

How to Strengthen Western Engagement in Central Asia

SPOTLIGHT ON EU EDUCATION ASSISTANCE IN UZBEKISTAN

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The European Union's 2007 Strategy for Central Asia identified education as a key area of cooperation. To this end, the EU launched programs to initiate and encourage fundamental reforms, and to liberalize and modernize education systems in the region. Yet, twenty years later, a [review](#) by the EU Directorate General for External Policies made clear its disappointment over the EU's engagement in Central Asia as being "of limited to no impact." In the case of education assistance to Uzbekistan, Brussels' broad concepts and reforms have been held back due to Central Asia being a lower political priority for the EU, which consequently limited its financial and logistical support to the country's education sphere. The holdup is also due to the authoritarianism of the Uzbek authorities, which were disinclined to implement any changes they saw as a threat to their authority, and to local stakeholders, who were both overlooked and often unwilling to take on concepts that they perceived as far from their local reality.

As the EU prepares to revise its strategy in Central Asia for 2019, it should adopt a more gradual approach, one that is consistent with the longer-term funding it is able to commit to a state that holds little strategic value for Europe. Part of the new strategy should include better adaptation to the local social context by more ardently engaging local stakeholders—teachers, students, and parents. This new approach would involve setting up more targeted, specific projects, such as increasing the number of Uzbekistani youth studying in Europe, the opening of satellite campuses of European universities, and promoting public-private partnerships. It is precisely this new generation of Uzbekistani stakeholders trained in or with the support of European education institutions who will breathe life into reforms by drawing on European concepts of instruction, particularly if these concepts are perceived as relevant and not imposed from the outside, but locally owned.

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An Education System Weakened Since Independence

The education sector in Uzbekistan was hard hit by the collapse of the USSR. A quarter of a century after its independence, this country, in which people under 25 years of age make up 44 percent of the population, continues to be seriously lacking in school and university infrastructure. Less than a quarter of children are enrolled in nursery schools, whereas in primary and secondary schools, hundreds of thousands of students attend school on a rotational basis. Upon leaving secondary school, only one out of eleven are admitted to a university. Furthermore, the state struggles to recruit teachers; in 2017, it was estimated that schools are lacking as many as 20 to 25 percent of the teaching staff they need. Low salaries and heavy workloads demotivate many teachers, and, in certain classes, subjects as fundamental as mathematics are taught only partially or even not at all due to the lack of qualified instructors. Also, potential employers disparage recent graduates' education, which they consider as rote and overly based on state ideology, disconnected from labor market requirements, and possibly even purchased within the pervasive corruption of higher education.

Many other foreign donors focused their assistance on primary and secondary education, but the EU opted to prioritize tertiary-level education. It concentrated on fundamental reforms, such as redesigning curricula and revising teaching methods to move Uzbekistan from a Soviet education to a so-called Westernized and modern education. It included Uzbekistan in several educational assistance programs (Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, Central Asian Education Platform) and urged the government to embark on reforms to make its higher education system compatible with the Bologna Process (uniform European educational standards), and, ultimately, to integrate with it. While it has had some positive impacts, the results of European assistance on the education sector in Uzbekistan, in many ways, have been below expectations, controversial, and lacking in visibility. European-funded projects have often been hampered by at least three sets of issues: limited recipient government incentives, the EU's one-size-fits-all approach in the post-Soviet space, and Brussels' ignorance about local socio-political contexts.

Uzbek Authorities: Low Motivation for European Reforms

The success of foreign assistance strongly [depends](#) on incentives in recipient countries. In Uzbekistan, the state has a record of keeping a tight grip on the education sector, which it has viewed as strategic for its independence and nation-building. Despite a stated openness to foreign cooperation, the first president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov (in office 1991-2016), often proved unwilling to implement the agreements he had signed with the EU, and, in general, to promote so-called Western ideas such as developing critical thinking, which the regime perceived as a potential threat. Uzbekistani authorities consequently restricted foreign donors' access to local stakeholders and limited most European assistance to official dialogue at the highest level of state.

This has had a significant impact on the effectiveness of European assistance. In any society, knowledge is not a continuous flow transmitted from top to bottom (or bottom to top), but rather it decentralized and dispersed streams among individuals and organizations. Thus it is imperative for foreign education assistance to go beyond engagement with the Ministry of Education and tap into local knowledge currents. Yet, under both Karimov and current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the base—teachers, students, and parents—has rarely been included in the reflection and decision-making process about improved methods and reform strategies, whether initiated by the Uzbek government or by foreign donors. As a result, many reforms have not been received well locally and thus have remained simple declarations of intent.

Further, by defining broad objectives that are insufficiently connected to the local context, the EU has risked having its projects being usurped by the authorities for their own domestic ends. For the Uzbek government, subscribing to European programs has often been less a real commitment to reform (in any sector) than a public relations policy aimed at bolstering political legitimacy. From the 1990s onward, Karimov exploited so-called Western concepts such as human rights and democratization. He overused the notions in his writings and declarations on education, while at the same time promoting his own ideology about education needs and processes. On the outside, the Uzbek government drew international prestige from its perceived cooperation with the EU to make a show of opening up the country to international cooperation.

Pitfalls of a One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Following the example of many other foreign donor programs, the EU education assistance plan opted for a one-size-fits-all approach to the post-Soviet space. It used rhetoric [stamped](#) with fashionable terms—liberalization, pluralism, democratization, and modernization—according to which European aid must help the region go from a socialist-style school-and-university system to a Western one. In so doing, the EU inadvertently created a dichotomy between a formerly Soviet system, [said](#) to be deficient and outdated, and a European-Western system said to be modern, progressive, and the new norm.

Through this approach, first, the EU downplayed the diversity of the post-Soviet space, as well as each government's distinct policies and ambitions in the education sector (beyond their common authoritarian backgrounds). Second, simply transposing a European system on another region broadly ignores, as Lehigh University Professor Iveta Silova [wrote](#), the “loose coupling (or divergence) between global norms and local meanings,” as well as the tensions between the continuities and discontinuities resulting from the fall of the USSR. Most European assistance programs were conceived and implemented above the heads of local stakeholders without due consideration for the multiple local contexts, different historical and social backgrounds, values, aptitudes, and aspirations. In Uzbekistan, there has been little sense of local ownership of

European education programs, where they have generally been undertaken with only limited advance consultation with selected officials. This lack of local ownership and the EU's one-size-fits-all approach have led some at the school level in Uzbekistan to resist EU suggestions. Many Uzbekistani teachers and parents hold on to certain Soviet legacies that they perceive as positive. They see the move toward a new norm imposed from the outside as invalidating the education system as hitherto practiced. There are additional aspects underpinning these notions.

First, the privatization of higher education encouraged by Europe has often been interpreted as a "commercialization" of education that used to be tuition-free and universal. They say it heightens inequalities because it hinders access for many students from underprivileged backgrounds while reproducing the privileges of wealthier families.

Second, the EU's radical undermining of the system with which the Central Asian populations grew up and in which the teachers were embedded is perceived as the loss of an education (*obrazovanie*) that was respected for being of high quality, despite its faults. Also, that system was seen as enhancing moral values and behavior (*vospitanie*) that the local population still values and contrasts with what it perceives as the current decreasing of morality.

Third, European or other Western projects that have pressed teachers to switch from teacher-centered to child-centered learning have had a very limited impact. For many teachers, these [concepts are unsustainable](#), and therefore unrealizable, unless there is a significant improvement in their social conditions (increase in salaries and lighter workloads). If there has been any forward motion, it is that the practice of the teacher-centered approach has been somewhat softened. Still, the way the EU pushed for the "post-Sovietization" of education [inadvertently turned](#) the supposed normality of the so-called modern education system into something perceived as "abnormal."

The Curse of Corruption

Several scholars have [argued](#) that donor states have often made little distinction between the most and the least corrupt regimes. This observation rings true in the case of European assistance to Uzbekistan, where both the state and its education system, [in particular](#) at the tertiary level, are highly corrupt. This raises questions about ethics and impact. In Uzbekistan, because local NGO's are subject to strict monitoring and are often unable to receive foreign funding, foreign aid disbursement is, by and large, sent through the government. In a neopatrimonial state in which the political and economic circles are tightly interwoven, transferring EU funds, in the framework of large programs, to the country's highest authorities runs the risk of having part of the funds misappropriated, and consequently of unintentionally supporting a regime whose corruption constitutes a main cause of the deficiency of the education system.

Putting the Cart Back Behind the Horse: Policy Recommendations

The lack of connection to local stakeholders has considerably limited the EU's ability to evaluate the needs of Uzbekistani society, and, as a result, to revise and adapt its projects to the local situation. By promoting more modest, gradual, and specifically targeted projects, the EU would have a more concrete and effective impact. This approach would be financially and logistically less demanding, consistent with its investment capabilities toward Uzbekistan, and contribute over the long term to fulfilling the reforms the EU has been working on for more than twenty years without it being judged as paternalistic or disconnected from local reality.

First, the EU could allow more Uzbekistanis to study in European universities. This would contribute to counteracting the considerable dearth of places in Uzbekistan's universities, strengthen people-to-people contacts, and provide an alternative vision to the local education system as well as to the ones proposed by Russia or China. In 2016-2017, fewer than 2,000 Uzbekistani students were enrolled in European universities, a low figure compared to those attending Russian and Kazakhstani universities, which is about 22,000 and 3,400, respectively.

Second, higher education could be enhanced by having European university branches in the regions. The two satellite campuses of European universities in Tashkent, Torino and Westminster, are very popular and illustrate the potential impact of an increased European university presence in Uzbekistan. These two institutions do not suffer from the corruption that is pervasive in the country's university system and they provide graduates with the skills and qualifications that employers require.

Third, beyond higher education, the EU can intervene through targeted contributions to school institutions, including building or restoring schools that, until now, have often been funded in an opaque manner and often by parents (an unsustainable burden). The EU could also contribute to redacting or revising textbooks, in particular in European languages and in scientific subjects (mathematics, physical sciences, biology, etc.). In a positive sign, Mirziyoyev has made updating textbooks a priority, but he has sometimes demanded it be done in an extremely short and unrealistic time period (as little as two weeks).² Openings like this provide new opportunities for the EU to contribute, either directly or indirectly.

Fourth, through support for cultural centers and NGO's, the EU can also help the development of private tutoring, which has, since the 2000s, advanced considerably in Uzbekistan. Many parents turn to tutoring to compensate for the low number of daily course hours due to the rotation system, the mediocre quality of education, and the lack of teachers in certain subject areas. EU member states could also contribute bilaterally to training teachers.

² Author's interview with a textbook author in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in October 2017.

Fifth, public-private partnerships could constitute an effective way of mobilizing resources for education. While local businesses decry the lack of qualified young Uzbekistani graduates, European companies can contribute to improving the situation through greater involvement in professional trainings. Corporate philanthropic resources can be [more resilient](#) than traditional sources of foreign assistance. Corporations also often have the advantage of having existing connections to government officials and local communities.

Conclusions

Education assistance, its modalities, and its impact continue to be intensely debated. It has been [argued](#) that there is no fixed educational blueprint that can be applied to all countries, and the paths proposed here are not without their own criticisms and pitfalls. However, the EU undermined its own goals by seeking to impose fundamental reforms from the outside, top-down, and over the short-term (granted, there are issues over which the EU has little means of influence). A helpful step would be to encourage political will from the government to turn from ideologized instruction to training students in critical thinking. Another is that reforms cannot be effectively implemented without significant prior domestic economic progress; this is indispensable to enable the considerable investment required in the education sector. Reform programs are unlikely to succeed without a notable improvement in the financial and social conditions of local teacher-stakeholders and households for which access to education has become a heavy financial burden.

Mirziyoyev's ongoing reforms provide access for cooperation with local stakeholders and officials, which were largely restricted under Karimov. There are new possibilities for engagement with nongovernmental organizations, local government, and the private sector. It is these stakeholders who will be able, if the EU manages to convince them, to put into practice the ideas of European reforms and concepts. The EU decision to revise its strategy in Central Asia by 2019 is a chance to refocus its approach and make it more effective by not repeating the unintentional mistakes that have negatively impacted twenty years of European commitments in the Uzbekistani and, more broadly, the Central Asian education sector.