



# The Perks of an Unlikely Couple: Why Cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia is Worth Considering



## Executive Summary

The European Union (EU) and Russia may seem strange bedfellows in Central Asia given the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between them.

However, starting from the double observation that they share an interest in a stable, prosperous and secure Central Asia, and that they have very complementary expertise and capabilities in areas in which they are both already active, this policy brief argues that cooperation between the EU and Russia holds significant potential in terms of amplifying their contribution to the stability and prosperity of the region.

After outlining the EU's and Russia's common interests in Central Asia, as well as the formal basis for possible cooperation, this policy brief identifies opportunities for cooperation through both bilateral and multilateral channels. Possible areas for cooperation include soft security issues (e.g. drugs trafficking and water management), hard security issues (e.g. the fight against extremism), and sustainable development.

The policy brief ends by highlighting the barriers for actual cooperation before offering concrete policy recommendations on how to overcome these obstacles.

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## Introduction

If one starts from the observation that the European Union (EU) and Russia have a common interest in a stable, prosperous and secure Central Asia, then the question arises why they would not consider joining forces in order to help make Central Asia thrive and prosper. The answer seems obvious - not only do their bilateral relations remain at an all-time low, they also share a lack of trust and have a mutual suspicion of each other's goals and involvement in a region which Russia still considers its backyard and crucial to ensure its great power status.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles to collaborating, the idea of possible cooperation in Central Asia should not be disregarded so easily. Indeed, in a number of specific policy areas, cooperation between the EU and Russia holds significant potential in terms of contributing to the stability and prosperity of the region because of the strong complementarity of their expertise and capabilities. Moreover, the EU's and Russia's objectives and interests in Central Asia collide to a much lesser extent than in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Central Asia is not a strategic priority for the EU, and it does not have the ambition to become a leading actor in the region. Therefore, both the EU and Russia have shown some willingness to cooperate in light of their overlapping interests in specific areas.

In what follows, this policy brief first outlines the EU's and Russia's common interests in Central Asia, as well as the formal basis for possible cooperation. Next, it identifies opportunities for cooperation through both bilateral and multilateral channels. Possible areas for cooperation include soft security issues (e.g. drugs trafficking and water management), hard security issues (e.g. the fight against extremism),

and sustainable development. The policy brief ends by highlighting the main barriers for actual cooperation before offering concrete policy recommendations on how to overcome these obstacles.

## Converging Interests

The interests of the EU and Russia in Central Asia converge to the extent that they both want Central Asia to be a stable, secure and prosperous region (Juraev 2014; Sattarov 2018; Prandin 2019). Moreover, both actors have an interest in containing security threats in the region, which is reflected in their involvement in the spheres of border management, anti-drugs trafficking, environmental protection, counterterrorism and prevention of radicalisation. Although having converging interests is not a sufficient condition for possible collaboration, it does raise the question whether cooperation is possible.

Formally, there is currently no cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia. However, there is an ongoing dialogue on Central Asia between EU and Russian officials at various levels in the form of an exchange of information. Overall, these contacts are said to be quite positive and constructive in nature.<sup>1</sup> At a senior diplomatic level, there are bilateral consultations on general affairs between the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia and his Russian counterpart, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, Grigory Karasin. While these consultations used to take place annually, in recent years they have increased in frequency and now take place bi-annually. During the preparation of the EU's new strategy for Central Asia, the EUSR briefed his Russian counterparts on several occasions. There are also consultations at more technical levels on specific issues, including on counterterrorism and on drug trafficking. The latter, for instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with EU officials, August-September 2019.

takes place in the framework of the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for Combating Drugs Trafficking (CARICC). The question is whether these contacts could go a step further and result in effective cooperation on the ground.

## Is Cooperation Possible?

There is a widely held perception (including among Russian policymakers) that the EU does not want to cooperate with Russia. While it is true that the EU remains cautious about the idea of cooperating with Russia, from an EU perspective there are, in fact, two key factors that in principle make cooperation with Russia in Central Asia possible.

First, EU officials believe that it would be in the EU's interest to cooperate with Russia in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> EU officials think that cooperation would be beneficial in certain areas where both the EU and Russia are active. For certain policy areas, such as border management and anti-drugs trafficking, EU officials acknowledge that joining forces would amplify the likelihood of having a positive and lasting effect compared to when both parties act separately. Moreover, in some areas, the EU and Russia have complementary expertise and capabilities. By joining forces in those areas, EU officials think that this could create a win-win situation, with tangible benefits for the Central Asian countries.

These acknowledgements are in line with what is laid down in the so-called "selective engagement" principle, which is one of the five principles that currently determine the EU's position towards Russia (Council of the EU 2016). Although the first of these five principles explicitly links any substantial cooperation with Russia to progress in terms of implementing the Minsk agreements, the 'selective engagement' principle allows for cooperation with Russia in

areas of common interest. Given the overlapping interests of the EU and Russia in the region, Central Asia hence emerges as a region where the principle of selective engagement could be applied, and thus where the EU could agree to cooperate with Russia in those areas that are of interest to the EU.

A second factor that points to the possibility of cooperation with Russia can be found in the new EU strategy for Central Asia, which was launched in May 2019 (European Union 2019). A key element of the new strategy is the aim to forge what it labels a "non-exclusive" partnership with the countries of Central Asia. This means that the EU is ready to establish new synergies and strengthen existing synergies with other external actors active in the region. The new EU strategy thus leaves an important opening for possible cooperation with Russia, even if Russia is not mentioned explicitly in the strategy. This is also acknowledged by the EU officials that were interviewed for this policy brief.

## Possible Areas for Cooperation

Four areas stand out when it comes to possible cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia: border management, anti-drugs trafficking, water management, and environmental protection, including the mitigation of the effects of climate change. These are areas in which both the EU and Russia are active in the region, and for which joining forces are expected to be beneficial, as it would avoid duplication and enhance the outcomes of their efforts because of the complementary expertise and capabilities that the EU and Russia have in these fields.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews with EU officials, August-September 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with EU officials, August-September 2019. See also Sattarov (2018) and Prandin (2019).

There are two more areas where cooperation could be possible, namely the areas of counterterrorism and prevention of radicalisation, and trade and regulatory convergence. However, cooperation in these areas is less likely to materialise in the short term. In the area of counterterrorism and prevention of radicalisation, the possibility of cooperation is compromised by the diverging understandings and approaches that the EU and Russia have in these fields. When it comes to trade and regulatory convergence, cooperation is in principle possible through alignment between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, while both Russia and the Central Asian member states of the EAEU, namely Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have been advocating for this alignment, the EU is not willing to formally align itself with the EAEU. This refusal is not only due to the conflict in Ukraine, but also because the EU has several concerns about the incomplete nature of the EAEU as a customs and economic union (Bossuyt and Bolgova 2019). Nevertheless, EU officials do acknowledge the potential benefits of enhancing regional economic connectivity via EU-EAEU alignment. Therefore, EU officials believe that one should work towards convergence, or at least mutual recognition, of technical standards and trade procedures.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that cooperation is also possible in the framework of regional and multilateral organisations. The organisations that appear most suitable are the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In the framework of the UN, cooperation is possible specifically on counterterrorism and prevention of radicalisation, namely through the Office of Counter-Terrorism (OCT), drug trafficking, namely through the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNOD), and sustainable development, namely through the United

Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The OSCE, in turn, offers a suitable platform for cooperation between the EU and Russia on border security. Cooperation in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) could also be envisaged, however, for the time being, this does not seem likely to take place. EU officials believe that there is a substantial mismatch between the norms and standards used and promoted by the SCO and those by the EU, especially in the sphere of counterterrorism.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to cooperation on connectivity, and in particular, transport infrastructure, China is - for obvious reasons - the main external partner that the EU is now considering cooperating with in Central Asia. Nevertheless, given Russia's interest in aligning with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as Russia's pivotal geographical location along the continental land bridge that China is seeking to establish, the EU might also seek to cooperate with Russia on connectivity. In particular, joint financing of infrastructure projects could be considered between the EU, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB). However, the EU insists that for any joint projects on connectivity, the implementing partners will need to abide by the market-based principles and international norms, including transparency and sustainability (Bossuyt and Bolgova 2019).

## Barriers to Cooperation

Although there are several areas that hold considerable potential for possible cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia, it is important to be realistic about the likelihood of cooperation materialising in the short term, as a

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews with EU officials, August-September 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with EU officials, August-September 2019.



number of persistent obstacles seem to stand in the way.

First, despite the ongoing dialogue and exchange of information on Central Asia between EU and Russian officials at various levels, there is a serious lack of trust between both sides, which undermines any attempt to cooperate. Both actors perceive each other not only as possible partners in the region, but also as potential spoilers.

Moreover, despite EU cooperation with Russia in Central Asia being formally possible based on the EU's principle of selective engagement and its ambition of having a non-exclusive partnership with Central Asia, some EU member states interpret the principle of selective engagement with Russia in a very restrictive manner, even excluding practical cooperation in areas where there is a clear common interest, such as in the Arctic (Van der Togt 2020). These are mostly EU member states which, based on their own historical experiences with Russia, believe that the Ukraine crisis has confirmed the failure of a cooperative approach towards Russia. Therefore, they remain vehemently opposed to any formal cooperation between the EU and Russia as long as Russia does not fulfil its commitments under the Minsk agreements.

Another obstacle to cooperation is the abundance of (highly effective) misinformation and fake news on the EU, which is being spread in Central Asia through Russian popular and social media. As these fake narratives are negatively affecting perceptions of the EU amongst the Central Asian population, this situation is obviously not conducive for any attempt at building trust between the EU and Russia. Common narratives include that of 'Gayropa' and that of the EU being in a state of perpetual crisis.

Finally, although Russia and the EU have a common interest in a stable, secure and

prosperous Central Asia, they have a rather diverging understanding of, and approach to, stability, security and prosperity. Russia equates stability in Central Asia with the status quo, and it upholds the idea that Central Asia is not ready for democracy. In Russia's view, democracy would even be counterproductive and would destabilise the region. Moreover, Russia promotes the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic governance. As such, the development aid it offers to the region does not target governance issues. In contrast, the EU envisions the achievement of stability in Central Asia through inclusive and sustainable development, and it believes development in the region can only be durable if accompanied with enhancements in governance. This fundamental divergence in terms of approaches and understandings with respect to their common interests in Central Asia can contribute to misunderstanding between the EU and Russia, which is likely to undermine attempts to cooperate.

## Policy Recommendations

The persistent barriers for cooperation described above may instil little hope that cooperation between the EU and Russia will materialise in the short term. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that in a number of specific policy areas cooperation between the EU and Russia holds significant potential, in terms of contributing to the stability and prosperity of the region, because of the strong complementarity of their expertise and capabilities. This is also why both EU and Russian officials believe that it would be beneficial to cooperate in Central Asia. In specific areas, such as border management and anti-drugs trafficking, joining forces would amplify the likelihood of having a positive and lasting effect compared to acting independently. This could create a win-win situation, with tangible benefits for the Central

Asian countries. In order to arrive at this situation, several concrete steps will need to be made:

- Russia and the EU should keep the dialogue and exchange of information open, both at high diplomatic levels and at lower technical levels on the ground. This is necessary in order to address the lack of trust and hence to engender a more positive perception of each other.
- Russia and the EU should identify areas of possible cooperation based on their common interests and complementary expertise and capabilities. Both sides have expressed their readiness to search for common areas to cooperate. This expression of interest should be seized upon as an important first step towards possible cooperation.
- EU officials should try to convince those EU member states, which are reluctant to allow the EU to engage with Russia on the basis of selective engagement, of the positive effects that EU-Russian cooperation can yield for the EU's involvement in Central Asia, namely a win-win situation for all parties concerned, not least for the main beneficiaries, i.e. the Central Asian societies.
- As it is unlikely that Russia will itself address the spread of misinformation and fake news on the EU that is circulated via Russian popular and social media, the EU should increase its efforts at enhancing awareness among the Central Asian population of fake news and misinformation. The EU should also invest more in media campaigns and other channels that can help to improve its perception among the Central Asian population.

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