



P9_TA(2024)0027

EU strategy on Central Asia

European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2024 on the EU strategy on Central Asia (2023/2106(INI))

(C/2024/5718)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the joint communication by the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 15 May 2019 entitled ‘The EU and Central Asia: New opportunities for a stronger partnership’ (JOIN(2019)0009),
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 17 June 2019 on the New Strategy on Central Asia,
- having regard to the joint communication by the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 19 September 2018 entitled ‘Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy’ (JOIN(2018)0031),
- having regard to the joint communication by the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 1 December 2021 entitled ‘The Global Gateway’ (JOIN(2021)0030),
- having regard to the outcomes of the 18th EU-Central Asia Foreign Ministers’ meeting, held on 17 November 2022 in Samarkand, which focused on finding solutions to common challenges,
- having regard to the joint press communiqué by the heads of state of Central Asia and the President of the European Council, issued following the second regional high-level meeting held in Cholpon-Ata on 2 June 2023,
- having regard to the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Kazakhstan, of the other part ⁽¹⁾,
- having regard to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Kyrgyz Republic, of the other part ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to the Commission proposal of 13 June 2022 for a Council decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union, of the one part, and the Kyrgyz Republic, of the other part (COM(2022)0277),
- having regard to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Tajikistan, of the other part ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, of the other part ⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to the outcomes of the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference, held on 18 November 2022, the second EU-Central Asia Economic Forum, held from 18 to 19 May 2023, the fourth EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, held on 10 March 2023, and the seventh EU-Central Asia High-Level Conference on Environment and Water Resources, held from 23 to 24 February 2023,
- having regard to the EU-funded study entitled ‘Sustainable transport connections between Europe and Central Asia’, conducted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and published on 30 June 2023,
- having regard to the Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Kazakhstan on a strategic partnership in the field of raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen, signed on 7 November 2022,
- having regard to the outcomes of the human rights dialogues with the Central Asian states,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 29, 4.2.2016, p. 3.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 196, 28.7.1999, p. 48.

⁽³⁾ OJ L 350, 29.12.2009, p. 3.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ L 229, 31.8.1999, p. 3.

- having regard to the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia, endorsed during the 19th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting held on 23 October 2023,
 - having regard to the joint declaration by the heads of state of Central Asia and the Federal Chancellor of Germany following their summit on 29 September 2023 in Berlin,
 - having regard to its previous resolutions on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan,
 - having regard to the EU Gender Action Plan III 2021-2025,
 - having regard to its resolution of 23 October 2020 on Gender Equality in EU's foreign and security policy ^(?),
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0407/2023),
- A. whereas since the adoption of the EU strategy on Central Asia in 2019, the region has been affected by significant external factors, such as Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and China's increasingly assertive foreign policy, as well as by internal instability, particularly the violent unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022, the violent crackdown following protests by the Pamiris in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of Tajikistan in November 2021 and May 2022 and in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, in July 2022, and repeated clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border;
- B. whereas Central Asia is a region of strategic interest to the EU in terms of security and connectivity as well as energy and resource diversification, conflict resolution and the defence of the multilateral rules-based international order, which has been challenged by Russia's attack on our values, the exacerbation of the global food crisis, aggression and atrocities, the spread of disinformation, weaponised corruption and meddling in elections;
- C. whereas none of the Central Asian states support Russia's invasion of Ukraine and do not recognise Ukrainian regions annexed by Russia as parts of the Russian Federation;
- D. whereas on 28 March 2023, the EU's Special Envoy on Sanctions called on the countries in the region to avoid assisting Moscow's attempts to evade sanctions imposed on Russia over its war of aggression against Ukraine;
- E. whereas Russian officials and propagandists continue to use aggressive rhetoric against some Central Asian states, in particular against Kazakhstan, questioning its territorial integrity and national identity;
- F. whereas circumstances such as Russia's isolation as a result of its war of aggression against Ukraine, the strengthening of trade routes through Central Asia bypassing Russia, the planned enlargement of the EU in Eastern Europe and the growing influence of China in the region call for a complete rethink of the EU's Central Asia strategy and a more active presence of the democratic EU in the region as an alternative to established autocratic actors;
- G. whereas there is a need to ensure connectivity between Europe and Asia in a way that avoids crossing Russian territory; whereas the EU has a strong interest in the deployment of efficient trade and energy corridors between Europe and Asia, as demonstrated by the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference held in Samarkand on 18 November 2022;
- H. whereas all five Central Asian states ratified the Paris Agreement; whereas they are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change; whereas reckless water mismanagement and pollution of major rivers for the irrigation of cotton fields resulted in the ineffective use and exploitation of water resources in the region; whereas glaciers in Central Asia continue to shrink rapidly, exacerbating one of the most severe water crises on Earth and exposing the vulnerable population of the area to disastrous health, ecological and social problems; whereas frequent water conflicts and political instability have limited unified planning and efficient allocation of transboundary rivers; whereas the geopolitical shifts in the wider region pose opportunities for more meaningful regional cooperation; whereas such regional cooperation has proven impactful in the context of water diplomacy and resolving border disputes, and will be even more crucial to address the growing transboundary threats posed by climate change;

^(?) OJ C 404, 6.10.2021, p. 202.

- I. whereas Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) are new-generation agreements that are the cornerstone of the EU's engagement with Central Asia; whereas Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian state to sign an EPCA in 2015, which came into force on 1 March 2020 following its ratification by all Member States, and should be periodically reviewed; whereas negotiations on the EU-Kyrgyzstan EPCA were concluded on 6 July 2019, but the agreement has still not been signed as a result of a legal dispute between the Council and the Commission; whereas negotiations on the EU-Uzbekistan EPCA were concluded on 6 July 2022; whereas at the beginning of 2023, the EU and Tajikistan started negotiations on an EPCA; whereas a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Turkmenistan was signed in 1998, but Parliament has not given its consent to ratify the agreement because of its deep concern over the short-term benchmarks for Turkmenistan's progress on human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- J. whereas the first EU-Central Asian leaders' meeting took place in Astana on 27 October 2022, followed by a second such meeting in Cholpon-Ata on 2 June 2023; whereas a leaders' summit is planned for 2024; whereas these meetings represent further institutionalisation of EU-Central Asian relations and complement the work of existing regional dialogues and platforms;
- K. whereas the first C5+1 summit between Central Asian leaders and the President of the United States was held in New York on 19 September 2023; whereas the C5+Germany summit took place in Berlin on 29 September 2023;
- L. whereas all five Central Asian states have low and declining democracy scores and are classified as authoritarian regimes and as 'not free' by Freedom House's 2023 Freedom in the World report; whereas the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has reported a marked deterioration in the press freedom situation in Central Asia and the average score for Central Asia in the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index was well below the global average; whereas Reporters Without Borders has reported numerous cases of Central Asian authorities pressuring their media to either cover Russia's invasion of Ukraine in a 'neutral' manner, or to ignore it altogether;
- M. whereas Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs visited Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on 21-25 February 2022 and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on 21-25 August 2023; whereas its Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia maintains regular inter-parliamentary relations with the Central Asian countries;
- N. whereas in Central Asia, there are well grounded fears of radicalisation, growing extremism and a terrorist threat, with a very high number of former ISIS fighters returning to the region and a dire security situation in Afghanistan;
- O. whereas women and girls in Central Asia remain highly vulnerable to abuse, especially as there is a high level of acceptance of violence against women and low awareness of gender stereotypes;
- P. whereas child marriage remains common in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where one in every eight girls is married before 18 years of age;

EU engagement with Central Asia

1. Underlines that the EU and Central Asia are facing profound global and regional geopolitical shifts and challenges, which provide significant impetus for them to work towards long-term, structured and mutually beneficial cooperation in matters of common interest; strongly encourages the EU to intensify its engagement with Central Asia, given the geostrategic importance of the region, and to promote a strategic partnership with these countries by expanding cooperation at political and economic level; welcomes the increased high-level contact between the EU and Central Asia, in particular the meetings between the Central Asian heads of state and the President of the European Council, and the work of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia; calls for follow-up to all these high-level meetings and declarations with concrete actions; welcomes, in this context, that the first EU-Central Asia summit is planned for 2024, as well as the endorsement of the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia, which serves as a strategic blueprint to advance dialogue and cooperation in specific areas, including building cultural, social and economic resilience; encourages the EU to continue promoting political and economic reforms that strengthen the rule of law, democracy, good governance and respect for human rights; notes that Parliament is ready to promote parliamentary cooperation with Central Asia;

2. Notes that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its increased nationalistic narratives have weakened Russia's standing in the region and have encouraged Central Asia to pursue cooperation with other actors, and that these actors have stepped up their cooperation with Central Asia; takes note also of Chinese engagement in the region; stresses that the EU now has the opportunity to expand its ties with Central Asia and play a more prominent role in the region; underlines that the EU should use this window of opportunity to foster mutually beneficial cooperation and offer Central Asia a partnership that can become a special track in a broader strategy towards the EU's Eastern neighbours; considers that strengthening this cooperation would also contribute to counteracting Russia's influence in the region;

3. Underlines the importance of transatlantic cooperation on Central Asia and invites the EU to take initiative in working out a joint strategy for Central Asia with the United States, which should include cooperation in the areas of democracy promotion, investments and trade, economy and regional security;
4. Reiterates the commitment of the EU to work together with the countries of Central Asia for peace, security, stability, prosperity and sustainable development in full respect of international law, as well as the principles of respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, non-use of force or threat of its use and the peaceful settlement of international disputes;
5. Rejects any attempt to facilitate or assist in any way the international recognition of the secessionist entity in occupied Cyprus, including in relation to its alleged acceptance as an observer in the Organization of Turkic States; encourages the Central Asian states concerned to effectively uphold the respect of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states and to not ratify the amended Statute of the Organization of Turkic States, which would put into effect the decision to grant observer status;
6. Recognises that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its implications present both challenges and opportunities for the Central Asian states, which have traditionally maintained close relations with Russia; underlines the EU's interest in increasing economic relations and intensifying political ties with the countries of Central Asia, in part to minimise the circumvention of sanctions against Russia and Belarus; emphasises the significance of continued close exchange on sanctions and calls on the authorities of the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to cooperate closely with the EU, in particular its Sanctions Envoy, in order to intensify their efforts to prevent sanctions circumvention; condemns the procedure of Russia recruiting Central Asian migrants and citizens to fight in Ukraine and supports actions aimed at putting an end to it; notes the individual efforts of the Central Asian states to ensure that their territories are not used to circumvent the EU sanctions and welcomes Kazakhstan's administrative measures and high-level political commitment in this regard; invites the EU to use a differentiated approach in its Central Asia strategy, which will assess the level of cooperation with the EU on the sanctions policy towards Russia; notes the role that Member States themselves play in ensuring that export goods that will likely still make their way to Russia via Central Asia undergo the appropriate preventive controls;
7. Considers that a review of the EU-Central Asia strategy is necessary in order to update it in the light of the geopolitical events that have taken place in recent years; reiterates the key role of EPCAs as the framework for cooperation with the Central Asian states; notes, with concern, that the EPCA with Kyrgyzstan, negotiations on which were concluded in 2019, remains unsigned; calls on the Council and the Commission to rapidly advance the ongoing negotiations on an EPCA with Tajikistan, and to resolve the outstanding issues and sign the EPCAs with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan without further delay in order for Parliament to exercise its prerogatives regarding the ratification of these agreements; stresses that failure to sign such agreements after the conclusion of negotiations calls into question the EU's credibility as a global actor;
8. Notes that the EPCAs with the Central Asian states negotiated to date put a strong emphasis on respect for democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law; stresses the importance of mainstreaming human rights, democratic values, gender equality, free media and the green transition in interactions with the Central Asian governments;

Regional cooperation

9. Underlines the great potential of mutually beneficial cooperation on sustainable development, connectivity, energy, critical raw materials and security, with Central Asia being a key region for connectivity between East and West; recalls, in this context, the significant geopolitical consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which have reinvigorated the Middle Corridor not only as a regional economic zone, but also as an alternative and sustainable route between Asia and Europe that avoids crossing Russian territory; recalls that the New Eurasian Land Bridge passes through sanctioned Russian and Belarusian territory; stresses the significance of promoting regional integration along the Middle Corridor and notes that in order to attract much needed financing for infrastructure projects under the Global Gateway, the bottlenecks identified in the study conducted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development must be eliminated; calls on the Commission to investigate the possibility of the European Investment Bank's support for investments in infrastructure development in Central Asian states, especially in the Middle Corridor;
10. Believes that the EU's policy towards Central Asia in the fields of energy, connectivity and resource diversification should be inspired by the European Green Deal and based on mutually beneficial strategic partnerships that take into account the peculiarities of each of the Central Asian states, ensuring their access to modern technologies and quality jobs, while guaranteeing secure and competitive access to raw materials and energy for the EU; is concerned, in this regard, with the creation of dependency on Russia as a result of the signing of the natural gas deal between Gazprom and Uzbekistan through Kazakhstan;

11. Recognises the crucial role of the EU in financing Central Asia's sectoral reforms, improving its energy efficiency and reducing its greenhouse gas emissions; welcomes the launch of the Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia (SECCA) project in 2022, and looks forward to its positive impact on strengthening national policies for transitioning to a sustainable energy system and increasing investment, capacity and awareness in renewable energy and energy efficiency in the region;

12. Underlines the importance of a positive investment climate for the economic development of Central Asia and EU-Central Asian trade and cooperation; highlights that a positive investment climate leading to the creation of quality workplaces with adequate salaries and decent working conditions depends on stable democratic institutions, respect for human rights and the rule of law, as well as the capacity of businesses and civil society for due diligence application;

13. Notes the Central Asian states', with the exception of Tajikistan, long-standing approach of maintaining relations with Afghanistan and their evolving pragmatic engagement with the Taliban, which they nevertheless do not recognise, since the takeover in 2021; underlines that countries in the region, in particular Pakistan and China, but also the Central Asian states, play a key role in ensuring stability in Afghanistan through the provision of humanitarian aid, electricity, trade opportunities and joint connectivity projects; encourages the EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan to continue cooperating closely with counterparts in the Central Asian states as part of the EU-Central Asia dialogue on Afghanistan; recognises that Central Asia is a crucial area for containing religious extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking networks and faces increased migratory pressure due to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan; reiterates its outrage at the Taliban's treatment of women as less than secondary citizens and calls on the European External Action Service and the EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan to cooperate with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in assisting women who try to flee Afghanistan;

14. Highlights the EU's role as an important donor of aid to the region; underlines the importance of taking a united approach as Team Europe, as this makes it possible to create synergies and maximise the impact of the action taken and showcases the benefits of multilateral cooperation, and brings together the best tools and partners, such as civil society organisations, human rights defenders, independent media and experts, and the public and private sector, to deliver the intended impact; stresses the need to ensure the visibility of EU assistance and investment and calls for EU assistance and budget support to the Central Asian states to be linked to concrete benchmarks for progress on democratic reforms, human rights, protection, the rule of law and sustainable development; stresses the importance of coordinated cooperation with other partners and international organisations to enable synergies and avoid duplication;

15. Notes that climate change, a growing population and economic needs are putting increasing strain on water resources in Central Asia; stresses the need for closer regional cooperation on this matter between upstream and downstream countries in order to prevent conflicts over the distribution and use of water resources; welcomes regional platforms, such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, which encourage dialogue and cooperation between Central Asian states; recalls that the EU-Central Asia environmental dialogue was established in order to support the stabilisation of the Aral Sea and foster better management of water resources; calls for the implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change and stands ready to provide expertise and cooperation in order to achieve this;

16. Highlights that settling conflicts, including those concerning water distribution, in line with international law and good neighbourly relations, and avoiding at all costs the use or threat of force are crucial for achieving both long-term regional stability and the Sustainable Development Goals; underlines the importance of the delimitation and demarcation of disputed border areas between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to prevent further military clashes between the two countries and welcomes the steps taken by both sides in this regard; reiterates the EU's offer to support the peaceful settlement of the conflict through technical assistance and confidence-building measures; welcomes the settlement of the border delimitation issue between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in January 2023; reiterates that the EU is committed to the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the area;

Democracy and human rights

17. Insists that respect for human rights and compliance with international obligations are important for the EU's relations with Central Asia; urges the Central Asian states to adhere to their democracy and human rights obligations, noting that this is also in line with the PCAs and the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+); stresses the importance of maintaining regular human rights dialogues with the Central Asian states, as these dialogues are an instrument to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and political pluralism, and a forum to raise issues of concern; calls on the EU delegations and the Member States' representations in Central Asia to continue playing an active role in monitoring the situation on the ground, working with human rights defenders and reacting to human rights violations and politically-motivated persecution, including by attending trials and visiting political prisoners; encourages cooperation with UN treaty bodies and special procedures as well as in multilateral human rights forums such as the UN Human Rights Council;

18. Is concerned about the lack of accountability for serious human rights violations on a large scale, including the employment of harsh measures by authorities to end mass protests and ensuing unrest during the so-called 'Bloody January' events in Kazakhstan, as well as in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in Tajikistan and in the Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan; calls on the authorities in all five Central Asian states to take effective measures to launch independent and thorough investigations into all allegations of torture and ill-treatment and other serious human rights violations, and to prevent the use of excessive force and torture by police and security forces; calls on the governments of Central Asian states to carry out judicial reforms with a view to ensuring greater independence and transparency;

19. Underlines the fundamental democratic shortcomings in Central Asia, with regard to democratic governance, the rule of law and human rights protection, which still persist and have worsened in several respects recently; underlines the need to make election processes more transparent, open and fair for all political actors; highlights the important role that civil society can play in supporting and advancing democratic reforms, good governance and human rights protection in Central Asia; regrets the restrictive approach taken in legislative initiatives on non-governmental organisations and the media, which reduce the space for civil society activities; calls on the Central Asian states to take meaningful steps to address these shortcomings, to implement relevant International Labour Organization conventions and ensure compliance with their international obligations concerning democratic governance and human rights protection, while noting that they have committed to do so under the PCAs with the EU, the negotiated EPCAs and the EU's GSP+; notes that the Central Asian states have young and dynamic populations that should be given opportunities to get meaningfully involved in shaping their countries' future; welcomes the activities of the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum and calls for the EU to enhance its support to civil society;

20. Notes the need to boost Central Asia's resilience against disinformation by promoting independent media and content in local languages, increasing media literacy and organising targeted courses for local journalists; stresses the need to strengthen media independence and pluralism and freedom of expression in Central Asia in line with the highest democratic standards; calls for greater transparency of media ownership and financing with the aim of enhancing media independence and pluralism; regrets that Central Asian authorities have exploited the fight against disinformation to restrict the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression, including by accusing those who speak out on corruption, injustice and government abuse of allegedly spreading 'false' information, inciting 'discord' and promoting 'extremism'; is concerned about the increasing number of arrests of journalists and bloggers and about threats to close independent media outlets; insists that respect for the rights of journalists, independent bloggers, human rights defenders and civic and environmental activists must be ensured, that they must be guaranteed protection against harassment, pressure and threats, that any attacks against them must be investigated and that all those unjustly detained and imprisoned are immediately and unconditionally released; condemns the number of recent government initiatives to shut down independent media services and block access to their sites in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the draft media legislation currently under consideration in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan that threaten to increase state control over media operations;

21. Calls on the Central Asian authorities to release all political prisoners; calls specifically on the authorities of Kazakhstan to release: Aigerim Tleuzhan, Marat Zhylanbayev, Bekizhan Mendygazyev, Timur Danebayev, Kairat Klyshev; calls on the authorities of Kyrgyzstan to release: Azimbek Beknazarov, Aibek Buzurmankulov, Aidanbek Akmatov, Temir Makhmudov, Marat Bayazov; calls on the authorities of Uzbekistan to release: Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov, Allabai Tokymbetov, Nurlan Naiypov, Amirbek Adilbekov; calls on the authorities of Tajikistan to release: Faromuz Irgashov, Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, Khursand Mamadshoev, Khushruz Djumaev; calls on the authorities of Turkmenistan to release: Omruzak Omarkuliev, Murat Dushemov, Murat Ovezov, Mansur Mingelov, Nurgeldy Khalykov;

22. Is concerned that, even though gender equality is supposedly protected by law in all countries, gender-based violence, domestic violence, child marriage, discrimination and harassment of ethnic and religious minorities and LGBTIQ people are still widespread in Central Asia; urges the Central Asian governments to prevent these human rights violations through appropriate laws, education campaigns and measures, including increasing the awareness and qualifications of public officers, notably police officers, strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to advocate for legislative changes, improving frontline support services for survivors and raising awareness to combat existing stereotypes and promote equality in society; expresses concern that criminalisation of LGBTIQ people remains in place, basic anti-discrimination legislation is lacking in most countries, corrective rape is being used against lesbians and there is a lack of safe spaces for LGBTIQ people to gather, with ongoing raids on bars and social spaces, and police brutality rife; stresses that any EU strategy on Central Asia must be in line with the EU's Gender Action Plan III;

23. Reiterates its concerns about rampant corruption and kleptocracy in Central Asia, which erodes trust in government, fuels inequality, deprives citizens of public services and slows down economic growth; calls on the Central Asian governments to take action beyond widespread anti-corruption rhetoric and to finally commit to fighting corruption and kleptocracy and to adopt national strategies focusing on an integrated approach to the prevention and repression of corruption as well as to increase transparency and access to information, and to limit private influence;

24. Underlines that the EU should capitalise on its positive image in Central Asia by engaging in more cultural and public diplomacy; advocates for strengthening ties and increasing opportunities for collaboration between European and Central Asian institutions and fostering people-to-people contact and mobility, offering opportunities in education and science, such as academic-level exchange through the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes, and increasing sustainable tourism;

25. Notes the willingness of Central Asian states to start a visa liberalisation dialogue with the EU and calls on the Commission to intensify consultations on developing targeted and comprehensive reform roadmaps for the Central Asian states to pave the way for visa facilitation and readmission agreements;

Bilateral cooperation

26. Notes that Kazakhstan is the first Central Asian state with a ratified EPCA, which provides a solid foundation for expanding cooperation in key areas of mutual interest, such as connectivity, energy efficiency, green economy and digitalisation; welcomes the signing of the memorandum of understanding between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the EU on a strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen value chains; calls on the Kazakh authorities to continue implementing political and economic reforms, which should strengthen democracy, the rule of law and good governance; underlines that implementation of the vision of 'Just and Fair Kazakhstan' must ensure respect for human rights and freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and improve the electoral framework in line with the recommendations of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights; calls on the Kazakh authorities to complete the investigation into the January 2022 events, to publish their findings and to ensure justice for victims of torture; notes the potential benefits of increased people-to-people exchanges with Kazakhstan through a visa facilitation agreement, the consultations on which started in May 2023;

27. Underlines that the upcoming signing of the EPCA and the ongoing GSP+ implementation put further emphasis on the need to ensure the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Kyrgyzstan in line with its international commitments; observes, with concern, the deterioration of democratic standards and human rights in recent years, considering that Kyrgyzstan has been regarded as the most democratic country in the region with a vibrant civil society and free media; is concerned about the persecution of the political opposition, among others representatives of the Social Democrats Party, and the negative impact of legislative initiatives that target the activities of independent media and civil society, notably the law on 'false information' and draft laws on 'foreign representatives', 'mass media' and 'protecting children from harmful information', and the increasing number of cases against human rights defenders, media workers and journalists as well as media outlets; calls for the EU to continue supporting civil society and independent media;

28. Notes that the start of negotiations on the EPCA agreement with Tajikistan is an opportunity to broaden the scope of bilateral cooperation and exchanges; underlines the need for continued close cooperation on security issues as Afghanistan continues to be a source of instability and security concerns owing to harsh rule by the Taliban and ongoing humanitarian crises in the country; reiterates that the legitimate fight against terrorism and violent extremism should not be used as a pretext to suppress opposition activity, hinder freedom of expression or hamper the independence of the judiciary; welcomes Tajikistan's interest in joining the GSP+, which can support sustainable economic growth and boost trade, and requires effective implementation of international human and labour rights standards; calls on Tajikistan to improve the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of expression, and to stop intimidating and persecuting media workers, human rights defenders, independent lawyers and civil society as well as the repression of the Pamiri minority in the GBAO;

29. Notes that Turkmenistan remains the only Central Asian state without a PCA with the EU, which limits the scope for bilateral engagement; stresses that Turkmenistan needs to demonstrate an improvement in its dire democracy and human rights record in order for Parliament to reconsider its position and ratify the PCA; urges the Turkmenistan Government to decriminalise consensual sexual relations between men; notes that it should be in Turkmenistan's interest to open up in order to avoid being the outlier in the region with limited options for cooperation; recognises the potential of mutually beneficial cooperation in areas such as energy, connectivity and trade, and welcomes Turkmenistan's expressed interest in supplying gas to Europe by means of building a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline;

30. Notes the announced reforms in Uzbekistan aimed at achieving genuine change in the country in terms of socio-economic development, efficient administration, a more independent judicial system and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; stresses that the constitutional reform is an opportunity to strengthen the rule of law and to give the reforms a solid legal foundation; reiterates, nevertheless, its deep concern over Uzbekistan's poor record on democracy, media freedom, human rights and the rule of law, including the brutal crackdown on the Karakalpakstan protest, restrictions on freedom of association for both non-governmental organisations and political parties, and persecution of and threats against journalists, independent bloggers, content producers and human rights defenders; reminds the authorities of the importance of upholding the freedom of expression, both online and offline, the freedom of assembly, the freedom of association and the independence of the media; welcomes some noteworthy improvements in women's rights in Uzbekistan; urges the Uzbekistan Government to decriminalise consensual sexual relations between men; welcomes the completion of negotiations on the EU-Uzbekistan EPCA and reiterates its call for a swift completion of the necessary legal and technical procedures for the signature of the EPCA; welcomes Uzbekistan's leading role in promoting regional cooperation in various fields, including connectivity and the use of water resources;

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31. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and to the presidents, governments and parliaments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
