2020 for Kyrgyzstan (12 percent) and Kazakhstan (2.6 percent), while the GDP is projected to increase in Turkmenistan (1.8 percent), Tajikistan (1 percent) and Uzbekistan (0.7 percent). In addition to the economic effects of domestic measures to contain the pandemic, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and to a certain degree Uzbekistan were hit by falling commodity prices (Bouma/Marnie 2020: 5). Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were affected by the drop of remittances (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020b: 4). Addressing these general economic challenges and making Central Asian economies less vulnerable to external shocks by strengthening domestic consumption and diversifying the economies is far beyond the potential impact of youth policy. However, they set the broader context of measures required to integrate younger generations into the labour markets of Central Asia. Furthermore, the innovative potential of young entrepreneurs can play a key role in changing the economic structures in Central Asia.

Table 6: Female Unemployment as Percentages of the Work Force for the Age Group 15 to 24 Years according to Estimates of the International Labor Organization



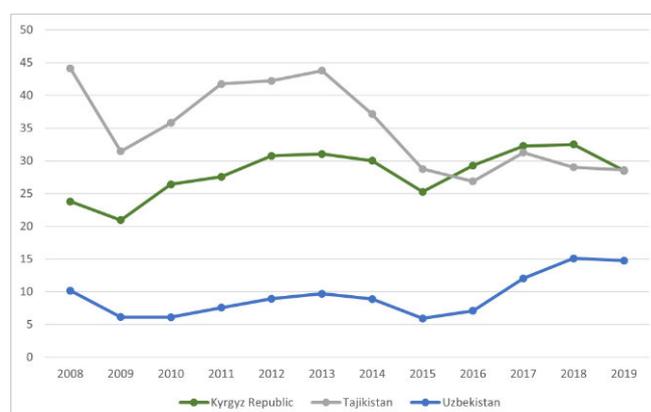
Source: Own Table based on data from The World Bank (2020d), Series: Unemployment, youth female (% of female labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate).

b. Reducing Incentives for Labour Migration

The COVID-19 pandemic has also severe repercussions for the second challenge to be addressed by a sustainable youth policy for the region: **For offering the youth a future perspective in their own country. Current incentives fostering emigration need to be addressed.** Traditionally, Russia is the most important recipient of migration flows in the post-Soviet space (Ryazantsev 2014: 10). The economic and demographic situation in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan make these countries exporters of workers, while Russia is an attractive destination due to language proficiency, common historical and cultural legacy and still existing infrastructure from Soviet times (Ryazantsev 2016: 3-4). Considering youth policy, there is another even more important push factor incentivising labour migration to Russia: it is seen “as a strategy of success in life” (Ryazantsev 2014: 13), making it desirable to leave Central Asia. In 2019, an estimated number of 3.4 million Central Asians worked or resided permanently in Russia (Institute for War & Peace Reporting, Central Asia 2020).

Due to the Russian economic crisis from 2014 to 2016 (Ryazantsev 2016: 16) and the tightening of Russian immigration regulations (Putz 2015) migration flows were redirected towards Kazakhstan. The country suffers from a labour shortage due to the oil driven economic development, while being a destination for Central Asian workers as attractive as Russia in terms of the previously mentioned factors. Furthermore, especially among highly skilled workers with university education, also brain-drain to Western and increasingly to Asian countries has become an issue of concern in recent years.

Table 7: Remittances as Percentage of GDP by Country



Source: Own table based on data from The World Bank (2020d), Series: Personal remittances, received (% of GDP).

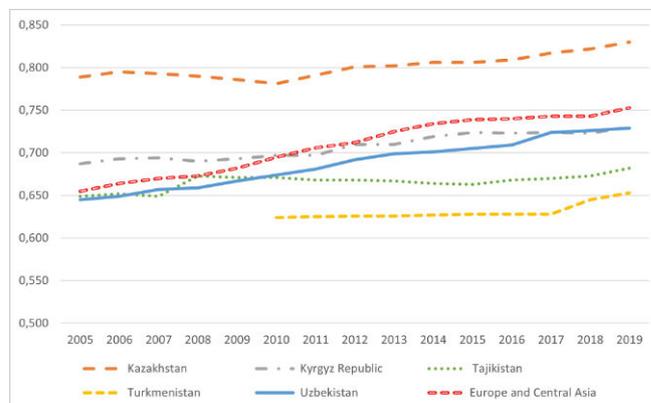
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan benefit from their migrant workers' remittances, which amounted to 33 percent of Kyrgyz, 29 percent of Tajik and 15 percent of the Uzbek GDP in 2018 (see table 7). While remittances increase families' disposable income and have a positive effect on local economies, they are considered to reduce pressure on home countries' governments to proceed with economic reforms (Malyuchenko 2015: 13). Table 7 also displays how strong dependency on remittances makes countries vulnerable to external shocks. Caused by the global financial crisis, the drop in annual remittances sent to Tajikistan was as large as 13 percent of its GDP between 2008 and 2009. Caused by the Russian economic crisis and the devaluation of the Russian Rubel, the drop between 2013 and 2016 was equal to 16.9 percent of the country's GDP. Current estimates foresee an even larger drop in remittances of 28 percent for Central Asia in 2020, caused by the economic effects of the pandemic and low oil prices (The World Bank 2020f). In addition to the loss of economic gains and risks of large-scale work migration, it also has severe social consequences for the families in the home countries and puts migrant workers at risk, as standards of health protection and occupational safety applicable to the often undeclared workers are insufficient (Malyuchenko 2015: 13). In order to reduce the economic vulnerability of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and to a lesser degree Uzbekistan to external economic shocks as well as to profit from the "demographic dividend", it is necessary to increase the attractiveness of national labour markets for the youth in Central Asia.

c. Improving Standards of Education in Central Asia

One crucial means to address the two previously mentioned and some of the other challenges is reforming the education sector. [Because of the high importance of education, the research paper considers the reform of the Central Asian education sectors a challenge in its own right.](#) All Central Asian education systems are still in a process of transformation from Soviet-style systems and adaptation to international standards. Comparing Central Asia's performance in the Education Index of the United Nations Human Development Report⁴ to the average of European and Central Asian countries (see table 8) reveals that Kazakhstan is the best performing Central Asian country and the only one above the average of the comparative group. Despite positive trends in recent years, all other Central Asian countries remain

below the average of all European and Central Asian countries. For all of them, the gap to the comparative group has widened over the last 15 years.

Table 8: Education Index of the Human Development Report for Europe and Central Asia



Source: Own table based on data from United Nations Development Programme (2020).

In Kazakhstan reforms are quite advanced and the country possesses the required resources to fund further reforms. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan both lack the financial means for fundamental reforms and a better funding of the education sector. For Uzbekistan, the positive trend accelerated since the current president took office in 2016 (Plottka 2019: 2). Turkmenistan remains a special case as one of the most isolated countries on earth, in which the teaching of totalitarian ideology partly replaced education and undermined the education system (Horák/Šir 2009: 69-80). However, all five countries are underspending on education compared to standards of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, Peyrouse 2019: 3).

In all five countries, social and gender inequality between rural and urban populations hamper access to education for vulnerable groups and women. The Soviet legacy left a relatively good educational basis in terms of gender equality across all five Central Asian states, where the enrolment rate for women and men in primary and secondary education differ only slightly. However, the gender gap in education can be aggravated by other factors. For example, girls in rural areas generally have fewer chances of getting good education, and the same applies for ethnic and conservative religious minorities.

⁴ The index is the "geometric average of mean years of schooling and of expected years of schooling" (Saisana 2014: 1817).

Furthermore, an inadequately educated workforce is considered a factor limiting the economic development in Central Asia (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2018: 163). Again, the situation is very different within in the region. However, closer cooperation between the educational and business sector, especially with regard to vocational education and training, is crucial to address the challenge of labour market integration of the young workforce.

Closer cooperation between higher education and research institutions and companies with a focus on applied sciences can provide additional impulses for economic development by strengthening research and development (R&D). This will help to diversify the Central Asian economies. It is also crucial for dealing with new challenges, such as environmental issues. Intensifying research cooperation within the region or with the EU can help addressing climate, water and environmental or other challenges more effectively. Therefore, it is necessary to reduce incentives for highly skilled Central Asians to leave the region. The Central Asian research and higher education sector has to become more sustainable by offering attractive long-term career perspectives to young researchers.

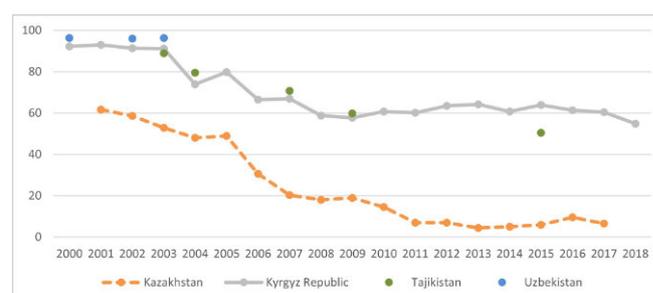
In sum, [EU support for the education sector reform in Central Asia has to address all levels from primary schools to vocational training, higher education and research](#). As education is key to create high prospects for the younger generations, equal access to education for all parts of Central Asian societies is crucial to reduce social inequalities. Reforming primary and secondary education with a focus on educating a skilled workforce helps to integrate young Central Asians into the labour markets. Making the research and higher education sector more sustainable strengthens research and development and reduces incentives for migration.

d. Bringing Central Asian Societies Back on a Track of Reducing Social Inequality

Reforming education and research in Central Asia are also key to [decrease social inequality in the region, which is the fourth challenge to providing younger generations with better perspectives for life](#). Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are “upper middle income countries” and therefore no longer eligible for official development aid (ODA).⁵ Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan belong to the group of “lower middle income countries” and remain eligible for ODA (OECD 2020). However, all Central Asian countries made considerable achievements in poverty reduction dur-

ing the last twenty years (Martin 2019: V). For Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan,⁶ data on the percentage of the population living on less than 5.50 US-Dollar a day at 2011 international prices displayed in table 9 show this development. For the other three countries, The World Bank does not provide sufficient data to show long-term trends. Table 9 also reveals that progress in poverty reduction slowed down since the global financial crisis.

Table 9: Poverty Headcount Ratio at 5.50 US-Dollar per day (2011 PPP)



Source: Own table based on data from *The World Bank (2020c)*, Series: Poverty headcount ratio at \$5.50 a day (2011 PPP) (% of population).

For the cases of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and to some degree also Uzbekistan, much of the achievements are based on remittances, making the poverty reduction efforts prone to external shocks. In consequence, the current pandemic has severe effects on the poverty levels in Central Asia. The lockdown in Russia during the first wave in spring 2020 resulted in a sharp drop of remittances transferred to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. While the effects for the second wave in 2020 are not yet clear, The World Bank expects an additional 1.4 million people to fall into poverty in Central Asia (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020b: 16).⁷

Other indicators such as the provision of Central Asian populations with basic supplies also show positive trends during years from 2000 to 2015.⁸

⁵ The EU continues its support for both countries under regional programs.

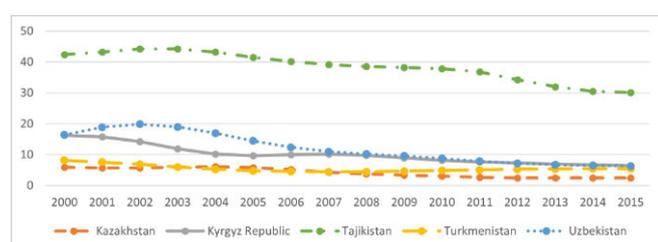
⁶ Selected data for Tajikistan in table 9 suggests a similar trend in this country.

⁷ The estimate applies a threshold of 3.20 US-Dollar (in PPP) per day, which is less strict than the threshold of 5.50 US-Dollar per day used in this paper. Applying the higher threshold, even more people can be expected to impoverish due to the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸ Data for the years 2015 to 2020 are not available.

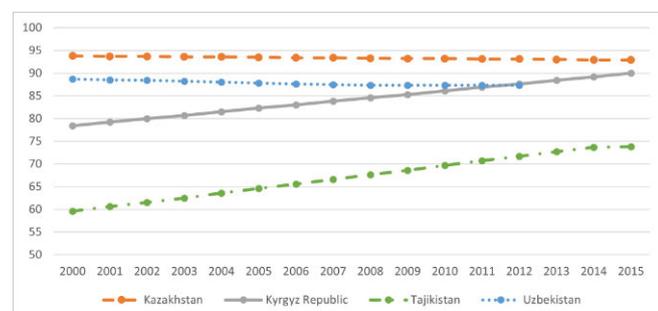
Table 10 shows that undernourishment has considerably decreased in this timeframe. In four of the Central Asian states, less than 11 percent of the population were affected in 2015. The only exception remains Tajikistan, where about 30 percent of the population suffered from undernourishment in 2015. Tajikistan is also the outlier in Central Asia concerning the access to water. While the provision with water has undergone considerable improvement in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between 2000 and 2015, further efforts are needed in the latter country, which has not yet achieved the same level of water provision as the other countries.

Table 10: Prevalence of Undernourishment (Percentage of Population)



Source: Own table based on data from The World Bank (2020a), Series: Prevalence of undernourishment (% of population).

Table 11: Access to Water Supply (Percentage of Population)

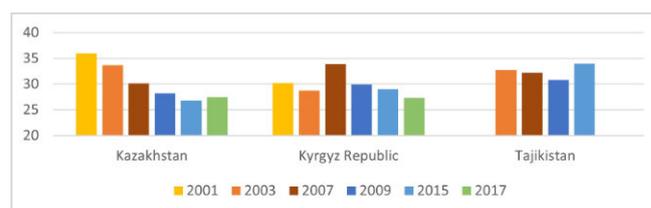


Source: Own table based on data from The World Bank (2020a), Series: Improved water source (% of population with access).

Concerning the distribution of income within the society, the results for Central Asia are mixed (see table 12). In Kazakhstan, there is a clear positive trend towards a more equal distribution of income between 2001 and 2017. For Kyrgyzstan, the progress is not as significant as for Kazakhstan and also shows negative developments in the early 2000s. For Tajikistan, the trend is ambivalent: following little progress until 2009, inequality increased afterwards. Unfortunately, there are no sufficient data available to judge whether the trend turned in Tajikistan or the data

recorded for 2015 are an outlier from the general trend.

Table 12: Gini Index According to World Bank Estimates⁹



Source: Own table based on data from The World Bank (2020c), Series: GINI index (World Bank estimate).

Considering social inequality, special attention should be paid to gender issues. Social and cultural norms in Central Asia hamper women and girls' access to public services. The detrimental effects of the gender gap in education, labour market and access to health services lead to the general social vulnerability of women in Central Asia, who face multiple risks, such as high maternal death, unemployment, and poverty. Harmful practices, for example, gender-based violence, child marriages and bride kidnapping limit women's ability to fulfil their aspirations and needs. To sum up, all Central Asian countries achieved considerable progress in poverty reduction and in increasing levels of wealth. The biggest efforts are still needed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, the economic crises of the last ten years showed that the countries' achievements are vulnerable to external shocks as economies are dependent on commodity exports or remittances. Therefore, social inequality needs to be further reduced and achievements need to be based on a more stable economic basis to provide younger generations with greater prospects in their home countries. This also includes the reduction of inequalities between men and women which persist in Central Asia in pay gaps and the low participation of women in labour force and decision-making bodies (The World Bank n.d.).

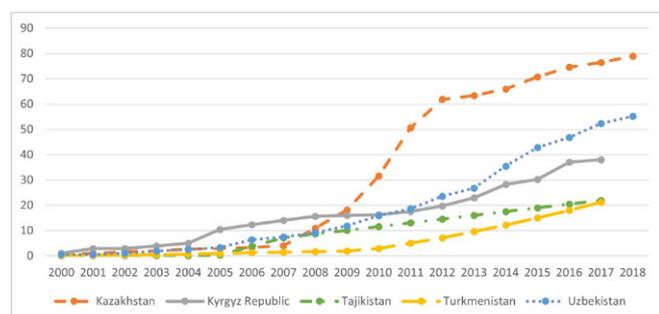
e. Providing Reliable and Affordable Internet Access to Central Asians

In Kazakhstan, where close to 80 percent of all people have internet access, the level is comparable to levels in European countries in 2018 (see

⁹ A "Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality". The uneven distribution of data across time results from limited data availability for Tajikistan. No data are available for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (The World Bank 2020)

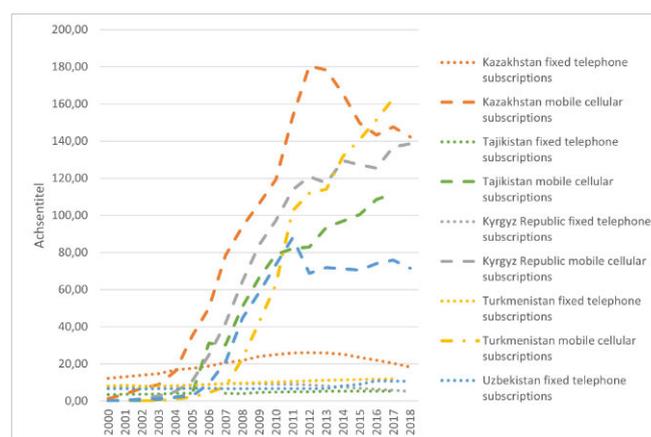
(Table 13). In Central Asia, internet is also cheapest in this country with an average of 11.1 US-Dollar per month for broadband internet (see table 15). In all the other Central Asian countries, considerably fewer people have internet access. Uzbekistan, the richest of the three “lower middle income countries” in Central Asia with second lowest costs per month, ranks second, where more than half of all citizens had internet access in 2018. Kyrgyzstan, where 38 percent of people had internet access in 2017 and where prices per months are considerably higher (28.7 US-Dollar per month), ranks third. For these three countries, the economic performance explains the degree of internet access. The laggards are Tajikistan (35.58 US-Dollar per month) and Turkmenistan (224.68 US-Dollar per month), where just about 20 percent of all citizens have internet access. In both countries, political reasons more likely explain digital isolation. The fact that monthly prices for broadband internet increased from 2019 to 2020, by 6.42 US-Dollar in Tajikistan and 148.53 US-Dollar in Turkmenistan underline that governments are not willing to provide citizens with internet access (cable.co.uk 2020).

Table 13: Internet Users per 100 People



Source: Own table based on data from The World Bank (2020a), Series: Internet users (per 100 people).

Table 14: Subscriptions to Fixed Telephone and Mobile Cellular per 100 People¹⁰



Source: Own table based on data from ITU (2019). No data available for Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in 2018.

Table 15: Internet Speed and Costs for Broadband Internet in Central Asia

Country	Mobile		Fixed Broadband		Broadband Costs per Month	
	Rank of 141	Download	Rank of 176	Download	Rank of 206	US-Dollar
Average		30.47 Mbps		74.64 Mbps		
Kazakhstan	99	17.69 Mbps	65	41.15 Mbps	8	11.1
Kyrgyzstan	105	16.52 Mbps	83	29.27 Mbps	51	28.7
Tajikistan	127	10.77 Mbps	101	24.51 Mbps	70	35.58
Turkmenistan	-	-	176	1.89 Mbps	200	224.68
Uzbekistan	133	10.07 Mbps	95	26.92 Mbps	11	11.44

Source: Speedtest (2020) and cable.co.uk (2020).

Meanwhile table 14 displays that subscriptions to mobile cellular are much higher. There are one or more contracts per person in all Central Asia countries except Uzbekistan. In this country, 70 contracts per 100 people were recorded in 2015. However, table 15 shows that widespread usage of mobile phones is no fix to the lack of internet access. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the download speed of mobile internet was roughly half of the global average, while it was just one third of the global average in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in March 2020. Speed of fixed broadband internet

¹⁰ Possible reasons for the drop in mobile subscriptions in Kazakhstan are first, further market consolidation between 2015 and 2019. Second, the raise of messenger services providing VoIP, such as WhatsApp and Viber, which are used to communicate with relatives especially in Russia, replaces Russian SIM cards. Third, between 2018 and 2019 Kazakh telecom legislation changed, which require mobile phone users to register their SIM cards with IMEI code and individual tax number, which could lead to a further reduction in mobile phone contracts (Kazakhstan 2.0 2019).

was not better in global comparison, except in Kazakhstan, where the download speed was above half of the global average. In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, it was roughly one third of the global average. Turkmenistan ranks 176 of 176 countries in the index having the slowest internet on earth with less than 1 percent of the downloadable data volume per second of Singapore, the country which ranks No. 1. This underlines that [providing reliable and affordable internet access to Central Asians is a two-fold challenge](#): On the one hand, new technical infrastructure is required in all Central Asian countries. This is of special importance to enable Central Asian businesses to explore the digital economy. On the other hand, the Tajik and Turkmen governments lack the political will to provide their citizens with internet. The positive example is Uzbekistan, where the number of citizens with internet access is rising and prices are cheap.

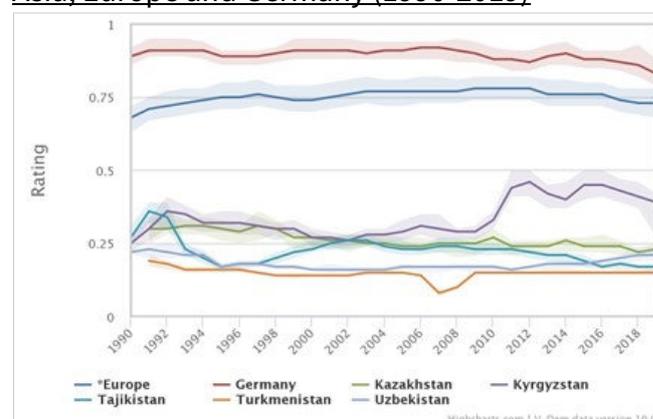
f. Giving Citizens a Voice and Opportunities to Become Engaged

Initial hopes of the early 1990th that the newly independent states in Central Asia would democratise (Fukuyama 1992) did not become reality. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan all Central Asian states are autocratic systems.¹¹ Table 16 compares the performance of the five countries on the Electoral Democracy Index of the V-Dem project with the values for Germany and the European average. The index allows to classify four of the Central Asian states as clearly autocratic: A functioning electoral regime forms the core of any democracy (Merkel et al. 2003: 50-51; Lindberg et al. 2014: 161), but does not exist there. Table 16 shows that the Kyrgyz electoral regime started to outperform the other four countries' electoral systems in the early 2000th.¹² As a political consequence, Kyrgyzstan is the only country in the region where elections ever resulted in a change of government. Therefore, some authors consider Kyrgyzstan to be a democratic island in the region (Kunze 2018: 143), while others still classify the country as a hybrid regime (Lempp/Wolters 2020: 76).¹³

However, the new Kyrgyz President's aim of replacing Kyrgyz parliamentarism by strong presidential systems might end the more democratic Kyrgyz path in Central Asia (Putz 2020a). In Kazakhstan, expectations were high that power transition to a new president might pave the way for reforms (Pleines 2019). Instead, the International Election Observation Mission to the presidential elections in 2019 concluded that the "moment for potential political reforms [...] was tarnished by

clear violations of fundamental freedoms as well as pressure on critical voices" (OSCE 2019). Most likely, the new president will follow the political course of Nursultan Nazarbayev, who remains an influential figure behind the scenes. It remains to be seen, whether the president is able to build an own power base independent from his predecessor. New political courses were taken in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. During the last years, the elimination of the political opposition, the accumulation of power and the establishment of a cult of personality added up to a trend of establishing a totalitarian system in Tajikistan (Schmitz 2019). Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became Uzbek president in 2016, he pursues a cautious liberalisation strategy. Schieck (2017) argues that this process is a transformation from old to new authoritarianism. In times of globalisation, authoritarian regimes cannot rely anymore on repression, but require political legitimacy. However, together with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, the country still belongs to the "worst of the worst" (Freedom House 2019) in terms of freedom rights. It is an open question how long Turkmenistan will be able to continue its course of isolation (Meurs 2018).

Table 16: Electoral Democracy Index for Central Asia, Europe and Germany (1990-2019)



Source: V-Dem (2020a).

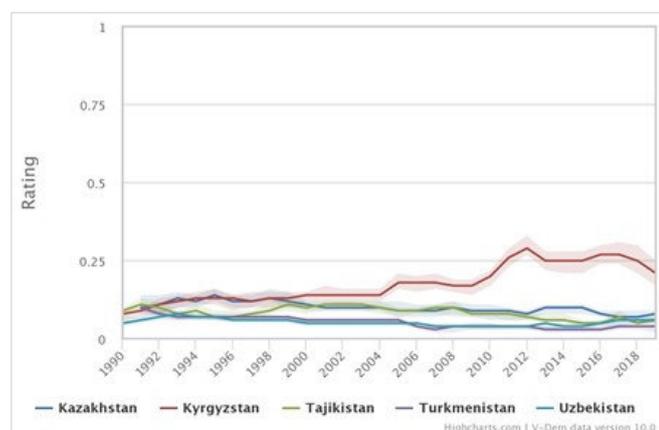
¹¹ Tajikistan (Schmitz 2019) and Turkmenistan (Horák/Šír 2009) might also be classified as totalitarian systems, characterised by a dominant ideology, a monistic power centre and mass mobilization (Linz 2003).

¹² The Electoral Democracy Index of V-Dem combines data on the freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected officials, and suffrage (V-Dem 2020a).

¹³ The classification of the Kyrgyz political system is disputed as a functioning democracy is not limited to election, but requires further elements such as political rights, civil rights, horizontal accountability, and effective power to govern (Merkel et al. 2003: 51; Merkel 2007). Despite the fact that Freedom House considers the country "partly-free" (Freedom House 2019), Kyrgyzstan is not a fully functioning democracy.

While unfolding the potential of the youth as change makers is necessary to create high prospects for the younger generations, the brief overview of the democratic performance of the Central Asian countries underlines how limited opportunities for engagement are. Since the early 1990th, continued efforts of external actors, including the EU, to support democratisation in Central Asia also show limited effects. Based on a global review of the effectiveness of democracy aid, Lührmann, McMann and van Ham (2017: 26) argue that democracy aid is more effective, when it does not pose a threat to regime survival. However, a threat to their power is exactly the way how Central Asian leaders perceive democracy promotion (Boonstra 2012: 2-3). The EU's focus on the promotion of good governance and the rule of law (Warkotsch 2008) or grassroot level activities (Boonstra 2012: 4; Hoffmann 2010) instead of supporting transformation resonates with these findings. Therefore, below the threshold of transformation, [giving citizens a voice and opportunities to become engaged regardless of gender, ethnicity and religion is a challenge that needs to be addressed](#). To address it, support for civil society seems to be a suitable, however, not unproblematic approach.

Table 17: Participatory Democracy Index for Central Asia (1990-2019)



Source: V-Dem (2020b).

The structures of civil society and conditions under which citizens can engage differ considerably in the region (Hönig 2020). Kyrgyzstan is again the best performing country of the region, where civil society organisations can work relatively free (see table 17). However, even there the government tried to limit external funding for non-governmental organisations (NGOs, Turmenbaeva 2020: 130-131). In Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, citizens willing to engage face most difficulties (see table 17). In order to support active citizens in all five Central Asian countries, the major challenge is to overcome the EU's previous focus on

liberal and Western style NGOs (Axyonova/Bos-suyt 2016) and to increase cooperation with local initiatives as well as governmental-organised NGOs (GONGOs, Hönig 2020: 193). Cooperation with GONGOs might cause additional challenges, as some independent NGOs – where they exist – question the legitimacy of GONGOs, which they consider representatives of the government and not part of the (independent) civil society. However, without them citizens' engagement remains limited and biased.

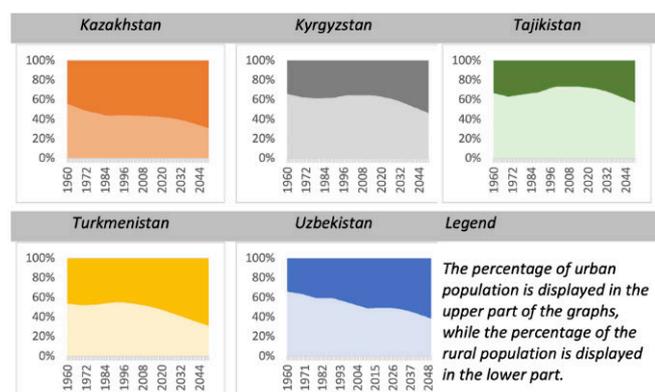
g. Reaching Out to Central Asians in Rural Areas

The previously mentioned challenges affect Central Asians living within in the same country in different ways. The most important dividing line is the divide between urban and rural population. The economic situation in the urban centres is better as is the provision of infrastructure, most notably internet access, public services, including education, and basic needs. As a consequence, there is a clear trend of urbanisation in all Central Asian countries as shown in table 18. Especially the youths are seeking a better future in urban centres (Goble 2017). Projections assume that in all countries except Tajikistan a majority of the population will live in cities in 2050 (see table 18). Urbanisation coupled with population growth puts the infrastructure in Central Asian cities under pressure. To solve the expected problems for urban infrastructure, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan started building entirely new cities for up to 300,000 inhabitants to ease the pressure on existing cities (Goble 2017). Considering that the future perspectives of migrant workers abroad are currently unclear, their return to home countries would create additional pressure and need for new infrastructure.

Despite the infrastructural challenge caused by urbanisation, the movement of citizens towards cities also has economic repercussions. The relevance of the agricultural sector in all five countries has been in decline for several years (see table 19). The ongoing urbanisation will result in a further shrinking of the agricultural sector. Against the backdrop that the Central Asian economies are highly dependent on commodity exports and that the secondary sector is small, urbanisation accelerates the existing economic problems. Therefore, [European youth policy for Central Asia has to create incentives for the younger generation to stay in the countryside](#). Addressing rural populations, special attention should be

paid to vulnerable youth and rural women, for whom access to public services, education and labour market are greatly limited. Focusing on cities would contribute to amplifying urbanisation and its negative externalities, which are counterproductive in terms of addressing the other challenges mentioned before, most notably the provision of infrastructure and integration of younger generations in the labour market.

Table 18: Urban and Rural Population and Projections in Central Asia from 1960 to 2050



Source: Own table based on data from World Bank (2020b), Series: Urban population (% of total population), Rural population (% of total population).

Table 19: Contribution of the Agricultural Sector to GDP in Central Asia

Country	Agricultural Sector in percent of total GDP	Year	Long-term Trend
Kazakhstan	4.7	2017	↘
Kyrgyzstan	3.8	2017	↘
Tajikistan	23.6	2017	↘
Turkmenistan	9.3	2015	↘
Uzbekistan	19.7	2017	↘

Source: International Food Policy Research Institute 2019.

III. Youth Policy Aims of the EU-Central Asia Strategy, German and Other EU Member States' Development Cooperation

The following section assesses how a youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations resonates with the EU's general youth policy aims and to what degree youth policy is already included in the strategic framework of the new EU-Central Asia policy, the objectives of German development cooperation, and the policy approaches of some selected EU member states. The EU's general youth policy objectives are

defined in the "European Union Youth Strategy" (European Commission 2018c) for the years from 2019 until 2027 and build on the previously adopted European Youth Goals. The specific youth policy objectives for EU external relations are defined in the newly adopted Council conclusions (Council of the EU 2020). The EU-Central Asia Strategy emphasises the role of youth for sustainable economic development and prioritises education cooperation as a major aim of the youth policy in the region. Moreover, the broad policy framework set by the EU facilitates cooperation in other policy fields, which do not mention youth directly but have a strong impact on the future perspectives of the young generation. The youth policy aims of German development cooperation fully correspond with the EU-Central Asia Strategy and give priority to international vocational educational cooperation and environmental protection. The Central Asia policies of other member states analysed in this chapter also widely follow the EU's policy framework and provide an opportunity for EU-wide task-sharing. Therefore, the existing strategic framework is specified in this chapter to later formulate the recommendations on youth policy approach and its implementation in Central Asian states.

a. The EU's General Youth Policy Aims

Acknowledging considerable differences of the specific situation of youth in Central Asia and in Europe, the overall challenges are comparable in a number of aspects. Therefore, the EU's approach to youth policy and its general objectives can serve as an overall framework for a youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations. This approach is outlined in the "European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027" (European Commission 2018c), which the Council of the EU (2018) endorsed in 2018. Three of the overall objectives of the European youth policy, as they are defined by the Council of the EU (2018: 2-3), fit the previously discussed challenges for youth in Central Asia:¹⁴

- "Enable young people to be architects of their own lives",
- Empower young people to become change makers,
- "Contribute to the eradication of youth poverty [...] and promote social inclusion".

The European Union Youth Strategy's focus on a cross-sectoral approach is in line with the broad definition of youth policy applied to this research paper (Council of the EU 2018: 3), covering a wide range of policy areas (see section IV). The participatory governance approach to youth policy, as

outlined by the European Commission (2018c: 10), fits the focus on stakeholder engagement under the EU-Central Asia strategy of 2019. The strategy also calls for increased efforts of public diplomacy to make the EU more visible in the Central Asian region. In this respect, the three core areas of the European Youth Goals (“Engage”, “Connect”, “Empower”) could be used to make EU youth policy activities more visible in Central Asia.

The new youth policy dimension as proposed below should entail measures empowering Central Asian youth in political, social, economic, and cultural terms to support them in becoming a transformative force in their societies. To make use of the transformative potential of the youth, engaging the younger generations in societal affairs is key so that they can shape the future of Central Asia. Therefore, the EU should contribute to achieve the third major objective of the Youth Strategy by connecting the youth in Central Asia in three dimensions: within the region, with Europe, and in the digital space.

This will also allow for achieving the European Youth Goals abroad, as demanded in the Council conclusions on youth in external action (Council of the EU 2020). The eleven European Youth Goals,¹⁵ which were developed in a consultative process involving young Europeans, however, cover too many areas of youth policy. Considering the given resources for EU-Central Asia cooperation, the EU needs to prioritise activities within a youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations in order to maximise its impact. Against the backdrop of the previously discussed challenges for youth in Central Asia, the new dimension should focus on the following six European Youth Goals. They correspond with the policy areas for priority activities discussed in section IV of this research paper:

- Equality of All Genders (goal 2);
- Inclusive Societies (goal 3);
- Information & Constructive Dialogue (goal 4);
- Moving Rural Youth Forward (goal 6);
- Quality Employment for All (goal 7);
- Quality Learning (goal 8).

b. The EU’s Youth Policy Aims in Its Relations with Central Asia

With regard to EU external relations, the Council recognises general challenges for youth, such as a lack of decent work, limited access to quality education, especially vocational education and training, and emphasises long-lasting negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth (Council of the EU 2020), which are in line with

the challenges discussed in chapter II. To address them, the Council stresses the necessity to ensure that youth policy becomes a mainstreaming issue in EU and member states’ external policies. By proposing to establish a new youth dimension of EU relations with Central Asia, this research paper contributes to achieving the policy objective of the Council conclusions. Specific youth policy objectives identified by the Council include investing in youth education with attention to vocational training, non-formal, and distance education, enhancing cooperation with the private sector to provide decent jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities for youth, addressing youth in climate strategies, and ensuring a gender mainstreaming approach throughout all EU and member state programmes and actions (Council of the EU 2020).

The EU’s new Central Asia policy addresses youth as both an opportunity and a challenge for the Central Asian states under the objective “Partnering for Prosperity”, which mentions a high literacy rate and very young population as resources for sustainable economic growth, but also as a test for the Central Asian labour market (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 8). The aims of youth policy in the narrow sense are specified as “Investing in Youth, Education, Innovation and Culture”, and include two main areas of cooperation: higher education and vocational training focusing both on quality of education and equal access especially for rural communities and women (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 13). Both priorities are in line with the challenges identified in this research paper. Moreover, other strategic objectives regarding the younger generation include providing employability and closing skills gaps within the Central Asian labour market as they address socio-economic issues faced by the region, such as high emigration rates and low economic diversification. Therefore, challenges for the creation of new perspectives for the Central Asian youth identified in the previous chapter,

¹⁴ The fourth objective (“Improve policy decisions with regard to their impact on young people across all sectors, notably employment, education, health and social inclusion”, Council of the EU 2018: 2) addresses national policies and would constitute direct interference with Central Asia legislation and national sovereignty.

¹⁵ 1. Connecting EU with Youth; 2. Equality of All Genders; 3. Inclusive Societies; 4. Information & Constructive Dialogue; 5. Mental Health & Wellbeing; 6. Moving Rural Youth Forward; 7. Quality Employment for All; 8. Quality Learning; 9. Space and Participation for All; 10. Sustainable Green Europe; 11. Youth Organisations & European Programmes.

and recommendations given on education and socio-economic policy, correspond with the youth policy aims of the EU-Central Asia Strategy.

However, chapter II shows that some challenges for Central Asian youth can only be addressed within a broader policy framework. Indeed, overarching objectives listed in the EU-Central Asia Strategy, such as providing rule of law, human rights, and democracy under the “Partnering for Resilience” pillar, and economic measures for supporting SMEs and promoting sustainable connectivity under the “Partnering for Prosperity” pillar, can also exert leverage on the state of Central Asian youth, providing general conditions for sustainable human development. [This research paper goes further and amplifies youth policy aims of other policy areas, such as digitalisation, gender equality policy, and agriculture policy, which will be shown in chapter IV.](#)

Criticism of the EU’s youth policy stems from the distinct orientation on higher education (Laruelle 2019: 6-7), which is an exclusionary approach regarding the high rate of economic and social inequality in Central Asian states. Higher education and EU projects in this area only reach very limited target groups – especially the metropolitan population and those who belong to the political and economic elite (Paramonov 2018: 316; Cornell, Starr 2019: 67). A hidden effect of such programmes is a widening opportunity gap between urban and rural populations in the region. The fact that the labour market and skills gaps are mentioned in the EU Central Asia Strategy is a good signal for educational cooperation. Providing vocational training based on local labour market needs and establishing a sustainable dialogue between authorities, business and educational actors can increase the visibility of the EU’s engagement by reaching broader population groups. Therefore, the recommendations given in this research paper pay attention to different equity gaps in the region – notably, disparities between the urban and rural population, as well as gender and social inequalities.

c. Youth Policy Aims of German Development Cooperation

Since 2007, Germany has uploaded its foreign policy objectives for Central Asia to the EU-wide strategic framework. Hence, German development goals in Central Asia follow the European strategic framework and focus on the following topics: democracy promotion, sustainable economic development, cooperation in science and education, development cooperation and security issues (Deutscher Bundestag 2018: 7).

Moreover, German development cooperation is guided by priorities established in bilateral cooperation with the Central Asian states. For all five countries, both public health and sustainable economic development are specified as major areas (Deutscher Bundestag 2018: 14-15), which widely correspond to the challenge analysis of this research paper. Both areas of action emphasise the importance of sustainable human development and provide a broad framework for the approach to youth policy in Central Asia.

Further objectives are codified in area-specific documents such as “Green Central Asia”, which outlined environmental cooperation in a joint declaration from January 2020. Addressing challenges such as climate change, and economic and demographic development, this strategic framework states, among other aims, strengthening inter- and intra-regional cooperation in sustainable development and security, and enhancing stability and prosperity (Joint Declaration of Intent 2020: 1, 3), which coincide with the objectives and recommendations of this research paper. In addition, “Green Central Asia” emphasises the role of “civil society, community-based organisations, business and industry, scientific and educational institutions [...] to promote climate and environmental cooperation” (Joint Declaration of Intent 2020: 3), which is a chance to engage Central Asian youths in climate and environmental protection through fostering participation and creating vocational training programmes, while incorporating prospects of green economy and technological transformation in the region.

Another area of action emphasised in German development cooperation with Central Asia is vocational training. Indeed, the dual vocational training system is Germany’s main educational export, which can be a paragon for some EU-wide measures. Its importance for Germany is stressed by the fact that two strategy papers outlining the aims of German international vocational training cooperation were adopted in 2013 and 2019. Whereas the first strategy underlines the benefits of the German vocational training system and pursues its popularisation and dissemination worldwide (Deutscher Bundestag 2013: 6), the second sets holistic objectives, such as the insurance of political, economic and social participation, creation of future prospects, and movement towards societal stability (Bundesregierung 2019: 1-2). Both environmental and educational cooperation as priority areas of German development cooperation with Central Asia correspond to the new EU-Central Asia Strategy as well as to the approach of this research paper.

d. Policy Aims of Selected EU Member States

Concerning the engagement of EU member states in Central Asia, there are two groups of countries: countries with historically rooted ties or interests in the region, such as Germany, Latvia, France, the Netherlands and Finland or countries in which cooperation with the five Central Asian states is limited to economic cooperation, notably in the energy sector and trade. For this research paper, a number of EU member states of the former group were selected, whose policies towards the region and their objectives will be briefly specified below: France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Latvia.

French interests in the region are focused on security policy, due to NATO's intervention in Afghanistan and the subsequent stationing of the French Air Force in Tajikistan. The overall objective of French engagement is the prevention of state instability in the region in connection with terrorism and organised crime. Consequently, over the last two decades, France has established a widespread cooperation on police training in these priority areas (Peyrouse 2012: 3) and contributed to the launch of two major EU programmes: The Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) and the EU Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) (Gower 2011: 39). Another area of French engagement in the region is providing rule of law, here France established the EU Rule of Law Initiative in cooperation with Germany (Peyrouse 2012: 2).

Security policy is a major cooperation field of **the Netherlands**, which also contribute to BOMCA (Hartog/Kettle 2012: 3). Similarly to France, the objective of Dutch Central Asia engagement is related to stability especially in Kazakhstan, where some Dutch companies made large investments in the energy sector. Hence, the Netherlands fund the Security Sector Reform (SSR) with the aim "to improve democratic governance and monitoring of Kazakhstan's security sector by providing training courses for officials and civil society leaders" (Hartog/Kettle 2012: 3). Moreover, Dutch engagement in security issues uses the OSCE framework to contribute to border management and drug traffic control (Hartog/Kettle 2012: 3). Like France, the Netherlands see a close link between security policy, stability and sustainable economic and human development (Hartog/Kettle 2012: 4), therefore, the engagement of both EU member states could be seen as a wider framework of youth policy aims mentioned in the EU-Central Asia Strategy.

Northern European countries, such as Sweden and Finland, emphasise democracy promotion,

human rights, and rule of law in their Central Asian policies. Sweden was the only country whose engagement in Central Asia was notably values-based and limited to human rights and poverty reduction. Swedish Central Asia Strategies (2003-2005 and 2006-2009) were focused on the two resource-poor Central Asian states: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Joensson 2013: 4). The cooperation ended in 2010 with a phasing-out strategy (SIDA 2010: 7). The objectives of Swedish development cooperation in this period were "to improve opportunities for citizen participation in the development of society, and to improve poor people's possibilities of earning a living and maintaining good health." (SIDA 2010: 21). Gender equality issues were addressed as a cross-cutting priority for all projects and policy measures (Joensson 2013: 4). Despite political tensions with non-democratic regimes in Central Asia, Sweden can still contribute to a values-based cooperation within the OSCE's and the EU's cooperation framework with the region (Joensson 2013: 4).

Whereas Sweden reduced its development cooperation in Central Asia, Finland continues its engagement in democracy promotion, good governance, and rule of law. In 2018, the "Country Strategy for Development Cooperation" for both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was adopted for the period between 2019 and 2021 (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018). The target groups of Finnish development cooperation are vulnerable population groups, such as rural women, children, and people with disabilities (Lipiäinen 2013: 3). The new Finnish strategy stresses "economic, social and environmental sustainability" (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018: 3). According to the new strategy, the overall objectives of Finnish Central Asia policy are: strengthening human rights and rule of law by paying special attention to vulnerable groups and women, strengthening civil society, providing sustainable economic growth, and promoting environmental protection (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018: 20-24). The new aspect in the Finnish strategy for 2019-2021 is a strong focus on climate change, which is addressed as an economic, governance and environmental challenge (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018: 22-24). The Finnish Central Asia policy framework is closely tied to the new EU-Central Asia Strategy and can be used for developing further synergies within a values-based approach to the region.

Latvian Central Asian policy is strongly influenced by a shared experience of political and economic transformation after the decline of the Soviet Union. However, Latvian cooperation with Central Asia is dominated by security policy and transportation, due to the establishment of the

Northern Distribution Network (NDN) during the Afghanistan NATO operation and to the old Soviet railway connections between Central Asia and Baltic ports (Jēkabsone 2013: 2). Hence, both security and transit cooperation are interconnected as Latvia is interested in using its infrastructure capacities to build up the transit of Central Asian and Chinese goods (Jēkabsone 2013: 3), but also faces some risks related to drug and human traffic through its ports (Bossuyt 2017: 455). Therefore, Latvia is one of the major partners of BOMCA. An almost overseen niche for Latvian cooperation with Central Asia is the promotion of economic and democratic transformation and good governance, as both Latvia and the five Central Asian states experienced the Soviet system and its repercussions (Jēkabsone 2013: 3, Bossuyt 2017: 452). Another important area of action is higher education, where Latvia contributes to the EU's Central Asia Education Platform (CAEP) (Bossuyt 2017: 452) and constitutes an important destination for academic mobility of Central Asian students (Bossuyt 2017: 449).

To sum up, cooperation projects of the EU member states are focused on the energy sector and economic cooperation with Central Asian hydrocarbon suppliers (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) as alternatives to Russian oil and gas (Gower 2011: 44). Consequently, there is a lack of interest concerning cooperation with resource-poor countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Human rights and democracy promotion as values-based dimensions of the EU's Central Asia policy gain low interest in bilateral relations of most EU member states with Central Asia (except Finland). The pragmatic view on cooperation with focus on energy and in some cases security policy (as in France, the Netherlands and Latvia) dominates Central Asian policies of the analysed EU member states. The EU-wide initiatives and the framework of some international organisations such as the OSCE play a crucial role for the Central Asian engagement of many EU member states as a possibility to build synergies and bring their expertise even if they have few resources for bilateral cooperation.

This research paper coincides with both the youth policy aims of the new EU-Central Asia Strategy and of the German Federal Government, but takes a broader approach to youth policy, which includes not only traditional areas of action, such as education and socio-economic development, but also other policy areas, which have an indirect but strong influence on the general well-being of youth as will be shown in the next chapter. Central Asian policies of other EU member states analysed in this chapter reflect historically rooted interests and cooperation

fields, which provide a foundation for EU-wide task-sharing and building synergies between EU-level actors and member states.

IV. Policy Areas Relevant to Youth Policy in Central Asia

This chapter evaluates EU activities in six policy areas most relevant to creating higher prospects for Central Asians in the age group 14 to 30 years against the backdrop of the challenges identified in chapter II. This research paper chose to have a closer look at those policy areas that are highly relevant (1) for addressing the existing challenges as described above and thus (2) for achieving the desired impact in youth policy. The focus is mainly put on policy areas (3) where the EU and its member states have a long-standing experience. In the following, for each of the chosen policy areas the existing initiatives of the EU, Germany and the other selected EU member states – where relevant – are presented and evaluated. The main criterion for their assessment is the contribution that they could make so far to the creation of new perspectives for the youth in Central Asia. Based on the evaluation, it provides recommendations for the German government to implement the new EU-Central Asia Strategy.

In addition to the recommendations given here, the EU and its member states should consider two mainstreaming issues for the establishment of a youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations. First, investing in regional cooperation should become a mainstreaming issue of all activities in the youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations. Second, cooperation with other international actors, such as the UN and the OSCE, should be intensified in order to improve the effectiveness and the impact of the newly established youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations. However, the assessment of the youth policy activities of these organisations are outside the scope of this research paper.

a. Education Policy

Education policy is a policy area that meets all three criteria. Per se, comprising initiatives in primary, secondary and tertiary education, it is mainly addressed towards the younger population, that (the group of people under 25 years) makes up the largest age group in all five Central Asian countries. A good education can help the young generation to integrate into the labour market and thus help to reduce the rate of youth

unemployment which is already quite high in the region with the exception of Kazakhstan. Directed towards highly skilled workers with university education, education policy initiatives can also help to prevent brain-drain to Western, but also Asian countries. Education policy can furthermore play a role in decreasing social inequality in the region, addressing the disparities concerning the access to education between the big cities and the rural areas as well as between men and women.

Instruments

Although the current EU-Central Asia strategy aims at “increas[ing] the quality of education, higher education and vocational education and training” (Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 13) the existing EU education policy initiatives in Central Asia show a clear focus on higher education (Paramonov 2018; Cornell/Starr 2019: 67). The two most important EU-funded higher education programmes with the Central Asian countries are:¹⁶

- the [TEMPUS programme \(Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies\)](#) which ran from 1994 to 2013: Its main goal was to support the modernisation of the higher education sectors (include Central Asia) through e.g. institutional cooperation (Paramonov 2018; Gussarova/Andžāns 2018a);
- [Erasmus Mundus](#) (launched in 2007) and its follow-up programme [Erasmus+](#) (since 2014): The programmes mainly finance the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, but also contribute to the sharing of best practices and support educational reforms (Paramonov 2018; Gussarova/Andžāns 2018a). Along with the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (today Horizon Europe), Erasmus+ today is the main funding instrument for higher education and research in Central Asia overall (Momosheva/Berenaliev 2019). Some of the various activities under Erasmus+ are managed at the national level by national agencies whereas others are managed at the European level by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA, Gussarova/Andžāns 2018a).

Worth mentioning is also the [European Education Initiative for Central Asia](#) which was initiated in 2007 as a platform for dialogue between the EU and Central Asia to provide support for reforms of the education sector in the Central Asian countries to bring them closer to European standards (e.g. through the participation in the Bologna

Process). Next to political dialogues, the initiative includes the exchange of information (e.g. on the occasion of joint events) as well as various programmes under the framework of previously Tempus or Erasmus Mundus (Paramonov 2018; Momosheva/Berenaliev 2019). The [Central Asian Education Platform \(CAEP\)](#), which was running under the European Education Initiative from 2012 to 2019, was an important platform for dialogue on reforms in vocational education and training (VET) and higher education within Central Asia. To this end, the main activities carried out were the exchange on various occasions such as conferences, workshops and seminars, but also online (e.g. by setting up their website as project database with a mapping of activities of the EU, member states and other international actors in the area of education) (Gussarova/Andžāns 2018a).

The EU’s approach to education initiatives in Central Asia is mainly criticised for its strong focus on higher education. The critique stems from the fact that higher education in Central Asia and thus also those initiatives target limited groups of the population, especially those in urban areas. Therefore, they are regarded to be elitist and their reception as well as impact for the society as a whole are considered to be rather low (Paramonov 2018; Cornell/Starr 2019: 67). Furthermore, this focus does not coincide with the needs of the local labour markets which are under increasing pressure to integrate the young population (Cornell/Starr 2019). Another point of criticism is the fact that EU support in the area of education mainly comes through comprehensive instruments like Tempus, Erasmus Mundus or Erasmus+ which barely consider existing circumstances on the local level in Central Asia (Peyrouse 2019). Although it is well acknowledged that the EU’s experience in higher education and research development is substantial, some say that this experience is not transferable to Central Asia; the two regions are too different due to their respective histories (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019a).

Contrary to the EU, German initiatives in Central Asia in the area of education mainly focus on vocational training. The country promotes dual vocational training based on its own model (Deutscher Bundestag 2013: 6; Stehling 2015). To a large degree, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)* implements

¹⁶ The “Central Asia Research and Education Network (CAREN)” is the third major project in education policy, but this paper addresses it under the policy area of digitalisation policy in chapter IV.b.

the initiatives on behalf of the German ministry responsible. Projects addressed towards all five Central Asian countries or a group of countries are:

- the “[Professional Education and Vocational Training in Central Asia – Fostering Systemic Approaches in the Food Processing Sector](#)”: It is commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the GIZ. It runs from 2019 to 2022 with a total budget of 5.5 million Euro for all five countries and aims at improving employment-oriented vocational training, especially in the food processing industry by promoting the dual vocational training system and involving companies in the design of industry-relevant courses for vocational education and higher education (GIZ n.d.(b));
- the strategic alliance “[Arbeitsmarktorientierte berufliche Aus- und Hochschulbildung in Bauberufen in Kasachstan und Kirgisistan](#)”: Also commissioned by the BMZ, the project seeks to establish practical-oriented vocational and higher education for building professions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from 2019 to 2023 (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung n.d.);
- the “[Sparkasse partnership project for the introduction of dual vocational training in the financial sector and the introduction of basic financial education for young people in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan](#)”: Financed by the BMZ for the period of 2014 to 2020, the project aims among other goals at improving the basic financial education of the population in the three target countries (Finanzgruppe Sparkassenstiftung für internationale Kooperation 2018: 15).

In Kazakhstan, the project “[Transfer von Dualen Ausbildungsprogrammen in Logistik, Mechatronik und nachhaltiger Energieversorgung nach Kasachstan \(GeKaVoC\)](#)” is funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) from 2017 to 2020. Its goals are to establish an inter-company education centre based on the German model and to strengthen the cooperation between the economy and state-run enterprises (GeKaVoC n.d.). In Kyrgyzstan, the GIZ is implementing on behalf of the BMZ the project “[Employment Promotion and Vocational Qualification](#)”. It is directed towards young women and men looking for work after completing their training, especially women in rural areas (GIZ n.d.(a)).

For its international cooperation in vocational education, the German government established so-called [round tables](#) to coordinate the activities in this area. The actors involved include German

ministries, organisations, etc. (Bundesregierung 2019).

Among the other selected EU member states, mainly Latvia engages in education policy initiatives in Central Asia. The country was active in the framework of the [CAEP](#) and coordinated cooperation in vocational education (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia 2016). The number of Central Asians among foreign students at Latvian universities is already quite high and the country is actively trying to attract even more students from the region in order to strengthen the cooperation between their education facilities (Bossuyt 2017; Jēkabsons 2013). Latvia’s engagement is generally evaluated positively, but some doubt that it meets the local needs (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019a).

Recommendations

To allow education policy initiatives to have the desired impact and to address the identified challenges adequately, the main task is to [reform the underdeveloped education sectors in the five countries](#), where the reform process away from the Soviet-style system and towards international standard is ongoing and differs considerably between the five countries. In Uzbekistan and even more so in Turkmenistan, the major task is the liberalisation and opening of the education sectors. Therefore, the current needs in the higher education sector are two-fold: On the one hand, the further [adaptation to international standards](#) needs support. On the other hand, some of the [previous reforms need corrections](#). Most notably, the higher education systems need to become sustainable by becoming an attractive employer for Central Asian researchers and lecturers. In parallel to reforming higher education, the Central Asian research sectors also need to be strengthened. Especially, [closer cooperation with the industrial sector](#) is required to promote innovation and create jobs for highly skilled people. The sector of vocational training faces a similar challenge. Being still rooted in the Soviet system, education needs to adapt to employers’ needs and become [more labour market oriented](#) to offer apprentices a better perspective.

The EU’s focus on education in the new Central Asia Strategy is generally seen positive, but greater emphasis should be put on [primary and secondary education as well as vocational education](#) instead of tertiary education (Cornell/Starr 2019) which can increase the visibility and effectiveness of the EU’s initiatives by reaching broader population groups including those in rural areas and women. The German dual vocational training system should continue to serve as a best practice example, which has to be adapted to the specific situation in Central Asia. As the process

of adaption as well as the ownership by local stakeholders in Central Asia (Euler 2019) is crucial for long-term success, efforts should continue to be project based instead of aiming for policy reforms.

To prevent brain-drain towards Europe, academic exchange programmes should focus on [circular mobility for students, lecturers and researchers](#), like Kazakhstan's Bolashak programme already does. Central Asian students or researchers could be offered so-called "return grants". This means that scholarships for stays abroad are only granted if students or researchers return to their home countries afterwards (Plottka/Smirnova 2019). By providing incentives to return to research and higher education institutions in the home countries, such a funding scheme would directly contribute to improving higher education in Central Asia.

Building on experiences from its Erasmus+ program and its predecessors, [the EU, most notably the European Commission, should help to establish new intra-Central Asian exchange programs for pupils, trainees, students, teachers, lecturers, and researchers](#). This could be a crucial means to address the previously mentioned challenge to open the education sectors, most notably in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Experiences in international exchange create lasting bonds and have the potential to give regional cooperation a more stable basis. The focus should be on pupils and trainees, with increased efforts to develop vocational training in Central Asia, as incentives for students to stay in other Central Asian countries are still limited.

As Latvia has a high number of students from Central Asia coming to the country, it would be best suited for taking over the responsibility for the distribution of those return grants. Transferring existing European or German models to Central Asia might not work as a mere copy process, but only if only those components are transferred that fit best the Central Asian experiences, history, culture, etc. (Euler 2013). The EU should also consider to [intensify the cooperation with like-minded actors](#) like the Ukraine which receives a lot of students from Central Asia (Gusarova/Andžāns 2019a). In general, the EU and the member states should [engage more actively with local stakeholders](#) in order to achieve a long-term impact of its initiatives (Peyrouse 2019). One example could be to invite local stakeholders or local German embassies to the German round tables in addition to the responsible actors for international cooperation in vocational education on the national level. Only introduced so far in Kazakhstan, this could be extended towards the other Central Asian countries.

b. Digitalisation Policy

It has been shown before that the major obstacle to digitalisation remains the need to further develop digital infrastructure, notably broadband internet. By aiming at the promotion "of access to affordable, open and secure broadband connectivity" (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 12) the new EU-Central Asia Strategy as well as the strategy "Connecting Europe and Asia" (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2018) recognise this challenge. In addition to the technical task of building the necessary infrastructure, bridging the digital divide in Central Asia is also a question of political will, as the examples of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan show. The new strategy's focus on digital economy could be helpful in engaging the more reluctant Central Asian countries in a dialogue on infrastructure development for the digital era.

Like in other areas of infrastructure investment, the EU's Central Asia activities are competing with Chinese activities under the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese company Huawei is highly active in implementing new 5G technology in the region (Thomson 2020). While EU budgets earmarked for Central Asia are far too small to compete with large-scale Chinese investments, the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession on the Chinese project is unclear. Investment activities have been in decline since 2017 (The Economist 2020). The current recession troubles recipient states in paying back their debts to China, revealing how dependent some states have become on China. This is true especially for Kyrgyzstan in terms of Chinese lending and Turkmenistan in terms of gas export contracts. If recipient states start turning their back on China's Belt and Road Initiative and investment activities do not resume following the crisis, this could open a window of opportunity for the EU to step in and support the development of the digital silk-road. It should prioritise this area of infrastructure investments as affordable and open internet access is important for the economic and societal development in Central Asia alike.

Concerning EU youth policy, European support for infrastructure investments provides the general framework, establishing the necessary preconditions for a successful digital dimension of youth policy for Central Asia. This research paper addresses the aim of providing reliable and affordable internet access in a more targeted approach on Central Asian youth. While it is

closely related to the policy area of higher education, due to its significance and priority status under the new EU Central Asia Strategy, the research paper dedicates an own chapter to the policy area. The digital dimension of European youth policy in Central Asia should focus on three elements: (1) digital infrastructure for higher education; (2) training of digital skills in all education programmes; (3) providing opportunities to develop digital businesses.

Instruments and Recommendations

The [Central Asia Research and Education Network \(CAREN\)](#) was funded by the EU from 2009 until 2019: In the tradition of the ancient Silk Road, CAREN aimed at facilitating the exchange of ideas and information between academics, researchers and students in Eurasia and thus e.g. at establishing a high-capacity data-communications network and connected it to its European counterpart. The project was managed by DANTE (Delivery of Advanced Technologies to Europe) and supported by the national research and education networks in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (Uzbekistan is no current project member) (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019a; Gussarova/Andžāns 2018a; Paramonov 2018). Regarding sustainability, the project is a best practice example for EU-Central Asia relations as the cooperating national networks cooperate to continue the provision of CAREN services on a permanent basis (iCAREN 2019). Against the backdrop of the considerable challenges to further develop digital infrastructure at Central Asian research and higher education institutions and the current developments in facilitating online learning, the EU should continue to support CAREN's ongoing efforts. The objective of the continued support should not be to replace regional funding by EU funding, but to complement it to allow for further development of CAREN activities to address new challenges. Therefore, it is necessary to take stock of what CAREN is able to provide on a self-sustainable basis and to evaluate in which areas further demands cannot be met on a self-sustained basis.

Reaching out to peripheral higher education institutions as well as additional activities in developing online education are such areas. With regard to the latter, Germany can provide best practice examples: Funded under the European Social Fund, the "Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern" facilitates the development of online learning units at all Bavarian higher education institutions and integrates them in a region-wide blended learning system. Students from different universities can take courses taught under this umbrella at any Bavarian higher education institution while mu-

tual recognition of awarded ECTS is guaranteed. CAREN could be developed into a [virtual university of Central Asia](#), connecting lecturers and students from participating higher education institutions alike.

The digital dimension of EU policy for Central Asian youth may not be limited to higher education, which would further accelerate the digital divide within Central Asian societies. Therefore, the training of digital skills should become a mainstreaming element in all EU-funded education projects and those aiming at labour market integration. [Integrating the topic of digitalisation into other education and youth projects](#) will also increase their attractiveness in the target group. Again, the major focus of these activities should be on youth outside the urban centres and on poor youths. For example, the project "Prospects for Youth" (GIZ n.d.(h)) funded by the "German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development" (BMZ) includes training in IT competences.

The activities within EU projects could be complemented by [projects addressing teachers as multipliers](#). Training them in didactics of digital literacy should be one component of the activities. With regard to the youths, special emphasis should be put on the need for data protection and risks of online activities, such as fake news, online bullying, fraud, radicalisation and individual security. In Kyrgyzstan, digital literacy is one of the government priorities under its strategy "Digital Kyrgyzstan 2020-2025" (World Bank 2016).

Furthermore, the EU's priority on the digital economy (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 12) is an area relevant to improving prospects for the younger generations. Kazakhstan has already established a programme to develop a "creative society" under its strategy "Digital Kazakhstan 2020", which created 8,000 jobs in 2019 (Yergaliyeva 2020). As Kazakhstan is not subject to bilateral development cooperation and has sufficient own funding to support its digital economy, the EU could work for [establishing a region-wide network on exchanging best practices to support the digital economy with a special focus on the creative economy](#). This would also facilitate the establishment for potential cross-border joint venture. For Kyrgyzstan, which lacks sufficient resources to develop the digital economy on its own, [a project incubator for promising business concepts in the digital economy](#) could be established with EU funding, which could provide limited risk capital as seed money and training in business management for start-ups and give them access to market-based

investors. So far, investment in digitalisation is not yet addressed by the “Investment Facility for Central Asia” (European Commission n.d).

c. Economic Policy

Economic policy initiatives are key to the creation of future perspectives for the young generation on the labour market, but the policy area itself is too comprehensive for this research paper. Therefore, it focuses on project-based initiatives that can create such opportunities for young people in Central Asia and thereby already address one of the biggest challenges identified before. The region’s very young population and thus the high share of people of working age bear great potential for economic growth, but only if the young workforce and especially young women who suffer from a high unemployment rate specifically in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan can be integrated into the Central Asian labour markets. Giving young people a perspective in their home countries, relevant initiatives can also help reducing incentives for labour migration, which makes the region highly dependent on its migrant workers’ remittances and thus vulnerable to external shocks. As Central Asian labour migrants to Russia are a welcome target of the recruitment efforts of the IS (Dilleen 2019), integrating young people into the local labour markets could also help reduce radicalisation trends in the region. In a broader context of measures required to create future perspectives for the young generation on the regional labour market, such initiatives can help to reduce the region’s dependency on commodity exports such as oil, to attract foreign investments and to prevent a further shrinking of the agricultural sector due to the ongoing urbanisation. Here, economic policy initiatives are closely linked to education policy since foreign investors in the region are looking for qualified employees (Gussarova/Andžāns 2018b: 2).

Instruments

Under the heading “Partnering for Prosperity” of its 2019 Central Asia Strategy, the EU stresses, also with relation to the region’s young population, the support for the transformation of the Central Asian economies “into diversified and competitive private sector-driven economies which can create jobs” (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 8). “[T]he agricultural sector and agri-business, the

environment and water, energy, transport and sustainable tourism” are identified as “employment-generating sectors” where the EU has expertise (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 8).

Assistance for the development of the private sector in Central Asia, including economic measures to support (the competitiveness of) Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), is a priority of the Investment Facility for Central Asia (IFCA) and Central Asia Invest (CAI), two regional investment programmes that need to be highlighted (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019b: 5). Under its fifth call, published with a total budget of 10.9 million Euro in 2019, CAI is funding seven projects (European Commission 2019a):

- [“BOOST – Businesses and Organisations in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan operate sustainably”](#): The project was officially launched in early February 2020 and its overall aim is the creation of jobs in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan and the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan (BOOST 2020);
- [“Expansion of Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek local smallholder organic agriculture and forest-based food products to EU Markets”](#): The project aims to strengthen the “competitiveness of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the agri-food sector of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan through increasing the efficiency and sustainability of production and processing of food products from smallholder farming and forest management operations” and thereby targets small-scale farmers and forest owners, including women and the youth (EkoMaktab 2020);
- [“Regional Integration and Capacity Building to Boost Agribusiness MSMEs Competitiveness and Trade Promotion in Central Asia \(CANDY V\)”](#): The project’s overall goal is to foster Kazakhstan’s, Kyrgyzstan’s, Tajikistan’s and Uzbekistan’s integration into the global market by supporting the growth and competitiveness of agribusiness MSMEs in these countries (Hilfswerk 2020);
- [“Capacity building of industry associations serving engineering companies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan”](#): By strengthening the role of industry associations and attracting MSMEs, the project aims at improving the skills of engineers in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan through e.g. the exchange of European experience in the management of associations (Cleantech Latvia 2020);
- [“D-TEX – Digitalization of supply chains in the textile industry in Central Asia”](#): By involving SMEs in the digitalisation of supply chains, the project not only wants to support regional

economic integration, but also SMEs' growth and the expansion of production and exports (UzJobs 2020);

- [“Silk Road CBT Initiative: Connecting Central Asian Community-Based Tourism and European Markets”](#): By supporting MSMEs in the community-based tourism sector and promoting Central Asia as a “regionally branded tourism destination”, the project plans to promote investments and the development of the private sector (Acted 2020);
- [“PROMHOUSE – Promoting professional housing management in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan”](#): The project's overall aim is to empower and strengthen private companies in the sector of housing management in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In order to do so, PROMHOUSE will provide special training to “housing managers” so that they can compete on the market (PROMHOUSE 2020).

Under its previous calls I to III, CAI has been funding 28 projects with a total budget of 14 million Euro. Next to the desired result of improving the business climate for SMEs, an additional effect of CAI was the promotion of female entrepreneurship and gender equality (European Commission 2015).

Under the IFCA 2017-2018, four projects with a total budget of 34.1 million Euro have been funded (three national projects and one project with a regional scope). Two of the national projects were related to the environmental sector, the remaining national project in Turkmenistan as well as the regional project to the private sector which were considered to be “an engine of economic growth and job creation” (European Commission 2019b: 8). The latter two projects are:

- [“Advice for Small Businesses in Turkmenistan”](#): Through business advice and training, the project increases the competitiveness of SMEs in Turkmenistan by improving the qualifications of employees and business management (European Commission 2019b: 10);
- [“The SME Finance Facility for Central Asia – Phase 2”](#): As the access to long-term finance through bank loans or other non-bank sources is one of the biggest challenges for SMEs in the region, the facility provides long-term financing to Central Asian SMEs to invest in their growth and thus competitiveness. Companies of up to 500 employees are eligible for a loan which will have to be repaid by the end of 2024. At the same time, financial literacy levels in SMEs in the region are low, so that phase 2 of the project also provides knowledge and business advice through local

consultants and international industry advisers (European Commission 2019b: 12).

Like CAI, the IFCA stresses its projects' focus on gender equality and the creation of economic opportunities for the young population (European Commission 2019b: 41).

The German development cooperation mainly follows the “priorities of the partner country” when it comes to the support of a sustainable economic growth in Central Asia (Deutscher Bundestag 2018: 14). The projects are mainly commissioned by the BMZ and implemented by the GIZ. Most of the projects are addressing Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the GDP and the GNI per capita are the lowest among the five countries (Böttger/Braun/Plottka 2019: 300). Among these projects are:

- [“Rural development in Southern Kyrgyzstan; Integrated Rural Development Programme”](#): Running from 2018 to 2022, the project aims at increasing the opportunities to earn an income in the poor and rural area of Dschalal-Abad where currently many young people work abroad. Such opportunities are seen particularly for the agricultural and the tourism sector. Therefore, better cooperation (e.g. in producer groups, networks) within agricultural value chains and in tourism is envisaged. The improved availability of services in rural areas (advisory services, transport and logistics, quality control, purchase of agricultural inputs, market information and information for tourists) is expected to have a positive impact on the quality and quantity of agricultural and tourist products (GIZ n.d.(c));
- [“Promoting Sustainable economic development”](#): The project has been running from 2014 to 2019 in Kyrgyzstan. Considering elements of green economy, it promoted sustainable economic development and value chains in the areas of agro-ecotourism, cattle breeding, fruit and berries, walnuts, and sugar beets. It also included technical and commercial training for staff at the chambers of commerce and professional associations, for stakeholders involved in production, logistics and trade, as well as for banks on the development of financial services tailored to the needs of SMEs and agricultural producers. Achieved results so far are the training of 60 farming households on how to welcome international guests and offer resource-efficient services, the award of a Fairtrade certification to a Kyrgyz walnut supplier, the increase of the average yields of sugar beet growers from 32 to 58 tonnes per hectare, the contracting with a sugar factory that now makes sugar beet cultivation a secure source

of income, the training of 400 farmers in animal health and hygiene standards, the introduction of internationally recognised standards in 30 farms so that the beef can be exported (GIZ n.d.(d));

- **“Promotion of Employment and Vocational Qualification”**: Running from 2017 to 2020, the project aims at the successful integration of young men and women, especially women from rural areas, into the Kyrgyz labour market after they finished their vocational education. To this end, it implements a cooperation model for career guidance and counselling as well as new short-term vocational education courses of high demand. So far, six employment-oriented qualification measures were established at vocational schools, 1,881 people were trained in qualification measures and there is a 65 percent employment rate from the participants of those qualification measures. Furthermore, 16 schools developed a career guidance programme for ninth grade students in which 650 students are participating (GIZ n.d.(a));
- **“Sustainable economic development; Prospects for Youth”**: To strengthen the economic participation of young people, this project operates in 20 partner municipalities in northern Kyrgyzstan. It promotes the exchange in the area of youth between NGOs, the private sector as well as stakeholders on the national and the local levels. In 2018, the National Youth Council as a platform for cooperation between ministries and agencies on youth topics was established. On the local level, the municipalities are encouraged to engage in dialogue with the young people and consider their views when it comes to the allocation of funds for youth related services. The project also emphasises capacity building of local, regional and national actors. So far, more than 100 youth specialists and more than 280 young leaders participated in trainings and learned how to actively shape their communities by implementing projects with and for the local youth. The project also supports local youth NGOs in implementing projects that focus on job relevant skills development for the youth, career guidance, youth services and employment opportunities for young people and those that focus on areas as e.g. IT and tourism that have a potential for growth throughout the country (GIZ n.d.(e));
- **“Supporting the local economy in selected high-mountain regions”**: This project running from 2016 to 2020 aims at boosting the competitiveness of MSMEs, including smallholder farmers, in the Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, a high-alpine region where the poverty rate is at 51 percent and thus above

the national average and where only 7 percent of the land can be used for agriculture. It supports business stakeholders in implementing practice-oriented consulting services for MSMEs. In cooperation with the regional administration, this has already led to advisory service formats for entrepreneurs and potential business start-ups having been institutionalised. The project also supports the microfinance organisation “Madina va Hamkoron” which has been able to provide financing options for 100 SMEs. As the most immediate result, sixty promoted companies have been able to create new jobs (GIZ n.d.(f));

- **“Towards Rural Inclusive Growth and Economic Resilience (TRIGGER II)”**: TRIGGER II (2019-2021) mainly focuses on the agricultural sector in Tajikistan and wants to strengthen the economic resilience of MSMEs including smallholder farmers and young entrepreneurs, especially women. Therefore, it enhances the dialogue between private sector actors and political institutions (e.g. at the annual Dushanbe Economic Meeting, one of the successes of the project). Furthermore, TRIGGER supports the development of inclusive value chains and promotes start-ups and entrepreneurship. By improving the availability of support services, potential founders are encouraged to create a start-up and the economic capability of existing companies is increased (GIZ 2019).

The BMZ together with the EU commissioned the project **“Sustainable economic development in selected regions of Uzbekistan”**. Between 2013 and 2020, the project supports the Uzbek government in implementing measures to enhance the development and economic growth of SMEs in the disadvantaged regions Karakalpakstan, Khorezm, Surkhandarya, Jizzakh, Syrdarya and Kashkadarya as well as in the three regions in the Fergana Valley, Namangan, Andijan and Fergana, to improve income and employment opportunities for their population. That involves the development of an environmentally sound and market-based economy which involves all citizens and the introduction of new technologies that are environmentally friendly as well as the introduction of EU agricultural standards (GIZ n.d.(g)).

Among the selected other member states, Finland is devoted to a number of economic policy initiatives that support the private sector in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the Central Asian region’s two poorest countries, and thus also the creation of future perspective for the young population in these countries. Most of these initiatives are implemented in the form of an interinsti-

tutional cooperation between UN or other international organisations and Finnish government authorities. Examples are:

- the fourth phase of the UNDP project “[Aid for Trade in Central Asia](#)”, where the Finnish government contributes 4.8 million Euro between 2018 and 2021 for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan;
- the second phase of the International Labour Organization’s project “[From the Crisis towards Decent and Safe Jobs](#)”, where Finland contributed 4 million Euro for both countries between 2014 and 2019.

Both initiatives aim at a continued government support for reforms to promote the growth of the private sector, an increased income creation through the development of private sector financing opportunities and strengthened SMEs as well as more decent working conditions. Finland’s development cooperation in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was evaluated in 2016 and assessed as highly relevant. The programmes seem to be mainly achieving the desired outputs without major delays. (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018).

Recommendations

To allow economic policy initiatives to adequately address the identified challenge of creating perspectives for the Central Asian young generation on the labour markets, they should increasingly focus on the [support of SMEs and start-up pioneers](#). When it comes to explaining the EU trade and business regulations, the sharing of experiences with SMEs from the EaP countries could be an advantage (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019c). The cooperation of SMEs from different countries of the region should be increasingly addressed in EU initiatives (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019b). Also, the introduction of one-stop-support points of the EU on any issues of SMEs or investment in each Central Asian country should be considered as they could increase the outreach towards a wider spectrum of businesses (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019c). Another aspect that EU economic policy initiatives should give more attention to is the creation of incentives for [opening up own small businesses](#). Creating favourable tax policies could be such an example that would allow e.g. migrant workers to invest their money in their own businesses. This way, they would no longer be dependent on going abroad to work and Central Asia could make use of the entrepreneurial potential of its population (Ryazantsev 2016).

A newly established [Youth Fund](#) would be a highly visible and efficient instrument to specifically empower Central Asia’s young generation. Financial support for this fund should be

provided by the private sector and financial institutions. The fund should use the potential of youth innovation to support the creation of new jobs and by incentivising to open small businesses. This will be crucial to increase the competitiveness and diversification of the states’ economies. The fund should support SMEs as well as the start-up sector as they provide young people with jobs and create economic opportunities for growth. Recipients of funding should be offered additional support in terms of capacity building for starting new businesses. This should include [network platforms to connect with SMEs and young entrepreneurs from the Eastern Partnership countries](#) to exchange experiences. Central Asians can benefit from their experiences, best practices and a closer cooperation. Combining close ties with Central Asian countries and transformation experiences as a post-Soviet state with high standards of digitalisation and experiences in establishing an innovative start-up scene, Latvia would be ideal to take the lead for this initiative. Such a network platform resembles the “Polish Challenge Fund”, which is a newly established instrument of Polish development cooperation for transferring Polish expertise to neighbouring countries. Currently, the fund is limited to projects in Belarus and Ukraine (Government of Poland 2020). Furthermore, Poland as one of the initiators of the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy has close ties and continued interest in cooperating with countries in the Eastern neighbourhood of the EU.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Central Asia has been gradually developing its potential in the [tourism sector](#) which made it one of the most promising sectors for economic growth and for creating new jobs. However, there are still a number of obstacles to a flourishing tourism industry (even before the pandemic) like the poorly developed tourism infrastructure (hotels and transport) or the unavailability of information on tourist routes and attractions in English. These require a significant amount of investment which will only be made if there are trends of an increasing number of tourists and if the Central Asian countries show their willingness to work on long-term development strategies together. Here, one could think of creating a joint tourist programme (in English) through each of the five countries (Gussarova/Andžāns 2019a) or of the introduction of a common tourist visa for all countries to facilitate travel in the region. But of course, the still ongoing travel restrictions under the COVID-19 pandemic are an obstacle to the further development of the tourism sector. Any initiative in this area can only show its effect once these restrictions have been lifted and travelling for the purpose of tourism is possible again.

Where it is not possible to fully put an end to the dependency on remittances through e.g. the proposed measures above, economic youth policy initiatives should try to [improve the protection of young workers abroad](#), notably those working in Kazakhstan.

d. Social Policy

Social inequality as an obstacle to the creation of higher prospects for young Central Asians can be reduced through adequate social policy initiatives. In particular, they can help addressing the unequal distribution of income within the society and reduce poverty. The progress in poverty reduction in the Central Asian countries during the past twenty years again slowed down since the global economic crisis and remains highly dependent on remittances and thus prone to external shocks so that there is still a long way to go, especially in the two poorest countries Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As poverty can be reduced through the creation of decent jobs, the economic policy initiatives as presented before also play a special role in this regard. Relevant policy initiatives can further help to address the existing gender inequality (initiatives presented in the cross-cutting chapter on gender equality policy) and the divide between the urban and rural population. The urban-rural divide illustrates the unequal provision of the population with basic supplies as well as the unequal access to public services, especially – and not only since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – health care which can be addressed through adequate social policy measures.

Instruments

Next to educational projects, the main engagement of the EU in Central Asia right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was focussed on social-oriented projects, “helping to solve a number of social problems” (Paramonov 2018: 211). Relevant project activities were thus first implemented under the [TACIS programme \(Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States\)](#) and from 2007 on under the [Development Cooperation Instrument \(DCI\)](#). The specific effort that the EU puts in social policy initiatives depends to a large degree on the situation in the different countries of the region so that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the socio-economic situation is the worst among the five countries, are the main target of EU social protection initiatives focussing on health care, humanitarian aid or the improvement of the rural population’s way of life. In Kyrgyzstan, social projects are mainly implemented by local non-governmental organisations

(NGOs) which receive funding from the EU (Paramonov 2018). The EU stresses the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) to enhance social development. Through testing and improving the responsiveness of social policies to the population’s needs, through contributing to the enhancement of service quality or through providing social services where public authorities lack the capacities or recourses, CSOs could play a role in improving the population’s access to (quality) social services (European External Action Service 2014). After the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997, the EU continued to invest the largest share of its assistance (66 percent of the total assistance for the period between 2007 and 2011) in social protection, especially health and food security. In the country, the EU is not only funding social projects, but also financially supporting the state budget e.g. through subsidies to the pension fund. As part of the DCI, the EU initiated in Tajikistan in 2007 a sector support programme under which it subsidised the Tajik budget with 5 million Euro (of a total amount of 14 million Euro) to support social spending (Paramonov 2018). Bilateral development assistance from 2014 to 2020 foresees 57 million Euro for the health sector, among others for the improvement of the “availability, affordability and quality” of health services (European External Action Service n.d.: 1).

EU social policy initiatives in Central Asia reach their limit when the underlying European values are misunderstood or rejected in the region (Paramonov 2018). This might be the case for initiatives aiming at gender equality and therefore at a new role of women in the society that is supposed to replace their role as it has been for many decades. In addition, there is basically no public attention or awareness of the EU’s support of social policy initiatives in the region as its financial support often goes to NGOs that then get the credit for the implementation of a project (Paramonov 2018).

Already in 2005, the BMZ named the reduction of poverty as overarching aim of the German policy towards Central Asia. Corresponding measures concentrated inter alia on the provision of basic social services to the population (Klinnert 2015). Today, the German government is [supporting the development of the local health care systems](#) which should especially profit vulnerable groups such as women and girls in rural areas, LGBTIQ people, people with disabilities, sex workers, HIV-positive persons, drug users, and migrant workers. In Kyrgyzstan, where the health care system needs substantial reform, where the hospital infrastructure needs modernisation and where the access to health services is very limited for the above mentioned groups as well as for people

with no official registration, Germany is supporting bilateral projects which focus on the development of a national emergency system as well as – together with The World Bank – the third health care reform programme of the Kyrgyz government. In Tajikistan, the German government is supporting health care reform programmes, the improvement of the health care quality in the areas of mother-child health, sexual and reproductive health, as well as food security for mother and child in the rural areas. It further assists the Tajik government in developing demand-oriented health services as well as the rapprochement to international standards (Bundestag 2018).¹⁷

Among the other selected EU member states, Finland highlights the support for “economic, social and environmental sustainability” in its strategy for development cooperation with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018: 3). Under Finland’s Wider Europe Initiative, the International Labour Organization’s project “From the Crisis towards Decent and Safe Jobs”, where the country contributed 4 million Euro for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between 2014 and 2019, aims at the improvement of social and health services, the creation of social protection floors and thus a better social protection (International Labour Organization n.d.). Until it phased out development assistance in Central Asia in 2010, Sweden provided a total support of about 280 Mio. SEK to the health/social protection sector in the region between 1998 and 2010. This means that contributions to health and social protection made up about one third of all its contributions in Central Asia during that time-frame. 89 percent of the contributions to the health/social protection sector were dedicated to health activities, the largest single contribution for the health sector reform in Kyrgyzstan. The remaining 11 percent were for social protection activities (Sida 2010). Despite its withdrawal from development assistance to the region, Sweden can still continue its values-based cooperation and work e.g. through the OSCE (Joensson 2013).

Recommendations

In order to effectively target the above-mentioned challenges and create perspectives especially for young Central Asian women who live in traditional societal structures, adequate initiatives should include social policies that help them [to balance work and family](#). If the obstacles to combine both remain too high, women – despite their relatively high level of education – cannot participate in the labour market and the region loses their potential for economic growth (UNFPA 2014). Health services, also for sexual and reproductive health, must be [made accessible particu-](#)

[larly for young people](#). Even if those services are available, they might not be accessible for the youth as e.g. opening hours are limited to the time when they are supposed to be in school or young people do not have the courage to seek services, especially for sexual and reproductive health, at all if service providers have a negative view about young people’s sexuality. In addition, services should be [affordable](#) for young people who might still financially depend on their parents (UNFPA 2014). To address the inequality between men and women not just when it comes to income, but also e.g. concerning the access to education, [gender mainstreaming](#) needs to be considered for all policy instruments in all policy fields. Overall, the current [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has aggravated the existing structural problems so that ongoing initiatives might need adjustment.

e. Gender Policy

Despite some progress related to gender equality in Central Asia since the Soviet time, women’s rights remain a problematic issue due to the traditionalism and conservatism that has increased in Central Asian societies since they gained independence in the 1990s (Beyer/Finke 2019: 318), and the lack of political participation, which concerns not only young women, but youth as a whole (UNICEF 2016: 32). However, there are strong disparities in the status of women between the five Central Asian countries. According to World Bank data, general women’s rights are provided in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan: e.g., there are no barriers for a woman to register a bank account or a firm, or to sign a contract (World Bank 2020e).¹⁸ While Kazakh and Kyrgyz women strive to close the gender payment gap and achieve higher positions in political institutions and business, Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen women combat harmful practices such as bride kidnapping and gender-related violence.

However, the state of women’s rights in the five Central Asian states diverge not only by country, but also between rural and urban spaces and different ethnic groups (Sabzalieva 2016). For example, there are strong disparities between the status of urban and rural women in Kyrgyzstan: despite several regulations guaranteeing gender equality, practices such as bride abduction and

¹⁷ For EU project-based initiatives, reference is made to the chapters on economic and on gender equality policy.

¹⁸ No gender related data on Turkmenistan are available.

polygamy have become more frequent in rural areas since the 1990s (Beyer/Finke 2019: 315). Therefore, gender inequality is only one social impediment for Central Asian women and girls and vulnerability factors can overlap.

Promoting gender equality policy in Central Asia faces an additional drawback. A common lack of awareness for girls' and women's rights in Central Asia results in a shortage of monitoring and available data. Harmful practices such as child marriage are often only registered after the spouse has reached the age of 18 (UNFPA 2014: 11). The willingness of local authorities to provide some gender-related statistics and to report cases of gender-related violence is doubtful. As a rule, Turkmenistan does not provide any gender-related data on women's access to education and public services. Therefore, notably regarding rural women, there is a risk that their problems and needs are overlooked, so that evidence-based policy-making on gender issues is undermined.

Hence, gender equality should be addressed as a cross-cutting policy issue including specific measures in the areas of education, labour market integration, socio-economic policy, and support for vulnerable rural women. Therefore, the measures required to end gender inequality should be a consistent part of all youth policy instruments in all other policy areas, and their effects should be considered by their positive or negative impact on gender disparities.

Due to the Soviet legacy embedded in the education system, women in Central Asia have relatively high qualifications because they widely enjoy good access to primary and secondary education (World Bank 2020e). However, young women in Central Asia are negatively impacted by the gender gap in terms of access to tertiary education. Although the share of female enrolment in higher education is relatively high, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, young Tajik and Uzbek women continue to face a gender gap due to traditional gender roles, according to these young women are primarily perceived as good wives and mothers, and not as well-qualified workers (Sabzalieva 2016). However, investing in young women's education and skills in Central Asia bears potential because they are more likely to stay in their local communities and can transmit their experience and knowledge to future generations.

Hence, investments in women's skills and education should be accomplished by increasing their employability and young women's integration into the labour market, due to the relatively high

unemployment rate in this group, especially in economically weak Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (World Bank 2020e). Female vulnerable employment rates show that notably women in more conservative Tajikistan and Uzbekistan face limited access to the labour market (World Bank 2020e). By contrast, these indicators in Kazakhstan are the lowest in the region. Here, further fostering of female employment and addressing labour market needs can help to overcome the labour shortage. Young women in Central Asia have the potential to contribute to economic growth and be active members of the labour market; however, they cannot unveil their potential.

Young women are not a target group of labour migration, because the migration rate of female workers from Central Asia is very low (Rocheva/Varshaver 2017: 93). However, the most progressive and open Kyrgyz society faces the challenge of a feminisation of labour migration to Russia¹⁹ because Kyrgyz women obtain a good proficiency level in Russian and enjoy simplified conditions for getting working permits (Rocheva/Varshaver 2017: 100). Hence, female Kyrgyz migrants should be addressed by policy measures in this area. Also, Tajik and Uzbek young women should be kept in mind due to their high unemployment rate and, thus, growing migration incentive. However, low rates of female labour migration in Central Asia generally make them an attractive target group for sustainable human development measures.

While women's rights in Central Asia can be addressed in the framework of gender mainstreaming and cross-cutting policy areas, there is one group that should be addressed with specific measures. Due to the wide gap between urban and rural populations, special attention should be paid to rural women and girls as well as female members of ethnic and conservative Islam minorities, who are particularly worse off because of harmful practices such as child marriage and bride kidnapping (Cuaresma/Knerr 2014: 14, UNICEF 2016: 26). A lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, including a short age of information, hinder girls in rural areas from obtaining a secondary school qualification, continuing with tertiary education or vocational training and starting their career, due to early pregnancies and births (Cuaresma/Knerr 2014: 14). In the case of vulnerable women, gender inequality amplifies socio-economic disparities by limiting access to commodities and public services, especially to healthcare as outlined above.

¹⁹ In 2015, 31 percent of Kyrgyz labour migrants to Russia were women (Rocheva/Varshaver 2017: 92).

Rural women are strongly affected by income disparities and the increasing risk of poverty due to the lack of labour market integration and high percentage of vulnerable employment as shown above.²⁰ Thus, vulnerable women should be addressed by specific policy measures, in addition to gender mainstreaming. The empowerment of rural women can be an objective of agricultural, educational, and social policy.

Instruments

All European external policy frameworks follow the new EU Gender Action Plan II (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2015), which sets out three thematic priorities:

- girls' and women's physical and psychological integrity,
- economic and social rights and empowerment, and
- girls' and women's participation (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2015: 4).

Therefore, all European development cooperation instruments should widely correspond with these strategic objectives (European Commission 2018a: Annex 2: 6). Thus, striving for gender equality is a cross-cutting issue of European external action. In this area, European normative power must stick to a values-based policy approach in development cooperation if it wants to implement the "principled pragmatism" of the Global Strategy. Its limitations, especially in conservative and traditionalist Central Asian societies with significantly different norms and values (Spaiser 2018: 75-79), should be reflected by establishing adapted instruments and measures notably at the grassroots level.

The following EU-funded project can be a paragon in this area: "[Assistance to Development of the Potential of Culture and Leisure Centres](#)" conducted by the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband International (DVV International) between 2016 and 2018 in Uzbekistan shows how the EU's normative approach on gender equality can be adapted to the Central Asian reality and used to reach local communities by investing in infrastructure for non-formal education in chosen rural areas and empowering local actors (DVV International 2018). Focusing on rural populations, notably vulnerable women and youth, DVV International addresses the rural-urban gap and high female unemployment, providing capacity building for local actors and stakeholders on a grassroots level by following the "train-the-trainer" model. In the second stage, culture and leisure centres organise non-formal education courses

for rural women, giving courses on cutting, sewing and computer literacy fostering SMEs. This project is a good example of how the EU can stick to its values-based policy and adapt it to the local reality: empowering local stakeholders, giving them resources and providing know-how, e.g., in methodology of adult education and social work, allows the EU to reach target groups, to which access is limited by political, geographical and cultural barriers.

Similarly, another partly EU-funded project in Uzbekistan, "[SABR: Socio-economic Development Centre](#)", established the Capacity Development Centre for further grassroots initiatives addressing social and economic challenges faced by women in the region. SABR combines two pillars: investments in physical infrastructure and capacity building, and fostering public services, such as psychological, medical, and social support to vulnerable women as well as micro-financial instruments for SMEs (SABR n.d.). Due to a long-term partnership with DVV International, SABR is the main NGO working with vulnerable women and providing one-stop-services for these groups in Uzbekistan. This form of public service centre particularly suits the needs of rural women due to the general lack of public services and its easily accessible unbureaucratic format. In rural areas, there are many barriers for women to go to local authorities due to shame and a lack of privacy. Establishing non-formal multitasking centres in Central Asian rural areas is an important step to meet rural women's needs.

Similarly to the EU's approach to gender inequality, German development cooperation in Central Asia supports female empowerment in the framework of established priorities such as vocational education, employment and sustainable socio-economic development. Two major organisations, the Institute for International Cooperation of the DVV International and the GIZ, provide a gender mainstreaming approach in their projects. A major objective of German development cooperation is integration into the labour market and providing decent work for the young population and women. Thus, there are many projects on vocational education and employability, which specify vulnerable women, particularly in rural areas, as a target group. "[Promotion of Employment and Vocational Qualification](#)" is a project of the GIZ. It specifies youth and rural women as target groups and aims to support their "professional orientation and relevant qualification

²⁰ According to World Bank data female vulnerable employment accounts for 32.8 percent of female employment in all five Central Asian states (Own calculations based on data from The World Bank (2020)).

for their successful integration into the Kyrgyz labour market” (GIZ 2020 n.d.(a)). This project is an example of the gender mainstreaming approach found in German development policy on Central Asia. It achieves both concrete results, providing better employability chances for rural women, and overarching objectives, ensuring income for vulnerable groups, and thus contributes to reducing poverty and overcoming disparities between urban and rural areas, which is a paragon for further policy measures.

Public health is another major area of German development cooperation, which is also related to gender issues. Access to sexual and reproductive health services is often restricted for young women in rural areas. Hence, German projects such as “[Promotion of Perinatal Health in Kyrgyzstan](#)” (GIZ n.d.(i)), which aims at capacity building for the new National Perinatal Centre in Bishkek, can be broadened to provide high-quality perinatal services in local communities. Strengthening vocational and further education for local staff will conflate the following long-term goals: providing employment and equal access to healthcare and building capacities outside of capitals.

There are few engagements in terms of gender equality from other EU member states. As shown in chapter III, apart from Germany, only Finland currently promotes a values-based policy towards Central Asia and emphasises rural women as a target group (Lipiäinen 2013: 3). Against the backdrop of the European Gender Action Plan II, Finnish development cooperation in Central Asia primarily prioritises Kyrgyz and Tajik women in the framework of rule of law, good governance, and civil society empowerment (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2018: 20-21).

Recommendations

Gender-related issues in Central Asia should be addressed by paying attention to local traditions and cultures, so that a conflict between different values and norms can be avoided. Addressing women’s rights in Central Asia, the EU can further develop its “principled pragmatism” approach. Indeed, both EU-funded projects mentioned in this chapter are a benchmark for balancing values-based policy and adapting it to local conditions and needs. Their best practices are based on “[train-the-trainer](#)” and [one-stop-services](#) models, which are essential to establish [low-threshold access](#) to sufficient education, labour and social services for vulnerable women in conservative communities of Uzbek rural areas. This can be a paragon for further EU-funded long-term projects for rural women in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

German development cooperation supports the gender mainstreaming approach in its Central Asian projects. Measures aimed at women’s economic empowerment are a constant part of most GIZ projects; women are mostly present as a target group or women’s rights are addressed as a general framework alongside climate change and environmental risks. Providing better opportunities for young women in the established policy areas of education and employment, and fostering female entrepreneurship and participation, will exert long-lasting influence on Central Asian societies as women can transmit their skills, experience, and knowledge to future generations. This is an effective way to address general socio-economic challenges also faced by women in the region, such as poverty, economic underdevelopment, and the urban-rural gap. Addressing educational and socio-economic needs at a grassroots level opens a window of opportunity for the transformation process. However, we recommend [broadening the gender agenda in German development cooperation](#), notably in projects dealing with rural areas where specific measures are needed to address overlapping challenges faced by vulnerable women. Hence, best practices established in lighthouse projects in capitals as “[Promotion of Perinatal Health in Kyrgyzstan](#)” should include [activities for the rural population](#) to close the urban-rural gap.

An additional challenge not yet addressed by European and German policy measures is female labour migration. Due to a lack of reliable data on female labour migration (Rocheva/Varshaver 2017) it is difficult to predict the prevalence of this phenomenon over the next decades. However, the situation with female migrants should be observed in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan due to high female unemployment rates. Here, [local projects on human trafficking prevention and labour rights](#) are helpful in raising awareness of the risks of illegal labour migration. With respect to the brain-drain in Central Asia, investing in women can enhance sustainable human development in the region not only due to their pivotal role in child-rearing, but also their low migration rate.

Finally, the current wave of gender-based violence caused by the [COVID-19](#) pandemic can be used as an opportunity to [elevate gender debate](#) and [rethink women’s role](#) in Central Asian societies. The experience of the EU and its member states, especially Germany and Finland, will play a pivotal role in establishing an inter-societal dialogue.

f. Democracy Promotion

Initially, the EU's democracy promotion approach to Central Asia was based on Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" (Fukuyama 1992) argument, assuming that transition to market economies in the post-Soviet space will also result in transition to liberal democracies (Sasse 2008). The five newly independent states in Central Asia, however, persistently remain to differing degrees authoritarian, as shown before in chapter II. In the EU's enlargement policy, conditionality proved to be the most successful instrument to promote and support democratic transformation. It was, therefore, also applied to relations with third countries, where it proved to be less effective (Sasse 2008). For Central Asia this approach suffers from three limitations: First, the EU cannot offer membership prospects as its biggest incentive. Second, the EU is competing with Russia and China for influence in the region. While Russia offers a best practice example of authoritarianism and a blueprint to governments without democratic participation, China offers unconditioned development assistance and provides legitimacy to (semi-)authoritarianism (Sharshenova/Crawford 2017). Third, the ongoing developments of the Central Asian political systems – as described in chapter II – are merely driven by domestic factors than external influence. Most notable, Central Asian rulers consider democracy as a threat to their power. Therefore, the EU faces a trade-off between using conditionality to promote democracy and maintaining influence in the region. This will become the litmus test for making "principled pragmatism" (European Union 2016: 8) work.

Considering these circumstances for EU democracy promotion in Central Asia, a three-level approach seems to be suitable, which is in line with the priorities listed in the new EU-Central Asia Strategy (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019): On the first level, [the EU should maintain bilateral political dialogues](#) to promote the "respect for human rights in compliance with international standards" and "democracy, the rule of law and good governance" as set out in the new EU Central Asia Strategy (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 3-4) and the new "Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument" (European Commission 2018b: 27). It is unlikely that these dialogues will have direct effects in terms of transformation. However, they signal the importance of these objectives within EU-Central Asia relations. They also support the implementation of

projects on the other two levels by guaranteeing political circumstances and establishing a forum to address problems as democracy promotion in the region remains a highly sensitive topic.

On the second level, [the EU should continue to directly support democratisation in areas where it is in the interest of the Central Asian ruling elites](#), such as rule of law seen as a precondition to attract foreign direct investments. In order to meet the specific situation in each country, projects should be established on a bilateral basis while regional exchange of best practices can complement the projects, as proposed in the new strategy (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 4). To increase the effectiveness of projects, efforts should focus on countries where circumstances are most promising. Currently these are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

On the third level, and this one should be the focus for the youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations, [the EU should further strengthen the civil society in Central Asia](#) to build "the roots of democracy" (European Commission 2012) and activate the youth as change makers. As proposed in the new EU-Central Asia Strategy special emphasis should be put on strengthening civil society to empower citizens to participate in public decision-making as well as engaging in the implementation of EU-Central Asia relations (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 4, 15). Support for civil society organisations is also one of the objectives of the proposed new "Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument" (European Commission 2018b: 27), which also calls for consultation of civil society prior to programming (European Commission 2018b: 27, 33). Since 2014, the EU has started developing strategies for engagement with Central Asian civil societies. This endeavour needs to be continued following the expiration of the current roadmaps by the end of 2020. Special emphasis should be put on the local level. Without touching on highly sensitive democratisation, participation of NGOs on the local level offers citizens the opportunity to directly influence their living conditions. Empowering civil society on the local level both is a means to promote democracy in the long-term and to increase the effectiveness of EU support for Central Asia, as local authorities and NGOs can be empowered to become implementing partners. Considering the different situations, the five Central Asian countries should be addressed individually. However, a regional dimension should not be limited to the exchange of best practices,

but also foster people-to-people contacts across borders in the region.

The third level is the focus of this research paper, as it gives young citizens power to directly improve their own lives. By empowering them to become change makers they can improve their own perspectives in their hometown in the short- to mid-term perspective, while a vital civil society and local participation are the fertile ground to build democracies in the long-term perspective.

Instruments

The “EU-Central Asia Forum” is the major new instrument to strengthen the civil society dimension of EU-Central Asia relations. It aims at fostering mutual understanding, increasing the EU’s visibility and allowing for sharing best practices (Delegation of the European Union to Tajikistan 2019). While the forum is a suitable instrument to raise awareness for the new emphasis on the civil society dimension in EU-Central Asia relations, it also suffers from the considerable heterogeneity of civil society in Central Asia. Experiences from the “Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum” show that heterogeneity is a major obstacle to effectiveness. While the “EU-Central Asia Forum” is less institutionalised than the one for the Eastern Partnership, differences between participating organisations are larger than in Eastern Europe (Tsertsvadze 2017).

Therefore, [the Central Asia Civil Society Forum should be turned into a continuous process by establishing a working group on youth policy](#). On the Central Asian side, participation should not be limited to highly professional non-governmental organisations working on youth, but reflect the complete independent civil society, where it exists. This is necessary to reaching out to the wider civil society. In order to be able to also address legal questions relevant to youth in Central Asia and to facilitate cooperation with Central Asian governments on youth issues, NGOs close to them should also be represented in the working group. Including independent and state-sponsored civil society will, however, increase efforts required to moderate the working group activities. To ensure EU-wide participation of European civil society, it seems to be useful that the responsibility for organising the working group rests with the EU institutions.

Considering the heterogenous membership of the working group, a need-assessment is required to ensure effectiveness and output orientation of the working group. Having established the group, participants should be asked what they expect from their participation and what they seek to achieve. Based on the results of the

assessment the working group can decide on its working mode and objectives.

While heterogeneity of Central Asian civil society actors is a challenge, hardly any independent NGOs exist in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and those in the other three countries are under increasing pressure (Tsertsvadze 2017), the [EU’s policy is biased towards a certain type of neo-liberal NGOs](#). In this context, a neo-liberal civil society organisation is officially registered, independent from governments, often dealing with human rights issues and they often receive funding from abroad (Babajanian et al. 2005). In other words, they are highly professional and resemble Western NGOs. In their analysis of EU support for NGOs in Central Asia, Axyonova and Bossuyt (2016) found that NGOs of the neo-liberal type receive the major share of EU funding. They also found a positive trend that over the years, the EU applies more often a community-driven development approach. However, this trend needs to be intensified under the new civil society dimension of EU-Central Asia relations. Only this will allow for reaching out into the countryside and on the local level.

Major obstacles are of bureaucratic nature as smaller NGOs are less professional, have fewer access to EU funding and struggle to meet formal criteria for managing EU funding. To address these challenges and to reduce the existing funding bias, EU information activities about funding schemes should reach out to the Central Asian periphery and new capacity building instruments addressing traditional and local Central Asian civil society are required. Furthermore, the administrative burden associated with the application, implementation and accounting procedures for EU supported projects should be reduced and special support instruments for small initiatives and organisations established. As minimum standards for administrative procedures have to be respected, neo-liberal NGOs could function as intermediaries between the EU and traditional and local NGOs. This is of crucial importance to increase the participation of youth organisations, which are often less institutionalised. Furthermore, the EU’s hesitant approach to cooperation with state-led civil society should be reconsidered in order to establish the civil society dimension also in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This is in line with the EU’s own evaluation of civil society involvement in the Agenda 2030 activities, which recommend to address “invited spaces”, which are provided by governments and independent spaces alike (Corella et al. 2020: 31).

The approach of the project “[Prospects for Youth](#)” (GIZ n.d.(h)) funded by the “German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and De-

velopment” (BMZ) and implemented by the GIZ in Kyrgyzstan can serve as a good example. As a follow-up to a project running until 2019, it aims at building capacities of local, regional and national stakeholders in youth policy to establish a policy framework for the policy area. It also provides training and project funding for youth NGOs active in developing of skills needed for labour market integration.

Recommendations

In order to raise awareness for the EU’s intensified engagement with civil society in Central Asia, the activities should be framed as an own coherent strand of EU-Central Asia relations and communicated as the “civil society dimension” of EU-central Asia relations, including a youth subdimension (European Union 2018; European Union 2014a; European Union 2014b). A bilingual website in English and Russian would increase transparency and should provide an overview of EU and member state activities.²¹ As the European External Action Service lacks resources to permanently update its own websites dedicated to Central Asia, the new website should be a common endeavour of the EEAS, Commission and all member state governments. This would also be a first attempt to visualise the real dimension of EU engagement in Central Asia.

The “Central Asia Civil Society Forum” should be turned into a sustainable long-term process, which gives European actors direct access to Central Asian civil society. To this end, participation has to reach out beyond the group of neo-liberal NGOs and also include traditional and local organisations. A specific dimension for youth organisations should be established and sufficient levels of their representation should be ensured. In a demand-driven approach, the forum should define its objectives more concretely with a focus on direct impact and sustainability. As a first step, a need-assessment among the participating organisations should be conducted.

In order to reach out into the periphery and continue the trend of increasing cooperation with local civil society, a funding scheme for small scale youth projects eligible to less professional NGOs should be established. This needs to account for lower levels of professionalisation and find a better balance between the administrative burden for managing the project and ensuring good and targeted implementation. In turn, it should be coupled with the requirement to participate in capacity building activities.

V. Recommendations

The review of the six policy areas most relevant to youth policy in Central Asia has most importantly revealed that a new youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations can build on numerous initiatives and activities. However, these are not yet visible as a coherent policy dimension. Therefore, the first priority should be on establishing the youth policy dimension within EU-Central Asia relations and making it visible in Europe and Central Asia.

Setting up the Youth Policy Dimension in EU-Central Asia Relations

A first step to establishing a youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations should be a continued stock-taking exercise of ongoing and previous initiatives and projects relevant to youth policy. Information and contact details of all existing EU youth policy activities in Central Asia should be provided through a bilingual website in English and Russian. It raises the profile of the youth policy dimension and is the first element of a communication strategy to intensify European public diplomacy in Central Asia. Moreover, it contributes to reaching out to new partners in Europe and Central Asia.

Putting the objective of working better together into practice, the Central Asia Civil Society Forum should be turned into a continuous process by establishing a working group on youth policy. On the Central Asian side, participation should not be limited to highly professional non-governmental organisations working on youth, but reflect the complete independent civil society, where it exists. This is a first step to reaching out to the wider civil society. In order to be able to also address legal questions relevant to youth in Central Asia and to facilitate cooperation with Central Asian governments on youth issues, NGOs close to them should also be represented in the working group. Including independent and state-sponsored civil society will, however, increase efforts required to moderate the working group activities.

Investing in Regional Youth Cooperation

While the EU considers Central Asia to be a region and its strategy papers have always underlined the aim of facilitating regional cooperation, concrete efforts from Central Asian governments to establish functioning cooperation between the five partners are relatively new. The main necessity in such an initial phase of cooperation is to build trust between the partners. Youth policy is

²¹ Cases of vulnerable civil society need to be considered.

most likely the most effective instrument in reaching this objective in the long-term. Therefore, investing in regional cooperation should become a mainstreaming issue of all activities in the youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations.

Building on experiences from the Erasmus+ programme and its predecessors, the EU should help to [establish new intra-Central Asian exchange programmes for pupils, trainees, students, teachers, lecturers, and researchers](#). Experiences in international exchange create lasting bonds and have the potential to give regional cooperation a more stable basis. The focus should be on pupils and trainees, with increased efforts to develop vocational training in Central Asia, as incentives for students to stay in other Central Asian countries are limited. The main focus of student mobility is currently Russia, Asian and Western countries. Continued reforms of Central Asian higher education sectors will make intraregional student mobility more attractive. Directly involving the younger generations into EU supported activities is also a contribution to enhancing the EU's public visibility in Central Asia.

Combining reform efforts in higher education and projects in vocational training with mobility schemes for teachers, lecturers, and researchers contributes to exchanging best practices. To facilitate ongoing exchange between participants, the EU should establish a [virtual European University of Central Asia](#) offering online courses for multiple universities, organising online trainings in teaching methods and connecting researchers.

Exchange should also include the business sector. With a focus on SMEs and start-ups, the EU should establish a [Central Asian network of business entrepreneurs](#). In addition to connecting innovative Central Asians, it should also link them to entrepreneurs from Central and Eastern Europe, who can share experiences and best practices from starting new businesses in transition countries. Paying special attention to digital economy, the Central Asian network of business entrepreneurs could combine face-to-face and online activities.

[Establishing a Youth Fund for Central Asia](#)

The EU should initiate [a new Youth Fund to empower Central Asia's young generation](#). To maximise impact and increase efficiency, it should bring together international donors active in Central Asia and also raise funds from the private sector. Following the three key objectives of the European Youth Strategy, the fund should empower young entrepreneurs by functioning as a business incubator, providing seed investment and advice. It should engage young change

makers by supporting civil society, funding small-scale projects and offering capacity building to civil society with a special focus on initiatives in rural areas and those working with vulnerable groups. It should connect young Central Asians by helping to establish new youth exchange programmes and making investment in regional cooperation an element of all its activities. Concentrating EU funding in the new youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations increases the visibility of the EU activities and facilitates access to support for youth activities.

[Working Better Together in the Youth Policy Dimension](#)

The previously proposed priorities for EU youth policy in Central Asia will give the new policy dimension a high profile and make it more visible to relevant stakeholders in Europe and Central Asia as well as the youth in the region. Setting up the structure of the youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations also serves as the basis to put the objective of working better together into practice. [Future priorities should be defined in consultation with relevant stakeholders in a working group on youth policy of the Civil Society Forum](#). Following up the experiences of drafting the Central Asia Strategy of 2019, such a participatory approach is crucial to increase the ownership of stakeholders, especially of the newly involved actors, for the new policy dimension.

[The EU institutions and member states should also put the principle of working better together into practice](#). Concerning the website, the working group on youth and the Youth Fund, EU-level institutions should remain responsible for the core structure of the new youth policy dimension to ensure the widest possible participation and outreach on the European side. For helping Central Asian countries to establish intra-Central Asian exchange programmes, the European Commission is best suited to provide its expertise from the Erasmus+ programme. Nevertheless, for this project it is of utmost importance that Central Asian countries bear the responsibility for managing the exchange programme to ensure long-term sustainability.

For activities in research and higher education the EU should be considered as one research area. However, countries with established close ties to research and higher education institutions in Central Asia, such as France, Germany, and Latvia, should take the lead to get universities and research institutions from all over Europe on board. Depending on the future of research cooperation between the EU and the United Kingdom, the participation of British institutions would be an additional asset due to their global attractiveness. Considering German experiences

with its dual vocational training system, relevant transfer projects and the engagement of German businesses in Central Asia, Germany should also take the initiative in the area of vocational training and in connecting companies and higher education institutions.

Activities in the area of gender and social policy complement the recent Finnish Central Asia policy, which puts a special focus on support for rural women, children, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. Concerning the Central Asian network of business entrepreneurs Latvia and Poland could take the lead for the initiative. Having own experiences of transformation in the post-Soviet space, Central Asian businesses can benefit from best practise examples from both countries. Latvia has already close economic relations with the Central Asian region, which has been a priority of Latvian foreign policy for long. The Polish focus on the Eastern Neighbourhood of the EU and its close relations with Ukraine provide a good opportunity to also involve businesses from the EU's neighbouring countries. A focus on the exchange between European and Central Asian entrepreneurs would be an expansion of the recently established Polish Challenge Fund, which serves as a platform to transfer Polish expertise to Belarus and Ukraine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Yvonne Braun, Research Associate, Institut fuer Europaeische Politik, Berlin

Julian Plottka, Senior Researcher, Institut fuer Europaeische Politik, Berlin

Ekaterina Smirnova, Project Assistant, Institut fuer Europaeische Politik, Berlin

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Editors:

Dr. Katrin Boettger, Director IEP

Dr. Funda Tekin, Director IEP

Layout:

Inga Kjer

Institut fuer Europaeische Politik e.V.

Bundesallee 23

10717 Berlin

info@iep-berlin.de

www.iep-berlin.de

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