

Policy Paper on Eastern Europe and Central Asia

A Youth Policy Dimension of EU-Central Asia Relations

Priorities for the Implementation of the
EU-Central Asia Strategy in the Area of Youth Policy

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ABSTRACT

The policy paper reasons that youth policy for the Central Asian region should become a priority under the EU's new Central Asia Strategy. As there is little risk of facing competition with other global actors, it allows the EU to develop together with its Central Asian partners activities of mutual interest for the majority of people living in the region. Investment in young change makers, human development, and education offers the opportunity to benefit from the “demographic dividend”, makes Central Asian societies more resilient and contributes to stability. To maximise the EU's impact in Central Asia, its youth policy needs to focus on priority activities. Therefore, the paper recommends to prioritise three tasks: (1) Setting up the youth policy dimension in Central Asia Relations; (2) Investing in regional youth cooperation, with a focus on education; (3) Establishing a Youth Fund for Central Asia.

Following the adoption of its second Central Asia Strategy in 2019 and the decision on the new multi-annual financial framework, the task ahead of EU institutions and national governments is to put the EU's new Central Asia policy into practice. To increase the effectiveness, efficiency and visibility of this new policy for Central Asia, it is necessary to define clear priorities within the broad strategic framework provided by the joint communication¹ and the Council conclusions.²

Against the backdrop of continuing population growth in Central Asia, this paper recommends a separate youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations as one of its priority areas. This new policy dimension should not limit youth policy to youth protection and risk prevention concentrated on vulnerable youth but also entail measures to support the legal, political, social, economic, and cultural integration of young people (aged 14 to 29 years). Such an approach, which considers “young people [...as] important change makers and essential partners”³ in EU external relations is a sustainable investment in *working better together* with Central Asian partners, today and in the future.

Therefore, the paper outlines how a separate youth policy dimension fits with the EU's Youth and Central Asia policy (section 1) and Central Asian interest in cooperation (section 2). Summarising major challenges for youth in Central Asia in section 3, a comprehensive package of recommendations to establish a youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations is proposed in section 4.

1. Relevance of a Youth Policy Dimension to the EU's Central Asia Policy

Supporting the creation of high prospects for the younger Central Asian generations is in line with the objectives of the new Central Asia Strategy: Measures to integrate young Central Asians into labour markets, reduce incentives for labour migration, improve educational standards, and promote digitalisation contribute to *partnering for prosperity*. Giving young citizens economic perspectives in life, reducing social inequality and offering opportunities for societal engagement makes Central Asian societies more *resilient*. Bringing together the younger generations from

across the region is a long-term *investment in regional cooperation*.

A youth policy dimension of Central Asia relations that considers young citizens to be change makers also concurs with the European Union Youth Strategy and contributes to achieving the European Youth Goals⁴ abroad, as demanded by the Council.⁵ The new policy dimension should entail measures *empowering* Central Asian youth in political, social, economic, and cultural terms supporting 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 the Youth Strategy by *connecting* the youth in Central Asian in three dimensions: within the region, with Europe, and in the digital space.

Box 1: Strategic Basis of a Youth Policy Dimension in EU-Central Asia Relations

Joint Communication. The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership, JOIN(2019) 9.

Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia, 10221/19.

Commission Communication. Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy, COM(2018) 269.

Resolution of the Council. The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, OJ 2018/C 456/01.

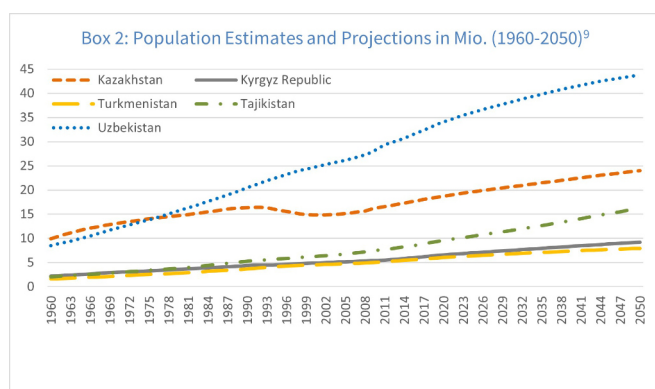
Council Conclusions. Youth in external action, 8629/2.

As the EU cannot compete with Chinese and Russian influence in the region, a youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia provides a potentially non-competitive policy area which allows the EU to develop activities of mutual interest together with its Central Asian partners while pursuing its own policy objectives. The EU can build on a number of existing initiatives and projects in the region, relevant to the elements of a youth dimension of EU-Central Asia relations as outlined before, to build on and achieve impact in Central Asia in the short- to mid-term perspective. These activities reach out to the wider society, with a special emphasis on rural areas, and they provide, therefore, an ideal opportunity to pur-

sue effective public diplomacy. To increase the EU's visibility in Central Asia, the youth policy dimension should be completed with a targeted communication strategy.

2. Relevance of a Youth Policy Dimension to Central Asian Partners

With regard to the EU's objective of *working better together* with its Central Asian partners, a youth policy dimension bears the potential to develop a common policy as the Central Asian countries have own interests in creating higher prospects for younger Central Asians and upcoming generations. In all Central Asian countries, the largest population group consists of people under the age of 25 years.⁶ It ranges from 40.9 percent in Kazakhstan, which has the oldest population, to 54.5 percent in Tajikistan, which is the country having the youngest population.⁷ In 2020, the median age in Central Asia is just 27.6 years.⁸ As box 2 shows, the trend of population growth is expected to continue. Therefore, policies addressing the younger generations are policies for the majority of citizens.



This very young population bears opportunities for economic growth, if a high share of working-age population is participating in the labour markets. A youth dimension of EU-Central Asia relations empowering Central Asians from 14 to 29 years meets the Central Asian governments' interest in economic growth: It offers support in realising the necessary investments in human development and education to benefit from the "demographic dividend"¹⁰. In addition, a youth policy dimension of the EU's Central Asia policy also contributes to the resilience of Central Asian societies and thereby the stability of the coun-

tries in the region. The EU and Central Asian governments share mutual interest in this.

The effects of a youth policy dimension are not limited to stability, but such a new youth policy dimension also has the potential to generate legitimacy for the ruling governments. Especially the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which can neither generate legitimacy by allocating significant revenues from hydro carbon exports or other natural resources nor rely on the legitimizing ideology of a totalitarian system,¹¹ depend on output legitimacy to win support. Most notably the ongoing reforms in Uzbekistan require success, otherwise the Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev risks to lose support of influential groups and popularity among Uzbeks.¹² A youth policy dimension of EU-Central Asia relations can, therefore, help to improve the political culture of the parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan and support the reforms in Uzbekistan by generating legitimacy.

In addition, a youth policy dimension of the EU's Central Asia policy, which helps to facilitate the integration of young people in society, needs to address a number of specific challenges to youth in Central Asia. EU support in addressing such specific challenges is also in the interest of its Central Asian partners. The specific challenges most relevant to youth policy are summarised in the following section.

3. Challenges to the Creation of Prospects for Younger Central Asians

The situation in each of the five Central Asian countries is quite different. Therefore, each country needs to be addressed in a different approach. However, seven major challenges relevant to youth policy can be identified in all countries.

Except for Kazakhstan, all Central Asian states are struggling with high unemployment rates.¹³ Since population growth will continue, labour markets are likely to be exposed to greater pressure. This makes it increasingly difficult for young people to find jobs. All five states are heavily reliant on commodity exports or remittances,¹⁴ which is why the global financial crisis, the economic downturn in Russia, and the current pandemic severely affected their economic prospects. This increases incentives for labour mi-

gration, while the economic crises reduce opportunities to work abroad. The youth dimension of EU-Central Asia relations should therefore strengthen local economies, reduce incentives for labour migration and facilitate the labour market integration of the youth.

The educational sectors in the region are still in the process of transformation from Soviet-style systems. While reform progress and needs differ considerably between the countries, varying degrees of social and gender inequality in rural and urban regions complicate or inhibit access to education, integration, and resources for women, disabled and vulnerable people. All five countries face the loss of young innovation potential caused by brain-drain and businesses are struggling with educational programs, which do not meet their demands. Therefore, continuing the reform of the education sectors is key to create prospects for the younger generations.

In a globalised world, digital literacy is a decisive factor opening up future opportunities for the younger generations. Digitalisations also bears economic potentials, which are hardly exploited in Central Asia. The major obstacle in Central Asia is a lack of reliable and affordable internet access. Provision of access ranges from about 80% of the population in Kazakhstan (2018) to just 20% in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (2017).¹⁵ Diverging costs for broadband internet (11.1 \$ per month in KAZ to 224.68 \$ in TKM)¹⁶ show that it remains a political challenge. Download speed is roughly half of the global average or below in all countries (with Turkmenistan being the global laggard).¹⁷ The EU should therefore continue its efforts in the digitalisation of the higher education sector and put more emphasis on digital literacy initiative and developing the digital economy.

While all Central Asian countries achieved considerable progress in poverty reduction and in raising levels of wealth, the latest economic crises showed that these achievements are vulnerable to external shocks. Therefore, social inequality needs to be further reduced and achievements need to be based on a more stable economic basis as well as income needs to be distributed more equally. Living conditions, opportunities in life, infrastructures as well as access to public services varies most notably between rural and urban regions. The countries also face a

gender gap and a generational gap, which need to be addressed. The youth policy dimension of the EU's Central Asia policy should therefore reach out to rural areas and specifically address disadvantaged groups with the aim of reducing social inequalities.

Democratic reforms remain a hot stone in EU-Central Asia relations. While democracy promotion should be an outstanding objective of EU ex-

Box 3: Major Challenges of an EU Youth Policy Dimension in EU-Central Asia Relations

- integrating the growing young workforce into Central Asian labour markets;
- reducing incentives for labour migration, notably to Kazakhstan and Russia, but also to Asia and the West;
- reforming the Central Asian education sectors to make education more demand-driven and the higher education systems more sustainable;
- providing reliable and affordable internet access to Central Asians, developing a broadband internet infrastructure to open perspectives for the digital economy;
- 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;
- reaching out to Central Asians in rural areas instead of focusing only on urban centres and easy to reach citizens;
- giving citizens a voice and opportunities to become engaged, without touching the hot stone of democratisation.

ternal relations, as foreseen in the new strategy, progress in sectoral policy may not be threatened by connecting it too closely to the highly sensitive issue. However, to encourage young change makers, it is necessary to enable societal engagement. Therefore, the EU should support civil society working on youth policy and empower young citizens to engage in civil society.

4. Recommendations for Establishing a Youth Policy Dimension

The previous summary of challenges for young Central Asians is far from being complete. However, to maximise the impact of EU engagement in Central Asia, its youth policy dimension needs to focus on priority activities. The considerable resources, which the EU and all its member states dedicated to their Central Asia policy, do not allow for addressing all seven priorities at once. Therefore, the following recommendations for priority activities focus on establishing the youth policy dimension within EU-Central Asia relations at first.

Setting up the Youth Policy Dimension in Central Asia Relations

There is no need to start from scratch. The EU's Central Asia policy initiated a numerous projects, which already address the challenges identified as most crucial for youth policy in Central Asia. A first step to establishing a youth policy dimension in EU-Central Asia relations should be a stock-taking exercise of ongoing and previous initiatives and projects relevant to youth policy. [Information and contact to all existing EU youth policy activities in Central Asia should be provided through a bi-lingual 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.

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.

Box 4: Priority Recommendations to Establish an EU Youth Policy Dimension in EU-Central Asia Relations

- bi-lingual website on youth policy in EU-Central Asia relations in English and Russian to increase visibility;
- working group on youth policy to turn the Central Asia Civil Society Forum into a continuous process;
- intra-Central Asian youth exchange program to build trust between the countries;
- virtual European University of Central Asia offering online courses and trainings in teaching methods to connect lecturers and researchers;
- Central Asian network of business entrepreneurs to exchange with partners in Central Asia and Europe;
- European Youth Fund for Central Asia.

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 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+ program and its predecessors, [the EU should help to establish new intra-Central Asian exchange programs 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.

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 by helping to establish new youth exchange programs 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.

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- ² Council of the EU 2019: Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia, No. 10221/19.
- ³ Council of the EU 2020: Youth in external action – Council conclusions (5 June 2020), No. 8629/20, p. 2.
- ⁴ Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, in: Official Journal of the EU, No. 61 of 18 December 2018, pp. 1-22.
- ⁵ Council of the EU 2020: Youth in external action – Council conclusions (5 June 2020), No. 8629/20.
- ⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Dynamics 2019: World Population Prospects 2019.
- ⁷ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Dynamics 2019: World Population Prospects 2019.
- ⁸ The World Bank 2020: DataBank. Population estimates and projections, URL: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/population-estimates-and-projections/Type/TABLE/preview/on#> [28 April 2020].
- ⁹ The World Bank 2020: DataBank. Population estimates and projections, Series: Population total, URL: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/population-estimates-and-projections/Type/TABLE/preview/on#> [08 February 2021].
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- ¹⁴ Vera Martin, Mercedes/Fayad, Dominique/Al-Farah, Rayah/Saksonovs, Sergejs/Shi, Wei/ Yang, Fang 2019: Promoting Inclusive Growth in the Caucasus and Central Asia, International Monetary Fund. Middle East and Central Asia Department, Paper Serie No. 9/19.
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