

# EU-TÜRKİYE COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLOSER COOPERATION IN THE REGION

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**CENTER FOR EURASIAN STUDIES**

**EU-Türkiye Cooperation  
in Central Asia:  
Challenges and Opportunities for  
Closer Cooperation in the Region**

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## FOREWORD

**I**n times of growing geopolitical competition and in the search for alternative energy suppliers, Central Asia is increasingly gaining global interest and importance. In recent years, the region has become crucial for security and stability. Türkiye has been strengthening its ties with Central Asia based on deep-rooted connections. These ties were recently cemented with the inauguration of the Organization of Turkic States, further institutionalizing Türkiye's relations with Central Asia. Meanwhile, the European Union updated its Central Asia Strategy in 2019 and underlined its recognition of the strategic importance of Central Asia.

At the conference titled "EU-Turkey Cooperation in Central Asia - Challenges and Opportunities for Closer Cooperation in the Region" held on May 13<sup>th</sup> 2022 in Ankara, Türkiye, researchers and diplomats from Türkiye, EU and Central Asian countries discussed what synergies can be utilized between the European Union and Türkiye and what the prospects are for closer cooperation.

This report contains the summary of the opening remarks, keynote speeches, and the presentations delivered during the conference, as well as an overview of the commonly underlined points regarding EU-Türkiye Cooperation in Central Asia.



# EU-TÜRKİYE COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA:

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLOSER COOPERATION IN THE REGION

**A**t the present, not only the Eurasian region but the entire world is being shaken by the military developments taking place in the north of the Black Sea. The Russia-Ukraine war that began with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has caused enormous humanitarian catastrophe and destruction of cities and towns, industrial plants, and infrastructure. The cost of the war will further multiply as long as it continues. For now, it is uncertain how long this war will last and what its results will be. Despite this uncertainty, it is safe to say that effects of this war will be felt for a long time to come. One of the possible consequences of the war will be the recalibration of the international order. Today, forecasts anticipate a new kind of a cold war and new iron curtains to fall some thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only political, but also economic and even cultural and information domains are polarized. In such a context, it becomes more urgent to contemplate on the ways in which stability, peace and a functioning international order could be reinstated. Overall, the recent developments necessitate devising ways to overcome the short and mid-term negative effects of the Russia-Ukraine war. The economic, food, and energy crises in particular are the main problems that need urgent remedies. In the long run, on the other hand, the global community needs to seek ways to repair the damages in the international system.

In such a critical turning point, a daylong conference to discuss European Union-Türkiye cooperation in Central Asia organized by the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Türkiye took place that inevitably brought to the fore the idea that such a cooperation may contribute to the resolution of both short-term and mid-term difficulties raised by the Russia-Ukraine war. The conference sought to explore the possibility of enhancing global connectivities in the east-west direction through cooperation at a time when regional disconnections rather than connections are the main themes of discussions.

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The conference took place on 13 May 2022 in Ankara with the title “EU-Türkiye Cooperation in Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities for Closer Cooperation in the Region.” The conference brought researchers and diplomats from Türkiye, EU and Central Asian countries together to discuss how a synergy could be created and utilized between the European Union and Türkiye and what could be the prospects for closer cooperation in Central Asia. The audience included representatives of the diplomatic missions in Ankara, former and acting diplomats, journalists, academics and think tank researchers, who also contributed to the conference with their comments and questions. The conference has been instrumental in propounding Turkish, Central Asian and European views on Turkish-EU cooperation in Central Asia, as well as the ways in which experts and policy makers perceive matters related to the Central Asian region, Türkiye-Central Asia relations, EU-Central Asia relations and Türkiye-EU relations.

The conference was composed of two panels. The first panel titled “Promoting Regional Energy Connectivity and Trade in Central Asia” focused on Central Asia’s potentials in terms of energy supplies and prospects for the transit of hydrocarbons to Western Europe through Türkiye. This was followed by the second panel titled “EU-Türkiye Cooperation in a Geopolitically Contested Environment.” In this panel, political context and factors affecting EU-Türkiye cooperation were discussed. The following four keynote speeches were also delivered:

- “Organization of Turkic States – Prospects for the Future” by Ambassador Bagdat Amreyev, the Secretary General of the Organization of Turkic States;
- “Türkiye as an Energy Hub” by Dr. Alparslan Bayraktar, the Deputy Minister of Energy and Natural Resources of the Republic of Türkiye;
- “Leveraging Synergies with the EU on Connectivity in Central Asia” by Rovshan Mirazayev, the Director for Energy, Minerals & Environment of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO);
- “Türkiye in Central Asia” by Ambassador Yönet Can Tezel, Director General for Bilateral Political Affairs - Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Caucasasia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye.

The program of the conference is attached at the end of this conference book.

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Mr. Walter Glos, the Director of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Türkiye



Mr. Nils Lange, the Deputy Head of Office and Research Fellow at  
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Türkiye



**Opening Remark of Amb. Ret. Alev Kılıç, the Director of Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)**

Mr. Secretary General of the Organization of Turkic States, Ambassador Bagdat Amreyev,

Mr. Deputy Minister of Energy and Natural Resources of the Republic of Türkiye, Dr. Alparslan Bayraktar,

Director General for Bilateral Affairs for the Caucasus and Central Asia of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, Ambassador Yönet Can Tezel,

Distinguished Panelists,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and privilege for the Eurasian Studies Center and me as its Director to be launching together and in cooperation with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Türkiye and its eminent Director Mr. Walter Glos two panels to discuss European Union- Türkiye cooperation in Central Asia. This was a developing topic when we started with our project some months ago. It addresses an urgent situation at

present, engendered by the Russia-Ukraine war that has been going on for more than two months now. I would like to express the wish for its cessation at the earliest to avoid further tragedies and for the establishment of peace and stability.

Unfortunately, today we are talking of a new kind of cold war and new curtains to fall some 30 years after 1991 when we cherished high hopes for a fresh peaceful world order devoid of major conflicts. There are dark clouds in the horizon for enhancing global connectivities and trade and economic relations.

On the other hand, with the rise of the Pacific and China in particular, a new development is underway in geopolitical terms. Within this development, we place Türkiye and the wider Black Sea basin moving to the center in the evolution of the concept of Eurasia, becoming the nexus for the East and the West. In this configuration we see the need to find ways to avoid a new cold war and the division of the world into hostile camps. We have a positive assessment for the role Economic Cooperation Organization and the Belt and Road initiative can play for Eurasian connections.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye was the easternmost post of the West. The iron curtain had fallen also to our east. Today we are also the westernmost of the East, in a position to connect with the East in a unique position with historical, cultural, linguistic kinship with Central Asia as we maintain our strong bonds with the West. As such, we see it incumbent on Türkiye with its unmatched potential, to be a conduit for the European Union to open up and connect with Central Asia and vice versa.

I hope and trust that today's conference with its distinguished speakers and audience will provide us with fresh and sound perspectives as to the EU-Türkiye cooperation in Central Asia and the challenges and opportunities for closer cooperation in the region.

Let me conclude expressing my appreciation for the very efficient cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Türkiye, Mr. Walter Glos and his team, particularly Mr. Nils Lange whose efforts were most remarkable.

Thank you.





Amb. Bagdat Amreyev, the Secretary General of the Organization of Turkic States

**Ambassador Bagdat Amreyev**, in his keynote speech titled “The Organization of Turkic States – Prospects for the Future,” presented the main features of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the vision of this organization. He explained that the name change of the organization from Turkic Council to its current form at its eight summit in Istanbul in November 2021 is not just a superficial adjustment. Rather this change was a result of the self-perception of the organization as the foundation of a united Turkic world that is becoming a new geopolitical reality. As to that, the OTS envisions itself not just as a Turkic organization founded and operating on common history, culture and language, but also as a universal structure. The interest shown by Latin American, African, Asian, Middle Eastern and European countries to the OTS attests that this vision has already been put in place. Amb. Amreyev also underlined the document titled “Turkic World Vision-2040” that was adopted at the same summit being a central document representing the wide range of objectives of the OTS.<sup>1</sup>

Amb. Amreyev pointed out several important aspects of the OTS. He underlined that the OTS is not a mechanism for government-to government contacts. Rather, it has a much wider vision with comprehensive outreach and objectives. In short, the OTS bears on itself the responsibility to be an organization that facilitates a whole range of interactions from politics to economy, culture, education, and sports. Despite that, in the short run the top priority of the OTS is economic and

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1 This document is available at: <https://www.turkkon.org/assets/pdf/haberler/turkic-world-vision-2040-2396-97.pdf> (accessed 11.11.2022).

trade relations. Trade facilitation and free trade agreements are the priority topics in the current agenda of the organization. The creation of a Turkic bank is also another short-term goal. In order to achieve its economy and trade related objectives, the OTS is open to adopting the best practices of the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union and other similar mechanisms that bring the desired results.

Amb. Amreyev stated that although Ukraine and Russia expressed their desire to be observers in the organization, they cannot be granted this status before the war between the two is over. This approach was illustrative of the cautious approach of the OTS not to be trapped in global competitions among big powers or interstate conflicts.

## The Organization of Turkic States

Organization of Turkic States (then called the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States - Turkic Council) was established in 2009 as an intergovernmental organization, with the overarching aim of promoting comprehensive cooperation among Turkic States. Its four founding member states are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye. During the 7<sup>th</sup> Summit held in Baku in October 2019, Uzbekistan joined as a full member. Hungary received observer status at the Organization during its 6<sup>th</sup> Summit in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyz Republic in September 2018. And lately in the 8<sup>th</sup> Summit held in November 2021, Turkmenistan joined as an Observer Member to the Organization.

The organization is committed to the purpose and principles of the Charter of the United Nations (UN) and other universally recognized principles and norms of international law, including sovereign equality, territorial integrity and inviolability of internationally recognized borders of states, as well as the maintenance of international peace, security and development of good-neighbourly and friendly relations.

The organization is dedicated to strengthening peace and stability, promoting wide-ranging cooperation and disclosing the potential for common development among its member states. Although it brings together a particular group of countries, the organization does not take an exclusive approach. On the contrary, by promoting deeper relations and solidarity amongst Turkic speaking countries, it aims to serve as a new regional instrument for advancing international cooperation in Eurasian continent, particularly in Central Asia and Caucasus.

Constructed on four main pillars of common history, common language, common identity and common culture, the Turkic Council does not limit itself to the confines of these commonalities. Rather, it aims to broaden the existing bilateral cooperation areas such as economy, science, education, transportation, customs, tourism and other various fields among the Member States into multilateral cooperation for the benefit of the region.

At the same time, the Organization does not limit itself within the frames of its Member States and willingly cooperates with its neighbouring states in order to ensure peace and stability in its region particularly in the fields such as transport, customs and tourism.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Organization of Turkic States (2022), "Organization of Turkic States," <https://www.turkkon.org/en/turkkonseyi-hakkinda> (accessed 11.11.2022).



Dr. Alparslan Bayraktar, the Deputy Minister of Energy and Natural Resources of the Republic of Türkiye

**Dr. Alparslan Bayraktar**, in his keynote speech titled “Türkiye as an Energy Hub,” presented a comprehensive picture of Türkiye’s energy policies, as well as its role in Europe’s energy security. Dr. Bayraktar detailed Türkiye’s policy of energy transition, an important component of which is decarbonization and green development. He underlined that Türkiye seeks to accomplish this transition by 2053. Dr. Bayraktar also provided information about Türkiye’s energy consumption rates. He underlined that Türkiye’s energy need has increased three folds in the last three years, which has made it the fourth largest energy consumer in Europe. Such dramatic rise in energy need affirms the centrality of energy security for the Turkish economy. For that, Türkiye carries out policies to increase the share of renewable energy in its energy package and takes measures for energy efficiency and supply security, particularly for the natural gas. The latter policy has two pillars; the first one is developing infrastructure such as construction of storage facilities. The second one is about diversifying suppliers and the pipelines. The completion of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant will also act as a significant supply for Türkiye’s increasing energy needs. Nuclear energy is one way to reduce Türkiye’s import dependency. Furthermore, the recent natural gas discoveries in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean are important developments that may become a game changer in Türkiye’s energy related prospects.

Dr. Bayraktar underlined the necessity of international cooperation for energy security, stressing that energy security is an issue that no country can solve by itself. Rather, energy security can be ensured only through international

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cooperation. He emphasized that energy security is thus both a regional and global issue that should be addressed accordingly. As such, Dr. Bayraktar emphasized Türkiye's willingness to cooperate with all the actors in this field. Finally, Dr. Bayraktar expressed that Türkiye's energy policy significantly contributes to the energy security of the region, particularly that of southeast Europe. Türkiye's diversified pipelines and developed gas infrastructure can help to bring more gas to Europe. Given the rift between the EU and Russia, Türkiye's energy infrastructure and its relations with supplier countries may be the much-needed instruments for the prospect of carrying Turkmen and Iraqi gas to European market.

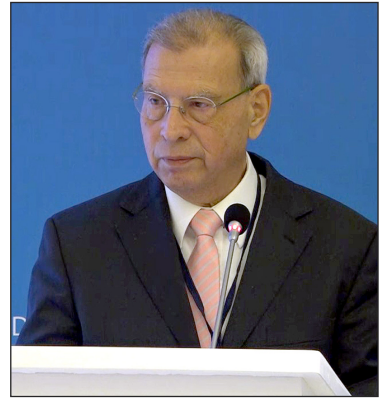
## Panel Discussion 1

### Promoting Regional Energy Connectivity and Trade in Central Asia



The first panel discussion of the conference titled “Promoting Regional Energy Connectivity and Trade in Central Asia” was dedicated to discussions on Central Asia’s potentials in terms of energy supplies and prospects of transit of hydrocarbons to Western Europe through Türkiye.

The first panelist **Dr. H. Yurdakul Yiğitgüden**, the former coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities and former Under-Secretary of Energy and Natural Resources of the Republic of Türkiye, in his presentation focused on Central Asia in terms of trade and energy connectivity. He explained that both Russia and the EU were among the early comers to the region, whereas China’s coming to the region was rather a later development. In spite of that, China proved to be a successful actor in the region in terms of succeeding in



Dr. H. Yurdakul Yiğitgüden

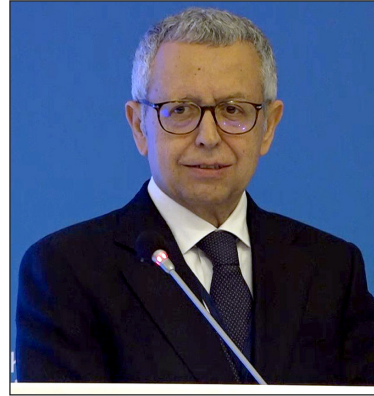


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building economic and trade ties with the Central Asian countries, as well as accomplishing infrastructure projects. These projects help Central Asian countries to compensate the disadvantages of being in a land locked region. Dr. Yiğitgüden stressed the huge oil and gas reserves in Central Asia and drew attention to the fact that the developed energy infrastructure of Türkiye might be a significant advantage for bringing the Central Asian energy to Western markets.

**Amb. Ret. Mithat Rende**, the former Permanent Representative of Türkiye to the OECD, in his presentation focused on the current global energy crisis. In addition to the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate-related factors of the crisis, he emphasized the consequences of the Ukraine-Russia war and Russia's policy to use energy as an instrument to exert pressure on the EU. Amb. Rende, from a realist perspective, questioned the possibility of replacing Russian gas with other suppliers by 2025. As to mid and long term prospects, he highlighted the role Türkiye might play for



Amb. Ret. Mithat Rende

its geographical location and energy infrastructure in strengthening the Southern Gas Corridor. He, however, added that for the Southern Gas Corridor to become a meaningful contributor to European energy security, the US and the EU need to show political will and energy companies should be willing to invest for its implementation. In this framework, he pointed out that working with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan will be critical for the realization of the corridor. In the Q&A section, Amb. Rende emphasized that for the successful implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor, an inclusive outlook should prevail and Central Asia should not turn into an arena of geographical competition. Rather, all the stakeholders need to work on mutual interest by finding common points.

The third panelist **Mr. Akram Nematov**, the First Deputy Director of the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, drew attention to the significance of Central Asia in terms of its strong demographic features and oil and natural gas supply potentials. He underlined that not only five Central Asian countries but also Afghanistan is an important component of the region. He noted systematic dialogue and regional cooperation should be implemented in Central Asia. Mr. Nematov pointed out that Central Asia has a huge capacity to be both a transit and supply corridor. He stressed that the main challenge concerns interconnectivity and that the key role of Afghanistan should not be overlooked in this regard. He emphasized that cooperation with both the EU and Türkiye will be instrumental in developing more inclusive strategic relations. He added that Central Asian countries and Uzbekistan, in particular, should be seen as equal partners and that the interests of the stakeholders should be taken into account. Emphasizing the role of renewable energy in facing the energy crisis, he noted not only Uzbekistan but also Central Asia in general has great potential at this point.



Mr. Akram Nematov



Mr. Rovshan Mirazayev, the Director for Energy, Minerals & Environment of the ECO

The first panel was concluded with the keynote speech of **Mr. Rovshan Mirazayev**, the Director for Energy, Minerals & Environment (EME) of the



Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). In his speech titled “Leveraging Synergies with the EU on Connectivity in Central Asia,” Mr. Mirazayev emphasized the alternative routes of Islamabad-Türkiye-Iran (ITI) and Kazakhstan- Türkiye-Iran, and noted that these routes are both competitive and complementary projects to the Middle Corridor. He added that the main challenge is the Chinese and Russian dominance on the Central Asian markets, and that the EU as a soft power has the capacity to balance China. He noted that the close relationship of the EU with Türkiye and Turkmenistan should serve as a model for contractual agreements with other Central Asian countries. Emphasizing the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor, Mr. Mirazayev stated that the relatively low infrastructural capacity of the Middle Corridor needs to be remedied. As a final remark, he raised two points: the likely need for a better unification of tariffs and the need for a balance of goods not only between China and Europe but of other regional states.

## **Economic Cooperation Organization**

Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is an intergovernmental regional organization encompassing countries from Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, Middle East and South Asia with more than 460 million inhabitants and over 8 million square kilometers connecting Russia to the Persian Gulf and China to Europe. The overall objective of the Organization is the sustainable economic development of its Member States and the Region as a whole.

Established as Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964 by Iran, Pakistan and Türkiye, the Organization was rechristened as “ECO” in 1985.

In 1992 and in the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and six former Soviet Republics, namely, Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan also joined the Organization, forming one of the biggest regional blocs in Asia and beyond.

Over the past three decades or so, the ECO Member States have been collaborating to accelerate the pace of regional development through their common endeavors. Besides shared cultural and historic affinities, they have been able to use the existing infrastructural and business links to further fortify their resolve to transfer their hopes and aspirations into a tangible reality.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Economic Cooperation Organization, “History,” [https://www.eco.int/general\\_content/86055-History.html?t=General-content](https://www.eco.int/general_content/86055-History.html?t=General-content) (accessed 11.11.2022).



Amb. Yönet Can Tezel, the Director General for Bilateral Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye

At the beginning of the second panel, **Ambassador Yönet Can Tezel**, the Director General for Bilateral Political Affairs (Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Caucasasia) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, delivered a keynote speech titled “Türkiye in Central Asia.” Amb. Tezel noted that geopolitics of the twentieth century has been unfair to the countries of Central Asia. This also affected Türkiye’s relations with Central Asia. According to Amb. Tezel, static and deterministic understanding of geopolitics fails to explain many of the dynamics of state-society relations of today. Geopolitical analyses lose their explanatory power when they fail to take the importance of societal agencies into account. Amb. Tezel noted that even though the world is going through difficult times, the imperfections shared by so many do not prevent us from helping each other. He added that Türkiye is not the single most influential player in Central Asia. Russia and increasingly China are also influential players, and Türkiye does not ignore this fact. Amb. Tezel underlined that, unlike the West, Türkiye’s engagement in the region has not fluctuated. On the contrary, thanks to its own experiences, Türkiye has been pursuing a consistent policy based on an understanding of the challenges and sensitivities faced by the Central Asian countries. He stated that Türkiye does not have any ideological objectives or ambitions regarding the region. Amb. Tezel argued that the EU could benefit from Türkiye’s socio-political and cultural edge in the region. At this point, he noted that the EU should not take any of this for granted or expect Türkiye to automatically share all of its assets. Rather, the EU should show its willingness to

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cooperate. Amb. Tezel also argued that the ruling elites in both the EU and the West are mostly liberal leaning technocrats disconnected from their societies, and thus who fail to understand the needs of their societies. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the Western elite encountering difficulties in understanding other societies. What the EU needs is to be more sensitive, sincere and humble when judging others. Nevertheless, he noted that this should not be a reason for an all-out rejection of the values and ideas that the EU could bring to the region. Finally, Amb. Tezel asserted that the EU deserves to be better understood and more EU vision is needed for possible and sustainable cooperation in the region. This, Amb. Tezel noted, would also help improve EU-Türkiye relations.

## Panel Discussion 2

### EU-Turkey Cooperation in a Geopolitically Contested Environment



The second panel titled “EU-Turkey Cooperation in a Geopolitically Contested Environment.” The focus of this panel was the political context and the factors affecting EU-Türkiye cooperation.

**Mr. Tony van der Togt**, Senior Research Associate at Clingendael Institute, in his presentation noted that when the countries of Central Asia became independent, security and energy supply were the main motivations of the EU to develop partnership and cooperation with the region. Particularly after the 9/11 attacks against the US, Central Asia has gained even more importance while the instability arising from Afghanistan has affected the region as a whole, particularly in terms of connectivity. This has been a reason for the EU's value-oriented approach transforming into a more realistic and pragmatic one in recent years. Mr. van der Togt emphasized the importance of cooperation with not only Central Asian countries but also with the countries in the South Caucasus. He stressed the importance of the EU-Asia connectivity strategy, the Eastern Partnership Initiative and cooperation with Türkiye in reducing dependency on Russia. An important view that Mr. van der Togt expressed was that the war in Ukraine changed the rules of the game and that there may be threats of regionalization and decoupling in the future, and that the biggest challenge at this point is the disruptions in connectivity.



Mr. Tony van der Togt

The second speaker of the panel **Amb. Ret. Selim Yenel** pointed out the potential for cooperation between Türkiye and the EU in Central Asia, and that their dialogue has been continuing at a high level even though the EU-Türkiye relations have been going through difficult times. Emphasizing the lack of coordination and joint action despite the dialogue, he argued that it is unfair for the EU to ask Türkiye to follow its own views without treating Türkiye as a real candidate and without carrying out consultations with it on issues such as the sanctions on Russia. Expressing that joint action and coordination could not be realized after the Arab Spring and in the Balkans because of the EU's reluctance, Amb. Yenel drew attention to the fact that cooperation in Central Asia could only be possible with a joint action. He argued that the EU must understand that it has to go beyond its self-imposed constraints. He stated that it is



Amb. Ret. Selim Yenel

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understandable that Türkiye's shortcomings in some areas such as human rights, rule of law and freedom are an important concern for the EU, but indicated that these should not prevent the EU and Türkiye from working together. Finally, he said that the EU is not a global power, and noted that Türkiye is an obvious choice for the EU in that it possesses value in terms of transportation, energy, and affinity for Central Asia.

The last speaker of the panel, **Dr. Daria Isachenko**, an associate at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), noted that Central Asia is a region associated with the concept of 'the great game.' She underlined that the role of Central Asian countries as subjects rather than objects are often denied, a fact that should be corrected. Dr. Isachenko stated that the geopolitical interdependence of Central Asia matters for Russia in terms of its own security. In parallel to this, Central Asian states also regard Russia as the most reliable security-provider. Therefore, not only economic and security dependence of Central Asia on Russia, but also political, cultural, social, and anthropological ties between Central Asia and Russia should not be ignored. Dr. Isachenko stressed that the EU and Türkiye should avoid any expectation from Central Asian countries to freeze their relations with Russia. She also underlined Türkiye's soft power approach, which is much valued in the region, and its ability to successfully develop bilateral ties with both Central Asia and Russia. She concluded her speech with three recommendations: recognizing the agency of Central Asia, acknowledging the presence and role of Russia in Central Asia, and the imperative for the EU to prove itself as an capable and effective actor.



Dr. Daria Isachenko



## **EU-Türkiye Cooperation in Central Asia: The Main Points**

**Turgut Kerem TUNCEL, Editor**

**T**he above summary of the opening remarks, keynote speeches, and the presentations reveals a number of commonly underlined points regarding EU-Türkiye Cooperation in Central Asia. The following is a brief outline of these points together with some further remarks.

### *The World at the Crossroads*

One of the most salient consensuses among the panelists was that the world today is at a crossroads. The Russia-Ukraine war is likely to change the geopolitical scene, if it has not already done so. Not only political but also economical and even cultural divides are broadening to a critical level. There is a strong sense that, at the present, we are witnessing the emergence of a new re-alignment of the global geopolitics. What is at stake is the unfolding of a new kind of a cold war. In addition, the recent climate, food, and energy crises together with the emerging financial crisis do not bode well for global stability.

The new likely configuration of the world is likely to be the end of globalization as we have known since the 1990s. As to that, it is worth noting Tony van der Togt's concept of decoupling. In such a future, pivotal countries that are situated between different regions, such as Türkiye, will gain significance. It can be inferred that these countries will play an important role either as the outpost of different international groupings like they were during the Cold War, or they will become the conduits between the competing camps.

### *Central Asia: Potentials yet to be Realized*

Another common view that was accentuated at the panels is that Central Asia has significant potentials that are still waiting to be fully realized. These potentials are rooted in region's natural resources and strategic location on the east-west and north-south nexuses.

As to natural resources, Kazakhstan is rich with coal, oil, and natural gas, whereas Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are gifted with significant natural gas reserves. The least fortunate of the five Central Asian countries in terms of natural resources are

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Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Yet, these two countries have the capacity for hydro-energy production. The region has potential for renewable energy such as solar energy and wind energy. The technologies developed by the European countries and China for generating solar and wind energies could be used in Central Asia for the production of renewable energy.

The strategic location of Central Asia at the crossroads of Eurasia is another advantage of the region. Being on the east-west nexus connecting East Asia with Europe and the north-south nexus connecting the Eurasian landmass with the Indian Ocean, the region has outstanding importance for global trade.

As to east-west connection, international sanctions imposed on Iran renders what is called the Southern Corridor a distant prospect. The rift between the EU and Russia calls the future of Northern Corridor into question, although at the present this route is the most viable one from an economic perspective. In such a context, what is referred to as the Middle Corridor that connects China and Europe via Central Asia, South Caucasus, and Türkiye gains further geostrategic significance.

As to global trade, one often overlooked connection is the south-west connection between the Indian Ocean and Europe. This connection requires Central Asian states to develop their relations with the countries in South Asia. By this way, Central Asia could open up itself to Indian Ocean and overcome the disadvantages of being land-locked. Such a prospect would also institute Central Asia as an important link on north-south and south-west nexuses. With respect to these nexuses, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) may play an important role. ECO may also be instrumental in establishing corridors passing through Iran.

In addition to global trade, Central Asia gains further significance in the face of the energy crisis that deepens as the Ukraine-Russia war continues. Central Asia, and in particular Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, are designated as possible natural gas suppliers to European markets. The Southern Gas Corridor, in this framework, deserves renewed attention.

Whereas Central Asia has a crucial significance for establishing global trade connections, several disadvantages of the region should also be acknowledged. One of these disadvantages is the old infrastructure inherited from the Soviet times. This infrastructure needs to be modernized for delivery of the energy resources to world markets and for Central Asia to become a crossroads of global logistics. The uneven development of the Central Asian countries is also another challenge that needs to be dealt with. In addition to inter-regional trade, boosting of intra-regional trade is a requirement to lift the economic life in the region and other interactions ranging from political to societal spheres. This would also help

institute a consciousness of being a region that would prosper with mutual benefits and future. The fact that interactions among the Central Asian countries have been intensifying since 2017 could be regarded positively in this regard.

### ***Russia and China in Central Asia***

One of the realities of Central Asia is the presence of extra-regional actors that leave the EU on the sidelines. This reality should not be overlooked when formulating realistic policies and contemplating prospects. Both China and Russia are actors with significant levels of influence in the region. Russia has been the dominant power since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when Tsarist Russia occupied the region. During the Soviet era, not only the political but also cultural hegemony of Russia consolidated. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was quick to establish ties with the newly independent Central Asian countries. Besides its cultural hegemony and economic ties, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union are the means of Russia to exert and sustain its influence over Central Asia. China is relatively a newcomer to the region. Despite that, it proved successful in establishing itself as an important actor particularly in the economic field. It is commonly accepted that today Russia is a significant political and security actor in Central Asia, whereas China is the main economic actor.

### ***The EU in Central Asia***

The EU developed an interest in Central Asia in 1990s in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Transportation of goods, oil and natural gas in the east-west direction bypassing Russia and security concerns particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks have been the main reasons of the former's interest in the latter. Accordingly, the EU supported several infrastructure projects such as the TRACECA and TAPI pipeline. One of the particularities of EU's Central Asia policy had been the emphasis on values. Put differently, the EU brought forward 'European values,' that is, democracy, human rights, rule of law etc., in its dealings with Central Asia. In addition, the EU had a one-size fits all approach to the regional countries. Only recently has the EU revised its outlook and adapted a more realist and less value-based approach, and also became more attentive to the particularities of each country in the region in contrast to its previous holistic approach. This new outlook could be referred to as 'principled pragmatism.' Today, EU's Central Asia policy is mainly determined by a pragmatic outlook regarding economic and energy relations. Despite this, the EU is a minor player in the region compared to China. For example, EU investments in the region is twenty-two times smaller than those of China.



### *Türkiye and Central Asia*

Türkiye was an early comer to Central Asia in 1990s. It was one of the first countries to recognize Central Asian countries and establish not only political or economic but also social and cultural relations. Moreover, in 1990s Türkiye was introduced to the region by Western countries as a model country. One main aspect of Türkiye's vision had been to help Central Asian countries to establish themselves as actors that could stand on their feet without reliance on any 'big brother.' Accordingly, Türkiye provided diplomatic and other assistance to new and unexperienced Central Asian countries. In addition, Türkiye did not aim to become a big brother to Central Asian countries. Despite good intentions and intense interactions, however, in terms of practical outcomes, Türkiye's Central Asia policy did not always give the anticipated results as it failed to fulfill some of the expectations of the regional countries. Considering the positive and negative outcomes of its interactions with the Central Asian countries, Türkiye has several comparative advantages in its relations with the region such as cultural, historical, linguistic, religious, and ethnic ties. In addition, Turkish diplomacy's cross-cultural skills are an important asset.

### *The EU-Türkiye Cooperation in Central Asia*

Both the EU and Türkiye have relative advantages in becoming substantial actors in Central Asia. The EU is a powerful economic actor. It is both an investor and a market for the regional countries. Türkiye has developed substantial relations with the regional countries in the last thirty years. Also, because of this, Türkiye bears importance for EU's political and economic access to Central Asia. Türkiye is a natural conduct between the EU and Central Asia. This is not only because of the geographical location of the former but also because of its decades-long partnership with the EU no matter the ups and downs experienced in this relationship. Türkiye's role as a connector gains significance at the face of the rivalry between the EU and Russia, another geographical nexus between Europa and Asia. In other words, Türkiye has all the merits to be a substantive trade and energy corridor between the EU and Central Asia, bypassing Russia. In addition, because of Türkiye's deep rooted and comprehensive ties with the region and its experience in multifaceted diplomacy, Türkiye could connect the EU with Central Asia and vice versa. Since the last thirty years, EU-Central Asia relations has not been truly established, whereas Türkiye and Central Asian countries developed rather stable relations. Accordingly, joining their strengths and coordinating their policies, or formulating a common agenda and perspective would provide both with significant advantages vis-à-vis the region.

Despite this positive outlook, fruitful EU-Türkiye cooperation in Central Asia is dependent on the resolution of disagreements between the two, which in the last

years has reached significant levels. Cooperation in Central Asia cannot be carried out without at least a partial resolution to these disagreements. Thinking in the opposite direction, EU-Türkiye cooperation in Central Asia itself would not be enough to overcome the differences between the EU and Türkiye. In other words, EU-Türkiye cooperation in Central Asia can be an outcome of the wider EU-Türkiye relations rather than their driver. Therefore, EU-Türkiye cooperation in Central Asia rests on a determination of both parties to sort out their disagreements and accept each other as inseparable partners.

## Conclusion

Some thirty years ago, with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a new concept that soon turned into a buzzword began to dominate intellectual and political discourses. This new concept was ‘globalization’ connoting a culturally, economically, and politically more connected and interdependent world. In the present, however, decoupling rather than interconnectivity, and competition rather than cooperation seem to be the main global trends. The same could also be said about the unipolar world order, which is being (or has already been) replaced by a multipolar one.

The Russia-Ukraine war that erupted on 24 February 2022 by Russia’s attempt to invade Ukraine has been the peak of polarization in almost all domains in the global scale. This threatens the world order as we have known it since 1990s and calls for inquiries on the ways in which a functioning international order could be reinstated. Whereas this would be a long-term project, in the mid and short terms solutions are needed for the economic, food, and energy crises that were erupted with the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war.

In such a gloomy context, Central Asia gains further significance in strategic calculations. First, the hydrocarbon energy rich Central Asia may play an important role in solving the supply problems that the EU countries face following the tug of war between Russia and the West and the mutual intimidations and sanctions. At a time when Russia has ceased to be a reliable energy supplier and the EU countries are seeking alternatives to Russia, Central Asia is an obvious alternative. Second, in the new geopolitical context, Russia has also ceased to be a reliable and/or preferable land route between the Pacific and the Atlantic. Therefore, the Middle Corridor that passes through Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and continues via Türkiye has gained both economic and strategic significance.

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This is arguably the primary reason that brings forth the prospect of Türkiye-EU cooperation in Central Asia. Both of these two have comparative advantages with respect to their relations with Central Asia. Whereas the EU is an important economic actor, Türkiye's deep and comprehensive ties with Central Asia, as well as Turkish diplomacy's cross-cultural skills make it an important actor in the region. Besides that, given the rift between the EU and Russia, Türkiye stands out as the only land conduit for transportation of goods and energy between the EU and Central Asia. In brief, Türkiye and the EU could easily complement each other's strengths.

Finally, Türkiye-EU cooperation in Central Asia should not be viewed as an imposition on the latter. This cooperation can and should work only when Central Asian countries also work towards developing their relations with Türkiye and the EU. The critical point here is the necessity of regarding Central Asian countries as independent and sovereign actors. Opportunely, Central Asian countries are willing more than ever to multiplying their partners. Central Asian countries' multi-vectorism is another inelible factor that strengthens the prospect of Türkiye-EU cooperation in Central Asia or, to frame the matter better, Türkiye-EU-Central Asia cooperation as equal partners.

# Program

## EU-Turkey Cooperation in Central Asia Challenges and Opportunities for Closer Cooperation in the Region

May 13, 2022  
JW Marriott Hotel Ankara

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|---------------|--|
| 09:00         | <b>Registration and Coffee</b>   |
| 09:30 – 09:45 | <b>Welcome Speeches</b><br>Amb. Ret. Alev Kılıç<br>President, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)<br><br>Walter Glos<br>Director, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Türkiye  |
| 09:45 – 10:05 | <b>Keynote: The Organization of Turkic States –<br/>Prospects for the Future</b><br>Ambassador Bagdat Amreyev<br>Secretary General, Organization of Turkic States  |
| 10:10 – 10:25 | <b>Keynote: Turkey as an Energy Hub</b><br>Deputy Minister Dr. Alparslan Bayraktar<br>Deputy Minister of Energy and Natural Resources<br>Republic of Turkey Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources   |
| 10:30 – 12:00 | <b>Panel Discussion 1:<br/>Promoting Regional Energy Connectivity and<br/>Trade in Central Asia</b><br><br><b>Dr. H. Yurdakul Yigitgüden</b><br>Former Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental<br>Activities and former Under-Secretary of Energy and<br>Natural Resources, Turkey<br><br><b>Amb. Ret. Mithat Rende</b><br>Former Permanent Representative of Turkey to the OECD<br><br><b>Akram Nematov</b><br>First Deputy Director, Institute for Strategic and Interregional<br>Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan<br><br><b>Moderated by:</b> Barçın Yınanç, Journalist |

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| 12:00 – 14:00       | <p><b>Lunch Break with an Input on Leveraging Synergies with the EU on Connectivity in Central Asia.</b><br/> <b>Rovshan Mirazayev</b><br/> Director for Energy, Minerals &amp; Environment (EME)<br/> Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)</p>   |
| 14:00 – 14:20       | <p><b>Keynote: Turkey in Central Asia</b><br/> <b>Ambassador Yönet Can Tezel</b><br/> Director General for Bilateral Political Affairs (Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Caucasasia), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey</p>   |
| 14:30 – 16:00       | <p><b>Panel Discussion 2:</b><br/> <b>EU-Turkey Cooperation in a Geopolitically Contested Environment</b></p> <p><b>Tony van der Togt</b><br/> Senior Research Associate, Clingendael Institute</p> <p><b>Amb. Ret. Selim Yenel</b><br/> President, Global Relations Institute Istanbul;<br/> Former Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the European Union</p> <p><b>Dr. Daria Isachenko</b><br/> Associate, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS),<br/> German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)</p> <p><b>Moderated by:</b> Zeynep Gürcanlı, Journalist</p> |
| 16:00 – 18:30       | Reception  |
| <b>Organisation</b> | <b>Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Türkiye and Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)</b>   |



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