Why no Central Asian strategy for the European Union?

In the past years, the European Union conducted a prolonged, inclusive process of debating and consulting to support the drafting of its new strategy for Central Asia. How come do the Central Asian states, clearly the beneficiary side of the partnership, see it irrelevant to develop their own strategy for the EU relations through a similar process of public discussion?

For the European Union, Kyrgyzstan is one of many small, poor and remote countries, with no particularly strong historical, political or economic connections. Reflecting this, the volume of the EU aid allocated for Kyrgyzstan, as well as other countries in the region, is very small in the context of the EU’s capacity and its engagement in other parts of the world. Yet, such “smallness” of Central Asia did not prevent the EU from launching a thorough assessment of the achievements and shortcomings of its engagement with Central Asia to date in order to draft a new strategy. Such assessment included numerous publications and discussions, involving scholars, activists and public/official figures from different EU and Central Asian countries.

The situation is quite the opposite in Central Asia. Thus, for Kyrgyzstan, the assistance of the European Union is not small at all, viewed in the context of the country’s economy and public expenditures. For the period 2014-2020, the EU allocated for Kyrgyzstan in the areas of “rule of law”, “education” and “rural development” 184 million euros, that is, more than two million euros for each month. Yet, such importance of the EU does not appear sufficient for the Kyrgyz MFA to justify having more than one full-time staff member to cover the relations with the EU. There is little known in public with regards to who and how takes decisions on what issues/areas need most EU assistance, who and how evaluates the effectiveness of cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and the EU... And it is not entirely clear how could the wider public possibly influence the government’s engagement with the EU.

The European Union’s Central Asia Strategy defines the main parameters for future EU engagement with Central Asian countries. In the current Strategy, adopted in 2007, “stability and security” were adopted as the central objectives of the European Union in our region, furthered by priorities in the development of the rule of law, education, trade, energy and transport links, and so on. As for small recipient countries, such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the EU Strategy essentially means a road map document, detailing areas and volume of aid. One may rejoice or feel ashamed seeing garbage bins in the capital of Kyrgyzstan with the label “EU assistance”, but those bins with those labels give a good idea of the nature of the partnership.

The opaqueness of the government of Kyrgyzstan in matters of foreign policy is a matter of its public accountability. What we call “national interests of the state” do not emerge in narrow
offices of the MFA. They can be put on paper in those offices, but after being born in the process of constant, open and wide-ranging dialogue between the elected leaders of the country and the general public. Such necessity is all the more evident in the context of debates (or conspiracy theories for some) on “debt diplomacy” of strong and rich countries, as well as suspicions of high-level corruption in recipient countries fed by large-scale foreign loans. The latter, well observed today in Kyrgyzstan, is partly the outcomes of opaque foreign policy.

The passive approach taken by the Kyrgyz government in matters of foreign policy is also a question of abandoning its agency in determining the nature of relations with external partners. Politicians and analysts in Brussels, Vienna or Warsaw may have their own thoughts about how the EU should help Kyrgyzstan. But those thoughts should be turned into policy and strategy only as a result convergence with a well-thought-out strategy of Bishkek itself on the same matter. But, unfortunately, there is no such a notion as “Kyrgyzstan’s strategy on its EU partnership”, and certainly there is no public discussion about how Kyrgyzstan can and should build relations with the outside world, including the EU.

The closed and reactive nature of foreign policy can have different explanations in Kyrgyzstan, whether of historical, political, organizational, cultural or personal origin. But none of them is a good reason not to change the situation. As a country heavily dependent on the external environment, Kyrgyzstan simply must have a clear strategy for action in all areas of foreign policy. The question is not that you need a text, called a strategy, which can be found in the subsections of the websites of certain state institutions. The strategy is needed as a) a tool of accountability of state bodies to the people and to each other, and b) a key aspect of the dialogue between the state agencies and scholarly community, and civil society more broadly.

Pointing to a problem is always easier than to have it addressed. What could be done for the sake of turning foreign policymaking more transparent and foreign policy actors more accountable? First, international organizations working with various public institutions of the country on themes of “good governance” and “improving public policy”, have to advocate for a culture of open and wide-ranging policy discussions, including on foreign policy matters. Close cooperation of state institutions with independent research centres, mass media and other civil society actors must become one of the preconditions for donors’ engagement on matters of governance.

In their turn, local actors, including the state institutions, parliamentary committees, expert community and civil society actors more broadly, should start proactively engaging each other into open and public discussions on policies. The current trend of major policy issues getting public scrutiny in social networks is not a complete solution. The so-called “viral” news items on Facebook or a growing number of newspapers and news websites are not a substitute for an in-depth, complex and constant process of research and informed deliberations on policy issues.

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