



Doc. 11460

04 December 2007

The situation in the republics of central Asia

Report

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

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Summary

Central Asia, as a region in the Council of Europe's neighbourhood, is of growing significance for Europe and shares with it a series of common problems. Europe should therefore be interested in promoting stability and democratic transition in this area.

The report covers four countries of the region: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (another central Asian state, Kazakhstan, is being dealt with in a separate report). All these countries proclaimed transformation into free democratic societies as their strategic goal but the transition process has so far brought mixed results, ranging from limited progress to failure.

Though the situation differs from one country to another, the report points at common features such as poor democratic performance, wide-spread human rights abuse and bad governance, which are proper to the whole region. These failures create a real risk of social explosion, political collapse and outbreak of large-scale violence.

In order to avoid it, the report calls on the authorities of central Asian states to urgently engage in reforms aimed at good governance, institutional modernisation and political liberalisation, with special focus on democracy, respect of human rights and the rule of law.

The report suggests that the Council of Europe should, in co-operation with the European Union and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), promote stability, good governance and democratic reforms in central Asia and share its experience of democratic transition with the countries of the region. It contains proposals for action that could be taken to this effect by the Assembly, the Committee of Ministers, the Secretary General and the member states.



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A. Draft resolution

1. When becoming sovereign in 1991, the newly independent states of central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) proclaimed as their strategic goal the transformation into free democratic societies based on market economy and integrated in the international community.
2. However, confronted with the authoritarian legacy of the former regime, with the challenges of simultaneous multifaceted transition in political, economic and social areas, and with waves of instability resulting from violent ethnic, religious and social conflicts, central Asian states have had enormous difficulties in making headway towards these goals. Progress has been further hindered by the lack of real political commitment to, and wrong conception of, reforms, absence of democratic traditions and non-existence of mechanisms of accountability. Initial high public expectations of rapid transformation quickly turned into disappointment, which dramatically weakened both internal motivations of political elites, and public support for reforms. Hence, transitions have brought mixed results, transformations are far from being completed and, in some cases, there is clear regression.
3. As former republics of the Soviet Union, the states of central Asia are participating states in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and thus are politically bound by the OSCE human dimension commitments, including respect for human rights, the rule of law and promotion of the principles of democracy, which to a large extent coincide with the Council of Europe's core activities.
4. However, the performance of central Asian states in these areas, from one country to another, ranges from limited improvement to complete failure. Democratic principles have failed to take root within societies and ruling elites and to replace authoritarian methods of government inherited from the past. Power remains highly centralised within the executive, with no effective checks and balances. Democratic institutions are weak, if not a mere imitation. Political opposition is barely tolerated. Human rights are routinely abused. Civil society organisations remain fragile. Corruption and abuse of power are widespread. Torture and ill-treatment of persons deprived of their liberty are commonplace.
5. Moreover, public authorities often fail to deliver the basic services in the social, economic, education and health protection fields which citizens are entitled to receive from a modern state. The lack of a tradition and of effective means of democratic control over authority, together with lack of accountability, result in deep popular suspicion of state institutions. Conditions are therefore ripe for tension between the state and the population and for rapid ascendancy of extremist militant groups. Faced with corrupt and inefficient public authorities, ordinary people find the image of a just society based on Islamic law, as propagated by some of these groups, an increasingly attractive alternative to the existing regimes.
6. In order to avoid the further deterioration of the situation in central Asia, with a real risk of social explosion, political collapse and outbreak of large-scale violence, these countries need to proceed with profound reforms in order to move towards good governance, political transformation and social stability. Problems that they are faced with need a locally-grown political response, which could be fostered by, but not imported from, the international community.
7. The European political and social experience interests and attracts elites and peoples of central Asia. Europe should use its influence and soft-power in order to promote liberalisation and political reform in the region. However, central Asia must not be considered as an arena for a new geopolitical "Great Game". Any externally designed projects which exclude the existing political forces or ignore local realities or interests of the majority, would only bring about destabilisation and would be doomed to failure.
8. As central Asia is not part of Europe, states of the region are not potential candidates for joining the Council of Europe. However, taking into account the situation of central Asia in Europe's neighbourhood, and its growing vulnerability to illegal migration, drugs production and smuggling, arms trafficking and threat of extremism and terrorism, our Organisation should be interested in promoting stability and good governance in central Asia, in strengthening national capacities and in reliable co-operation with these states in addressing common threats.
9. Furthermore, the Council of Europe, building on its experience of transitions in central and eastern Europe, could contribute, in co-operation with the European Union and the OSCE, to redefining the scope of reforms in central Asia, thus increasing their chances of success.
10. The Assembly urges the authorities and political forces of central Asia:
 - 10.1. to engage in serious reforms aimed at good governance, institutional modernisation, political liberalisation and accountability;

- 10.2. to address without delay urgent issues their countries are faced with, such as corruption, organised crime, poverty, spread of diseases, thus regaining confidence of their population;
- 10.3. to strengthen national capacities and to step up international co-operation in the fight against illegal migration and trafficking in human beings, drugs production and smuggling, money laundering, arms trafficking and terrorism;
- 10.4. to make use of international expertise, in particular that of the Council of Europe, regarding democratic transition;
- 10.5. to make progress in meeting political commitments entered into in the framework of the OSCE in the fields of building democracy, guaranteeing respect of human rights and abiding by the rule of law, and in particular:
 - 10.5.1. to allow political pluralism and to provide conditions for genuine political competition through free and fair elections;
 - 10.5.2. to ensure the genuine separation of power between the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches, and the proper functioning of democratic institutions;
 - 10.5.3. to guarantee all basic human rights and political freedoms, including freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of the media;
 - 10.5.4. to stop all forms of political repression and to release all political prisoners;
 - 10.5.5. to eradicate torture and ill-treatment of persons deprived of their liberty.
11. The Assembly calls on member and observer states of the Council of Europe:
 - 11.1. to strengthen the dialogue with authorities of central Asian states aimed at promoting and supporting reforms towards good governance, political liberalisation, institutional modernisation and accountability, and at sharing experience of, and expertise on, democratic transition;
 - 11.2. to maintain issues of democracy, human rights and the rule of law as central items on the agenda of the dialogue, while avoiding that these issues are perceived as tools of pressure aimed at achieving political or economic benefits;
 - 11.3. to provide support to the strengthening of, and to develop co-operation with, democratic institutions and civil society organisations in the countries of central Asia.
12. The Assembly calls on the European Union and the OSCE to make use of the Council of Europe's experience of, and expertise on, democratic transition in their programmes and activities in central Asia.
13. The Assembly invites the Secretary General of the Council of Europe:
 - 13.1. to inform the authorities of central Asian states of the core activities and achievements of the Council of Europe in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law;
 - 13.2. to consider ways of sharing with the central Asian states the Council of Europe's experience of, and expertise on, democratic transition;
 - 13.3. to contribute to strengthening civil society organisations in central Asia and to involve them in European civil society co-operation networks.
14. The Assembly welcomes the ongoing co-operation between Kyrgyzstan and the Venice Commission, and encourages the other states of central Asia to establish such co-operation.
15. The Assembly declares its readiness to contribute to establishing political dialogue with central Asia at the parliamentary level aimed at the strengthening of democratic principles and standards. With this in mind, it resolves:
 - 15.1. to keep the parliaments of central Asian states informed of its activities and of its resolutions and recommendations;
 - 15.2. to consider inviting representatives of the parliaments of central Asian states to follow those plenary sessions, committee meetings and other activities which deal with topics of common interest;
 - 15.3. to consider inviting central Asian parliaments to be associated with European Conferences of Presidents of Parliaments;
 - 15.4. to encourage its official representatives at international parliamentary fora where central Asian parliaments are represented to establish contacts and develop dialogue with their representatives.

B. Draft recommendation

1. The Assembly refers to Resolution ... (2008) on the situation in the republics of central Asia.
2. The Assembly recalls that the Council of Europe heads of state and government, meeting for the Warsaw Summit in May 2005, expressed commitment to new intercultural and inter-religious dialogue with neighbouring regions, including central Asia, based on universal human rights.
3. The Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to take steps so as to translate this commitment into practical action.
4. The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers considers:
 - 4.1. the possibility to invite representatives of central Asian states to follow conferences of specialised ministers organised by the Council of Europe;
 - 4.2. the appropriateness and the possibility of central Asian states' participation in some Council of Europe conventions;
 - 4.3. the possibility, in the framework of Council of Europe co-operation with the European Union and the OSCE, of the participation of Council of Europe experts in the elaboration and implementation of these bodies' programmes of assistance to central Asia in the fields of core activities of our Organisation;
 - 4.4. the possibility of establishing inter-institutional contacts with regional organisations in which central Asian states take part;
 - 4.5. other appropriate measures contributing to dialogue with central Asian states.

C. Explanatory memorandum, by Mr Murat Mercan

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the report

1. The states of central Asia which became independent when the Soviet Union was dissolved were little known to international public opinion generally – though known to some human rights NGOs and pressure groups – until May 2005.
2. The February-April 2005 “tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, and in particular the tragic events at Andijan (Uzbekistan) in May 2005 when the authorities violently suppressed a popular uprising, triggered a wave of criticism in Europe and a sudden interest in those countries. It became clear that stability in the region was more apparent than real, and that the actual situation might quickly deteriorate.
3. Reacting to the Andijan events, the Assembly held a current affairs debate in June 2005 on the situation in the central Asian republics. Following that debate the Political Affairs Committee was instructed to prepare a report on the subject.
4. In addition, the Council of Europe heads of state and government, meeting for the Warsaw Summit in May 2005, expressed commitment to new intercultural and inter-religious dialogue with neighbouring regions, including central Asia, based on universal human rights.

1.2. Twofold objective of the present report

5. Firstly, to understand the situation in the central Asian states, identify the causes of instability in the region, ascertain the threats and opportunities for Europe and consider possible responses aimed at keeping the threats to a minimum and taking advantage of opportunities.
6. Secondly, to consider the possibility of the Council of Europe playing a role in promoting reforms in central Asia, to identify the areas where a Council of Europe contribution could bring about practical results, and to put forward proposals as to how, in practice, to set about possible co-operation.

2. Why should Europe take an interest in central Asia?

2.1. Short presentation of the countries concerned

7. The term “central Asia” generally refers to the five central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union which became independent when the Union was dissolved in 1991. They are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.
8. This report will not deal with Kazakhstan, which is the subject of a separate recent report by Mr Iwiński.
9. Kyrgyzstan covers an area of 198 500 square kilometres and the population is estimated at 5.2 million, of whom 66% are Kirghiz, 14% Uzbek and 12% Russian. Around 75% of the population are Muslim (Sunni) and 20% Orthodox Christian.
10. Under the 1993 constitution, revised in 2003, Kyrgyzstan is a republic adhering to democratic values. The legislative power is a single-chamber parliament, the executive being headed by the president, who appoints the government.
11. Kyrgyzstan is the only one of our four central Asian countries to have relations with the Council of Europe. It is a member of the Venice Commission and co-operated with it in connection with its constitutional reform.
12. Until 2005 the president was Askar Akayev, who was elected as head of state in 1990, before the proclamation of independence. In April 2005 he was forced to resign following the “tulip revolution” sparked by fraud in the February-March 2005 general election. Since then the country, with Kurmanbek Bakiyev at its head, has experienced a series of political confrontations and crises and the situation remains highly unstable. A new constitution, prepared after a long political turmoil, will be submitted to a referendum on 21 October 2007.

13. Uzbekistan covers an area of 446 400 square kilometres and has a population of 26.8 million (80% are Uzbek, 6% Russian, 4% Tajik, 4% Kazakh, 4% Tatar, and 1.9% Karakalpak). Of the four countries, it has the largest population. The population is 90% Muslim (Sunni) and 9% Orthodox Christian.
14. The 1992 constitution introduced a system which was strongly presidential, the two-chamber parliament having only a subordinate role. Islam Karimov, who has been president since 1990, is an authoritarian leader. All the institutions of state are under presidential control and political opposition is not tolerated.
15. In 1999 and 2004, Uzbekistan experienced outbreaks of terrorist attacks which were attributed to radical Islamic elements. In May 2005 a popular uprising in the city of Andijan – which the authorities described as an Islamic rebellion – was brutally suppressed by the armed forces. The European Union called for an international enquiry into the events. When the Uzbek authorities refused permission the EU introduced sanctions against Uzbekistan, prohibited the issue of visas to the chief figures in the regime and considerably reduced its co-operation programmes. Since a certain softening of the Uzbek authorities' stance, the EU has given to understand that the sanctions might be reviewed.
16. Tajikistan covers an area of 143 000 square kilometres and has a population of over 7.3 million. Tajiks, a people closely related to the Iranians, account for 80% of the population, Uzbeks for 15%, and other minorities (Russian and Kirghiz) for an insignificant proportion. Islam is the dominant religion, being 85% Sunni and 5% Shiite.
17. The political system in place is a presidential republic with a two-chamber parliament. The president, Emomali Rakhmon,¹ has held that position since 1992.
18. Tajikistan's post-Soviet history has been marked by civil war (1992-97) between the ruling elite and members of various regional clans, some of them supported by pro-Iranian Islamists. After peace was restored, elections were held in 1999 and the opposition has seats in parliament.
19. Turkmenistan covers an area of 488 000 square kilometres and has a population of 4.8 million (85% Turkmen, 5% Uzbek, 4% Russian). The population is 90% Muslim (Sunni) and 9% Orthodox Christian.
20. Officially a presidential republic with representative institutions, Turkmenistan, from 1992 to 2006, came under the authoritarian rule of President Saparmurat Niyazov, who had been head of the republic's Communist Party from 1985 to 1992. Niyazov, who brooked no opposition, established a personality cult notorious for abuse of power, political persecution and a decline in general living standards. Since his death in December 2006 and the election of a new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, there have been some promising signs of change.

2.2. Importance of the region

21. As its name indicates, the central Asian region is strategically placed at the crossroads of that vast continent. As a result, the countries of the region have access to the great traditional international trade routes such as the Silk Road. Throughout its history, central Asia has seen civilisations pass through or come into contact, and has also been the object of rivalries and battles for influence between foreign powers. Central Asia itself was also home to various civilisations throughout history whose impact and values extended beyond the geographical borders of the region. These predominantly Muslim-Turkish cultures are in a way still a source of inspiration and practice to the peoples of central Asia today.
22. The region's strategic importance is all the greater on account of its immediate proximity to countries or areas affected by international or internal tensions and instability: Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the regions of north-west China. Only a little further off are Iraq and the Middle East. As well as being geographical, this proximity has historical, cultural, ethnic and religious aspects. Tensions or conflicts in those regions affect central Asia, and vice versa.
23. Political stability in central Asia would help reduce tension in these neighbouring regions, while conflict in central Asia would pose an additional threat to them. In an increasingly globalised world, and particularly given the Middle East's influence on the international situation, stability in central Asia, with its large Muslim majority, is of particular importance.

1. The president, known until recently as Rakhmonov, recently ordered that all "Russianised" names ending in "ov" and "ev" be converted back to their traditional Tajik form.

24. The war which the United States and its allies are conducting against the Taliban in Afghanistan has highlighted central Asia's importance in the fight against international terrorism – an importance which can only increase on account of the still fragile situation in Afghanistan.

25. As a crossroads of international trade, central Asia is a transit area for various types of illegal trafficking, notably drugs from Afghanistan, and in human beings and weapons. There is also local production of drugs. The countries of the region are themselves a source of migration and human trafficking, with Europe one of the main destinations. Europe thus has an interest in a reliable, effective partnership with the countries of the region in action to combat trafficking.

26. Mention should also be made of the abundant natural and energy resources of the central Asian countries. Harnessing these resources, which are of key importance to the world economy, requires large investment and consequently political stability and good governance.

2.3. Co-operation with European international institutions

27. All four central Asian countries participate in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. As OSCE participating states, they are politically bound by commitments in the area of the human dimension, including, *inter alia*, to guarantee full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; to abide by the rule of law; and to promote the principles of democracy by building, strengthening and protecting democratic institutions. However, the authorities of central Asian states clearly give priority to the OSCE activities related to security. The OSCE has a network of field offices across the region. Its co-operation programmes with the central Asian countries cover various fields ranging from security issues to environmental protection, and include the human dimension.

28. The European Union has been engaged in various programmes of technical assistance to the central Asian states since the early 1990s, through individual partnership and co-operation agreements and the TACIS programme. The results achieved so far are, however, rather limited. In June 2007, the Union adopted a new regional strategy for assistance to central Asia for the period 2007-13, which aims to ensure the stability and the security of the countries of the region, to help eradicate poverty, and to promote closer regional co-operation both within the region and between central Asia and the EU. One of the priorities of the strategy is to promote democratisation, human rights and good governance.

29. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) established in December 1991 after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. Turkmenistan, which was a full member of that organisation from the beginning, changed its status to an associate member in 2005. The CIS aims at co-ordinating the policies of its member states in the fields of trade, finance, law-making and security. The most significant issue for the CIS is the establishment of a free trade zone between member states. It has also promoted co-operation on democratisation, and cross-border crime prevention. The CIS has a parliamentary dimension, the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, which has a co-operation agreement with our Assembly.

3. Present situation

3.1. Shared problems

30. Fifteen years on from independence, these four central Asian countries are faced with a number of existing or potential problems which endanger their stability. Even though the situation varies considerably from country to country, it is possible to identify some common factors. After seven decades of a repressive regime, central Asian countries inherited an authoritarian legacy. With the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union they all faced waves of instability, violent clashes, and ethnic-religious and social conflicts.

3.2. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law

31. Despite these countries' professed commitment to democratic principles, including in connection with their OSCE undertakings, the central Asian countries' democratic development is extremely embryonic, not to say purely imitative. Democratic traditions are absent among both the elites and the general population. The ruling elites are wary of democracy, which they regard as a threat to their political future. Democratic institutions are weak or only exist for show. The power remains highly centralised within the executive, while the legislative branch does not play a counterbalancing role. Mechanisms of democratic accountability are almost non-existent. To varying degrees, the political regimes are authoritarian.

32. The authorities certainly profess commitment to human rights but in no way build them into their political practice, and may even blatantly ignore them. Consequently, central Asia's human rights performance is disastrous and human rights NGOs routinely report grave violations. Civil society on the whole is extremely weak, and the few remaining human rights activists are under growing pressure from, or openly persecuted by, the authorities. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the central Asian authorities have broadly used the pretext of the fight against Islamic extremism to strengthen pressure on all forms of opposition, to tighten control over civil society and the media, and to further limit civil and political rights.

33. Lastly, the principle of the rule of law receives mere lip service. The judiciary is weak and fully subordinate to political authority, and is often misused for achieving political purposes or to repress dissent. Though some countries of the region have engaged in judicial and legal reforms aimed at strengthening the independence and administrative capacity of the judiciary, these are yet to bring about results. Corruption and abuse of power are widespread, particularly in the law-enforcement services, and torture and ill-treatment of detainees and prisoners is commonplace. On the positive side, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan abolished the death penalty, Uzbekistan announced its intention to abolish it in 2008, and Kyrgyzstan introduced a moratorium.

3.3. Structural problems

34. Over and above the large differences between the countries in the region as regards natural assets and level of industrial development, the economic systems are observably inefficient. The wealth generated is distributed for the benefit of the ruling classes, resulting in general hardship and a yawning gap between the average standard of living and the opulence of the elites who hold power. Popular discontent is a factor of instability that is regularly activated, as demonstrated by the Andijan events and the "tulip revolution".

35. Education and public health systems have greatly deteriorated since the end of the Soviet era. The younger generations have no access to modern, balanced education, which makes them vulnerable to the doctrines of the various extremist movements. The public health systems are inadequate in preventing the spread of disease.

36. The police and other law-enforcement bodies, which suffer from widespread corruption and ineffectiveness, are powerless to check the growth of crime and drug dealing, use and trafficking. In some cases, there is what amounts to a parallel authority in the hands of criminal clans.

37. The harsh economic and social conditions, the difficulty of finding steady work, and more generally the lack of prospects of a decent life prompt a substantial proportion of the population, particularly the young, to go abroad in search of better opportunities. Wages sent back home from abroad are in fact an important source of income for the population.

38. In short, there is ill-governance. The countries in question fail to provide their peoples with the services they would be entitled to expect from a normal state. The clans wielding power use the machinery of state for their own purposes with little heed to the well-being of their "subjects". The lack of a tradition and effective means of democratic control over authority, together with lack of accountability, result in deep popular suspicion of state institutions.

39. Conditions are therefore ripe for tension between the state and the population and for rapid ascendancy of extremist militant groups akin to the Taliban. It is no coincidence that for several years now the radical underground group Hizb ut-Tahrir, with its avowed objective of setting up a "Grand Caliphate" uniting all the Islamic countries and peoples, has been strengthening its position. Given corrupt and inefficient public authorities, the vision of a just society based on Islamic law is increasingly attractive to the common people.

40. In short, to avoid central Asia's increasing the number of failed states and becoming a hotbed of international terrorism, we urgently need to encourage deep reform capable of democratising society in all these central Asian countries.

4. Reform strategy: promoting change while avoiding destabilisation

41. To the authorities and peoples of central Asia, Europe has the appearance of a stable and prosperous society. Consequently, European experience interests those countries and has the potential to influence them, despite the growing appeal of China and its model of authoritarian economic modernisation.

42. In the long term, it would be in Europe's interest if, like it, the central Asian countries practised – and not just professed – the principles of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law. However, it is unrealistic to expect such an ambitious objective to be achieved speedily.

43. We also need to be aware that the European democratic model, if there is one, is incapable of direct transplantation without acclimatisation to central Asian conditions. To take root in the societies of the central Asian countries, democracy – short of completely changing those societies – must adapt to their realities, cultures and traditions. After all, it should be remembered that these countries and peoples are not primitive tribes nor newly emerging nations on the map but direct descendants of very rich civilisations and cultures.

44. Because of the central Asian countries' vulnerability, too rapid political reform and radical restructuring of elites would run the risk of destroying fragile balances and plunging the countries into chaos. The consequences would be the opposite of what was intended. Kyrgyzstan, which has still not emerged from political crisis two years on from the "tulip revolution", provides a very telling example. Fortunately, the crisis there has not degenerated into violent confrontation. A much more violent outcome is highly likely in some other countries in the region.

45. To avert that, it is advisable to seek gradual change avoiding destabilisation. The overall goal should be to encourage reform aimed at bringing in good governance and developing the elements of democratic society.

46. Unfortunately, many of the political elites in the region, particularly those close to the seat of power, are extremely mistrustful of talk about the need for reform, particularly when it comes from abroad. It is essential to rehabilitate the concepts of "reform" and "democracy" in the eyes of the ruling elites and counter their tendency to see these as devices for overthrowing the regime.

47. For that purpose we need to establish dialogue with the authorities and seek to build relationships of trust with them. I am sure that it is possible and necessary to voice criticisms and fully uphold democratic values while staying constructive and avoiding giving the impression of preaching. To win trust, we need to avoid being seen as "pointing the finger". The mode of interaction and dialogue should rather be understood as an exchange of views where all sides have experiences to share and learn.

48. We need to get across the message that criticisms of abuses and shortcomings are aimed at preventing destabilisation in the region, which would be disastrous not only for the regimes in place but also for Europeans. Good governance and democratisation are in the authorities' interest because they would make it possible to create much more flexible and much more open societies.

49. The aim of dialogue would be to encourage the kind of reform that would promote accountability, transparency and access to information and generally would lay down the foundations of good governance. This kind of reform would strengthen popular confidence in the authorities and make it possible to build stable, lasting political systems.

50. What we have to avoid is presenting reform as antithetical to the heritage of central Asian civilisations. Local traditions and clan-based social structure still play an important part in people's lives and in the machinery of government. The reform strategy needs to take that into account, base itself on traditions where possible, and take care not to clash with them needlessly so as not to forfeit support or cause actual resistance within society.

51. Democratic, reform-oriented ideas have been extensively devalued in people's eyes in a good many former Soviet republics, including the countries of central Asia, by the transition years' crushing failure to improve people's lives. Pessimism and social apathy have replaced the optimism and expectancy of the 1990s. It would therefore be difficult to gain popular support for a sloganising reform project which ignored people's vital, day-to-day concerns.

52. I am convinced that the concept of "manageable crisis" as a way of tipping a country into the democratic camp is anything but a responsible policy. Not only would such a strategy fail to achieve lasting results, it might gravely compromise the very idea of democracy. Any action must therefore be avoided which might wreck the existing fragile equilibrium or endanger civil peace.

53. The risk of reinforcing fundamentalist influence in these countries, which at present have secular systems, is not to be underestimated. True, the "fundamentalist factor" is often an easy excuse which the authorities use to justify restrictions on freedoms and human rights violations. The factor nonetheless exists. To pretend otherwise would be political wishful thinking. What we need to do is assure the authorities in the central Asian countries of our support in the face of the fundamentalist threat, while reminding them of the need for observance of universal human rights.

54. Lastly, the aim of modernisation and democratic change for the central Asian states should be regarded as an objective shared by those countries and the international community. To present it in terms of competition for dominant influence between the various outside powers would be to repeat past errors.

55. Historically, culturally, linguistically, economically and in other ways, the central Asian countries have paramount links with the Russian Federation and Turkey. Those two countries are in a prime position as partners both of the authorities and societies of the central Asian countries. They could play a key role in promoting reform.

5. The possible Council of Europe contribution

5.1. Two preliminary observations

56. Firstly, my preliminary contacts with representatives of central Asian countries have shown that there is genuine interest, at different levels of society, in establishing relations and multiplying channels of dialogue with Europe, and a hope that their countries will gradually move towards the European model of democracy. Therefore, the commitment to new dialogue with neighbouring regions, including central Asia, based on universal human rights, which was made at the Warsaw Summit of the Council of Europe, responds to a real need. The Council of Europe can and should be part of the process of democratic transformation in central Asia.

57. Secondly, taking into account the fact that central Asia is outside Europe and, accordingly, not within the Council of Europe geographical area, as well as the limited resources at the disposal of our Organisation and the need to focus on core activities, it is difficult to argue in favour of a separate Council of Europe policy towards central Asian countries. However, the Council could contribute, through its expertise and experience in the field of democratic transition, to various activities led by our main institutional partners, namely the European Union and the OSCE, which are engaged in programmes of assistance to central Asia. Modalities of such a contribution should be defined by common agreement between the Council of Europe and the partner organisations. However, I am convinced that this effort is worth making, and that Council of Europe participation in joint programmes with the EU and the OSCE in central Asia would raise their effectiveness.

5.2. Establishing political dialogue

58. In the present situation political reforms in the central Asian countries can succeed only if supported by the authorities. It is thus of prime importance to convince the authorities that good governance and democracy will strengthen, not weaken, their countries' stability.

59. To win the confidence of the political elites, regular dialogue needs establishing. The parliamentary level has the advantage of bringing together office-holders who are able to discuss the wide range of political issues without being bound by any pre-established negotiation mandate. This level is therefore especially appropriate for establishing contact and creating confidence. Additionally, involving parliaments in international contacts would provide them with more institutional authority.

60. Questions do of course arise as to the democratic nature, representativeness and real powers of the parliaments in question, but that is no reason not to use this channel of political communication. In addition, the parliamentary representatives of the central Asian countries have experience of taking part in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

61. Political dialogue could focus firstly on common or shared threats to Europe and central Asia, such as drug trafficking, illegal migration, terrorism and extremism, and on opportunities (for example, the mutual advantages of economic co-operation, intercultural dialogue, and comparing notes on good governance).

62. It would also be a chance to raise issues of principle such as defence of democratic values and respect for universal and European human rights standards, and to share experience and good practice in these areas. Obviously, human rights issues are broadly viewed, among political elites of these countries, as bargaining chips designed to put pressure on them. Special attention should therefore be paid to explaining that these values are essential elements of internal stability in modern societies, and that ignoring them puts at risk the stability of their own regimes.

5.3. Sharing European experience

63. With successive enlargements, the Council of Europe has built up invaluable experience of assisting democratic transition and institutional reform. Even though central Asian countries undoubtedly have their special features, we must not forget that they were part of the former Soviet Union. The problems which they face today are, at least in part, linked to that heritage.

64. In that context, the experience of other former Soviet republics should be particularly relevant to the reforms which need carrying through in central Asia. The Council of Europe, having assisted the transition in east European countries and with its continuing assistance to former Soviet Union republics, could offer central Asia its experience.

65. The Council of Europe could therefore offer central Asian countries advice and help as regards good governance and reinforcement of administrative systems. That assistance could be focused on the institutions of key importance to the functioning of democratic government – parliaments, courts, law-enforcement bodies and local authorities.

66. The less “politically sensitive” areas of Council of Europe activity, such as culture, sport, youth, environment protection and sustainable development, might present opportunities for co-operation with central Asia as well.

5.4. Consolidating civil society

67. In addition to making contact with official institutions, the Council of Europe, particularly the Assembly, should pay special attention to contact with civil society in those countries.

68. Maintaining regular dialogue with the active elements of society in the broad sense would have a positive effect on their activities in their own countries and would help build them up into civil society. Such dialogue might also place them in a stronger position in their dealings with national government.

69. Lastly, the importance which the Council of Europe attaches to civil society would send a message to the authorities in those countries that they have everything to gain by treating those elements as necessary partners in carrying through social change aimed at better governance and greater democracy.

Reporting committee: Political Affairs Committee. Reference to committee: Reference No. 3113 of 24 June 2005.

Draft resolution and draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 13 November 2007.

Members of the committee: Mr Abdülkadir **Ateş** (Chairperson), Mr Konstantin Kosachev (Vice-Chairperson) (alternate: Mr Victor **Kolesnikov**), Mr Zsolt Németh (Vice-Chairperson), Mr Giorgi Bokeria (Vice-Chairperson), Mr Miloš **Aligrudić**, Mr Claudio Azzolini, Mr Denis Badré, Mr Radu Mircea **Berceanu**, Mr Andris Bērziņš, Mr Alexandër Biberaj, Mrs Guðfinna Bjarnadóttir, Ms Raisa Bohatyryova, Mr Predrag Bošković, Mr Luc **Van den Brande**, Mr Lorenzo Cesa, Mr Mauro Chiaruzzi, Ms Elvira Cortajarena, Ms Anna **Čurdová**, Mr Noel Davern, Mr Dumitru Diacov, Mr Michel Dreyfus-Schmidt, Ms Josette Durrieu, Mr Joan Albert Farré Santuré, Mr Pietro Fassino (alternate: Mr Pietro **Marcenaro**), Mr Per-Kristian **Foss**, Ms Doris Frommelt, Mr Jean-Charles Gardetto, Mr Charles Goerens, Mr Andreas **Gross**, Mr Davit Harutiunyan, Mr Jean-Pol Henry, Mr Serhiy Holovaty, Mr Joachim Hörster, Mrs Sinikka **Hurskainen**, Mr Tadeusz **Iwiński**, Mr Bakir Izetbegović, Mrs Corien W.A. Jonker, Ms Darja Lavtižar-Bebler, Mr Göran **Lindblad**, Mr Younal Loutfi, Mr Mikhail **Margelov**, Mr Tomasz Markowski, Mr Dick Marty, Mr Frano Matušić, Mr Murat **Mercan**, Mr Mircea **Mereuță**, Mr Dragoljub Mićunović (alternate: Mr Željko **Ivanji**), Mr Jean-Claude Mignon (Mr Laurent **Béteille**), Ms Nadezhda Mikhailova, Mr Aydin Mirzazada, Mr João Bosco **Mota Amaral**, Ms Natalia Narochmitskaya, Mrs Miroslava **Němcová**, Mr Hryhoriy Nemyrya, Mr Fritz Neugebauer, Mrs Kristiina Ojuland (alternate: Mr Andres **Herkel**), Mr Theodoros Pangalos (alternate: Mr Konstantinos **Vrettos**), Ms Elsa **Papadimitriou**, Mr Christos **Pourgourides**, Mr John **Prescott**, Mr Gabino Puche (alternate: Mr Pedro **Agramunt**), Mr Lluís Maria **de Puig**, Mr Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando, Mr Andrea **Rigoni**, Lord **Russell-Johnston**, Mr Oliver **Sambevski**, Mr Ingo Schmitt, Ms Hanne **Severinsen**, Mr Samad Seyidov, Mr Leonid Slutsky, Mr Rainer Steenblock, Mr Zoltán Szabó, Baroness Taylor of Bolton (alternate: Mr John **Austin**), Mr Mehmet **Tekelioğlu**, Mr Mihai Tudose, Mr José Vera Jardim, Ms Biruté Vésaitė, Mr Björn Von Sydow, Mr Harm Evert Waalkens, Mr David **Wilshire**, Mr Wolfgang Wodarg, Ms Gisela Wurm, Mr Boris Zala, Mr Krzysztof Zaremba.

Ex officio: MM. Mátyás **Eörsi**, Tiny Kox.

NB: The names of those members present at the meeting are printed in bold.

See 6th Sitting, 23 January 2008 (adoption of the draft resolution, as amended, and the draft recommendation); and [Resolution 1599](#) and [Recommendation 1826](#).