

THE EU'S FIRST SERIOUS CENTRAL ASIA INITIATIVE

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On 3-4 April 2025, the European Union (EU)-Central Asia Summit will be held for the first time, with the participation of European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The summit will take place in Samarkand, the capital of Uzbekistan, hosted by Uzbekistans President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan will also attend the summit.

The summit represents a significant initiative to demonstrate the EUs geopolitical interest in intensifying bilateral relations with Central Asia and fostering regional cooperation[1]. In light of the changing geopolitical landscape due to the Russia-Ukraine war and ongoing developments in Afghanistan, relations between the EU and Central Asia have gained strategic importance over the years.

European Council President António Costa, while emphasizing the prevalence of order and fragmentation in todays world, has underscored that the only viable solution for the EU is to build stronger partnerships to advance peace and prosperity. He noted that a multipolar world necessitates more and tailored collaborations. In this context, the inaugural EU-Central Asia Summit holds significant importance for working together to promote peace, security, and sustainable development within the framework of full respect for international law[2].

At the summit to be held in April, EU officials have stated that they will underscore their commitment to enhancing cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including transport and digital connectivity within the region and with the EU, underground resources, economic

and security cooperation, and energy transitions[3].

The Importance of Central Asia for the EU

High-level relations between the EU and the Central Asian Republics have intensified in recent years; two leaders meetings were held in Kazakhstan in October 2022 and in Kyrgyzstan in June 2023. Additionally, numerous ministerial-level meetings, the most recent of which took place in Luxembourg in 2023, have been conducted, and a joint roadmap has been established to deepen ties between the EU and Central Asia. This roadmap outlines concrete action points to enhance interregional dialogue, including a commitment to organize a summit.

In 2019, the EU adopted a new Strategy for Central Asia, which highlighted the regions growing strategic importance for EU interests and built on positive developments in regional cooperation over the years. The updated strategy aims to promote a stronger, modern, and non-exclusive partnership with Central Asian countries, with the goal of fostering the regions development as a sustainable, more resilient, prosperous, and closely interconnected economic and political space.

EU officials note that the EU is the regions second-largest trading partner and the largest investor, accounting for more than 40% of investments in the region.

Central Asias Belatedly Recognized Potential

It is evident that the importance of the Central Asian Republics for the EU has grown in recent years. However, Central Asia entered Türkiyes foreign policy radar in a significant way with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The independence of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan opened a window of opportunity for Türkiye based on historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. This period marked a turning point in shaping Türkiyes vision of the Turkic World.

Türkiye has initiated multifaceted endeavors in Central Asia across economic, cultural, diplomatic, and security domains. Concrete examples of these initiatives can be cited. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), established in 1992, has enhanced Türkiyes soft power in Central Asia through development aid, infrastructure projects, and educational programs. Another example is the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Founded in 2009 as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (Turkic Council), it evolved into the Organization of Turkic States in 2021. The OTS aims to foster joint economic, security, and cultural cooperation.

Relations between Türkiye and the Central Asian Republics in the fields of economy and energy are developing. The recent agreement between Türkiye and Turkmenistan aims to facilitate the delivery of Turkmen gas, albeit in limited volumes, to Europe[4]. As a reminder, the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor (TRACECA), initiated by the EU in 1993[5], aligns with Türkiyes goal of serving as a main axis between Central Asia and

Europe. Türkiye has played an active role in this project and has received logistical support from the EU[6]. Today, this main axis has materialized as the Middle Corridor. The EU has, in principle, expressed a favorable view toward the idea of transporting Turkmen gas to Europe via Türkiye. This new development adds further strength to Türkiyes position as an energy hub between East and West.

The suspension of Türkiyes EU accession process in 2019 has complicated joint projects between the EU and Türkiye in Central Asia. Instead of integrating Türkiyes initiatives into its own strategy, the EU has preferred to directly negotiate Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) with Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan[7], Kyrgyzstan [8], Uzbekistan[9], Tajikistan[10], Turkmenistan[11]). Türkiye has not been included in these agreements.

Central Asia holds a significant place in Turkish foreign policy. Since 1991, a consistent policy toward the region has been pursued through initiatives such as TİKA, the OTS, and economic endeavors. While the EU has partially responded positively to these initiatives, its own Central Asia strategy and uncertainties in its relations with Türkiye have hindered full cooperation. The planned EU-Central Asia Summit on 3-4 April 2025 stands out as an opportunity to initiate dialogue between Türkiye and the EU. The EUs interest in Central Asia is welcomed. Central Asia is a region that the EU should particularly focus on. It is understood that the EU is also seeking ways to become a significant actor in Central Asia. It is evident that the EU has an interest in securing a share of the regions underground resources. The bilateral agreements signed between the EU and the Central Asian Republics are important; however, it must be strongly emphasized that the EU can achieve success in this region by cooperating with Türkiye while pursuing tangible gains.

**Image: https://www.martenscentre.eu/blog/eu-central-asia-an-underdeveloped-relationship/.*

[1] First EU Central Asia Summit To Take Place on 3-4 April 2025, *Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan*, 13 February 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/uzbekistan/first-eu-central-asia-summit-take-place-3-4-april-2025_en?s=233.

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