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The EU and Russia in Central Asia: opportunities for cooperation

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Policy Memo Presented at the Moscow BEAR Policy Conference

“Evaluating the Potential for Cooperation: the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union”

Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO)

September 16-17, 2019

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This policy brief starts from the observation that the European Union (EU) and Russia have a common interest in a stable and secure Central Asia. Indeed, the interests of the EU and Russia in Central Asia converge to the extent that they both want Central Asia to be a stable and prosperous region. Moreover, both actors have an interest in containing security threats in the region, which is reflected in their involvement in the spheres of border management, anti-drugs trafficking, environmental protection and the fight against terrorism and radicalization. Although having converging interests is not a sufficient condition for possible collaboration, it does raise the question whether cooperation is possible.

Is cooperation possible?

Considering the widely held perception (including among Russian policy-makers) that the EU does not want to cooperate with Russia, it is important to highlight that from an EU perspective there are **two key factors** that, in principle, make cooperation in Central Asia possible:

1. The current EU position towards Russia is determined by the so-called ‘five principles’ that the EU agreed upon in 2016. Although the principles explicitly link any substantial cooperation with Russia to progress in terms of implementing the Minsk agreements, they also allow for so-called ‘**selective engagement**’ with Russia in areas of common interest. Given the overlapping interests of the EU and Russia in the region, Central Asia hence emerges as a region where the principle of selective engagement could be applied and thus where the EU could agree to cooperate with Russia in those areas that are of interest to the EU. EU officials believe that it would be in the EU’s interest to cooperate with Russia in Central Asia. First of all, EU officials think that cooperation would be beneficial in areas where both the EU and Russia are both active. For certain policy areas, such as border management and anti-drugs trafficking, EU officials acknowledge that **joining forces would amplify the likelihood of having a positive and lasting effect** compared to when each going it alone. Moreover, in some areas, the EU and Russia actually have complementary expertise and capabilities. By joining forces in those areas, EU officials think that this could create a win-win situation, with tangible benefits for the Central Asian countries.

2. A key element of the new EU strategy for Central Asia, which was launched in May 2019, is that it aims to forge what it labels a **“non-exclusive” partnership** with the countries of Central Asia. This means that the EU is ready to establish new synergies and strengthen existing synergies with other external actors that are active in the region. The new EU strategy thus leaves an important opening for possible cooperation with Russia, even if Russia is not mentioned explicitly in the strategy.

Possible areas for cooperation

Three areas can be identified that are most likely when it comes to possible cooperation:

- Border management
- Anti-drugs trafficking
- Water management and environmental protection, incl. mitigation of the effects of climate change

Two more areas for possible cooperation can be identified, but these two areas are less likely:

- The fight against terrorism and radicalization: cooperation in this area is less likely due to diverging understandings and approaches between the EU and Russia.
- Trade and regulatory convergence, in particular through EU-EAEU alignment: The EU is not willing to formally align itself with the EAEU, not only because of the conflict in Ukraine, but also because the EU has several concerns about the incomplete nature of the EAEU as a customs and economic union. Nevertheless, EU officials do acknowledge the potential benefits of enhancing regional economic connectivity via EU-EAEU alignment. Therefore, EU officials believe that one should work towards convergence, or at least mutual recognition, of technical standards and trade procedures.

Main barriers for cooperation

- Although there continues to be a positive dialogue and exchange of information on Central Asia between EU and Russian officials at various levels, there is a serious lack of trust between the EU and Russia, which undermines any attempt to cooperate. Both actors perceive each other not only as possible partners in the region, but also as potential spoilers.

- Some EU member states remain vehemently opposed to any formal cooperation between the EU and Russia, as long as Russia does not fulfil its commitments under the Minsk agreements.

Key recommendations

- Russia and the EU should keep the dialogue and exchange of information open, both at high diplomatic levels and at lower technical levels on the ground. This is necessary in order to address the lack of trust and hence to instill a more positive perception of each other.
- Russia and the EU should identify areas of possible cooperation based on their common interests and complementary expertise and capabilities.