

Germany's Changing role in Countries of Central Asia

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The international community, following the September 11, 2001 events and the subsequent outbreak of war in Afghanistan “rediscovered” the strategic importance of the Central Asian region. Germany was among the first countries to pay more attention to this region. However, Berlin already had decades of experience of dealing with major issues in Central Asia. Germany was the first European country to recognize Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and as early as 1992 it sent various diplomatic missions to the region. Now Germany is showing even greater interest in forging closer relations, both politically and economically, with these five Central Asian governments.

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Yet, the lack of improvement in the democratization process in the Central Asian countries could negatively affect these relations in the not-too-distant future (the recent deterioration in the German-Uzbek relationship is a sign of that). Such a development could seriously put at risk the successful implementation of the German (officially European Union) strategy for Central Asia.^[1]

Germany's interest in Central Asia

At first sight, the massive and willfully promoted presence of Germany in all five Central Asian states, all relatively poor countries by world standards, appears somewhat absurd. Nevertheless, substantial human and financial resources are being allocated to the region by Germany, and a recent increase in the numbers of German staff, supported by some European Union (EU) officials, testifies to the seriousness of Germany's plans for that part of the world. Berlin has created a network in which its diplomatic missions are supported by numerous economic and development institutions, such as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ, German Society for International Cooperation), the Bankengruppe (KfW, German Development Bank) and cultural bodies, such as the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD, German Academic Exchange Service), the Deutschen Volkshochschul-Verbandes e.V. (DVV, German Adult Education Association), the Welthungerhilfe (emergency aid), the Goethe Institute, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS, policy expertise) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES, think tank). In Almaty, Kazakhstan, the Germans have established the Kazakh-German KGU University. It is interesting to note that German is one of the most widely spoken foreign languages in the five countries making up the Central Asian region.

Berlin's motivation in creating a network of cultural institutions and economic programs in the region is many sided. Reinhard Krumm, in his paper “*Central Asia, the struggle for power, energy and human rights*”^[2] suggests that this has taken three chronologically distinct phases, in each of

which German interests have changed (although it would perhaps be more correct to say that new interests have been added in the light of changes in external conditions). In the period immediately following the five republics' independence, Berlin was primarily interested in protecting the approximately one million ethnic Germans who had lived in the region since their deportation to that region during the Second World War (through an edict of August 28, 1941, Joseph Stalin personally ordered the deportation in mass of ethnic Germans from the Volga region to Central Asia).

This displaced population (concentrated mainly in Kazakhstan, and to a lesser extent Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) is the key to understanding why political relations between Germany and the five Central Asian republics have been so intense since the early nineties. At the beginning of the 2000s, however, more interest was stirred by the rich energy resources (oil and gas) yet to be found in the region. This was clearly explained in a 1998 document presented by the German Social Democratic Party and entitled "Zukunftsregion Kaspisches Meer" ("the Future of the Caspian Sea"[\[3\]](#)).

The September 11, 2001 attacks on America marked a critical turning point in German policy towards Central Asia, which became for Berlin an area of strategic importance in the fight against international terrorism. The German strategy, outlined in the "Central Asia Concept" of March 18, 2002, was summarized by the German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle in last November during his visit to Astana: "If we are to ensure the success of the political process of reconciliation in Afghanistan, then it is crucial that neighboring countries become involved, that they (...) are politically engaged but have also such strong links with the Afghan economy that it can develop favorably."[\[4\]](#)

Berlin's interests in the Central Asian region are also predominant in the economic sphere and are keeping growing. These German economic interests there in Central Asia are certainly not limited to oil and natural gas, though these continue to be a primary focus - for instance, on March 14-15 next year Berlin will host the "Turkmenistan Oil & Gas Road Show 2012."[\[5\]](#) Equally important are German exports of machinery, vehicles and chemicals to the five republics, especially at a time when the global economic crisis has led to a decline in global demand for such products, which have always been the backbone of the German economy.

Political relations, but not good ones

Since the early nineties Germany has maintained good relations with the political leaders of all the republics of the region. The results are seen in the frequent visits by senior government officials, conclusions of economic agreements and a flurry of political activity by a growing number of German companies. The intensity of cooperation in the cultural sector is another indication of the intensity of these relations. To cite just one example, a "Year of Germany in Kazakhstan"[\[6\]](#) was celebrated in Kazakhstan, the main German partner in the region, between February 2009 and February 2010. During the Kazakhstani President's visit to Germany in 2010 Berlin decided to reciprocate by proclaiming the "Year of Kazakhstan in Germany." There have been numerous mutual visits made over the last few years by top government officials of both countries, including one to Astana by German federal President Horst Koehler in September 2009, during which a series of official documents were signed, including six trade agreements. In 2010 Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, twice visited Astana to sign a series of "investment memorandums."[\[7\]](#) More recently, on July 20, 2011, Westerwelle met his Kazakh counterpart in Berlin. A few days earlier in Karaganda was held the 5th meeting of the "German-Kazakh Intergovernmental Working Group on Business and Trade" (RAG).

Germany's relations with the five Central Asian republics seem therefore to continue to be strengthened over time. However, a closer analysis reveals some hidden weaknesses and inherent risks in Berlin's relations with these young states. These were brought to the forefront by the recent friction between the German and Uzbek governments. Berlin had planned for a German delegation to visit Tashkent in November 2010 to hold bilateral meetings with the Uzbek government and parliament in order to discuss human rights in the region. The visit was, however, rejected through a statement from the Uzbek foreign ministry. Frictions between the two governments also increased in August 2011, when the Uzbek authorities in Tashkent took control of Steinert Industries, a major German-owned bakery. Not even the German Ambassador, Wolfgang Neuen, was subsequently allowed entry into the facility.[\[8\]](#)

Tashkent's behavior in this matter was most likely prompted by President Karimov's desire to impose tight control over the national economy. As early as 1993 he issued a decree establishing a national economic model which on the one hand supported the opening up of the country to international trade but at the same time maintained strict governmental control over the goods and services coming in and out of the country. The presence and expansion of large German companies in the country may have been interpreted as a threat to the Uzbek government's control of the economy. The punitive action taken against the bakery was probably meant as a way to send a clear message to Berlin.

On the other hand, this unexpected reaction alone does not explain Tashkent's current discontent with Germany. Karimov's recent attitude could equally be read as a reaction to the Bundestag's May 19 investigation into violations of human rights in Uzbekistan. On May 19, 2011, six years almost to the day after the Andijan massacre, during which about 800 people were killed after the Uzbek security forces opened fire on demonstrators in this eastern region of Uzbekistan, four members of the German Parliament (Viola von Cramon, Johannes Pflug, Dagmar Enkelmann and Volker Beck) officially called on Chancellor Angela Merkel to raise the cases of Akzam Turgunov and twelve other human rights defenders unjustly imprisoned and tortured by the government of Uzbekistan.[\[9\]](#) Tashkent must not have liked this initiative, and Karimov is probably now sending to the Berlin government a clear message that he will not accept any kind of German interference in Uzbekistan's internal affairs.

Human rights

It is increasingly evident that the speed of democratization in the Central Asian states will to a large extent determine the success or failure of the German strategy towards the "stans." The key issue here is to define the optimal strategy for ensuring the maintenance of the close ties which bind Germany to this key region, an indispensable bridge between Europe and Asia.

Until recently, Berlin has favored a very tolerant attitude towards the authoritarian regimes of the five Central Asian republics. This has set the tone for the relationship between Berlin and Tashkent. In consequence, strong pressure from the German government has persuaded the EU in November 2009 to finally (and reluctantly) lift the sanctions – including an arms embargo – imposed on Uzbekistan following the May 15, 2005 Andijan massacre.[\[10\]](#) Between 2005 and 2009 Berlin did not comply with EU sanctions anyway, and continued to support the Uzbek president – for example, Germany paid 67.9 million euros to Tashkent between 2005 and 2009 to cover the costs of using the Termez military base, which provides essential logistical support for the German troops deployed in Afghanistan. During the same period, in breach of the Europe-wide ban on Uzbek officials imposed by Brussels (penalties were attached to EU members hosting visits by members of the Uzbek

government), Berlin allowed the Uzbek Interior Minister, Zokir Almatov, to travel to Germany for medical treatment.^[11] Since 2010, Germany has granted the Uzbek government an additional 15.9 million euros a year as “financial compensation” for its use of the Termez base, even though Tashkent has demonstrated no real will to respect human rights of its citizens, as the EU demands.

Putting the moral considerations involved in these disbursements aside, one cannot pin the slightest hope for success on any strategy based on the appeasement of Tashkent’s anti-democratic policy. Berlin’s disinterest in dealing with human rights issues in Uzbekistan means a huge loss of bargaining power. Its passivity is now more likely to enhance the level of blackmail undertaken by the Uzbek government. This will only strengthen Tashkent’s conviction that there is no need to review its human rights and democratization practices.

Judging from its official policy documents, Germany does seem to understand that the issue of human rights is fundamental, not only on the humanitarian level but also in terms of protecting Germany’s own interests in the region. The democratization, pacification and stabilization of the area are at the centre of the EU’s strategy for Central Asia, which was drafted in 2007 under the German presidency of the time and coincides almost completely with Germany’s own. A reading of both German and EU official documents shows indeed a clear understanding of the importance of democratization and the protection of human rights. The EU document reads: “The aim of the European Commission’s assistance Strategy Paper for Central Asia (2007-13) is to promote the stability and security of the countries of Central Asia, to assist in their pursuit of sustainable economic development and poverty reduction and to facilitate closer regional cooperation both within Central Asia and between Central Asia and the EU.”^[12] However, these official statements, if anything, do not constitute a sufficient means of improving, or at least ensuring, the protection of human rights, despite the many useful projects also being implemented by the EU and Berlin in this field. The key will be to add even more strategic and humanitarian projects to these statements, to take immediate and firm action against any violations and to refuse to accede to the socio-economic demands of Tashkent and those of other regional governments, unless progress is made.

Such a course of action would involve, for example, linking the payment of a ‘financial contribution’ for the use of the Termez base to real action on various humanitarian issues. Germany should react immediately and firmly to Karimov’s recent initiatives, make sure that any sanctions deemed necessary are actually applied and ensure that demands for democratization are taken seriously in Tashkent. Such a strategy would increase the bargaining power and the credibility of Germany and the EU in throughout all of Central Asia.