

"The European Union is not about imposing"

Interview with Patricia Flor, EU Special Representative for Central Asia

One year after her appointment as a European Union Special Representative for Central Asia, Eurasian Dialogue could interview Mrs Patricia Flor and discuss the past, present and future of EU-Central Asia relationships.

The EU Central Asia strategy is not expected to change, but you have mentioned an additional dimension of high-level security dialogue being set up in 2013 between the EU and Central Asia – could you explain this in more detail?

The European Union has been active in the security field now for a couple of years, including border management and fighting drugs. What we want to do now is to intensify that and have a regular and intensified dialogue with the Central Asians. This is particularly relevant now when we look at Afghanistan, as we will see a transition as of 2014. The idea is to have a more systematized dialogue about security issues while also looking into concrete proposals about how we can further develop our programs with Central Asia in the security field. The first meeting of the High-Level Security dialogue took place on 13 June in Brussels.



Post-2014, what will the EU's concrete role be and can we expect new delegations, more presence and increasing relations?

First of all let me say that even though 2014 is a transition year for Afghanistan, it is really not a year in which the overall EU-Central Asia relations will change. The EU-Central Asia strategy was adopted in 2007, then after five years there was a review and it was reaffirmed by the Foreign Ministers of the EU and High Representative Catherine Ashton in 2012. So, the EU-Central Asia strategy, with its priorities like development, water and the environment, rule of law, regional cooperation, human rights and so forth, will continue to be the framework for the EU-Central Asia relationship. It will not change in 2014.

But, realistically, on the ground there will be a big change?

It remains to be seen. It is true for Afghanistan, where there will be a transition from NATO to the Afghan national security forces, but of course the question of what the impact on central Asia will be remains to be seen – there is a lot of speculation around that. I would say that the EU is committed to continued engagement, within EU-Central Asia framework, but also with Afghanistan and the whole region through the Istanbul process. So the EU is committed to supporting confidence building measures in the bigger region (the Istanbul process encompasses Afghanistan and other neighbors like China, Pakistan and Iran). The EU would like to support commercial opportunities for everyone in the region as well as the fight against drug trafficking. There will be increased opportunities also for Central Asia through this Istanbul process. As you can easily see, this of course means increasing trade between Central Asia and South Asia, through Afghanistan, in energy and in other goods and services. So, I would say that while everyone focuses on the security threat, the other side of the coin is what

actually can be brought to the region in terms of economic development. Because without social and economic development there will be no stability in the region.

Germany has played an important role as an economic actor tied to Central Asia. Will the EU also be putting more efforts into convincing countries to opt for more economic ties with Central Asian countries?

The EU-Central Asia strategy was always a joint-endeavor. It had a regional aspect in the sense of bringing the EU and all of Central Asia together, it had a bilateral aspect in terms of EU relations with each of the Central Asian countries and it had an aspect of member state engagement. There are a couple of activities in Central Asia like the platforms on water and environment for example that are being coordinated by EU Member States, so it is always complementary. The EU does coordinate with member states, so that we don't overlap, making sure that one member state engages in rule of law, while others engage in the environment for example.

The EU now has full-fledged delegations with ambassadors at the helm, in four out of the five Central Asian member countries. We have an EU liaison office in Turkmenistan which will slowly grow up to be a delegation.

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How will you be working with Moscow, Washington and Beijing? And will there be a place for Ankara as well?

It is part of my mandate as EU Special Representative to make the connection to all other relevant actors. I do travel to Washington, Moscow and Ankara and I'm also looking forward to receiving a Chinese delegation for consultations on Central Asia in July. The reason being that the EU today is a well-established partner in Central Asia, but there are many others with their own ties to central Asia. You mention Ankara, where there is an ethnic and language tie. So, it is good to see where they have their priorities, where we have ours and see whether there is scope for joint interest.

Is there a lot of 'joint interest' with Turkey?

The EU would want to see a peaceful, stable, prosperous Central Asia that is built on rule of law and democracy. That is our experience of how you achieve stability. And I believe that the EU and Turkey share many of these interests. And part of that mix is that Turkey is active economically and in education. Turkey has been instrumental in creating the Istanbul process. There are many really common goals and objectives that we have. I would also say that there are joint interests with Moscow. The Russians want to fight drug trafficking, which we want as well. We want to ensure stability in the region, but sometimes differ on other aspects like NGO's and human rights, where we might come from a different angle. In other spheres there is a common interest.

How will you promote better civil society and EU-Central Asia ties? Could you give some examples of funds, projects and ideas?

The EU attempts to include Central Asian civil society in many of its activities. There are many projects, which are financed from the EU budget and run by NGO's. To give you an example, in areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, there are a couple of projects to do with inter-ethnic relations and dialogue between different actors, including things like trial monitoring. These are often being done by local NGO's. We finance it, but we look for partners on the ground to complete these tasks. The EU is

also very active in water and environmental areas. These are areas where you also have NGO's involved. They are usually called upon for advice and consultation, while others are directly involved in the implementation process. That is an intensive contact we have with NGO's.

“The EU is first and foremost very transparent”

The EU is first and foremost very transparent. We usually give funds via local tenders. Sometimes there are working groups and sessions which both involve civil society groups and government institutions to look at broader problems like water issues and the environment. Human rights dialogues are generally between EU government representatives and Central Asian government representatives. However, the EU always consults civil society groups in the region beforehand, in order to get a broader understanding of human rights in the area.

You have said before that the EU approach to Central Asia is focused on guaranteeing stability. The region itself, with the exception perhaps of Tajikistan in the 1990s and Kyrgyzstan in 2010, has been relatively stable. However this stability has come with an absence of democratization. Bearing that in mind, how can the EU work to improve the human rights situation in Central Asia?

There can be no long-term stability without human rights and rule of law, as well as the inclusion of people in decision-making. If you look at crisis in the past, it usually has to do with inter-ethnicity, lacking rule of law, corruption and feelings of injustice. My argument is that we all like stability, but if you really want to obtain it you must engage in areas of rule of law and democracy and increased participation. The EU, through the rule of law platform and judicial reforms, does help with the improvement of human rights throughout the Central Asian region.

The EU is a relative newcomer in Central Asia. What, in your opinion, has been its policy success thus far?

The EU did come later than others. But, in all fairness, the EU's foreign policy instruments are also very new in themselves. We have done well in the sense that we are actually now well established, we have delegations on the ground and a strong presence. But we also, established the three platforms of cooperation in the areas of the environment, rule of law and education, where we bring all of the Central Asians together to discuss with the EU. I would argue that the EU is now a partner, which is accepted in the region, as well as being appreciated. And we offer support and assistance in areas where others don't. Russia and China for example are not spending much on judiciary reform and democratization, which is instead covered by the EU. This has earned us legitimacy and trust throughout the region.

Is there a positive perception of the EU in Central Asia?

When people talk about what they like and how they would like to live – many look West, towards the EU. They would like to study and live in the EU and are generally attracted to much of what the EU has to offer. They also say that they are Asian and want to find their own cultural path and practices, but absolutely look to Europe for many things. We are definitely very well appreciated in the region.

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Some commentators have described the relations between the EU and Central Asia as asymmetrical. What can the region offer the EU?

There are relations, which bring benefit to both sides. For example, no drugs coming through the region would benefit both partners. There are also energy resources and growth in the region. To Kazakhstan the EU is the biggest trade partner and economically, it is a region that would benefit from more trade and economic interaction. For future development of the region, Central Asian can definitely work with us. With Afghanistan as a neighbor we have a shared interest in stability – it would be in everyone's interest.

You have been appointed as the EU Special Representative for Central Asia one year ago. What have been the main surprises – good or bad – that you have faced during this year?

It was very interesting to see that, after 20 years of independence, on the ground, lots of progress has been made. My first stay in Central Asia dates back to the 1990s when I was posted to Kazakhstan. I remember what the region looked like and how troubled it was. In many areas the old Soviet system was crumbling and nothing new was there to replace it. In terms of economic and institutional development, many things have been done. New companies have sprung up and an economic boom is obvious when you look at how much has been built over the years. On the other hand, I always regret when I see to which extent there is mistrust among many in the region, which impedes regional cooperation. This is an obstacle, which hinders the fulfillment of regional cooperation. The EU experience shows that you do better economically when you promote business with your neighbors and open your borders, while agreeing on standards and rules of trade. It is about engaging with your neighbours and investing in trustful relationships, rather than prolonging prejudice and mistrust. That is something I continuously try to lobby for, but it is not an easy issue.

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What type of integration are we talking about here? Military, trade, institutional and political?

We are not talking about integration, but cooperation. You start from simple things: for example when some crossing points and borders are closed it doesn't foster trade or cooperation between countries. Environmental challenges are another good example. Both upstream and downstream countries share the same rivers and these countries need to find an understanding that would allow all partners to pursue the legitimate interests that they have. The EU has managed to agree with countries on certain trans-boundary projects. It is a difficult process, but progress is being made.

Would Central Asian countries allow the EU to take up a mediating role?

I would put it differently. I would say that the EU could offer advice and examples on how some of these problems can be solved. Rules and exchange of information can be very helpful to solve some of these problems' sometimes even under very difficult circumstances. Take for example the Rhine Commission that worked through world wars, which shows that countries can manage to work through conflicts and disputes. This know-how from the EU is something we are happy to share with Central Asia to improve the situation, while ensuring stability, which is beneficial for everyone. It is not that they should allow us to do something, they themselves should do it, while we work with them to find good solutions for the benefit of everyone.

What is the leeway for the personality of the EU SR to impact on the actual policy of the EU in Central Asia? In which areas have you brought a particularly personal touch to the mission of the EU SR?

I always find it key to listen and understand the positions of my partners and other interlocutors. I think that if you don't understand their opinion and priorities then you can't productively engage with them. That is why one of the key areas of engagement in water and security is to see where do they see their priorities for cooperation, because the EU is not about imposing; we can offer a lot, but it must be wanted from the other side. There are many areas in which Central Asia wants assistance, like for example in the case of rule of law.

Mrs Patricia Flor has been appointed as a European Union Special Representative for Central Asia in July 2012, succeeding Mr Pierre Morel. Prior to joining the European External Action Service, Mrs Flor worked for the German diplomacy as an Ambassador to Georgia (2006-2010) and as Ambassador, Special Envoy for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (2010-2012). [Her Curriculum Vitae is available on the website of the EEAS.](#)