
KYRGYZSTAN HOSTS EU-CENTRAL ASIA FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING

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The foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission met on 7 July in Bishkek for the 15th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting.

The participants reaffirmed their joint commitment to forge a strong, diversified and forward-looking partnership that builds upon the positive dynamics underway in Central Asia and the strong mutual interests between the two regions. They reaffirmed their commitment to work together for peace, security, human rights, democracy and sustainable development in full respect for international law, the Delegation of the European Union to the Kyrgyz Republic said.

The foreign ministers of Central Asia welcomed in that respect the new EU Strategy on Central Asia adopted by the EU Member States on 17 June 2019, which focuses the EU's commitment to the region on partnering for resilience and prosperity, as well as investing in regional cooperation. The EU emphasised its commitment to mobilise all its policies and instruments in line with the objectives of the Strategy and to strengthen its role as a partner for the Central Asian countries in their reform process, as a supporter of their integration in the world trading system, and as a supporter of their regional cooperation efforts.

In line with the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia, the participants agreed to work together to promote sustainable connectivity. The participants also highlighted the importance of supporting as appropriate the involvement of Afghanistan in EU-Central Asia cooperation initiatives and projects and to strengthen connectivity between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan.

The participants stressed the importance of Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements as a cornerstone of relations between the EU and the Central Asian countries.

The participants welcomed the first EU-Central Asia Forum, held back-to-back with the Ministerial meeting, as a key opportunity for the civil societies of the two regions to contribute to the development of the EU-Central Asia partnership. They welcomed the proposal made by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to host the first EU-Central Asia Economic Forum.

To underpin the European Union's political commitment and kick-start the implementation of the new EU Central Asia Strategy, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, at the EU-Central Asia Ministerial meeting in Bishkek, presented a set of EU funded regional programmes. These programmes will

support the environment, climate action, sustainable consumption and production, energy, gender equality, counter-terrorism, and education, the European Commission said on July 7.

Coming on top of over 1 billion of bilateral and regional assistance for the period 2014-2020, these programmes, worth 11 million, will benefit all countries of the region – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan.

"The positive regional dynamics in Central Asia and a demand for closer cooperation with the European Union presents a significant opportunity for a closer, stronger partnership, said Federica Mogherini. Our new Strategy for the region will enable us to cooperate more closely with the countries of Central Asia in tackling the challenges they face: from sustainable development to economic diversification, strengthening civil society and human rights to providing expertise and financial support for reform processes. We are ready to build on the enormous momentum gained over the last five years, as a consistent and reliable partner, to foster resilience, prosperity and regional cooperation."

The new programmes announced on July 7 cover:

- Sustainable energy: The EU will invest 11 million in a new hydropower plant in Tajikistan, with additional support from Germany. This hydropower plant will create new opportunities for Tajikistan to meet increasing demand, and to export excess electricity to neighbouring countries, including to northern Afghanistan.
- Economic empowerment: The EU will invest 11 million in the economic empowerment of women in the region. This project will be implemented together with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It will provide Afghan women with the skills they need to participate in the economic development of Afghanistan, and contribute to closer peaceful ties with Central Asia.
- Education: The EU also launched a new 11 million programme in support of the education sector in Kyrgyzstan. This financing agreement will support Kyrgyzstan's education development strategy, in order to better formulate, implement and monitor education policy. It will help to improve resource allocation, ensure equitable access across gender, ethnicity and linguistic background, and enhance the synergy between skills and labour market needs.
- Inclusive sustainable growth: The EU has extended the activities of the SWITCH Asia Programme, with an amount of 11 million. The programme will support sustainable consumption and production and promote inclusive sustainable growth. It aims to reduce poverty and contribute to economic prosperity in Central Asia.

In addition to the above programmes, several others are in preparation:

- Sustainable development: The EU is preparing a contribution in support of the initiative of the Government of Uzbekistan to establish the Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Human Security for the Aral Sea Region, under the auspices of the United Nations. The initiative will reduce vulnerability of the people living around the lake and advance sustainable development in the Aral Sea region.
- Intra-regional trade: The EU will launch an upgraded phase of the Border Management in Central Asia programme. With this new phase, the EU aims to increase security and facilitate intra-regional trade in Central Asia and Afghanistan through integrated border management.
- Health: The EU will furthermore launch the next phase of the Central Asia Drugs Action Programme. The goal is to work on integrated, balanced and evidence-based drug policies.
- Counter-terrorism: New technical assistance to support law enforcement capacities and regional cooperation in countering terrorism.

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