

CENTRAL ASIA, THE WEST, STATE AND RELIGION

S. Frederick Starr

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“The EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus in the International System” (EUCACIS) is a PhD Support Programme for Postgraduates and Doctoral Researchers in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, organized by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) and the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE). Funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and the programme Erasmus+, it offers scholarships for three years to excellent postgraduates who are working on a doctoral thesis in political science, contemporary history or economics on a topic related to its thematic focus at a university or academy of sciences in the Southern Caucasus or Central Asia (including Afghanistan, the Kashmir region in India and the autonomous region Xinjiang in China).

It is the objective of the EUCACIS programme to provide intensive PhD research training for its participants to bring them closer to international standards, to support them until they submit their doctoral theses, and to help them establish their own networks with other young researchers in the target regions and in Europe. This will be achieved through four international conferences (in Almaty, Berlin, Yerevan and Bishkek); four PhD schools in Berlin, Yerevan and Istanbul; two research training stays; and continuous online coaching.



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About the Series

EUCACIS in Brief publishes opinion pieces and short articles written by fellows of the EUCACIS PhD Support Programme, alumni of the Master Programme „The European Union and Central Asia in the International System“ (EUCAIS) and other members of the wider EUCACIS network. It aims at making the debates within the network, notably during the EUCACIS conferences and PhD schools, accessible to a wider public. The papers are available on the programme website: www.eucacis.eu

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When the new states of Central Asia sprang from the collapse of the USSR, the West was caught by surprise. Quick to affirm the new sovereignties, neither Europe nor the United States was prepared to say what it would do to preserve them in the face of threats. Beyond this, as they initiated relations with the new states, the North Atlantic countries applied a simple three-part structure that had been worked out nearly two decades earlier and enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Relations with the countries of Central Asia would be divided into three quite distinct spheres or “baskets”, in the terminology of the Helsinki agreement: security, economics, and “democracy”, which came to include human rights. Back in 1975, “security” meant nuclear arms reduction, while “economics” referred above all to investments and trade the USSR sought from the West.

In the first years after 1992, a principal western security interest in Central Asia was to remove nuclear arms and fissionable material from the region. Thanks to Kazakhstan’s active participation, this was soon accomplished. Other more traditional dimensions of state security proved more difficult, for the new sovereignties faced both external threats from their former rulers to the North and internal threats from radical Islamists. Both the US and EU relegated these matters to NATO. While logical in an organisation sense, this meant that the three “baskets” became quite separate from one another rather than being negotiated together as a single package involving trade-offs by both sides.

Notably absent from this formulation of the economic basket was a programme to transform Soviet-type statist and command economies into market economies, and related programs to foster institutional transformation within the governments, so as to increase responsiveness and effectiveness and thus create an environment in which democratic practices can eventually emerge. In other words, there was a need for a further focus on governance as such, in addition to the existing focus on democratic change. Over time this

adjustment has been introduced on an ad hoc basis and is taking its place among western goals and objectives.

These matters still warrant the closest attention from the West. But there is a further objective that should have been included from the outset among the strategic objectives in Central Asia of both the United States and Europe. Indeed, this goal should figure prominently in western declarations and actions respecting Central Asia today. Simply stated, the West should strongly affirm the importance of secular states in pluralistic societies, of secular laws and secular courts, and of higher education that fully embraces modern secular learning.

A general blindness to the importance of cultural values has led the West to severely undervalue or even ignore the importance of its own values, especially in the area of religion. Like the states of Central Asia, the West affirms the role of religion(s) in the lives of citizens and is seriously committed to protecting the right to practice religion. However, through a long and sometimes bloody process extending over centuries, the West came to the view that such affirmations are best protected in modern and pluralistic societies by states that are themselves secular and by secular systems of law, and that an essential condition for the preservation of these values is education that is fully open to modern learning. So deeply are the principles of the secular state, secular systems of law, and secular education embedded in the Western consciousness that they are simply assumed, taken for granted.

For whatever reason, the West has failed to affirm these values in its own policies and, by doing so, has neglected important area of potential collaboration with the states of Central Asia. All of the five new states have secular governments, secular systems of law, and embrace modern learning. In this respect, they are absolutely distinctive in the Muslim world, and offer a model for emulation by other Muslim-majority countries. This is all the more true because Central Asia has full claim to being

one of the generative heartlands of Islam and not an outlier to the Arab world. The fact that people who codified the Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad and founded the most influential Sufi orders embrace today the secular state, secular laws and courts, and modern learning as matters of high principle, even while allowing ample social space for the faithful to practice their religion or religions, is of enormous and global importance. That these affirmations are combined with technological sophistication and growing economies makes them all the more important. The West should acknowledge and embrace this.

This is not to say that all is well in the secular states and courts of Central Asia. For better or worse, all five of the new countries inherited their secularism and embrace of modern learning not from indigenous sources like the Jadids (whom the Soviets destroyed) but from the USSR. Especially with respect to the state and law, the Soviet model of secularism was irredeemably tainted by its intimate link with the militant atheism of the Communist Party. The new states of Central Asia reject this, of course, but have faced many challenges in

defining the best way to manage relations between faith(s) and the state. Too many laws and habits continue from the Communist era, discrediting and undermining the high principle of secularism in state institutions and the law of Central Asia.

The West should take a deep interest in these matters. Drawing on its own experience, it has much to offer. Central Asian officials and religion can bring their own thoughts and rich experience to the table, for what should be a very fruitful dialogue.

Unfortunately, neither the USs nor the EU has grasped the value and importance of such an exchange. By failing to identify and affirm their own values, they have denied the region and themselves a valuable focus of collaboration and reform. It is not enough to decry circumstances that may, or may not, give rise to religious extremism. It is time to affirm the importance of secular states and laws as such, and to work with Central Asians to develop institutions and practices that best embody these ideas in the context of their societies.