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SEnECA Agenda for
Future Research Cooperation

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Contents

Executive Summary

The new strategy "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" aims at strengthening research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. It also seeks to address the lack of Central Asia expertise among European decision-makers. Based on assessments of the current state of affairs of Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies and Central Asia, the "*SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation*" provides concrete recommendations for policy-makers, university managements and researchers on how to improve research cooperation between the EU und this region of increasing importance to Europe.

Challenges for Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia

In order to improve research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia, the following ***common challenges*** need to be addressed: institutional and disciplinary fragmentation of Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia, unbalanced academic mobility flows, limited access to research funding and a lack of intercultural competences of university administrators, researchers, and students. Specific challenges for Central Asian Studies in Europe are methodological and practical problems while conducting research in non-democratic countries. In addition, European Studies in Central Asia face peculiar difficulties including the risk of financial dependency on EU funding, lack of academic cooperation within Central Asia, researchers' insufficient proficiency in European languages and insufficient familiarity with EU funding schemes and procedures. Before addressing these challenges, the EU needs to clarify two ***general questions***: Which challenges require country specific and which regional measures? Does the EU focus on funding for international competitive lighthouse projects or broad support for research and higher education as an instrument of development cooperation?

Recommendations to Improve Research Cooperation between Europe and Central Asia

With regard to ***thematic priorities*** of future research cooperation, social sciences and humanities can be beneficial in the following areas: political transition and social change; economic transition and international economics; environmental challenges and their societal consequences. In order to detect long-term trends and future challenges we recommend to support basic research for Central Asian Studies in Europe. However, European Studies in Central Asia need to put stronger emphasis on applied research. In both cases, interdisciplinary projects are needed, which have a more comprehensive view of the wider Central Asian region including neighbouring countries. The most challenging task with regard to ***research methodology*** is to overcome Eurocentrism in theory and research concepts. Furthermore, specific measures need to ***facilitate research in authoritarian***

regimes, including data protection; methodological specifics of the research field; and better preparation of young researchers for field research. Ethic committee could provide guidance in these questions and conduct risk assessments for research projects.

The challenge of *securing sufficient levels of funding* can be addressed on two levels. First, measures can be taken to establish Central Asian Studies and European Studies in Central Asia as own disciplines and provide sufficient institutional funding for a number of research hubs at different universities. In addition, we recommend following steps: better connect researchers and funding institutions; provide funding for non-research activities, notably networking and dissemination activities; consider specifics of research in authoritarian regimes in tenders and evaluation processes. Second, existing research units can be empowered to become more successful in the competition for research funding. The following measures will directly increase the number of beneficiaries of EU research funding in Central Asia:

- provide seed-funding for researchers to write funding applications;
- establish "science support centres" managing the formal part of applications and projects;
- strengthen inter-administrative competences by exchange and twinning programmes;
- offer workshops on "how to write funding applications";
- offer specialised language trainings;
- intensify dissemination activities on funding opportunities, notably outside the capitals.

In order to balance *academic mobility between Europe and Central Asia* mass student mobility as well as opportunities for excellent researchers should be considered. Offers for Central Asian colleagues need to put more emphasis on circular mobility, otherwise academic mobility can turn into brain drain. The uneven participation of the Central Asian states in European mobility schemes needs to be also balanced, so that more Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek participate. Other useful measures include:

- colleges for Central Asian guest fellows on specific research foci;
- EU-Central Asian collaborative master's and PhD programmes and joint research centres;
- dissemination activities at peripheral universities and research institutions;
- return grants, which allow Central Asian researchers to return to in the region;
- facilitating visa application processes and requirements.

To increase the mobility of Central Asian researchers within their region *first steps towards a "Central Asian Higher Education Area"* should include a funding scheme for student, researcher and lecturer mobility in Central Asia; an expert network of researchers on European integration in Central Asia; and collaborative master's and joint PhD programmes within Central Asia. To make research based in Central Asia more attractive we recommend to establish travel funding for Central Asian researchers to participate in international conferences and joint EU-Central Asian peer-reviewed journals.

Blended research to facilitate research cooperation is met with considerable scepticism. There is wide agreement that face-to-face cooperation cannot be replaced, especially with regard to developing intercultural competences and establishing trust among partners from Europe and Central Asia. Once the trust has been established, online tools can complement research to a certain degree. However, digital humanities are still in a very early stage. In order to prepare young researchers the new research field should quickly become part of their methodological training.

1. Introduction

The new strategy "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" of May 2019 defines cooperation in research, (higher) education and innovation as one of the EU's future policy priorities in its relations with the region. More specifically, it aims at increasing and diversifying the number of Central Asian beneficiaries of EU research funding, strengthening research cooperation, notably in the areas of water, food and environment, and stimulating academic mobility within Central Asia.[1] In addition to European interest in supporting research in general, the emphasis on cooperation between Central Asian and European researchers and think tankers results from experiences with the implementation of the previous EU Strategy for Central Asia.[2] It was not able to achieve all its goals due to the lack of expert knowledge about Central Asia. Consequently, there is a need for academic expertise to implement the new strategy and evaluate the EU's policy towards the region by providing scientific and analytical monitoring by both European and Central Asian experts.

Therefore, the *SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation* provides recommendations on how to improve cooperation between Central Asian and European experts in social sciences and the humanities. In addition to considering concrete policy objectives, it aims at providing decision-makers with better access to academic policy advice on implementing the new Central Asia Strategy as well as establishing the basis for independent assessments of the EU's future policy towards the region. The paper is part of the final phase of the SEnECA project and follows-up on mapping[3] and analysing Central Asia Studies in the EU[4] and European Studies in Central Asia.[5] Based on semi-structured expert interviews and a questionnaire answered by researchers from European and Central Asian countries, it recommends future research priorities, measures to strengthen common research and stimulate academic mobility as well as new forms of scientific cooperation.

The biggest obstacle for the research infrastructure is that both research fields, Central Asia Studies in the EU and European Studies in Central Asia, are not established disciplines. Accordingly, this fragmentation is to be observed within the research infrastructure and education policy of both sides. Taking into account the devolved political competences in research and higher education as well as the necessary academic independence – where it exists – there are a number of addressees of the recommendations, ranging from individual researchers, university management and decision-makers. No one-size-fits-all policy towards all European and Central Asia countries is possible due to crucial differences in political, economic, social and educational infrastructure.

This challenge is reflected in more concrete problems that European and Central Asian researchers are dealing with, such as difficulties in securing research funding, a lack of intercultural competences, unbalanced mobility flows and limited access to the field. The latter is linked with the non-liberal-democratic-order in five Central Asian countries. Therefore, specific conditions of Central Asia both as a research field and a cooperation partner need to be considered: corruption, lack of digital infrastructure, insurmountable bureaucracy, a high level centralism and nepotism in the higher education system and different levels of integration into the global education system within the region itself.

The *SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation* starts with a brief summary of the current state of the art of Central Asian Studies in Europe (chapter 2) and European Studies in Central Asia (chapter 3). The analysis is followed by recommendations, which are grouped as follows: research

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[1] European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* (May 2019), JOIN (2019) 9, 13–14.

[2] The Permanent Representatives Committee, "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership," (May 2007), accessed November 11, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st_10113_2007_init_en.pdf.

[3] "SEnECA Database", Strengthening and Energizing EU-Central Asia Relations, accessed November 11, 2019, https://www.seneca-eu.net/seneca-research-database/.

[4] For a detailed analysis see: Julian Plottka and Lydia Drews, "The Current State of Affairs of Central Asian Studies in Europe," *SEnECA deliverable D1.2 Background Paper* (June 2019), accessed November 11, 2019, https://www.seneca-eu.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SEnECA_D1.2_Two-background-papers_v2.0_2019-07-12.pdf.

[5] For a detailed analysis see: Nazira Momosheva and Yzatbek Berenaliev, "The current state of affairs of European Studies in Central Asia," *SEnECA deliverable D1.2 Background Paper* (June 2019), accessed November 11, 2019, https://www.seneca-eu.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SEnECA_D1.2_Two-background-papers_v2.0_2019-07-12.pdf.

priorities (chapter 4.1), methodology in researching authoritarian regimes (chapter 4.2), funding opportunities (chapter 4.3), academic mobility (chapter 4.4), and blended research (chapter 4.5). In chapter 5 the main recommendations are summarised.

2. The State of the Art of Central Asian Studies in Europe

The analysis of the current situation of Central Asian Studies in Europe[6] revealed several challenges, especially for researchers working on the region at European research and higher education institutions. These include:

- *institutional and disciplinary fragmentation* of Central Asian Studies;

- a *low level of awareness for the importance of Central Asia to Europe*;

- limited *access to research funding*;

- *unbalanced mobility flows* between Europe and Central Asia;

- *a lack of intercultural competences* of university administrators, researchers, and students;

- methodological and practical problems while conducting *research in authoritarian countries*.

In order to initiate and facilitate research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia and to put researchers in a better position these factors need to be addressed.

In Europe, there are only a few research centres dedicated to Central Asia studies even though increasing tensions between Russia and western countries provided an impetus for founding several new research institutions, including the Centre for East European and International Studies in Berlin[7], covering the region of Eurasia. Yet, this did not change the main characteristics of Central Asian Studies in Europe: most researchers dealing with the region work at university departments, research centres or think-tanks primarily dedicated to other research foci. Consequently, Central Asian regional studies are highly institutional fragmented. A number of networking efforts are underway, e.g. "Eurasian Insights: Strengthening Central Asian Studies in Europe (EISCAS)".[8] Nonetheless, they have not yet been able to fully address the issue. The high degree of fragmentation is a two-fold challenge, in institutional, but also disciplinary terms.

Consequently, Central Asian Studies are not a fully established research discipline[9] at European universities and research institutes. The main reasons for this are disciplinary and theoretical plurality and varying geographical definitions of Central Asia.[10] The insufficient awareness of the importance of Central Asia to Europe serves as an accelerating factor.[11] In order to establish a common discipline, researchers must employ interdisciplinary competences to better understand their colleagues working on the same region and to facilitate cooperation across disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, a continuation and intensification of ongoing networking initiatives is need. Both will help to establish Central Asian Studies as a research discipline in its own right.

Funding for small research areas is another challenge, which needs to be addressed. First, not being recognised as an established discipline disadvantages Central Asian Studies' stance in competition

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[6] Julian Plottka and Lydia Drews, *The Current State of Affairs of Central Asian Studies in Europe*.

[7] "Centre for East European and International Studies," ZOIS, accessed 21 October 2019, https://en.zois-berlin.de.

[8] "Eurasian Insights: Strengthening Central Asian Studies in Europe," EISCAS, accessed 21 October 2019, https://eiscas.eu.

[9] While the term "research field" refers to a common subject of study, which can be addressed by different disciplines, an established research discipline is defined by a common research agenda, common research perspectives and institutions, such as academic associations and journals.

[10] Some define Central Asia as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while other definitions also include Afghanistan, Northern Iran and Xinjiang and some even Mongolia.

[11] For details see Susann Heinecke, "Long-term Central Asia Communication Strategy," *SEnECA deliverable D3.3* (November 2019).

for funding, particularly within universities, as the discussion about closing of the "Zentralasien-Seminar" at the Humboldt University exemplifies. Second, the high degree of institutional fragmentation is a disadvantage. The drafting of funding applications requires considerable institutional resources, which small research units often lack. Third, differences between European and Central Asian research and higher education systems require an understanding of the research partners' administrative procedures, which could be achieved by developing resources and capacities, notably inter-administrative competences within European universities.

Data on student and researcher mobility between EU and Central Asian countries shows a clear imbalance: while the European research and higher education system is an attractive destination for Central Asian researchers and students, few Europeans are interested in researching and studying in Central Asia.[12] Furthermore, academic mobility from Central Asia to European countries often turns into brain drain, if Central Asians continue their careers in European countries after having completed their study or PhD programmes in Europe. Making circular migration more attractive will strengthen the capacities of Central Asian research and higher education systems.

Researching in authoritarian regimes is a methodological challenge, especially for researchers of social sciences and humanities. Peculiarities of researching politics and societies in non-liberal-democracies, such as limited access to data, non-reliability of data or numerous risks are hardly considered as an aspect in methodology. First, interviewees and local experts bear ethical risks. Second, Western researchers can face major obstacles with regards to safety issues, such as crime-related risks and state-related risks, which are specific to non-democratic countries. They can cause, for example, the threat or actual seizure of research data, arrest and/or detention and police harassment.[13] As a result research topics and results "are determined by what is possible and safe".[14] Third, the most common problem refers to methods, especially qualitative tools and interviews. On the one hand, local experts, stakeholders and policy makers are difficult to reach. Even the SEnECA team had to face this challenge, despite being well connected in the region and complying with high European data protection standards. On the other hand, there is no certainty interviewees will reveal truthful information as opposed to politically acceptable answers. Whereas all answers, including negative reactions, could be useful as a marker for hard or fluid red lines, it could be difficult to use them due to research design formalities. In short, the output of research in the authoritarian field is less certain and predictable compared to researching established democracies. Such challenges can put deadlines and deliverables in funded research projects at risk. There is an increasing awareness of these challenges, and researchers have started to develop solutions. However, curriculums of study and PhD programmes do not necessarily explore these issues or offer targeted methodological training. Funding institutions and programmes are seldom flexible enough to deal with mentioned challenges.

This overview of challenges for Central Asian Studies in Europe shows that they are three-fold. First, researchers dealing with the region need to be better connected in order to establish Central Asian Studies as its own discipline. Second, access to adequate research funding for under-developed research areas needs to be improved, especially with regards to the provision of funding and the capacities to apply for funding. Third, the specific research area of Central Asia requires specialised training in a number of research soft-skills to address the peculiarities of the region.

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[12] For figures see: Julian Plottka and Lydia Drews, *The Current State of Affairs of Central Asian Studies in Europe*, 15.

[13] Marlies Glasius et al., *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 24, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-68966-1.

[14] Marlies Glasius et al., *Research in the Authoritarian Field*, 22.

3. The State of the Art of European Studies in Central Asia

The research field of European Studies in Central Asia faces challenges on two levels. First, compared to Europe, the Central Asian research and higher education systems are a quickly moving target. They are constantly changing thanks to ongoing reforms.[15] Therefore, a number of challenges for the whole research and higher sector exists[16]:

- *lack of resources* for investments in research and higher education in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan;
- *processes of internationalisation* of research and higher education on different levels in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which need readjustment and support respectively;
- *lack of political will* to internationalise research and higher education in Turkmenistan;
- *insufficient cross-border cooperation* between the five research and higher education sectors.

Second, there are challenges specific to European Studies in the region. These include:

- *institutional and disciplinary fragmentation* of European Studies;
- risk of *financial dependency* of EU funding programmes;
- *lack of cooperation* between researchers of European integration in Central Asia;
- researchers' insufficient *methodological skills and proficiency in European languages*;
- insufficient *familiarity with EU funding schemes* and procedures;
- insufficient application of research findings to *provide demand-driven policy advise*.

The Central Asian research and higher education systems are still transitioning from former Soviet systems and are adapting to the standards of the Bologna Process. However, levels of political ambition for reform, available resources as well as reform progress differ considerably between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. As a result, capacities of research and higher education systems also differ considerably between the five Central Asian states.

Kazakhstan was the first of the five countries to join the Bologna Process in 2010 and invests considerable funding in its research and higher education sector. It is most advanced regarding reforms in its research and higher education sector.[17] Adjustments of some reforms are necessary, as e.g. the internationalisation of higher education on BA level sets strong incentives for non-circular student mobility. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are willing to Europeanise their research and higher education systems.[18] Yet, considering the two countries' economic situation they lack the resources for major investments. Political change in Uzbekistan has recently led to liberalisation in research and higher education, facilitating European researchers' visits to the country considerably. This process which should be further encouraged by EU policies. Turkmenistan is still resisting the liberalisation of the country, which greatly limits the prospects of its research and education institutions. Therefore, measures aimed at the improvement of research cooperation in social sciences and humanities need to address political decision-makers in order to increase their readiness to liberalise research and higher education. In general, support for the continuation of ongoing reform processes and in some cases a readjustment of reform steps taken are the major challenges in order to improve research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. Therefore, measures need to be adapted to each countries' specific situation. In addition, support for deepening

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[15] Nazira Momosheva and Yzatbek Berenaliev, *The Current State of Affairs of European Studies in Central Asia*.

[16] The "SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation" does not provide specific recommendations to address these challenges, as reforms of the research and higher education sectors in Central Asia in general are not the paper's topic. However, it is important to keep these challenges in mind when discussing recommendations specific to improving research cooperation.

[17] Momosheva and Berenaliev, *The Current State of Affairs of European Studies in Central Asia*: 3–4.

[18] Interview.

cooperation between the five research and higher education sectors needs to take a regional approach.

EU funded initiatives, programmes and projects have played a crucial role in helping researchers to work in the research field of European Studies in all five Central Asian countries. However, their independence from European funding in the mid- to long-term perspective is necessary to guarantee sustainability. The number of researchers covering the field, as well as the number of programmes offered differs considerably between the five Central Asian countries: the countries have individual interests in developing European Studies at their research and education institutions and are responsive to European cooperation and reform initiatives to differing degrees. European Studies is not yet a separate academic discipline in any of the states, as it cuts across the established classification of research disciplines due to its interdisciplinary character. In all five countries research and teaching activities are highly fragmented. It is largely a multi-disciplinary research field, which lacks a shared theoretical approach or methodology. This institutional and disciplinary fragmentation of European Studies is a major challenge similar to the situation of Central Asian studies in Europe. In order to improve research cooperation, the discipline needs to be strengthened and cooperation deepened. Cooperation exists most often with European universities on a purely bilateral basis, while academic connectivity across the Central Asian borders is still insufficient. To date, no academic network or association linking European integration researchers from all Central Asian countries exists. Researchers are also insufficiently connected to decision-makers. European Studies in Central Asia have a very limited practical relevance. The provision of more demand-driven academic policy advice to Central Asian governments would also improve the standing of the research discipline.

As mentioned before, the imbalanced academic mobility flows are an obstacle to research cooperation. Notably, insufficient circular migration resulting in a brain drain to Europe (and also Northern America) threatens the sustainability of Central Asian research and higher education systems in general. In addition, imbalanced mobility not only between the EU and Central Asia but also within Central Asia should be considered. 65 % of mobility grants for Central Asia are awarded to researchers from Kazakh universities.[19] There are also imbalances within the countries: European lighthouse projects form elite institutions in Central Asia, which increase the differences between the capital and the provinces.[20] EU decision-makers need to decide, if EU funding for research and higher education aims at supporting a limited number of internationally competitive elite institutions. Alternatively, the EU could focus on the periphery in Central Asian research and higher education sectors. Supporting smaller and less internationalised universities and research institutions, would contribute to improving the quality of average study programmes in the region.

A further issue that needs to be addressed is the language proficiency of researchers. A considerable part of research on European integration conducted at Central Asian universities and research institutions is published in local languages, notably in Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik. This limits the outreach of the publications not only in Europe, but in Central Asia. It is also a threshold preventing the successful applications at European funding institutions. Publishing in English – the modern "lingua franca" of Europe – is required to improve the exchange between researchers of European integration from Central Asia and with their colleagues from all over the world. Proficiency in English also provides better access to the field in Europe. Furthermore, the methodological skills of many Central Asian researchers need to be improved. The lack of sufficient expertise is an obstacle to writing successful funding applications and publishing in peer-reviewed journals.

In sum, the major challenge for improving cooperation with researchers of European integration in Central Asia is the sustainable establishment of this research field in all Central Asian countries. Newly established research units as well as existing ones need to be better linked across Central Asian borders and with colleagues in Europe. Continued support for academic mobility, needs to put special emphasis on circular migration and on balancing the number of funding recipients more evenly between the five countries. Finally, the language issue has to be addressed in terms of

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[19] Momosheva and Berenaliev, *The Current State of Affairs of European Studies in Central Asia*: 10.
[20] Interview.

language courses and publishing opportunities. When addressing these challenges, EU decision-makers need to take to mainstreaming issues into account:

(1) Which challenges are best addressed by *country specific measures*? Which challenges require a *regional approach*?

(2) Is the prime objective of the EU's research policy for Central Asia to establish *internationally competitive lighthouse projects*? Or is European support for Central Asian research and higher education sectors *part of EU development cooperation*, which should reach out to as many students and researchers as possible?

4. Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the current state of the art of Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia, structured expert interviews and a questionnaire, this section provides recommendations on how to improve and strengthen research cooperation. The interviews and the survey addressed researchers of different career levels (from postgraduate student to senior researcher) working at different types of research institutions in Europe and Central Asia. The recommendations are clustered in four chapters: research priorities (chapter 4.1), methodology in researching authoritarian regimes (chapter 4.2), funding opportunities (chapter 4.3), academic mobility (chapter 4.4), and blended research (chapter 4.5). Not all recommendations address decision-makers, some also address researchers and can be implemented under the autonomy of academic institutions.

4.1. Research Priorities

The *SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation* considers the priorities defined in the new EU Central Asia Strategy. However, it clearly underlines that research on Central Asia must not be limited to applied sciences reflecting the current political agenda. The real strength of academic expertise is to identify trends and developments that might become politically relevant in the future and bring them to the attention of decision-makers. In order to provide such expertise and detect long-term trend well in advance, research needs considerable freedom to conduct basic research apart from the topics on the current political agenda.

In this sense, the *SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation* calls for covering three topical clusters, which are associated with the new EU Strategy for Central Asia[21]: political transitions and social change research, economic transition and international economics, environmental challenges, food security, sustainable agriculture and health. However, research on Central Asia may not be limited to these priorities. The following list of suggested research priorities is also limited in a second dimension. It focusses on research priorities, where social science and the humanities can help to better implement the new EU Central Asia Strategy. Therefore, it does not cover other technical and natural sciences aspects also relevant to the EU's Central Asia policy in each cluster.

Box 1: Thematic Research Priorities

Research in social sciences and humanities can contribute expertise in the following thematic clusters for a better EU policy towards Central Asia:
- *political transitions and social change*: civil society, youth, geopolitics;
- *economic transition and international economics*: grey and black markets, approximation to trade standards, energy cooperation;
- *environmental challenges*: governance issue, societal consequences.

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[21] Topical clusters are based on expert's opinions in semi-structured interviews with European experts on Central Asia and on SEnECA Questionnaires (see before).

The first thematic cluster addresses **political transitions and social change research**. Recent uncertainties about how political transitions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan would take place, arguably underscore the importance of expertise in this area to European decision-makers. To fully understand these processes, the focus on elite level politics needs to be complemented by an analysis of societal developments. One of the topics, highly relevant in this respect is *civil society*. As the new EU Central Asia Strategy calls for involving civil society in order to develop the partnership between both regions[22], this topic is relevant for implementing the EU policy towards Central Asia also in the short-term. Since in Central Asia only a limited number of civil society organisations fulfil the Western definition, it is doubtful whether established academic concepts of civil society are useful to understand the situation in the region. Overcoming the Eurocentric perspective in research will most likely produce better insights.[23] The same applies to the established instruments of EU participative democracy, which are unlikely to produce the intended results in Central Asia. Therefore, a profound understanding of Central Asian civil society is required to adapt the policy instruments. Otherwise, mistakes from involving civil society in the European Neighbourhood Policy will be repeated in Central Asia. Civil society organisations from rural regions in Central Asia are less likely to match European standards. Therefore, engaging Central Asian civil society runs the risk of being concentrated in the capitals with a focus on a small number of organisations, just as in the Eastern Partnership countries. To have any impact, the involvement needs clearly defined priorities on which the funding is spent. So far, civil society involvement in EU's external policies often lacks such a focus.[24]

Political transitions can only be understood if there is sufficient knowledge about the ongoing processes of social change. In this respect, *youth* is a very good example for the need for basic research, which allows to detect long-term trends outside the focus of current politics. Taking into account the demographic dynamics of the region (the median age is under 30[25]), young people will play a pivotal role in Central Asia over the next decade. Therefore, it is essential to find out what Central Asian youth think about political and socio-economic developments in their countries and whether they support the provided policy. There should be more research on the values, opinions and conceptions of the Central Asian youth.[26] According to the demographic issue it is relevant to consider how the EU can contribute to the modernisation of education in Central Asia. *Religion* is another research topic of increasing political importance. So far it is mainly addressed in terms radicalisation in connection to security. However, this narrow focus needs to be widened in order to better understand the role of religion in Central Asian politics and societies.

Research on political transitions and social change is particularly important considering the *geopolitical role of the region* and possible risks associated with further nation building processes and elite change.[27] It could detect tensions between Central Asian actors on the one side and Chinese and Russians on the other. This could enable the EU to intervene specifically in these fields by taking political and economic advantage of latent conflicts between Central Asia and third countries. Social sciences are essential to find out what Central Asian policy-makers, stakeholders and different social groups think about the Chinese impact on Central Asia. Cross-border cooperation between Central Asian countries and ethnic issues should be considered as well, since modern geopolitical conflicts are increasingly fought by involving societal actors, such as ethnic minorities, and not just by employing conventional soldiers.[28]

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[22] European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *The EU and Central Asia*, 15.

[23] For more details on overcoming Eurocentrism in research on Central Asia see below.

[24] Katrin Böttger, „Feedback from Institut für Europäische Politik," Evaluation of support to Civil Society in enlargement and neighbourhood, European Commission, accessed 21 October 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2018-2086629/feedback/F11575_en?p_id=225482.

[25] Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns, "Central Asia in 2030: SEnECA forecasts for the region and the role of the European Union," *SEnECA Policy Paper No. 13* (May 2019), 4, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.seneca-eu.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SEnECA_Policy_Paper_13_2019.pdf. DOI: 10.17185/duepublico/48711

[26] Interview.

[27] Interview.

[28] Zafar Najafov, "Internationalization of Ethnic Conflicts and Impact on Regional and International Security," *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs*, 4 (2017), https://www.longdom.org/open-access/internationalization-of-ethnic-conflicts-and-impact-on-regional-andinternational-security-2332-0761-1000312.pdf. DOI: 10.4172/2332-0761.1000312

The second topical cluster is concerned with ***economic transition and international economics***. From a social science perspective, economic structures beyond official structures should be researched: the *grey and black markets*, illegal trade, and small enterprises, which are not part of the official statistics but represent a big market share. Participating in the official markets in Central Asia is also a highly political issue and closely related to research on political transition as the beneficiaries of regulated market access are often relevant for system stability. The research findings are important to the economic dimension of the EU's Central Asia Strategy[29] for two reasons: firstly, the grey economy is relevant to the welfare of a considerable number of citizens in Central Asia. The priority area of "partnering for prosperity" in the new EU Central Asia Strategy needs to take this into account with regard to economic reforms. Secondly, the grey economy poses a big challenge to trade agreements and the *approximation to standards* for facilitating trade, since unregulated actors of the grey economy will not adapt to standards of trade agreements. Therefore, compliance to those standards requires more fundamental economic reforms. The adaption of trade standards has also a geopolitical dimension. The Russian backed "Eurasian Economic Union" and also the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" are means to export standards to the Central Asian countries. Understanding how these adaptation processes take place is another research area of utmost interest to the EU, as it competes to set standards in the region. Despite the EU's reduced enthusiasms for *energy cooperation* with Central Asia, due to the failure of related initiatives under the previous Central Asia Strategy, the policy area is still relevant to the countries in the region. Energy transformation and its domestic-, foreign- and geopolitical consequences are, therefore, relevant research issues. Fossil energy exports have been the basis of the Central Asian economy over the last 20 to 30 years. Therefore, risks associated to this source of income being lost or decreasing in Central Asian countries should be researched. Future research on energy in Central Asia should not focus exclusively on supply security for Europe, as in the past, but also discuss the importance of hydrocarbons for the stability of the political systems in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The third topical cluster is devoted to ***environmental challenges*** such as climate change, water management, clean and renewable energies, sustainable development, green transportation and circular economy, which are relevant due to population growth and increasing urbanisation.[30] Central Asian experts, engaged in the region's environmental problems (the drying up of the Aral Sea, tailings storage, nuclear landfills, desertification, the disappearance of glaciers, etc.) could exchange their scientific discoveries and research with their European colleagues and join efforts to solve these problems. In addition to researching the technical aspects, social science can also contribute to addressing these challenges. First, climate change and water management are *governance problems*, which cannot be addressed by one country alone. Solutions need to be agreed either on the global level (e.g. climate change) or on a regional level (e.g. Aral Sea). Second, closely related to the previously mentioned research area of social change, *societal consequences* of environmental change are highly relevant to the EU's policy towards the region, but not yet sufficiently researched. This is also the case for societal consequences of mitigation policies: how do policies addressing environmental challenges affect societies and actors, which are relevant to the stability of the political system? Unless this aspect is taken into consideration, mitigation policies will not find support. The nexus between security and sustainable development as set out in the Unites Nation's "Sustainable Development Goals Programme 2015-2030"[31] is another example, how social science research can help to address concrete policy challenges.

4.2. Methodology in Researching Authoritarian Regimes

As mentioned before, thematic priorities should be researched in an ***interdisciplinary way***. Social sciences and the humanities can still support the priorities singled out in the EU Strategy for Central Asia by investigating political, economic and societal aspects, the effects of the problems in question, and how these issues can spiral with regard to security issues. Furthermore, the topics are

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[29] Interview.

[30] Anna Gussarova and Māris Andžāns, *Central Asia in 2030*, 3–5. DOI: 10.17185/duepublico/48711.

[31] "Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development," (2015), accessed November 11, 2019, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf.

interconnected with each other and should accordingly be subject to more complex and comprehensive studies and basic research, which should be organised around the guiding principle that treats Central Asia not only as a link in the chain of Silk Road but as an important, autonomous partner of Europe throughout the centuries. It is still common to see Central Asia as a post-Soviet space, but it should be considered as a core of a larger region (***Wider Central Asia***), which includes also Xinjiang, Afghanistan, Northern Iran, and the Caucasus. This approach to Central Asia leads to research of cross-cutting issues, such as trade, logistics, energy, transport, destabilisation, and relations with third powers and to interdisciplinary research designs including the humanities (anthropology, history, culture studies).[32]

Box 2: Methodological Research Priorities

With regard to methodology, future research should consider:

- ***interdisciplinary*** cooperation;
- consider ***Central Asia as a wider region***, including Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Northern Iran and Xinjiang;
- Central Asian Studies: ***basic research*** to detect long-term trends and future challenges;
- European Studies: ***applied research*** to demonstrate the relevance of the research field;
- ***overcome Eurocentrism*** in theory and concepts.

In addition, the research priorities listed above correspond to medium- and long-term processes. European research is very much geared towards short-term political gains. It would be more beneficial to focus on long-term research projects and research designs that may have no immediate political or economic benefit. This basic research is important because it is proactive. It might help to predict political trends and crises before they are visible to policy makers. Therefore, the research agenda of Central Asian Studies in Europe should not only be defined in response to the current political agenda, but ***basic research*** needs to be funded. For European Studies in Central Asia a stronger focus on ***applied research*** would be useful in order to demonstrate the relevance of the research area to decision-makers.

As the transformation of the newly independent states of Central Asia has not directly led to the development of Western-style democratic market economies[33], it is important to ***overcome the colonial and Eurocentric perspective in research***. First, far from putting liberal values into question, the academic debates on whether concepts and terminologies developed for analysing Western democracies are suitable instruments to understand Central Asian politics need to continue. The development of new concepts and terminology will potentially help to improve understanding of political processes, which do not correspond with Western standards. Second, overcoming Eurocentrism is also key to establish research cooperation between European and Central Asian researchers on a level playing field.

Box 3: Facilitate Researching Authoritarian Regimes

- ***comply with the General Data Protection Regulation*** to secure your data;
- establish an ***ethic committee*** that provides guidance for researchers and assesses projects regarding risks for researchers and interviewees;
- ***consider specifics of field research in methodological requirements***, like the trade-off between data protection and intersubjective transparency of research;
- ***prepare young researchers for field research*** in authoritarian regimes, including "risk situation awareness trainings";
- provide ***insurances for researchers in the field***.

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[32] Interview.

[33] Anna Gussarova et al., *Current Challenges to Central Asia and Afghanistan: Towards a Better World* (CAISS and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017), 4, accessed October 21, 2019, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kasachstan/13545.pdf.

Considering the specifics of conducting research in authoritarian regimes, including Central Asia, there is a need for tailored recommendations on this issue. As mentioned above, there are ethical challenges associated with research in authoritarian regimes. Therefore, special attention should be paid to **data security** and the anonymization of sources that could prevent the misuse of scientific findings by the regimes, which is not unlikely in the case of political science research on protest movements and opposition activities. It is hence of utmost importance to comply with the GDPR regulation[34], which protects the researcher against the above mentioned risks. In addition, ethical review procedures at research institutions based on a broad understanding of the specifics of the Central Asian countries should be established. Since most research units working on Central Asia studies in Europe are comparatively small, it could be helpful to establish an **ethics committee** consisting of alternating Central Asia experts.[35] This committee could provide a more circular exchange of expertise about Central Asia in Europe and support institutions, researchers and funding officers working on the challenges of research in the non-democratic field. Not only researcher but also policymakers and funders should pay attention to red lines in research topics. The research design should be more flexible in terms of methods: online sources, statistics and official information could be used not instead of but together with qualitative methods. Concerning **flexibility in common scientific standards**, "a shift from transparency about the identity of sources to transparency about methods of working is needed".[36] Hence, the research methodology needs to be developed further with regard to researching authoritarian regimes. Indeed, improved **training programmes for young researchers** studying authoritarian regimes are recommendable. As the number of researchers working on the issue is limited at many universities, summer or winter schools could be used to provide such trainings. These should also cover practical issues, such as risk awareness trainings. Furthermore, **risk assessments and insurances** should be made available to young researchers travelling in the target regions.

4.3. Funding Opportunities

As research funding becomes increasingly competitive, an even larger number of researchers is struggling to secure a sufficient financial basis for their projects. Smaller disciplines such as Central Asian Studies are overly disadvantaged in the competition for funding. The following section gives recommendations of how this can be balanced to some degree: in general, there should be a greater awareness of Central Asia in European funding bodies. This can only be achieved by establishing Central Asia Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia as an own discipline with common institutional and methodological frameworks and common research agendas. Research donors should provide conditions for the sustainable funding of long-term projects. Most importantly to support basic research on Central Asia, **continuous funding for a number of interdisciplinary Central Asian Research Centres** at European universities is necessary. These centres can also serve as hubs for networking activities and developing common research agendas. The same approach would be also fruitful with regard to establishing European Studies in Central Asia. The research centres should also be better connected to EU institutions working on research funding strategies. Furthermore, Partnership Instruments should be used to also fund research projects in Central Asia. For example, none of the Central Asian countries has ever been included in the list of recipient countries of funding to "increase the participation of countries outside the European Union in Jean Monnet Activities".[37]

Another issue is the lack of communication: firstly, **exchange between researchers and funding institutions** and within Central Asia studies in the EU should be strengthened. This will lead to greater visibility for the public as well as policymakers. Secondly, there should be **funding for non-research activities,** like in the framework of Jean Monnet Activities, such as communication and

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[34] „General Data Protection Regulation," accessed October 21, 2019, https://gdpr.eu/.

[35] See: "Verfahrensordnung der Leibniz-Kommission für Ethik der Forschung," Leibniz Gemeinschaft, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.leibniz-gemeinschaft.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Bilder_und_Downloads/Über_uns/Ethik_der_Forschung/VerfO_Leibniz-KEF_2018.pdf.

[36] Marlies Glasius et al. *Research in the Authoritarian Field*, 98.

[37] European commission, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, "Additional funds to increase the participa-tion of countries outside the European Union in Jean Monnet Activities," (May 2019), accessed November 11, 2019, https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/pi_window_2020.pdf.

the dissemination of research outputs with the aim of promoting basic research, both politically and in the media. Thirdly, ***funding schemes need to consider the specifics of Central Asia as a non-democratic research field***. Therefore, funding institutions should maintain a certain level of flexibility not only regarding research subjects and methods but also in the funding requirements taking into account specific obstacles and risks.

Box 4: Measures to Secure Funding for Small Research Areas

- sufficient level of ***institutional funding for research hubs*** at universities;
- establish Central Asian Studies in Europe as a ***coherent research field***;
- establish European Studies in Central Asia as a ***coherent research field***;
- better ***connect researchers and funding institutions***;
- ***funding for non-research activities***, notably networking and dissemination activities;
- ***consider specifics of researching in authoritarian regimes*** in tenders and evaluation processes.

As argued before, smaller research areas face considerable problems developing applications for funding, because they simply lack the resources. Only larger research units can provide staff resources to write applications. A pooling of resources is a solution to overcome the imbalance between research units of different size. At many Germany universities for example, researchers winning funding applications must deliver part of the overheads[38] to the research division of their university administration. All researchers from the university can apply for ***seed-funding for developing new projects*** and writing applications, which is covered by funding from the overheads. Such an instrument allows a rebalance of the differing resources at larger research institutions to a certain degree.

However, writing applications not only requires academic excellence and financial resources, but also technical or administrative expertise related to the application procedures. If funding applications are successful, comparable expertise is need for project implementation. As with financial resources, this technical and administrative expertise can be pooled. An excellent instrument is to establish "***science support centres***"[39] at universities or larger research institutions. These centres employ staff that are trained for specific application procedures and help researchers during the drafting of applications by structuring the process, checking the formal requirements and writing the technical parts of an application such as the budget. Furthermore, they can monitor tenders and calls for applications and inform researchers who might be interested in writing an application. If an application is successful, the science support centres are also a very efficient way to manage research projects. Pooling expertise in this way is much more efficient than a decentralised approach, where each research unit or individual researcher is responsible for monitoring funding opportunities, having the technical expertise to write the application and managing the project afterwards. Small research areas such as Central Asian Studies will particularly benefit from the pooling approach as their disadvantages in applying for research funding might be balanced to some degree. With regard to the peculiarities of EU funding application processes and tenders, science support centres are even more beneficial for Central Asian researchers who are less familiar with European administrative procedures.

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[38] Overheads are funds within a project funding, which are not earmarked. The recipient can use it to cover general costs, which cannot be directly linked to the project, e.g. rent for office space.

[39] For a best practice example see the science support centre of the University of Duisburg-Essen: "SSC – Science Support Centre,"Universität Duisburg-Essen, accessed 21 October 2019, https://www.uni-due.de/ssc/.

Box 5: Measures to Improve Applications for Research Funding

- provide *seed-funding* for researchers to write funding applications;
- establish "*science support centres*" managing the formal part of applications;
- strengthen *inter-administrative competences* by exchange and twinning programmes;
- offer *workshops on "how to write funding applications"* and to *exchange best practise examples of research cooperation*;
- offer specialised *language trainings*;
- intensify *dissemination activities* on funding opportunities.

Regarding the specialisation of specific funding opportunities and project schemes, it will also effectively strengthen *inter-administrative capacities to manage cooperation with external partners*. At such science support centres, staff could be trained on managing cooperation projects with partners from specific non-EU countries. As cooperation with partners from third countries is in many administrative aspects more challenging than cooperation with European partners (visa requirements are only a minor example), specialised support from staff with experience in cooperating with partners from, for example, Central Asia would facilitate research cooperation considerably. Having such specialist support centres located at all cooperating institutions would be the best way to facilitate the management of international research projects.

In addition, *courses in training researchers and research administrators in how to apply for specific tenders or calls for application* are required. Regarding EU-funding schemes, private consultancies already offer such courses. However, they are mostly addressing clients from business backgrounds, who can afford to cover the course fees. As researchers in most cases lack the funding to cover these costs, donors, research associations, universities or larger research institutions should provide this kind of training for them.

Concerning the *inter-administrative competences of research administrators*, exchange programmes with partner institutions in the target region, as offered by Erasmus+ for higher education under its training opportunities for staff, will be suitable. Awareness of existing funding schemes for administrative mobility must be increased and new funding opportunities should be offered. Finally, administrative exchange could be developed into an instrument of administrative capacity building in research and higher education. The objective of better understanding the partners' administrative procedures could then be complemented with the objective of learning from the partners' expertise. European administrators should be offered the opportunity to work at a partner institution in Central Asia and vice versa. Such programmes could be further developed into twinning-programmes including an advisory element on adopting good practices of the partner institution and reforming existing administrative procedures.

Finally, there is a lack of dissemination of information about EU grants in Central Asia, in particular. *Information about research funding should become more visible in Central Asia*, especially on a local level outside the capitals. In addition, it should not just be shared in English, Russian and German but also in national Central Asian languages. There is a need for special training for applying to EU funding, which should focus on strengthening specific application writing skills and project management skills. It would also be helpful to have mentors with a long-standing record on winning funding applications that could support Central Asian colleagues. Increasing dissemination activities is especially crucial, if the EU decides to fund in addition to lighthouse projects also a wide range of research and higher education institutions.

4.4. Academic Mobility

The clear imbalance of academic mobility between European and Central Asian countries and the brain drain towards Europe can only be solved by a strategic approach to students' and researchers' mobility. In general, exchange programmes should focus on supporting circular mobility. The exchange among the five Central Asian countries is severely underdeveloped. To achieve the goal

of establishing a "Central Asian Higher Education Area"[40] exchange programmes for students, researchers and lecturers within the region are required. Comparing the unequal participation of Central Asians from different countries in exchange programmes, the EU should also take measures to stimulate more mobility of students from the other Central Asian countries.

There are two types of mobility that should be supported in the future: first, *mass mobility* programmes for students, for example ERASMUS or DAAD, and second, *scholarships and fellowships for excellent Central Asian researchers*, for example CAMCA Fellowship established by the Rumsfeld Foundation.[41] With regard to their sustainability, such programmes focused on research need to also consider teaching activities. Fellows should pass their newly gained expertise on towards their students in Central Asia. Mass mobility programmes for students and young researchers can help, firstly, to provide international scientific standards and secondly, to improve language skills of Central Asian youth. The latter type of academic mobility could provide future decision-makers and elites the opportunity to learn about European rules and values and to network with EU institutions and businesses. It would be especially important in the context of elite change and possible political transformation and would support European strategic goals in the region.

In addition, *collaborative master's and PhD programmes* and joint supervising of doctoral students should be further developed.[42] Good governance and civil society colleges also offer best practice examples, such as Carl Friedrich Goerdeler-Kolleg for Good Governance established by the Robert Bosch Foundation for participants from Russia and the Eastern Partnership. This college provides support for good governance projects in NGOs, state and education institutions by organising three international workshops and coaching for participants, who work on their projects in the home institutions. Hence, such colleges could provide European expertise in project management, support circular mobility in Central Asia and strengthen the non-bilateral exchange structure by requiring its fellows to conduct cross-border projects. In the mid-term perspective, *joint research centres* with branches in Europe and Central Asia should be established as a means of continuous academic exchange.

Box 6: Measures to Stimulate Circular Academic Mobility between Europe and Central Asia

- Continue support for *mass mobility on student level*;
- establish *colleges for Central Asian guest fellows on specific research foci* with relevance to development cooperation, e.g. good governance or human rights;
- establish EU-Central Asian *collaborative master's and joint PhD programmes and joint research centres*;
- *increase academic mobility* of Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek students, researchers and lecturers:
  - o Intensify dissemination activities at peripheral universities and research institutions;
  - o Secure an equal distribution of exchange grants.
- offer *return grants*, which allow Central Asian researchers to re-establish in the region;
- *make research based in Central Asia more attractive:*
  - o Travel funding for Central Asian researchers to participate in int. conferences;
  - o Joint EU-Central Asian academic journals;
  - o Facilitate visa application processes and requirements.

If such projects do not use blended-learning or -research, allowing their fellows to stay at their home institutions in Central Asia, "*return grants*" for long-term students and researchers will increase

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[40] European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *The EU and Central Asia*, 14.

[41] "Central Asia-Caucasus Fellowship Program," Rumsfeld Foundation, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.rumsfeldfoundation.org/greater_central_asia/central_asia_caucasus_fellowship_program.

[42] See "Between Europe and the Orient – A Focus on Research and Higher Education in/on Central Asia and the Caucasus," Volkswagen Foundation, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/funding/our-funding-portfolio-at-a-glance/between-europe-and-the-orient–-a-focus-on-research-and-higher-education-in-on-central-asia-and-the-caucasus.

circular migration. Either scholarships for stays in Europe are granted on the condition that students or researchers have to work as lecturers in their home countries for a limited period afterwards or special scholarships offer the opportunity to return and conduct research projects and teaching based on their research or studies in Europe. Alumni programmes connecting researchers, who returned from European research institutions, in all five Central Asian countries would be a complementary instrument and contribute to establishing a Central Asian Higher Education Area.

In order to increase mobility in Central Asia, the best option would be to establish a **Central Asian academic exchange programme** similar to the European Erasmus programme. Besides being arguably a first step towards a "Central Asian Higher Education Area", it would also contribute to regional cooperation, beyond the area of research and higher-education, in the long-term. It would also be useful to offer similar exchange schemes for researchers and lecturers. Moreover, a **local network of experts and researchers** on the prioritised research topics and one of scholars of European Studies should be built within the region. This would contribute to regional research cooperation and also provide European decision-makers with direct access to local research expertise. Hence, there should be a **joint European-Central Asian peer-reviewed journal** providing promising young research from Central Asia the opportunity to publish their research. Moreover, they should also have more opportunities to publish in Western scientific journals. In addition, Central Asian researchers should be invited to international events and conferences, and there should be additional funding opportunities for participants from Central Asia. This would also contribute to stimulating circular migration, as postings as researchers become more attractive in Central Asia. However, there are differences in understanding what research is and which the research standards are, not only between the EU and Central Asia, but also between Central Asian countries. International research standards should be imparted to students and young researchers also within a frame of DAAD or ERASMUS exchange programmes.

Box 7: Steps Towards a Central Asian Higher Education Area

- funding scheme for **student, researcher and lecturer mobility in Central Asia**
- **expert network of researchers on European integration** in Central Asia
- establish **collaborative master's and joint PhD programmes** within Central Asia
- include a **regional dimension in all EU tenders** for projects in/on Central Asia
- **increase academic mobility** of Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek students, researchers and lecturers by encouraging them to make use of EU funding

To address the imbalances in granting mobility scholarships between the five Central Asian countries more dissemination activities are needed in those countries, which make less use of the grants. Furthermore, the EU should provide funding per Central Asian country based on clear criteria, for example the number of students in the higher education system, the Gross Domestic Product per capita, Democracy Index and openness of the society.[43] Such an approach allows to consider the income levels of the Central Asian countries, as in the development cooperation funding. Furthermore, the strategic objective of mobility grants needs to be clarified: Is the guiding objective to support a limited number of excellent researchers and lighthouse projects working with key institutions in capitals, such as the Kazakh-German University? Or is the main objective to provide support for a broad range of smaller research and higher education institutions, notably form the provinces? Especially with regard to the latter objective and a lack of intercultural and inter-administrative competences, it would be helpful to have more language training for Central Asian researchers and students and more language courses of Central Asian languages in European universities. This would facilitate communication with European experts and increase interest in the region. Finally, the framework conditions for research should be improved. For example, visa problems that make access to Europe and the US for researchers from Central Asia more difficult

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[43] See criteria for development assistance for health in the region listed in: Gulnaz Isabekova, "Wer bekommt wieviel? Entwicklungshilfe im Gesundheitswesen der zentralasiatischen Staaten," *Zentralasien-Analysen* 108 (December 2016): 2–11.

should be addressed. Welcome centres at research and higher education institutions, which are familiar with the visa application processes, also help to facilitate application procedures.

4.5. Blended Research

The questions concerning blended research received the lowest attention of European and Central Asian experts among all others both in interviews and in SEnECA questionnaires. With regard to the need to develop intercultural competences and the differing research and administrative traditions, face-to-face contacts are still indispensable. In order to build trust and strengthen intercultural skills in research cooperation as the human dimension of scientific cooperation, every project needs regular meetings. Joint workshops and conferences organised by both sides provide vivid exchange and keep networks alive. They are also a chance to extend existing and build new networks. Furthermore, research stays and twinning programmes for university administrators are measures to build trust between research institutions in both regions. Having established good contacts, blended research can complement regular meetings.

There are crucial infrastructural challenges to using blended research, which need to be solved first. Strengthening the online dimension of research and higher education cooperation between Europe and Central Asia is a double fold challenge: first, the digital infrastructure at Central Asian research and higher education institutions is still insufficient. The provision of internet access is unequal between the five Central Asian states, due to political, but also infrastructural reasons. In order to make blended research a feasible instrument for EU-Central Asia research cooperation, the EU should continue its support for CAREN[44] and similar projects. Digital connectivity established by CAREN has resulted in the inter- and intraregional network of ITC experts, researchers and stakeholders, which is the best example of how infrastructure supports sustainable development. Second, considering Central Asia's young population as well as high unemployment rate, digital transformation and its societal consequences could be a relevant research subject in the mid-term perspective.

Beyond infrastructural challenges it depends very much on the purpose of using online tools, whether there are feasible solutions or not. On the one hand, online tools can be used as communication tools to stay in touch between workshops and conferences.[45] Having established a sufficient level of trust, the use of technical tools, such as video conferencing, distance learning, online courses and shared documents platforms, can complement research and education in European-Central Asian cooperation projects. Notably online learning has considerable potential to improve study programmes in Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia. Such courses provide students direct access to experts from the other region on a regular basis and without travel costs, which will also reduce the CO_2-emissions.

On the other hand, "Digital Humanities" go far beyond the use of online communication tools. The computer based analysis of texts, other documents and historical sources, digital data archiving[46] and the analysis of the influence of new technologies on current societies are still developing. They are a comparatively new research field and not yet established in mainstream social sciences and humanities. Digital Humanities have huge potential for transcontinental research cooperation as digital data can be more easily transferred around the globe, compared to written documents and physical objects. Online archives of European integration would facilitate research on EU policy in Central Asia considerably. However, the technologies to save also more fluid documents, such as tweets on "twitter" or websites, and to store written documents in digital archives are currently just explored. Therefore, concrete recommendations for using specific tools for Digital Humanities in European-Central Asian research cooperation cannot be presented. The most important

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[44] Central Asia Research and Education Network. For more information see: "iCAREN," Central Asia Research and Education Network portal, accessed October 21, 2019, https://icaren.org/.

[45] Manfred Thaller, "Geschichte der Digital Humanities," in Fotis Jannidis/Hubertus Kohle/Malte Rehbein, eds., *Digital Humanities. Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart 2017, pp. 3–12, here p. 9.

[46] Daniel Göler and Florence Reiter, "'Let's archive!' Die Dokumentation internetbasierter Daten als neue Herausforderung für die europäische Integrationsforschung," in *integration* 4/2019, forthcoming.

recommendation is to include courses on "digital humanities" in the education of students and PhD-level researcher working in Central Asian Studies and European Studies in Central Asia.

Box 8: Blended Research

- blended research cannot replace ***face-to-face cooperation*** at the stage of building trust and intercultural competences;
- ***improving digital infrastructure*** in Europe and Central Asia;
- ***online communication*** can complement research in between onsite activities;
- ***digital humanities*** should become part of curricular for students and PhD researchers.

5. Conclusion

The "*SEnECA Agenda for Future Research Cooperation*" has summarised the major challenges, which need to be addressed to improve research cooperation between Europe and Central Asia in social sciences and humanities with a special focus on Central Asian Studies in Europe and European Studies in Central Asia. In addition to specific challenges of both research fields, the EU needs to continue its support for the ongoing transformation of the Central Asian research and higher education systems. Cooperation between the five countries and their research and higher education sectors are the reform aspects, which need considerably more attention. The general willingness in Central Asia to intensify regional cooperation in general opens a window of opportunity that should be used.

With regard to thematic research priorities, social sciences and humanities can contribute to a better implementation of the future EU policy towards Central Asia by covering political transitions and social change, economic transitions and international economics, and environmental challenges. However, beyond applied sciences, the biggest asset of Central Asian Studies for EU decision-makers is basic research, which identifies future challenges and long-term trends. Therefore, they need to take an interdisciplinary approach in its research and cover the Wider Central Asia, including neighbouring countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. A further specific challenge is research in authoritarian regimes, which needs to be addressed in practical and methodological terms as well as by better preparing young researchers for their field trips.

To provide expert knowledge to EU decision-makers, European Studies in Central Asia and Central Asian Studies in Europe need sufficient funding. On the one hand, the general funding for smaller academic disciplines needs to be improved, on the other hand, a number of practical measures can make researchers from both research fields more successful in the competition for research funding. With regard to academic mobility, the number of outgoing and incoming students, researchers and lecturers needs to be more balanced between Europe and Central Asia and also within Central Asia. More exchange among the five research and higher education systems is also key to establishing a Central Asian Higher Education Area. Furthermore, blended research can have only a complementary function between face-to-face meetings. To make better use of web-based communication tools, the digital infrastructure in Central Asia needs to be further developed. Digital Humanities should become part on the curricular for students and PhD researchers of Central Asian Studies and European Studies to prepare them for the future of social sciences and humanities.

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