

POLICY BRIEF



Reconsidering EU Education Assistance to Central Asia

Reconsidering EU Education Assistance to Central Asia

Sebastien Peyrouse is research professor of International Affairs at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington DC.

Introduction¹

Central Asia's educational systems have been deteriorating since the collapse of the Soviet Union. All five Central Asian republics, to varying degrees, lack high-quality, effective education. Bad governance and pervasive corruption have added to the increasing disconnect between students' training and employers' needs. This is hindering the region's human development and long-term economic stability.

Education is a key area of cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Central Asia. Tertiary education has been the main focus of EU support to promote large-scale systemic reform to make Central Asian higher education systems compatible with the Bologna Process (aimed at inter-governmental cooperation on higher education in Europe in the broadest sense). However, most EU-proposed reforms have not been implemented by local governments. First, European political and financial attention has been insufficient as the region is not a high

Key points:

EU education assistance to Central Asia has been provided mostly through grand instruments, not taking into account local circumstances or governments' resistance to change.

Instead of focusing on overhaul reform through the Bologna Process, the EU should carry out more targeted bilateral cooperation projects, which would also help strengthen its image vis-à-vis Central Asian countries.

Engagement with a new generation of local stakeholders (including teachers, students and parents) is key for the EU to have a long-term impact and promote local ownership and appropriation.

¹ This paper is based on broader research on education in Central Asia that includes interviews with local stakeholders (teachers, parents and students) in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Some views were taken from Sebastien Peyrouse, 'How to Strengthen Western Engagement in Central Asia: Spotlight on EU Education Assistance in Uzbekistan', *PONARS Policy Memo*, no. 524, April 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/strengthen-western-engagement-central-asia-spotlight-eu-education-assistance-uzbekistan>. The author thanks Vera Axyonova and Jos Boonstra for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

priority for the EU. Second, Central Asian governments have been disinclined to implement reforms that they see as a threat to their authority. And third, several local actors have often showed unwillingness to accept concepts that they perceive as alien to their social and economic realities.

The new EU strategy for Central Asia² highlights education, and the forthcoming new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (from 2021 onwards) could offer the flexibility to support different aspects of education. The EU's proposal of creating a Central Asian regional higher education area, based on the European Higher Education Area (launched in 2010 as an outcome of the Bologna Process), might work better than the previous one-size-fits-all approach that has undermined the impact of EU education assistance to Central Asia. However, there is still a risk that the approach's relevance and effectiveness come under scrutiny, as it follows the much-criticised Bologna principle.

Rather than focusing on broad reform, the EU should consider several smaller targeted national projects that are more adapted to the local context and consistent with the amount of funding it is able to commit in the long term. This would enable the EU to engage with Central Asia on a practical level over the full spectrum of education and training.

Educational systems undermined

Deprived of Soviet subsidies in the 1990s, Central Asian countries had to reduce between one third (Uzbekistan) and over four times (Tajikistan) the percentage of GDP devoted to education.³ Twenty-five years later, despite increases, Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's spending on education of 5.99 per cent and 5.23 per cent of GDP, respectively, remain well below the necessary threshold given these countries' low GDPs. In 2016, spending on education in wealthier Central Asian states – 2.98 per cent of GDP in Kazakhstan and 3.05 per cent in Turkmenistan – was still below OECD standards.⁴ Against this background, Central Asian governments have decentralised education funding from national budgets to the local oblast level. This has resulted in significant cuts to the funding allocated to schools and local universities, in many cases challenging their very existence. Unable to pay for even basic utilities, many schools have had to resort to other sources of funding, especially contributions from parents.

Budgetary shortfalls have also led authorities to prioritise secondary or tertiary education over lower levels, particularly nursery. In the 2000s and 2010s, less than a quarter of

2 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, 'The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership', Brussels, 15 May 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf

3 'Education Development in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan', Challenges and Ways Forward', Open Society Institute, 2002, p. 12.

4 'Financing of Education Around the World Today', *Our World in Data*, <https://ourworldindata.org/financing-education>

Central Asian children had access to early childhood care and education.⁵ As for secondary education, despite the official enrolment rate of almost 100 per cent, many secondary schools have two or three shifts per day, and pupils are schooled for only a few hours. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, classes lack textbooks and are overcrowded, with as many as 40 pupils per class. Lastly, despite governments' efforts to increase the number of tertiary institutions, in 2016 Central Asia's higher education enrolment rates were still very low – 13 per cent in Tajikistan, 9 per cent in Uzbekistan, and 8 per cent in Turkmenistan, compared to 40-60 per cent among European countries.⁶

Teaching quality has also suffered since independence. With an average salary of less than €100 a month, many teachers are obliged to work a second job to meet basic needs. In 2017, it was estimated that Uzbek schools lacked 20 to 25 per cent of teachers, while schools in Kyrgyzstan suffered a shortage of around 1,500 teachers.⁷ In addition to having overcrowded classrooms, many are compelled to take on additional duties, such as maintenance of school premises. This has led to pervasive corruption among teaching staff and increasing demotivation among students.

Despite these common challenges, there are country-specific political and socio-economic contexts that affect Central Asia's educational systems. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are among the poorest countries in the world and their economies are highly dependent on remittances (32.9 and 31.3 per cent of GDP in 2017, respectively).⁸ High migration rates of parents negatively impacts school attendance of children left behind, especially those from less educated households. That said, according to UNDP's education index⁹, while education in Tajikistan has deteriorated overall (from 0.673 in 2008 to 0.659 in 2017), it has improved in Kyrgyzstan (from 0.597 in 1995 to 0.735 in 2017)¹⁰, among other reasons due to investments in higher education and the positive impact of foreign education institutes such as the OSCE Academy or the American University in Bishkek, which have turned the city into Central Asia's education capital.

In Kazakhstan, educational standards vary between the capital Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) and other major cities that receive significant government funding on the one hand, and disadvantaged – often rural – regions, where chronic under-investment has undermined the quality of education, including infrastructure such as buildings, on the other hand. In terms of higher education, most resources are devoted to Nazarbayev University.¹¹

5 Nazim Habibov, 'Early childhood care and education attendance in Central Asia', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34 (2012): 800.

6 'Enrollment in tertiary education', *Our World in Data*, <https://ourworldindata.org/tertiary-education>

7 'Shkol'naia reforma v Uzbekistane: Chevo zhdat' ot novogo uchebnogo goda', *Centr-1*, August 17, 2017, <https://centre1.com/uzbekistan/shkolnaya-reforma-v-uzbekistane-chego-zhdat-ot-novogo-uchebno-goda/>; 'Schools of Kyrgyzstan suffer shortage of 1,500 teachers', *Akipress*, August 30, 2013, <https://akipress.com/news:527346>

8 See the World Bank's data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/bx.trf.pwkr.dt.gd.zs>

9 The UNDP education index 'is an average of mean years of schooling (of adults) and expected years of schooling (of children), both expressed as an index obtained by scaling with the corresponding maxima'.

10 See UNDP, Human Development Reports, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/103706>

11 'OECD, Education Policy Outlook: Kazakhstan', *OECD Better Policies for Better Lives*, December 2018, p. 19.

In Turkmenistan, the country's first President Saparmurat Niyazov shortened the number of years of mandatory education and required all students to memorise his own writings, virtually destroying the education sector; the superficial and essentially cosmetic measures undertaken by current President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov have only marginally improved the situation. The Turkmen regime's closed nature further complicates prospects for cooperation.

Uzbekistan is the only country where there are some prospects. The changes initiated under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev have opened new possibilities for external support to education development and reform. Uzbekistan's overall reform process also provide opportunities for cooperation and engagement with local stakeholders such as local authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the private sector, something largely restricted under late President Islam Karimov. However, Uzbekistan still needs to decide what to do with its enormous vocational training system that was obligatory under the late President, and the fact that three different ministries oversee education prevents any holistic approach to reforming the overall system.

Deficiencies in the republics' education systems have had a very negative impact on economic and social development. While demand for low-skilled workers has declined markedly in Central Asia over the past fifteen years,¹² youth's lack of skills has massively exacerbated youth unemployment as their education does not meet market needs.

Long-standing European commitment

Since the 1990s, EU education assistance to Central Asia has mostly focused on tertiary education:

First, between the break-up of the Soviet Union until 2013, a regional programme, Tempus, supported the modernisation of higher education in 27 countries, including all five Central Asian states. The programme promoted tertiary education reform in line with the Bologna Process, aimed at developing 'a common higher education area in Europe, with a system of comparable qualifications (short cycle, bachelor, master, doctorate) [...] to make sure these meet the needs of a changing labour market'.¹³ Tempus enabled the creation of some joint degrees between Central Asian and EU universities, and contributed to setting up new evaluation systems.

Second, the Erasmus Mundus programme, initially aimed at EU member states, was extended to non-European states in 2004. It promotes student and academic staff mobility at all levels of tertiary education (bachelor, masters, and doctorate) through joint higher

¹² Open Society Institute, op. cit., p. 9.

¹³ See the European Commission's website introduction on the Bologna Process. https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area_en

education programmes and individual scholarships. In addition, in 2006 the EU Commission launched the Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window to support cross-national partnerships and cooperation exchanges among higher education institutions from Europe and other regions, including Central Asia.¹⁴

In 2014, the Tempus and Erasmus Mundus programmes were merged into Erasmus+. This programme combines all current EU programmes on education, training, youth and sports, and aims to support a wide range of education activities for the period 2014-2020. It provides scholarships for short-term studies in European universities and offers joint master's degrees delivered by a consortium of higher education institutions from different countries.

Third, the EU developed a Regional Initiative on Education under its 2007 strategy for Central Asia, coordinated by the European Commission until 2016 when Latvia and Poland assumed management. As part of the initiative, in 2012 an EU-Central Asia Education Platform (CAEP) was launched with a focus on higher education and vocational training. It aims to support the region's education systems through intra-regional and inter-regional dialogue between the EU and Central Asian states, coordinate EU education activities with other international donors, as well as help mitigate local social issues such as increasing gender inequalities and violent extremism. So far, CAEP has consisted of two phases from 2012 to 2019, which have included multiple meetings, workshops, seminars and conferences, and it is expected to be revised according to the new strategy and extended from mid-2020.¹⁵

Finally, the EU has aimed at contributing to vocational education and training through the European Training Foundation (ETF). ETF advocates for lifelong learning in Central Asia as well as in other regions such as Eastern Europe, the Balkans or the Middle East. In Central Asia, ETF, similar to CAEP's focus on VET, aims to address the increasing gap between what the region's education and training systems provide and labour market needs. Its activities have focused on 'supporting the EU institutions in designing and monitoring EU technical assistance and budget support and on promoting regional cooperation.'¹⁶

Limited impact of EU education assistance

Despite numerous initiatives and efforts, the impact of European assistance on Central Asia's education sector has been below expectations, at times controversial, and has lacked visibility. The new strategy presents an opportunity to incorporate best practices and lessons learnt from both Central Asia and other regions.

First, the EU's belief that the Western education system could be transferred greatly

¹⁴ Vera Axyonova, 'The EU Education Initiative for Central Asia five years on: lessons learnt', *EUCAM Policy Brief*, no. 30, February 2013, p. 2.

¹⁵ For more details, see <https://www.caep-project.org/project-presentation/>

¹⁶ See the ETF website https://www.etf.europa.eu/ru/regions-and-countries?field_related_regions_target_id_verf=16

underestimated the diversity of the post-Soviet space. By using a one-size-fits-all approach to post-Soviet countries, European education assistance has generally excluded local stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students) and ignored Central Asia's multiple historical, political, economic, social and cultural contexts and values. Meanwhile, Central Asian authoritarian regimes have significantly restricted foreign donors' access to local stakeholders. As a result, there has been little sense of local ownership of European education programmes.

The lack of local ownership has led some Central Asian stakeholders to resist EU-proposed reforms. For many teachers, concepts such as student-centred learning – versus the teacher-centred Soviet model – are unsustainable unless there are significant improvements to teachers' working conditions, i.e. better salaries, lightening of the workload, political liberalisation, etc. In addition, many did not appreciate how EU programmes radically undermined the Soviet education system – *obrazovanie* – with which they grew up and which they considered of high quality, despite its faults, and respected for being universal and tuition-free.

Second, the EU underestimated Central Asia's authoritarian and corrupt political context. EU-led reforms have stumbled on authoritarian regimes' lack of capacity and, above all, their tendency to want to control the population's capacity development and productivity. Despite their stated openness to cooperation with the EU, Central Asian authorities have been often unwilling to implement signed agreements or promote so-called Western ideas, such as critical thinking. Hence, students have continued to be approached as merely recipients of knowledge rather than producers of original thought.

Despite resistance to reform, Central Asian governments have used cooperation on education with the EU to gain international prestige. For example, Kazakhstani authorities were proud to enter the Bologna Process and integrate into the European Higher Education Area, but have not yet fully implemented the necessary reforms, lagging behind in terms of university autonomy, faculty empowerment, development of local communities, and the free flow of international knowledge.¹⁷ Instead of fostering reform, Kazakhstan's premature integration might have had the unintended consequence of slowing it down.

The way forward

The new EU strategy for Central Asia and the expected new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument provide an opportunity for the EU to reconsider its practice of applying a 'simplistic external answer from the West to a complex internal problem in the Rest' in order to avoid repeating a cycle of 'idealism, high expectations,

¹⁷ Dennis Soltys, 'Similarities, divergence, and incapacity in the Bologna Process reform implementation by the former-socialist countries: the self-defeat of state regulations', *Comparative Education*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2015): 192.

disappointing results [and] cynical backlash'.¹⁸ Without significant improvements to the socio-economic conditions of local stakeholders, particularly teachers and the many households for which access to education has become a heavy financial burden, and real commitment by Central Asian governments to move from rote instruction to free and critical thinking, large-scale reform programmes will not work.

The idea of creating a Central Asian higher education area is more promising than previous approaches, but if the EU moves forward with the concept, it must be careful not to divert too many resources that could be used to support several smaller initiatives (ongoing or new) that could significantly contribute to improving local education. Ideally, these smaller programmes would be promoted through bilateral education programmes with Central Asian partners, and vary in depth and scope depending on local needs and, in particular, partners' genuine interest.¹⁹

First, in tertiary education, the EU could take advantage of current programmes to allow more Central Asians to study at European universities. This would contribute to counteracting the considerable dearth of slots for students in Central Asian universities, help strengthen people-to-people contacts between both regions, as well as provide an alternative to Russia's and China's higher education systems that have been more welcoming to Central Asian students. In 2016-2017, less than 15,000 Central Asian students were enrolled in European universities, compared to over 150,000²⁰ and 30,000²¹ Central Asian students in Russian and Chinese universities, respectively. Furthermore, the EU's Erasmus Mundus programme only allows students to stay in Europe for a few months. The ability to stay longer to study an entire course or supplementary and/or specialised education would contribute to building the region's human capital in many sectors where proper training is lacking in Central Asia and where the EU possesses important educative capacity. One of the targets set by the new strategy – to increase the number and diversity of Central Asian beneficiaries – is certainly a step in the right direction.

Second, the EU could support existing and successful educational facilities such as the OSCE Academy in Bishkek or help facilitate the opening of satellite campuses of European universities, like the Turin Polytechnic University and the Westminster International University in Uzbekistan. These universities are very popular among students and parents. Despite their relatively high enrolment fees, they are not affected by corruption that results in random fee increases in Central Asian universities. Moreover, their high quality can help tackle the mismatch between market and employers' needs and the skills of graduates

18 William Easterly, *The White Man Burden. Why the West Effort to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (Penguin Books, 2006).

19 Jos Boonstra (ed.), Marlene Laruelle, Andreas Marazis and Tika Tsertsvadze, 'A new EU-Central Asia Strategy: Deepening relationships and generating long-lasting impact', *EUCAM Working Paper* No. 20, October 2018.

20 '25 let vmeste: Lavrov o partnerstve Rossii so stranami Central'noj Azii', *Mir24*, October 4, 2017, <https://mir24.tv/news/16270650/25-let-vmeste-lavrov-o-partnerstve-rossii-so-stranami-centralnoi-azii>

21 Aleksandr Shustov, "Miagkaia sila drakona: kak Kitai pytaetsia zavoevat' vliianie v Central'noj Azii," *Eurasia Ekspert*, 9 January 2018, <http://eurasia.expert/myagkaya-sila-drakona-kak-kitay-pytaetsya-zavoevat-vliianie-v-tsentralnoy-azii/>; See also the UNESCO website <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>

from local Central Asian universities. As Central Asian graduates of European universities enter the world of work, they would apply their high-quality skills in their professions in the private and public sectors, attesting to the potential positive impact of an increased European university presence in Central Asia.

Third, the EU and its member states should focus more on basic and elementary education; a sector that the new strategy does not address. It is precisely the lack of such basic education that impedes Central Asian youth from accessing higher education, which is the focus of the European Union. In particular, there is a need to improve infrastructure. The EU could fund the restoration of schools that are being currently supported mainly by parents as well as the building of schools in remote areas such as the mountainous regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where there is urgent need.

Fourth, the EU could contribute to improving the quality of instruction, including in European languages, by implementing targeted support programmes for teachers that include, among others, direct training, the organisation of seminars in Central Asia or Europe, fellowships in universities, or support to NGOs dedicated to teacher training.

Fifth, although vocational training is an essential sector of cooperation in the 2019 EU strategy, the EU needs to develop new initiatives to materialise its new declaration of intention. South Korea's model of opening several vocational training centres in Uzbekistan and providing them with support grants, among other things, could be a good example to follow.²² Within its broad programming, the EU could also promote trainings in line with market needs, including for vocational jobs. In this sense, it is a good development that the new EU strategy for Central Asia stresses the promotion of synergies between educational systems and the labour market. The EU should also promote European private sector engagement in local vocational training, for example through subsidies or tax deductions.



By UN Women Europe and Central Asia under Creative Commons License

²² 'Samarkandskomu centru professional'nogo obucheniia predostavljen millionnyi grant Respubliki Koreia', *Novosti Uzbekistana*, 27 February 2019, <https://nuz.uz/obschestvo/38986-samarkandskomu-centru-professionalnogo-obucheniya-predostavljen-millionnyy-grant-respubliki-koreya.html>

The 2019 strategy's overall attention to education in Central Asia is certainly a positive step. Yet, this was already part of the 2007 strategy and, therefore, will need to be materialised through concrete projects. This means revising the EU's assistance to education through a 'hands-on' approach and taking local circumstances into account. Instead of urging governments to adopt prematurely big reform models like the Bologna Process, the EU should launch new, more specific initiatives. Many are already mentioned in the new strategy, such as the inclusion of European studies in Central Asian universities and improving language training. This would not only make EU education assistance more effective, but it would also strengthen the EU's image as an engaged actor who is able to respond to local social and economic needs. This would also help the EU go beyond cooperating mainly with ruling elites, which is risky for both donors and intended recipients. Finally, and most fundamentally, local actors, trained in EU institutions or in local branches of European universities and then integrated into the higher echelons of the administration, would become vectors of real change, overcoming the defects and corruption of the current system and initiating new approaches and substantive reforms.



Established in 2008 by FRIDE as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. As part of CESS, EUCAM will continue to raise the profile of European-Central Asian relations in general, and more specifically to:

- Critically, though constructively, scrutinize European policies towards Central Asia;
- Enhance knowledge of European engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research;
- Raise awareness on the importance of Central Asia and Europe's engagement, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from Europe and Central Asia and provide a forum for debate.



The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance political development, democracy, human rights and in particular security, by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges.

CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.



Supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.