



Spain: a new European motor in relations with Central Asia?

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Central Asia represents a new element in terms of Europe and Spain's foreign policy, as no antecedents existed to the rapprochement that took place between 2004 and 2008. This article describes the reasons and actions taken by the European Union and Spain to bring this about. Within this process, the foreign policy of José Luis Zapatero's government has played a particularly active role, working through the EU and also (and especially) through the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the presidency of which was held by Spain in 2007. To conclude, the article highlights the existing opportunities that Spain has to confirm its role as a driving force to strengthen relations with Central Asia, which is effectively a nerve centre of Eurasia.

Central Asia reassessed within the EU

Until recently, the EU has paid very little attention to the old Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Only a few member states with an historical tradition of interests in Eurasia have shown any notable presence in the region. These include the United Kingdom and particularly Germany, the only EU country with embassies in all five Central Asian republics. Geographical distance, the strong influence exerted by Russia in the region and a lack of lobbies in Brussels to raise the region's political profile -these are just some of the reasons why political relations between EU and Central Asia have been rather insubstantial until quite recently. Even so, the EU and its member states have been among the Central Asian countries' main external trading partners, as well as being their main suppliers of technical assistance.

This relative distancing, however, began to change following the September 11 attacks in 2001, which placed security at the head of political agendas. The subsequent military intervention in Afghanistan resulted in a decisive re-evaluation of the strategic position of the neighbouring states, and thus the countries of Central Asia became valuable bases for accessing Afghan territory, as well as necessary allies to prevent the situation in Afghanistan from destabilising the region.

In addition, the steadily rising price of oil has turned energy security into a crucial sphere of concern. One particularly significant event was the Russia-Ukraine crisis over gas prices which -following Russia's interruption of its supply in January 2006- affected the rest of Europe, thereby highlighting the dangers of energy dependence. In response, EU countries have tried to introduce a common energy policy and to diversify their sources of supply; hence the resulting strengthening of relations with Central Asia (and particularly Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and the Caspian and Black Sea regions, initiating projects such as the *Nabucco*, a gas pipeline that could transport gas from the Caspian to Central Europe¹. As a European Commission statement put it

(and employing unusually sincere language), energy has become a “central part of all external EU relations; [...] crucial to geopolitical security”².

Within this context, and with the European Parliament focusing mainly on monitoring human rights, the Commission has gradually ceded its initial dominance in relations with Central Asia to the Council. This has, in turn, caused a shift from an essentially regional approach consisting of technical assistance to one that places greater emphasis on the bilateral component and political content. Meanwhile, some of the EU's revolving presidencies have been decisive in granting greater importance to this region within the EU agenda.

The Danish presidency in 2004 launched a regional political dialogue between the EU (represented by the *Troika*) and Central Asia, with the aim of fostering mutual trust. Austria's presidency in 2006 was also noteworthy in this respect, as it made Kazakhstan regional leader and the main interlocutor with the EU. Furthermore, in the intervening period, the post of EU Special Representative for Central Asia was created, a position that was initially held by Jan Kubis, ex-Secretary-General of the OSCE. It was a difficult time, politically speaking, as a serious deterioration took place in relations with Uzbekistan over the Andijan crisis³. Thus, even though some signs of detente began to appear during 2007, the sanctions applied to Uzbekistan by the EU and the United States caused Tashkent to take an abrupt about-face, and turn toward Russia. The sanctions also resulted in drastic measures such as the banning of NATO flights through Uzbek airspace, and the closing of the US airbase at Karshi-Janabad, a site of great importance for operations in Afghanistan.

In view of all this, it was hoped that the German presidency of 2007 would be the one that could organise strategic relations and draft a consistent policy on Central Asia. And in fact, the foundations for this were laid in June 2007, when the Council produced a strategic document that highlighted the instruments for the required actions and the priority areas for cooperation with the region. Though it can not exactly be called a strategy (given that it did not define specific objectives or analyse the complex, dynamic regional geopolitical context), the document represents an important step forward as a referential framework for relations with the region. Since then, the challenge has been how to implement the measure; how to formulate specific policies.

As the document itself states, the enlargement of the EU, the inclusion of the Southern Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Baku Initiative (which brings together the countries of the EU and those of the Black Sea and Caspian regions in order to integrate energy markets) are all processes that have brought Central Asia closer to the EU⁴. This rapprochement has also led to the region being included within the EU's concern for the stability of the European space, which is the sense of the European Security Strategy. In this way, as “neighbours of the neighbours” (the unofficial denomination the Commission has been using), the EU and its member states have developed a new interest in Central Asia, especially the countries that had some kind of previous link with the region, such as Spain.

Central Asia in Spain's external agenda: contributing to set the pace for Europe

Albeit with modest beginnings, Spain has caught the spirit of the EU's new stance towards Central Asia, and to a certain extent it has even acted as a leader in terms of Europe's influence in the area. In 1999, Spain opened the first Embassy in the region - in the old Kazakh capital of Almaty- with the main objective of providing support for business initiatives in Kazakhstan. Soon, important informal links were forged, such as

the friendly relations between King Juan Carlos I and Nursultan Nazabayev, the president of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, while greater attention was being paid to Asia (as demonstrated by José Maria Aznar's last government in the year 2000, with the approval of the Asia Pacific Plan) interest in Central Asia was still marginal.

Within this context, the foreign policy of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government has brought about a qualitative change with respect to Central Asia, resulting in a perceptible strengthening of relations and a general broadening of the field of dialogue, both in the multilateral sphere and in bilateral relations. And both the tempo and the motivations of Spain's actions have been in harmony with those of the EU.

Apart from economic interests, Spain's advances toward Central Asia are also based on security; referring to security in its broadest sense, including areas such as support for deployment in Afghanistan, energy diversification, care of the environment, migrations and management of water resources. Spain's agenda for Central Asia has focused on promoting regional cooperation and economic and institutional development as well as supporting democratic reforms and respect for human rights.

The opportunity Spain was given to promote this agenda during its presidency of the OSCE in 2007 considerably raised the Spanish government's interest in the region, providing as it did an opportunity to learn more about Central Asia and to explore the increasing possibilities for cooperation. The OSCE presidency also enabled Spain to take the unprecedented step of sending Miguel Ángel Moratinos, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, on a tour of the Central Asian republics.

Thus, the multilateral approach has been of primary importance in the establishing of a structured policy on Central Asia. Within the EU, Spain -together with Germany- has been one of the main driving forces in the drafting of a strategy for the region, though notable roles were also played by the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Italy and France. Spain was one of the countries that worked hard to prepare the ground ahead, foster a mood of possibility and to minimise friction with countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic, who were reluctant to intensify their relations with countries from the old Soviet Union without clearer advances in terms of democratisation. In contrast (and drawing on its own experience of transition to democracy), Spain's policy in Central Asia has used dialogue as an instrument to encourage modernisation and the progressive transformation of Central Asian political regimes, which still show distinct elements of authoritarianism.

It is also noteworthy that, during the drafting of the EU strategy, Spain was one of the countries that were most vocal in defending the need to make express mention of the OSCE as a complementary instrument with which EU institutions should coordinate. It was, in fact, the OSCE presidency that enabled Spain to develop a stronger agenda of multilateral actions with Central Asia. Spain's main line of action here was its support for Kazakhstan's candidacy to chair the organisation.

The vote of confidence was resolved favourably, and should come to fruition in 2010. It was by no means an easy enterprise, given that despite the support Kazakhstan received in its bid from Germany and Russia, other countries had serious reservations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic and Poland, all of whom objected to Kazakhstan's lack of respect for human rights and the insufficient development of democracy in the country. Spain helped to wear down some of this resistance, at the same time as it played the role of facilitator through its presidency of the OSCE, offering support to Kazakhstan in the reform of aspects related with electoral legislation, the media law, NGOs, etc. In this way, Spain's commitment to Kazakhstan

was a success on several different levels: it promoted the sense of belonging to the OSCE community among the Central Asian countries, it strengthened the existing trust between Spain and Kazakhstan and it ensured the OSCE presidency until 2011, by approving also presidencies of Greece (2009) and Lithuania (2011).

However, the OSCE also made other achievements with respect to Central Asia, and which are a consequence of Spain's presidency. These include the agreement through which the organisation is collaborating in the stabilisation of Afghanistan from Central Asia through the managing of borders, training police and providing support in the fight against drug trafficking. Another example with implications for Central Asia is the declaration on water management and the one that links security and the environment, which represents a pioneering step in the multilateral sphere. As for the OSCE human dimension, it was remarkable the willingness to collaborate with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) expressed by the new Turkmen leader, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, as well as some activities carried out in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Finally, by involving Uzbekistan in the organisation's activities, Spain has helped to gradually improve relations with the country.

Beyond the work being carried out in the multilateral sphere, Spain's focus on Central Asia has also had an effect in terms of increased bilateral relations. With bonds of friendship at a high level, one could particularly highlight the excellent relations that exist with Kazakhstan, and which the recent transferral of the Spanish Embassy to Astana -the new Kazakh capital- has helped to strengthen. However, Spain's perspectives are widening to include other countries and this and other gestures of diplomatic rapprochement⁵ are fostering greater complicity and mutual interest between Spain and the Central Asian republics, a situation that opens up a new scenario of opportunities for cooperation.

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, two closely-related windows of opportunity are highlighted here to strengthen relations with Central Asia, and which Spain should take into consideration if it wants to be one of the European motors in fostering cooperation with the region, taking advantage of the fact that it already has a good track record there.

On a bilateral level, and regardless of whether closer relations are developed with other countries in Central Asia, Spain could strengthen its links with Kazakhstan -a priority country for Spain and the EU, and the one that currently holds the regional leadership. With economic opportunities in sectors such as energy, transport, telecommunications and the space industry, Spain could also develop more its political relations with the country, taking advantage of the trust that it has generated during its presidency of the OSCE. For example, by offering assistance in preparation for Kazakhstan's presidency of the OSCE -especially in the training of diplomats and other specialists that will be required in 2010.

On a multilateral level, the most significant opportunity is the fact that Kazakhstan's presidency of the OSCE will coincide with Spain's next EU presidency in 2010. The two countries' capacity for cooperation will then be put to the test, as well as Spain's ability to manage new challenges, such as the following ones which the EU is facing with respect to Central Asia:

- Pushing forward in the implementation of the strategy adopted by helping to define specific objectives, coordinating the action of EU institutions and linking it up with other European policies.
- Providing Europe's foreign policy with greater terms of reference with respect to democratisation and human rights, so that the requirements of stability and energy security do not relegate this dimension to the background, thereby calling the EU's credibility into question.
- Improving European diplomatic representation in the region and the EU's visibility in the Central Asian media, an area currently dominated by Russia.
- Coordinating the actions of the European Commission and the OSCE to ensure that they do not end up mutually excluding each other as suppliers of technical assistance. In this sense, it might be useful for the EU to take on board what the OSCE has learned during the years it has been working on the ground in Central Asia.
- Improving energy cooperation with Russia, maintaining Spain's policy of not entering into competition with Russia in Central Asia.

Spain's future EU presidency will, therefore, offer an opportunity to work toward the progressive integration of Eurasia, where Central Asia could become a bridge for traffic between the most dynamic economies of Asia and Europe. However, in order to face this challenge with the highest expectations of success, Spain and the EU should continue to develop a global view of this space and of Europe's foreign policy there, by taking up a position in the complex network of actors and dynamics that intervene in the region. The geopolitical configuration of the continent is at stake -or, to put it another way, the balance of power and influence between the EU, the United States, China and Russia.

Notes

¹ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Council and the European Parliament - An energy policy for Europe*, COM (2007) 1 final, Brussels, 10th January 2007, pp. 9 and 23.

² European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Council and the European Parliament - An energy policy for Europe*, COM (2007) 1 final, Brussels, 10th January 2007, p.17.

³ In May 2005, Uzbek special forces crushed a popular revolt in Andijan which, according to official sources within the country, was led by Islamic extremists. Though the events and the number of victims have never been established, it is believed that unarmed civilians may have been among them.

⁴ Council of the European Union (2007), Note 10113/07, with the appendix *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, Brussels, 31st May 2007, pp. 2 and 4.

⁵ In addition to the efforts currently in progress to open a Spanish Embassy in Tashkent, important work to strengthen relations has also been done in the opposite direction by the Kazakh Embassy in Madrid and its Consulate in Barcelona, as well as by the Uzbek government, by opening recently its Embassy in Madrid and a Consulate in Barcelona. Other actions are in progress to ensure that Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are represented in Spain.

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