

**No. 14: The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia: SEnECA  
recommendations for implementation ; Part I**

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## POLICY PAPER

No. 14

### The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia: SEnECA recommendations for implementation Part I

September 2019



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## Executive Summary

This policy paper provides a reflection on the Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy to the European Parliament and the Council “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” (hereafter – the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia). The paper contains a general assessment, recommendations and a SEnECA Scorecard of the tasks set forth by the Strategy. It also gives a more detailed assessment of the Strategy’s third part – “Working better together” and offers recommendations on its implementation.

The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia is a timely and necessary document during the period of changes in Central Asia. It is setting out a comprehensive approach and it signals a clearer understanding of the region, putting the emphasis on “working together” instead of “teaching how to live”. It also gives due attention to the expanding regionalisation trends and Afghanistan as a shared source of risks and opportunities. On the other hand, the strategy signals less ambitions compared to some expectations. The narrative of the EU’s approach is unclear since many tasks mentioned are rather general. Methods and tools for measurement and the underpinning financial resources for the implementation seem to fall short of the necessity. The potential of cooperation with the EU member states and like-minded external actors has not been sufficiently addressed. Also, insufficient emphasis on universal human rights upsets some in the EU and Central Asia, whereas too much emphasis on Afghanistan upsets others in the region.

The aim of the SEnECA experts’ assessment is to support the implementation of the new strategy as constructively and concretely as possible.

## List of abbreviations

2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia; or Strategy – Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy to the European Parliament and the Council “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership,” Brussels, 15 May 2019, JOIN(2019) 9 final

C5 – all five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan)

EBRD – the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

EFTA – the European Free Trade Association

EHEA – the European Higher Education Area

EPCA – Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

EU – the European Union

GPA – Government Procurement Agreement of the World Trade Organization

GSP – the Generalised Scheme of Preferences

GSP+ – the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus

IMF – the International Monetary Fund

OSCE – the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

TEN-T – the Trans-European Transport Network

UNGA – the General Assembly of the United Nations

WB – the World Bank

WTO – the World Trade Organization

## 1. Introduction

The new EU Strategy for Central Asia<sup>2</sup> was announced by the European External Action Service on 15 May 2019.<sup>3</sup> It aims at setting the EU policy towards Central Asia for the next decade or so. The strategy covers a variety of areas and levels of engagement. In order to support an effective implementation of the new strategy, SEnECA hereby provides a set of recommendations.

This paper is based on experts' opinions – semi-structured interviews with experts from the SEnECA network, including from all five Central Asian countries – as well as discussions of three working groups among SEnECA and other Central Asia experts at the SEnECA Recommendation Workshop “Central Asia in 2030 and beyond: with or without the European Union” held on 11 July 2019 in Brussels, Belgium.<sup>4</sup>

This policy paper is a part of the final of the three phases of the SEnECA project – recommendations. The first two phases were mapping and analysis, covering the political and security relations, economic relations and trade, as well as cultural and other relations between the EU and Central Asia. Each phase produced three papers each.<sup>5</sup> The first of the three recommendation papers – No 13 “Central Asia in 2030: SEnECA forecasts for the region and the role of the European Union” – provided a set of scenarios on how Central Asia and its cooperation with the EU could develop by 2030.

This paper (No 14) and the following paper (No 15) provide recommendations for the implementation of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia. This paper focuses on recommendations of a more general nature, as well as on the third part of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia titled “Working better together”. Paper 15 is devoted to the parts two and three of the strategy, namely “Partnering for resilience” and “Partnering for prosperity”.

In the first chapter of this paper, a general reflection and perception of the new strategy is provided along with general recommendations. The second chapter provides the SEnECA scorecard for individual tasks of the new Strategy. The final chapter of the paper provides a more concrete assessment of and recommendations of the Strategy's third part – “Working better together” and offers recommendations on its implementation. Thus, the main contribution of this paper is a structured set of proposals aimed to assist in strengthening and energising the EU-Central Asian relations.

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy to the European Parliament and the Council “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership,” Brussels, 15.05.2019, JOIN(2019) 9 final, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_the\\_eu\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_-\\_new\\_opportunities\\_for\\_a\\_stronger\\_partnership.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> “New EU Strategy on Central Asia,” European External Action Service, 15 May 2019, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/62412/new-eu-strategy-central-asia\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/62412/new-eu-strategy-central-asia_en)

<sup>4</sup> Agenda of the event is available here: “SEnECA Recommendation Workshop “Central Asia in 2030 and beyond: with or without the European Union?” 11 July 2019, Brussels,” Trans European Policy Studies Association. <http://www.tepsa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/here-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> All SEnECA policy papers are available here: “Policy Papers & Briefs,” SEnECA, <https://www.seneca-eu.net/policy-papers-briefs/> and [https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico\\_mods\\_00047232?q=SEnECA](https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00047232?q=SEnECA)

## 2. The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia – general assessment and recommendations

The new EU Strategy on Central Asia is very timely, since the previous EU strategy for the region, adopted back in 2007<sup>6</sup>, has run its course. Since the time of drafting of the previous strategy, both the EU and the Central Asian countries have evolved, and so has the role of other external actors in Central Asia. The EU has enlarged and undergone various challenges, strengthening its common foreign and security policy and thus its global posture in the meantime. In Central Asia, some seemingly eternal leaders have passed, overhauling reforms have been launched in some of the countries, the power projection of China has surged, and the US has gradually backtracked. This situation indeed requires a new vision, an updated approach and enhanced instruments.

As SEnECA underlined in its previous policy paper “Central Asia in 2030: SEnECA forecasts for the region and the role of the European Union” (No 13), Central Asia will keep changing in the next decade (the expected lifetime of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia), possibly to a greater extent than it did in the previous twelve years. In 2030:

- “the Central Asian countries will probably be slightly better off and most of them will be economically more open, while freedoms and liberties will progress much slower. However, sudden and unexpected changes can also occur and change the course of development of one or more countries of the region;”
- the region “will most likely be more cooperative (...). Bilateral and multi-lateral relations could improve if new domestically and externally facilitated engagements develop. The enhanced cooperation, however, will most likely not amount to regional integration. Issues of tension among the region’s countries will remain (...);”
- “the EU will still be an important player in Central Asia. Economic engagement will remain a central driver for cooperation, having impact also on other sectors. At the same time, the EU’s comparative role in the region will decrease due to the growing (...)” influence of other external actors.<sup>7</sup>

Taking this into account, the EU has to closely follow the developments in Central Asia. If necessary, it has to adopt its approach to the changing environment or else its approach will not bring the desired results.

The new Strategy can be assessed from different perspectives. On the positive side:

- the new Strategy is comprehensive. It covers various areas of cooperation, ranging from political and security issues, to economy, trade, culture et. al. This partly runs contrary to the expectations before the publication of the document that the EU would be less ambitious in its approach to the region.
- The new document is less instructive towards Central Asian countries compared to the previous one from 2007. Even though emphasis on the so-called Western approach of governance, including the rule of law, freedoms and liberties, is clearly present in the new document, it leaves an impression of giving more flexibility for cooperation with Central Asian countries that are not ready to follow the model championed by the EU. This approach will help to focus the cooperation on areas where it is possible and to hope for positive indirect effects rather than to avoid cooperation altogether.
- The new Strategy signals a better and clearer understanding of the EU of Central Asia, in particular, the differences between the five countries. The previous Strategy emphasised the differences between the five to some extent as well, but it still left the impression that a “one

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<sup>6</sup> The Council of the European Union, “The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership,” 21.05.2007, Brussels, 10113/07, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st\\_10113\\_2007\\_init\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st_10113_2007_init_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Gussarova Anna and Andžāns Māris (Eds.), “Central Asia in 2030: SEnECA forecasts for the region and the role of the European Union,” SEnECA, May 2019, [https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/duepublico\\_derivate\\_00047610/SEnECA\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_13\\_2019.pdf](https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/duepublico_derivate_00047610/SEnECA_Policy_Paper_13_2019.pdf), p.1.

fits all” approach prevails. For Central Asian countries, especially those who have been in the shadow of the larger and more influential ones, such an approach is particularly important.

- The new document puts a significant emphasis on the regionalisation of Central Asia. It aims to foster regional cooperation which has largely grown in recent years due to the internal developments. The EU’s own experience in bridging gaps among its member states, integration and gains from cooperation can be of particular value. Also, EU’s cooperation with other regions, with some of the Eastern Partnership countries in particular, could be a good example for demonstrating practical benefits.
- The new Strategy puts significant emphasis on Afghanistan which is bordered by three Central Asian countries. The risks emanating from Afghanistan are closely linked to the security situation of most of the Central Asian countries. Therefore, both underlining significance of Afghanistan and proposing concrete measures, including the use of the expertise, knowledge and resources of Central Asian countries, is seen as very positive.

Regarding the less positive side of the Strategy, the following issues have been brought up by SEnECA experts:

- Though the document is comprehensive, it is less ambitious as some had hoped. In other words, the document is not a game-changer when it comes to the role of the external actors in the region. It does not propose new instruments that could significantly alter the relations between all or some of Central Asian countries with the EU, e.g. no strategic partnerships, visa facilitation or liberalisation regimes, or new infrastructure projects.
- Even though strategies are supposed to be general in nature, still, this document leaves an impression that there is no clear system of implementation and assessments of the tasks set – if and how the EU will measure success or lack thereof regarding the numerous proposed tasks?
- It is not clear by what financial resources the tasks set in the Strategy will be backed. Even though this is understandable, bearing in mind the ongoing negotiations on the EU’s Multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027, at least an approximate amount of resources for the EU Central Asia policy would have helped to better assess the potential of the EU’s ambitions in this region.
- Bearing in mind the many unknowns at the time of the drafting of the Strategy, the EU’s next multiannual financial framework and the composition of the European Commission in particular, it is understandable that the Strategy contains many general phrases with “strengthening”, “promoting”, “sharing”, “developing”, “intensifying” being named as task goals. Such language also leaves more flexibility for the EU in the changing circumstances. On the other hand, this leaves space for speculations on what, if any, are the EU’s ambitions (what needs to be done, not what could possibly be done).
- Although the EU member states have endorsed the new Strategy,<sup>8</sup> the document leaves the impression that the potential of coordination with the EU member states has not been fully employed. The EU member states have embassies, cultural centres, various development aid programs which can better reinforce the efforts of the whole EU.
- Related to the previous point, not only the EU institutions should seek closer cooperation with the member states but also the EU members themselves should be more outspoken in coordination with other members and EU institutions. They should also be more active on a regular basis – not just while documents like the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia are discussed or when a country takes up the role of the Presidency of the Council of the EU.
- The new Strategy mentions the role of external actors in Central Asia, however the attention to the benefits of common efforts with like-minded countries seems to be underappreciated in times when not like-minded countries are stepping up their presence and activities in the region.

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<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia,” Brussels, 17 June 2019, (OR. en), 10221/19, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf>, p.2.

- The promotion of universal human rights has always been among the EU's priorities. The Strategy also mentions these issues. At the same time, these issues could have been emphasised more. Of course, risking estrangement due to them should be avoided.
- As mentioned above, the enhanced role of Afghanistan in the EU's Central Asian policy is a positive development. It, however, also brings certain risks. The Central Asian countries should not be given the perception that the EU cares of the region mostly because of their neighbour – as in the case of the US policy towards the region.

More detailed recommendations on specific tasks of the Strategy are provided in the next chapter of this paper and in the following SEnECA policy paper (No 15). Therefore, these should serve as general and overarching suggestions for a better implementation of the Strategy:

- To develop concrete implementation plan(s) for the tasks set in the Strategy. In this regard, to coordinate efforts and avoid duplication, the EU would benefit from further consultations with the Central Asian countries on their perspectives, as well with the EU member states and like-minded actors.
- To develop concrete and comprehensive implementation measurement methods and tools for the implementation of the Strategy. They should include both quantitative and qualitative indicators against which the results should be measured.
- To review the Strategy regularly, at least once a year, and to make the conclusions available to the public.
- To implement stronger quality assurance and anti-corruption policies to maximise the efficiency of the EU's contribution via the new Strategy. At the same time, these measures should not amount to exaggerated bureaucracy as it would decrease the attractiveness of the EU's instruments.
- To avoid Afghanistan overshadowing Central Asian countries in the EU's Central Asia policy. Central Asian countries should not have the impression that the reason behind the EU's engagement with them is primarily due to the concerns regarding their neighbour.
- To devote significant attention to the communication of and about the EU in Central Asia. A better visibility and perception of the EU would also increase the attractiveness of the EU instruments and thus the success of their employment.
- Related to the previous point, on the other hand, the EU should also foster the image of Central Asia in the EU itself. Not only could it have the potential of raising support to EU's policy in the region, but it could also assist in developing people-to-people and business contacts.
- To coordinate the EU's policies with the EU member states and like-minded actors such as the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, the US, Japan, South Korea. This would reduce the risk of duplication of efforts and would maximise the outputs in areas where the EU member states and other external actors have strong background.

### 3. SEnECA Scorecard of the tasks of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia

SEnECA experts from the EU and each of the five Central Asian consortium partners were asked to assess the entire list of 45 tasks put forth by the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia.

SEnECA experts gave each of the 45 tasks a score on the scale from five to one, where five denotes the highest importance and one – the lowest. Based on the average score from all contributing experts on each task, they were arranged in a descending order – from the highest value score. Among all tasks, the highest score was 4.7 out of 5.0, while the lowest score among all was 2.9 out of 5.0.

The Scorecard was produced in June 2019. It was first presented and discussed in public during the SEnECA Recommendation Workshop – “Central Asia in 2030 and beyond: with or without the European Union” on 11 July 2019 in Brussels, Belgium.

This Scorecard (please see the top five tasks of the Scorecard in the Table 1 and the Scorecard in full in Appendix I) has certain limitations. Though SEnECA experts represent a balanced mix of universities, other education establishments and think-tanks both from Central Asia and the EU, scores given by the experts are influenced by their origin, as well as their research and professional background. Also, many tasks have received almost identical or similar scores. Therefore, conclusions arising from the Scorecard should not be generalised.

Importantly, the Scorecard presents a structured approach in assessing the importance of the tasks and thus a perspective for prioritisation of the tasks as set forth by the new Strategy. Similar assessment of the importance of the Strategy’s tasks was given also during the working group discussions among SEnECA and other Central Asian experts at the aforementioned July 2019 SEnECA Recommendation Workshop.

**Table 1:** Top five scores of the tasks of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia (entire Scorecard can be found in the Appendix I).

Task No.	Task as of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia	Score
9.	Strengthening cooperation on modern integrated border management, building upon longstanding EU-Central Asia and EU-Afghanistan cooperation	4.7
17.	Promoting improvements in the business and investment environment and supporting private sector development, in particular small and medium size enterprises, through EU Central Asia business-to-business dialogue and cooperation, sectoral dialogue and technical assistance	4.7
28.	Contributing to the development of transport corridors between the EU and Central Asia, based on the extension of the TEN-T networks	4.7
11.	Strengthening inter-regional and intra-regional cooperation fora and mechanisms in the field of the environment, water and climate change	4.6
34.	Stimulating intra-regional and international mobility of students, staff and researchers, as well as learners and trainers in vocational education and training	4.6

When the scores are arranged according to the three parts of the Strategy, the second part of the Strategy aimed at promoting prosperity ranks ahead of the first one which is aimed at promoting resilience. Both are ranked well ahead of the third part of the Strategy aimed at “working better together” (please see the Table 2). This signals that SEnECA experts consider the practically oriented tasks more significant than those related to improving cooperation tools and approaches in Central Asia.

**Table 2:** Scores of the tasks by the parts of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia (entire Scorecard can be found in the Appendix I).

Part of the Strategy	Average score
“2. Partnering for prosperity”	4.1
“1. Partnering for resilience”	4.0
“3. Working better together”	3.5

The highest score among the tasks aimed at “prosperity” (Part two) was received by task No 17 aimed at business and investment issues (4.7 points), followed by the task No 28 aimed at transport corridors (4.7 points) and task No 34 aimed at mobility in the education systems (4.4 points).

The highest score among the tasks aimed at “resilience” was received by task No 9 aimed at border management (4.7 points; this task received the highest ranking among all tasks of the Strategy), followed by the task No 11 aimed at environmental, water and climate change issues (4.6 points) and task No 1 aimed at issues of legal, judicial and electoral reforms, human rights, labour standards, good governance and women's empowerment (4.4 points).

The highest score among the tasks aimed at “working better together” was received by task No 43 aimed at EU-Central Asia policy dialogues (4.1 points), followed by the task No 45 aimed at EU's communication in Central Asia (4.1 points) and task No 41 aimed at further involvement of civil societies (4.1 points).

The next chapter of this policy paper provides more concrete recommendations and indicators for implementation of all of the tasks proposed under the third part of the Strategy aimed at “working better together”. Recommendations and indicators for implementation of part 1 and 2 of the Strategy are provided in the following SEnECA policy paper (No 15).

## 4. Recommendations for the EU and Central Asia “working better together”

This chapter provides a list of both general and specific recommendations regarding each of the eight tasks of the third part of the Strategy “Working better together”.

The third part of the Strategy received the lowest ranking in SEnECA scorecard among the three parts. Only three tasks of this part were ranked among the top 20 tasks of all tasks. This, however, should not be interpreted as a perceived insignificance of these tasks. Rather, tasks laid out in the other two chapters are seen as more practical and more central towards strengthening and energising the EU and Central Asian relations, whereas part three on “working better together” is mostly seen as supporting the first two parts.

In the paragraphs below, assessment, recommendations and indicators for each of these tasks are proposed. Regarding the latter, it should be underlined that a system of measurement of the implementation of the Strategy is of utmost importance. It is more prudent to invest more in measurement mechanisms and thus to be able to monitor outcomes or lack of them on a permanent basis than to continue investing efforts and resources in vain. Quantitative indicators, e.g. the number of meetings and projects, are central. However, more emphasis should be put on qualitative indicators, e.g. quality of deliverables and perceptions of relevant activities in target groups, to better determine the perception and effects of the EU’s activities.

### *Task 43 “Organising EU-Central Asia policy dialogues in specific sectors and supporting these dialogues with twinning operations”*

The EU-Central Asia policy dialogues including either all five Central Asian countries or smaller groups of them (where one or more would not be willing to join) are a significant tool to deepen the cooperation in spheres of particular interest and of particular potential. Such dialogues can bring more concreteness to EU’s engagement by focusing on particular areas of a shared interest. It is essential, though, that they are supported with twinning operations and thus have practical deliverables and are not limited to talking only.

The following can be suggested in regard to task 43:

- To develop and propose to Central Asian countries a short-list of policy areas of particular interest to the EU, based on both the EU’ interests and available resources to back the dialogues and prospective twinning operations.
- To ask the EU member states to become lead-nations in specific policy areas on which respective new dialogues could be based.
- To ask the Central Asian countries to develop a short-list of their policy areas of particular interest and explore the launching of respective activities in cooperation with the EU member states and other like-minded external actors – the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, the US, Japan, South Korea.
- To expand the policy dialogues, and if possible, also the twinning operations, to other like-minded external actors as participants.

Quantitative indicators for measurement could be the number of new dialogues and twinning operations launched, as well as the number of external like-minded partners attracted. Qualitative indicators could be based on interviews and focus groups with the cooperation partners to assess the levels of interest for engagement from different sides, as well as the quality and importance of the outputs and deliverables (e.g. existing and new dialogues, twinning operations, projects).

### *Task 45 “Developing more systematic common messaging and enhancing the use of web portals and of the social media to highlight the tangible benefits of EU engagement in the region”*

It has been often admitted by SEnECA experts that the image of the EU in Central Asia falls behind the image of other external actors in the region, Russia in particular (especially among the general public which is often mostly aware only of crises and controversial developments in the EU). This

has many reasons, ranging from modest presence of the EU related communication instruments to a higher visibility of other actors and the unfavourable (to the EU) information space and language proficiency (in most of Central Asia other external actors, Russia in particular, are clearly favoured).

Therefore, this task is of utmost importance. At the same time, communication will be able to change the EU's image for the better only to a certain extent, i.e. much will depend not only on words but also on actions of the EU that in turn can be strengthened by appropriate communication.

The following can be suggested in regard to task 45:

- To develop a specific communication strategy (approach) for Central Asia and each individual Central Asian country. It would benefit a better understanding of the specific communication needs, because approaches that work in particular regions or even in particular countries of Central Asia might not work elsewhere.
- To differentiate the recipients of the EU messages by prioritising politicians, civil servants, journalists, activists and opinion-leaders that could better multiply narratives about the EU via their networks.
- To strive to reach populations beyond the capitals and big cities of Central Asian countries. For this purpose, the EU could explore establishment of liaison or information offices outside the capitals.
- To communicate more in the local languages, and also, where appropriate (and keeping in mind Central Asian countries' efforts to strengthen their indigenous languages), in region's lingua franca – Russian, thus reaching inhabitants that do not have a sufficient command of English.
- To coordinate communication activities with other assets of the EU member states, thus unifying to a certain extent and multiplying messages from to the EU.
- Not to devote unproportionally high attention to the digital media and social media given the digital divide in the region.
- To facilitate inclusion of more movies, TV series, documentaries and articles from the EU in the local mass media outlets, thus reaching a wider share of population and creating a more balanced image of the EU. In this respect, preferential access to re-broadcasting of the EU media, the EU multi-media products and support to visits of Central Asian journalists to the EU could be of particular importance.
- To establish a dedicated online single-point-of-access platform for Central Asian people where comprehensive information on the EU and its various initiatives would be easily available.
- To foster the image of Central Asia in the EU. It could not only have the potential of raising support to EU's policy in the region, but the interest in it could assist in developing people-to-people and business contacts. In this regard, the EU should coordinate its efforts with EU member states and embassies and permanent representations, as well as business representatives of Central Asia.

Quantitative indicators for measurement could be based on the number of followers and reach of the EU related social media accounts, the number of visitors of the EU related websites, the number of reports related to the EU in media. Qualitative indicators could be based on regular qualitative and quantitative sociological researches among the societies and experts to learn the (possible) changes in knowledge and perception of the EU in Central Asia and vice versa.

*Task 41 "Involving civil society further in the development of the EU-Central Asia partnership, including by establishing an informal "EU-Central Asia Forum"*

Involving both Central Asian and the EU civil society is of utmost importance in creating durable relations between the EU and Central Asia. Without such a link, relations will be less stable and will depend more on (changing) political vectors of the respective times. The main challenges are expected to be the limited space for civil society in most of Central Asian countries and the limited interest and resources for engagement on the behalf of the EU's civil societies.

The following can be suggested in regard to task 41:

- To provide considerably more efforts to facilitate the involvement of the EU civil society in engagement with Central Asian counterparts. More financial resources from the member states and the EU institutions should be devoted to support contacts with counterparts in Central Asia.
- To distinguish more between legitimate civil society and state-organised civil society in Central Asia. Though the cooperation can be mutually beneficial in cooperation with both types, cooperation with the state-organised civil societies is unlikely to bring considerable results, while also risking discrediting the EU as a normative actor in the eyes of civil societies both in the EU and Central Asia.
- To see the EU-Central Asia Forum as a supplement, not as a panacea in fostering the ties between the civil societies in Central Asia, nor as a substitute to other activities. The Forum should be strengthened by financial support to a wider and more diverse participation in terms of topics and geography (especially from the EU and certain Central Asian countries). Also, lessons from the Civil Society Forum of the EU's Eastern Partnership should be learnt, at least in terms of clarity of the Forum's objectives and deliverables.

Quantitative indicators for measurement could be based on the number of meetings with Central Asian civil society representatives, number of people engaged in common events, number of new projects launched in cooperation with civil society organisations, number of the follow-up activities of the EU-Central Asia Forum. Qualitative indicators could be based on surveys and interviews with the civil society actors both in Central Asia and the EU to assess the levels of interest for engagement, quality and importance of the outputs and deliverables (e.g. existing and new initiatives and projects, role of civil society in the respective countries).

*Task 38 "Holding ad hoc senior officials' meetings in-between the regular meetings of the EU Central Asia High-level Political and Security Dialogue and Ministerial meetings"*

Holding joint *ad hoc* senior officials' meetings would be welcome. However, being aware of the time-constraints of the EU officials, a certain degree of regularity and institutionalisation of such meetings would still be preferable. Such meetings could be expanded also towards medium-level officials to reach more levels of civil servants. As other external actors are also engaging in dialogues with Central Asian officials, convergence with the like-minded external actors should also be considered.

The following can be suggested in regard to task 38:

- To seek not only for *ad hoc*, but also for regular senior officials' meetings in concrete sectors where the interests of both the EU and the Central Asian countries converge.
- To seek convergence with similar dialogues of other external like-minded actors, thus reducing the overstretch of Central Asian bureaucracies and improving the attractiveness of such formats.
- To foster the transfer of initiatives of such dialogues to similar C5 dialogues.
- To encourage and facilitate the participation of Central Asian non-governmental experts at senior officials' meetings. It could serve as both a way of legitimising them in the respective countries as well as strengthening the engagement of the local civil societies.

Quantitative indicators for measurement could be based on the number of meetings held, the numbers of people engaged in meetings, seniority of participants, number of follow-up activities of the dialogues. Qualitative indicators could be based on interviews of involved officials to assess the level of interest for engagement from different sides, quality and importance of the outputs of the meetings (e.g. common announcements), as well as quality and impact of the deliverables following the engagements (e.g. existing and new initiatives and projects).

*Task 40 “Intensifying consultations on Central Asian affairs as appropriate with third-partners”*

Consultations with third partners (as the new Strategy also puts it, with “like-minded and other relevant partners”<sup>9</sup>) are significant from various perspectives. In particular, the activities of others can both increase and decrease merits of the EU’s efforts in Central Asia.

The following can be suggested in regard to task 40:

- To consult and coordinate efforts primarily with more or less like-minded actors, the EFTA countries, the US, Japan, South Korea in particular. Multilateral common messaging and implementation of tasks could have a higher ratio of success in different spheres – from common aid programmes to common cultural events and communication.
- To consult and, where appropriate, seek mutually beneficial engagement also with other actors, such as Russia, China and Turkey. The EU should continue explaining its approach and seek synergy in areas of common concern, for example, in border control or trans-continental transportation networks. The EU should, however, avoid cooperation in spheres where there are principal differences, e.g. rule of law, good governance, and thus avoiding discrediting itself in the eyes of local civil societies and opposition groups in Central Asia.
- To involve Central Asian countries in the aforementioned consultations and thus to strive fostering C5 + EU + other like-minded actor(s) cooperation formats.
- To devote more attention to coordination among the EU institutions and with the EU member states (as they also interact with external actors in the region), thus avoiding duplication.

Quantitative indicators for measurement could be based on the number of meetings held, the numbers of external partners involved, the number of follow-up activities of the dialogues, seniority of participants. Qualitative indicators could be based on surveys and interviews with the involved officials to assess the levels of interest for engagement, quality and importance of the outputs of the consultations (e.g. common announcements), as well as the quality and impact of the deliverables (e.g. existing and new dialogues and projects).

*Task 42 “Encouraging more frequent inter-parliamentary contacts and visits”*

The proposed task on energising inter-parliamentary interaction did not receive a high score from SEnECA experts for a number of reasons, primarily because of the usually merely symbolic nature of bilateral and multilateral inter-parliamentary contacts and because of the contradictory nature of engagement between democratically and non-democratically elected parliaments.

The latter point is related to the low legitimacy of most of Central Asian countries’ parliaments. Cooperation with parliaments whose election has been widely contested can not only exaggerate debates in the EU over its engagement with countries with insufficient level of freedoms and liberties but can also unnecessarily legitimise parliaments elected in unfair elections.

The following can be suggested in regard to task 42:

- To particularly foster inter-parliamentary contacts with the Kyrgyz parliament, whereas strengthening of ties with other Central Asian parliaments should be carefully assessed. On some occasions, the strengthening of ties with others could serve as a symbolical appreciation of progress achieved in the respective countries at large and electoral process in particular.
- To devote particular attention to coordination and the unused potential of the European Parliament and its Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia (DCAS).

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<sup>9</sup> Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy to the European Parliament and the Council “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership,” Brussels, 15.05.2019, JOIN(2019) 9 final, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_the\\_eu\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_-\\_new\\_opportunities\\_for\\_a\\_stronger\\_partnership.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf), p.15.

- To facilitate coordination among the EU's national parliaments and with the European Parliament. Among other things, it could help avoid misunderstandings given the many institutions of the EU and member states engaging with the Central Asian countries' parliaments.
- To avoid creation of new instruments in inter-parliamentary ties, given that there are long lasting traditions in the form of inter-parliamentary friendship groups and delegations.

Quantitative indicators for measurement could be based on the number of inter-parliamentary meetings, the number of common announcements, the number of mentions of the EU and its activities in the national parliaments after the engagement, seniority of participation. Qualitative indicators could be based on surveys and interviews with the members of the parliaments and supporting staff to assess the levels of interest for engagement, quality and importance of the outputs of the meetings (e.g. common announcements), as well as quality and impact of the deliverables (e.g. existing and new initiatives and projects).

*Task 44 “Intensifying, where appropriate, cooperation with International Financial Institutions”*

Even though cooperation with other international financial institutions is necessary and welcome, this is already an ongoing process with each of those institutions having its specific aims and operating procedures that might and might not be compatible with those of the EU. Were appropriate and possible, the EU should focus on reducing possible overlapping of activities and mutual support of activities.

Quantitative indicators of measurement could be based on the number of meetings held with other international financial institutions, as well as number of coordinated cases or cooperation endeavours with the international financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Qualitative indicators could be based on surveys and interviews with the relevant officials to assess the levels of interest for engagement from the sides involved, quality and importance of the outputs of the meetings (e.g. common announcements), as well as quality and impact of the deliverables (e.g. existing and new initiatives and projects).

*Task 39 “Organising informal ministerial consultations on the side-lines of UNGA and developing common understanding and convergence of positions in the UN and other multilateral fora”*

This task received the lowest score among all tasks set forth by the new Strategy. On the one hand, UNGA (United Nations General Assembly), prioritised in this task, is not seen as the most significant and efficient cooperation format. On the other hand, positions of Central Asian countries in multilateral formats often differ from the positions of most of the EU countries, and therefore such engagements can often be seen as rather futile.

What, however, could be suggested in regard to task 39, is to share the EU's experience in reaching common positions among its own member states in international fora (which is often not an easy task) with the Central Asian countries. This could be an additional impetus for the C5 cooperation.

Quantitative indicators of measurement could be based on the number of meetings held, number of similar positions reached as a result of increased engagement, as well as similar votes in multilateral fora by the EU member states and the Central Asian countries. Qualitative indicators could be based on surveys and interviews with the relevant officials to assess the levels of interest for engagement from both sides, quality and importance of the outputs of the meetings (e.g. common announcements), quality and impact of the deliverables (e.g. common initiatives).

## 5. Conclusions

This policy paper presents SEnECA's experts' assessment and suggestions on a better and more comprehensive implementation of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia. Above all, the EU has to closely follow the internally and externally triggered changes in Central Asia. As the previous SEnECA policy paper (No 13) predicts, it is likely that in the forthcoming decade the region will change more starkly than it did in since 2007, when the previous EU' Strategy on Central Asia was adopted.

The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia sets out a comprehensive approach to Central Asia, and it shows a clearer EU understanding of the region. It rightly emphasises a "working together" approach over the one of "teaching how to live", which seemed more evident in the previous Strategy. The document is less instructive towards Central Asian countries, giving more flexibility for cooperation. It also demonstrates a better understanding of the differences between the five countries and aims to foster regional cooperation.

Looking from another angle, the new Strategy does not propose new instruments that could significantly alter the relations between all or some of Central Asian countries with the EU. Many tasks set by the document sound exceedingly general. Furthermore, Strategy implementation methods and measurement tools, as well as the underpinning financial resources for its implementation seem to be under-addressed, and the potential of coordination with the EU member states has not been fully employed.

According to the SEnECA Scorecard, the highest value has been assigned to the second and first parts of the Strategy – "Partnering for prosperity" and "Partnering for resilience" accordingly. The concluding part "Working better together" has come in third. Thus, SEnECA experts see the practically oriented tasks as more significant than those related to improving the ways of cooperation tools and channels. Among all the tasks offered by the Strategy, the highest score was given to the task No 9 on border management issues.

The overarching recommendations for a better implementation of the new Strategy are the following: to agree on indicators and develop concrete implementation plan(s) for each of the tasks; to develop concrete and comprehensive implementation measurement methods and tools for the tasks; to review the Strategy regularly in cooperation with actors on the ground and to make the conclusions available to the public; to implement stronger quality assurance and anti-corruption policies to maximise the efficiency of EU's contribution; to avoid Afghanistan overshadowing Central Asian countries in the EU's Central Asia policy; to devote significant attention to communication of and about the EU in Central Asia; to foster the image of Central Asia in the EU; to step up the coordination of EU policies with the EU member states (while they also should increase activity) and like-minded actors.

## Appendix I – SEnECA Scorecard of the tasks of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia

Part No.*	Task No.	Task as of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia	Score
I	9.	Strengthening cooperation on modern integrated border management, building upon longstanding EU-Central Asia and EU-Afghanistan cooperation	4.7
II	17.	Promoting improvements in the business and investment environment and supporting private sector development, in particular small and medium size enterprises, through EU Central Asia business-to-business dialogue and cooperation, sectoral dialogue and technical assistance	4.7
II	28.	Contributing to the development of transport corridors between the EU and Central Asia, based on the extension of the TEN-T networks	4.7
I	11.	Strengthening inter-regional and intra-regional cooperation fora and mechanisms in the field of the environment, water and climate change	4.6
II	34.	Stimulating intra-regional and international mobility of students, staff and researchers, as well as learners and trainers in vocational education and training	4.6
I	1.	Using regional programmes to support the sharing of experience in legal and judicial reform, human rights, international labour standards, good governance, electoral reform and women's empowerment between the EU and Central Asia, among Central Asians themselves, and with countries of the Eastern Partnership	4.4
II	32.	Increasing the number and diversifying the profile of Central Asian beneficiaries of the Horizon, Erasmus+ and Marie Skłodowska-Curie programmes	4.4
II	23.	Sharing experience regarding standardisation and quality infrastructure to facilitate intraregional trade and trade with the EU	4.4
II	27.	Strengthening bilateral and inter-regional cooperation to ensure effective sustainable connectivity	4.4
I	13.	Promoting scientific cooperation and research on water management as well as open access reliable data on climate and water that can inform effective policy	4.3
II	30.	Using innovative financing and blending to further encourage green investment, in particular in renewable energy and energy efficiency	4.3
I	4.	Using the EU-Central Asia High-level Political and Security Dialogue and the newly established post of EU security and counterterrorism expert with regional competence for Central Asia to strengthen practical cooperation on a broader security agenda, including security sector reform and governance, hybrid threats and the water/security nexus	4.2
I	12.	Developing sharing of experience and innovative financing to promote renewable energy	4.2
II	25.	Stepping up technical cooperation towards better use of the unilateral preferential access to the EU market provided by the GSP and GSP+	4.1

Part No.*	Task No.	Task as of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia	Score
III	43.	Organising EU-Central Asia policy dialogues in specific sectors and supporting these dialogues with twinning operations	4.1
II	21.	Supporting accession to the WTO and to the GPA, including through technical assistance	4.1
II	37.	Promoting a stronger dialogue between EU, Central Asian authorities, business organisations and social partners on skills gaps and labour market modernisation	4.1
III	45.	Developing more systematic common messaging and enhancing the use of web portals and of the social media to highlight the tangible benefits of EU engagement in the region	4.1
III	41.	Involving civil society further in the development of the EU-Central Asia partnership, including by establishing an informal "EU-Central Asia Forum"	4.1
II	22.	Intensifying dialogue on sanitary and phytosanitary measures to strengthen food safety systems	4.1
II	36.	Establishing a dialogue and promoting exchange of best practices on youth employability, women empowerment and employment policies	4.1
I	7.	Continuing cooperation on drugs policy to further strengthen national policies in drug demand reduction and address illegal drugs supply and related organised crime	4.1
I	15.	Supporting the sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems and the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and the future post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework	4.0
I	16.	Promoting sharing of experience and cooperation on the circular economy, in particular sustainable waste management systems and the fight against air pollution	4.0
II	18.	Promoting twinings to share know-how and build the capacity of Central Asian administrations in key aspects of economic reforms	4.0
II	24.	Promoting the simplification and harmonisation of customs procedures and supporting the development of cross-border e-commerce	4.0
I	5.	Holding ad hoc EU-Central Asia experts' meetings on the prevention of violent extremism and counterterrorism to promote sharing of best practices and strengthening of cross-border cooperation in line with relevant international commitments	3.9
II	20.	Intensifying the sharing of EU experience and best practices on addressing non-tariff barriers to trade and promoting regulatory convergence and harmonisation	3.9
II	35.	Helping Central Asia to develop a regional cooperation scheme inspired from the EHEA	3.9
II	31.	Using EU instruments (such as grants, blending and guarantees) as well as intensifying consultations with international financial organisations and other relevant actors to underpin sustainable connectivity projects	3.9
I	10.	Enhancing dialogue and cooperation on migration and mobility in the framework of the EPCAs and of the United Nations	3.8

Part No.*	Task No.	Task as of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia	Score
I	2.	Developing training opportunities on human rights and advocacy skills for civil society activists and human rights defenders and promoting cross-border contacts among them in the region, as well with their counterparts in the EU and Eastern Partnership countries	3.8
II	26.	Sharing experience on Geographical Indications to help the diversification of agricultural production	3.8
II	33.	Increasing inter- and intra-regional research and innovation cooperation in the areas of water, food and the environment	3.7
I	3.	Establishing a dedicated dialogue on labour standards and business and human rights	3.7
I	8.	Sharing expertise on cyber security and hybrid threats, including the opportunity for Central Asia to participate in the joint identification of hybrid threats as part of the EU's Hybrid Risk Survey	3.5
II	29.	Intensifying bilateral dialogues under existing Memorandums of Understanding on Energy Cooperation and organising as appropriate ad hoc regional conferences on energy	3.4
I	6.	Intensifying cooperation and synergies with the OSCE on preventing and countering transnational threats in Central Asia	3.4
III	38.	Holding ad hoc senior officials' meetings in-between the regular meetings of the EU Central Asia High-level Political and Security Dialogue and Ministerial meetings	3.3
II	19.	Sharing know-how on the development of statistical systems	3.3
III	40.	Intensifying consultations on Central Asian affairs as appropriate with third-partners	3.3
III	42.	Encouraging more frequent inter-parliamentary contacts and visits	3.2
III	44.	Intensifying, where appropriate, cooperation with International Financial Institutions	3.1
I	14.	Strengthening cooperation with the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Regional Central Asia on the water and security nexus	3.1
III	39.	Organising informal ministerial consultations on the side-lines of UNGA and developing common understanding and convergence of positions in the UN and other multilateral fora	2.9

- \*  "1. Partnering for resilience"  
 "2. Partnering for prosperity"  
 "3. Working better together"

## Appendix II – SEnECA Scorecard of the Part “3. Working better together” of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia

Task No.	Task as of the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia, Part “3. Working better together”	Score
43	Organising EU-Central Asia policy dialogues in specific sectors and supporting these dialogues with twinning operations	4.1
45	Developing more systematic common messaging and enhancing the use of web portals and of the social media to highlight the tangible benefits of EU engagement in the region	4.1
41	Involving civil society further in the development of the EU-Central Asia partnership, including by establishing an informal "EU-Central Asia Forum"	4.1
38	Holding ad hoc senior officials' meetings in-between the regular meetings of the EU Central Asia High-level Political and Security Dialogue and Ministerial meetings	3.3
40	Intensifying consultations on Central Asian affairs as appropriate with third-partners	3.3
42	Encouraging more frequent inter-parliamentary contacts and visits	3.2
44	Intensifying, where appropriate, cooperation with International Financial Institutions	3.1
39	Organising informal ministerial consultations on the side-lines of UNGA and developing common understanding and convergence of positions in the UN and other multilateral fora	2.9

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