

Position Paper of the SPD Parliamentary Group

Central Asia: Building bridges and creating opportunities

Social democratic approaches to a forward-looking Central Asia policy

The five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan occupy a key position in Eurasia. With a population of over 80 million and a land mass of more than four million square kilometres, the region is not only a focal point for trade and exchange between East and West. It is also in an exposed position to address regional and global challenges in the areas of security, climate change, connectivity and the transition to an environmentally and socially sustainable economy. We welcome the increased commitment of the countries in the region to address these challenges and are keen to support the Central Asian states to the best of our ability through exchanges on an equal footing.

Germany plays a leading role when it comes to European cooperation with Central Asia. This was impressively demonstrated by the first meeting between the Central Asian heads of state and Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin in late September 2023. As Social Democrats, we expressly welcome the strategic partnership between Germany and the region that was established at this meeting. This first-ever strategic partnership between Germany and an entire region will deepen relations and cooperation in the areas of the economy, energy and natural resources, regional cooperation and resilience, as well as climate and the environment, and will promote direct contacts between citizens. It is therefore a milestone in our relations with this region. Here Germany is making important and far-reaching offers of cooperation at a geopolitical juncture when the Central Asian states are seeking to diversify their international relations in the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Shortly before, in July 2023, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier already paid an official visit to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Germany's increased engagement in the region is also underlined by the numerous meetings between business representatives from both sides and with representatives of civil society on the ground. As concluded in the summit agreement of September 2023, the aim of this engagement is to strengthen cooperation in the areas of the economy, energy and natural resources, climate and environment, regional cooperation and resilience, and to intensify social exchanges.

Germany already played a leading role in the formulation of the EU's first Strategy on Central Asia in 2007 and was instrumental in the adoption of the new Strategy on Central Asia in 2019. We now need to engage in a conversation with our partners in the EU about updating the Strategy on Central Asia to take account of the new geopolitical situation. We strongly support the EU's engagement in Central Asia and the promotion of the partnership for political stability, prosperity and improved cooperation. As part of the EU Global Gateway strategy, we are committed to promoting interregional dialogue, strengthening economic relations and, last but not least, cooperating within the framework of the European Green Deal, which Germany is supporting with its 'Green Central Asia' initiative and other measures.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law also has a tangible impact on the countries of Central Asia. Closely intertwined economically and with a large proportion of their own populations employed as migrant workers in Russia, the states of the region are directly affected by the social and economic upheavals caused by the war. Germany must face up to these new realities in the region and support the governments and people on the ground in becoming more resilient economically and with regard to their own state sovereignty. We firmly oppose attempts by the Russian leadership to undermine Central Asian aspirations for independence. We support all efforts by the five Central Asian states to develop a closer cooperation at the regional level. Against this backdrop, we welcome the regular meetings of the heads of state and government and the new peaceful bilateral and multilateral approaches to addressing the challenges facing the region.

It is our task, and that of our partners in the EU, to ensure that sanctions designed to cut off supplies of Western goods to the Russian war machine are not circumvented. In this context, and given the extensive trade relations between the five Central Asian states and Russia, as well as the membership of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the Eurasian Economic Union, we welcome the willingness of the governments to continue dialogue with us and the EU on the sanctions regime.

Regional cooperation: strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region

As Social Democrats, we are convinced that good neighbourly relations are a prerequisite for achieving peaceful resolution strategies and that the involvement of all relevant actors can only succeed through multilateral efforts. The fifth consultative meeting of the heads of state of the Central Asian states in mid-September 2023 in the Tajik capital Dushanbe marks a further step towards greater regional autonomy for Central Asia. The enhanced cooperation agreed at the meeting in the fields of transport, youth and health policy, and the establishment of a Council of National Coordinators for Consultative Meetings, are aimed at jointly addressing the many challenges facing the region and placing greater emphasis on dialogue and cooperation. We therefore welcome the results of the Dushanbe summit and look forward to further momentum for regional integration at the planned sixth consultative meeting of the heads of state in Kazakhstan later this year.

Given the many regional and global challenges facing Central Asia, closer integration is urgently needed. At their previous summits, the five heads of state themselves have repeatedly called for the expansion of intra-regional trade, greater joint use of the region's transit potential, and also for joint action to combat the effects of climate change, as well as a coordinated policy towards the Taliban in Afghanistan. The aim should be to enhance the resilience of politics and society through social and economic progress and greater political participation by the population. The unrest and clashes in Kazakhstan, western Uzbekistan and eastern Tajikistan in recent years, and the earlier military border conflicts between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as well as the overthrow of the government in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020, have underlined the major importance of progress in these areas.

As Social Democrats, we are committed to strengthening civil society in its diversity and its commitment to democracy and to countering radicalisation tendencies in the region. To this end, we are establishing channels of communication with civil society actors and diversifying our dialogue partners through exchanges with foundations, trade unions, religious actors, representatives of minorities and within the framework of international science, foreign, cultural and education policy. We pay particular attention in this regard to the post-Soviet generation and the following younger generations. At the same time, we welcome exchanges through tourism.

Against the background of a rapidly growing and very young population with an average age of just 28 years, low economic diversification and advancing climate change with already noticeable shortages of water and arable land, there is an urgent need to jointly develop sustainable and future-oriented solutions. The demarcation of unresolved borders in the region is of major importance for regional stability as well as for trade and exchanges at the personal level. As Social Democrats, we therefore expressly welcome the fact that Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have managed to reach an amicable, diplomatic agreement on

the demarcation of the border between the two countries in January 2023. We also support the efforts of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to resolve disagreements about their border through negotiations.

It is important that the intensification of intra-regional trade is accompanied by measures to connect Central Asia to global value creation chains. The EU's Global Gateway initiative and its Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity, as well as the repeated meetings of the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum, are important steps to support the region in its efforts to gain access to global markets. However, this connection will only be sustainable and create value if it is supported by a well-trained workforce. We therefore support the approach adopted by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and its implementing organisations, which places particular emphasis on promoting a skilled and mobile workforce that is also able to operate in an international context.

The series of 5+1 summits held by Central Asian leaders, not least since the beginning of Russia's attack on Ukraine, shows that the region is in the process of presenting a united front to the outside world and articulating its interests accordingly. We welcome this development as an expression of efforts to reach out to each other and strengthen cooperation in the region. The 'Joint Roadmap for Deepening EU-Central Asia Relations', adopted at the 19th EU-Central Asia ministerial meeting held in Luxembourg in October 2023, marks a new stage in the cooperation between the EU and Central Asia and launches concrete steps to tackle regional and global challenges together. The EU-Central Asia summit planned for 2024 could send a clear political signal in this regard and set the course for the future.

Economy and trade: strengthening relations and promoting the integration of our economies

As a landlocked region between East and West, Central Asia is at the centre of various attempts to organise trade across the Eurasian continent. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, the People's Republic of China has long been promoting infrastructure in Central Asian states through massive investment with an eye on its own interests. China's core objective is to tap into the region's vast fossil and other energy resources and to structure trade flows so as to facilitate China's access to new markets, not least in Europe. China obtains a significant share of its energy imports from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. In addition, it is planning to build large solar power plants in Uzbekistan in the coming years.

As the self-proclaimed protecting power of Central Asia, Russia has long left the shaping of economic and trade relations in the region to Beijing, partly because it lacks the resources to expand its own economic activities. A constant factor, however, has been Russia's focus on individual key areas such as security and energy, as well as the still extensive trade between Central Asia and Russia. A prominent feature of Russia's relations with the region is the massive labour migration from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The vast majority of the more than four million migrant workers in Russia come from these three countries. The Central Asian countries are heavily dependent on these migration flows, both in terms of the migrants' remittances, which in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan account for up to a third of gross domestic product, and in terms of the exodus of workers for whom there are few career prospects at home. The Kremlin repeatedly exploits these dependencies to exert political pressure on the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular.

Meanwhile, Germany and its EU partners are increasingly offering the region alternatives to China's and Russia's aspirations in Central Asia. These include the Global Gateway initiative and the EU's revised Strategy on Central Asia. The meeting between German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the Central Asian leaders in Berlin at the end of September 2023 and the establishment of a strategic partnership between Germany and the region are of outstanding importance in this regard.

Today, Germany and the EU share with Central Asia the need to diversify their economic strategies and reduce one-sided trade dependencies. The roadmap sets out a clear agenda in this regard and formulates more than 40 concrete activities to promote the social and environmental modernisation of the economies of the Central Asian states and to integrate value creation chains more tightly for the benefit of both sides.

Our concern as Social Democrats is to support this process and to ensure that value- and rules-based trade is promoted, so that norms and labour standards, such as the ILO's core labour standards, are established and respected.

Furthermore, it is essential to support exchanges at the professional and academic level, to initiate more educational cooperation and thus to expand the transfer of knowledge with a view to the problems and solutions in the process of social-ecological transformation in Central Asia and Europe.

We attach particular importance to the expansion and development of trade routes in order to promote the integration of our economic areas. The study on sustainable transport links between Europe and Central Asia presented by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in June 2023 identifies the so-called Middle Corridor, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, linking Central Asia with the Caucasus and Southeast Europe via the Caspian Sea, as the most promising route for organising trade and economic cooperation with Central Asia and other countries in Asia. Massive investment is needed to remove existing infrastructure barriers and, in particular, to harmonise the standards and procedures required by an integrated trading network. This applies all the more to new technologies and the associated production facilities and distribution networks which we need in order to accelerate the implementation of the social and environmental transition. The laying of the foundation stone for a green hydrogen production facility in the Kazakh port city of Aqtau in July 2023, in the presence of President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, testifies to the importance Germany attaches to this task.

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the search for alternative trade routes has intensified. Germany has done an impressive job of cutting the cord to Russian energy supplies. Oil supplies from Kazakhstan underline the growing importance of Central Asian producers. However, this oil also flows through the network of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which in turn passes through Russian territory and is largely in the hands of Russian oil companies. In the long term, the Middle Corridor will not be able to handle the volumes that have previously been transported via the Northern Corridor, and therefore via Russian routes. This makes it all the more important today for all relevant actors in Central Asia and Europe to engage in close exchanges and to promote comprehensive research and innovation in order to break down barriers, test new approaches and advance the integration of our economies.

Climate and the environment: protecting natural resources and promoting social-ecological transformation

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report, the Central Asian region is one of the most vulnerable to global warming worldwide and can expect to experience a high number of extremely hot days per year and increased drought as a result of climate change. The region has already experienced temperature increases above the global average in recent years. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan face the threat of increasing desertification over large areas, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan must reckon with the rapid melting of their glaciers. Such developments will inevitably exacerbate existing social and economic dislocations and may threaten the food security of parts of the population. In the face of these challenges, we welcome the efforts of the governments of the five countries to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals. At the meeting in Berlin in September, Chancellor Olaf Scholz underlined the importance of joint action in this area and announced the initiative to establish a strategic partnership with other external donors with a primary focus on regional environmental and climate issues, as well as sustainable water and land use and glacier protection in the region. We support this initiative and are building on stronger links with existing programmes to promote resilience in line with the EU Strategy on Central Asia.

Germany's strategic partnership with the five Central Asian states must be especially alert to the impact of the climate crisis on the region's water supply. The entire region will suffer from an acute water crisis in the coming years. The accumulation of droughts in recent years has already led to severe local crop failures and livestock deaths, while the particular vulnerability of cross-border watercourses can fuel conflicts over distribution. The rapid completion of the Qosh Tepa Canal in Afghanistan also threatens in the

near future to divert large quantities of water from the Amu Darya, which has been the main artery supplying water to the south of the region. Germany should use its expertise to help the Central Asian countries to develop timely solutions to adapt to the impacts of climate change and for more efficient water use. GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation) and other stakeholders are ideally positioned to support this exchange of knowledge. A regional approach must be at the forefront of any cooperation. Only in this way can potential conflicts be resolved peacefully and strategies for a common regional water distribution policy developed.

In Central Asia, water is not only crucial for food security. It is also an important source of energy. The two mountainous countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan generate much of their electricity from hydro-power. In the past, plans to expand this capacity have led to conflicts with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which rely on higher water flows in the summer for their agriculture, while electricity is particularly needed in the winter. Under these circumstances, projects in agriculture and food policy are an obvious choice when it comes to promoting cooperation. The new cooperation between the countries of the region on the construction of the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan and the Kambar-Ata-1 Dam in Kyrgyzstan is helping to leave the old dynamics of escalation behind.

At the same time, further efforts are needed to promote closer cooperation on energy security issues in the region. The collapse of the interconnected power supply system in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in January 2022, and the frequent power cuts and district heating outages in the following winter, demonstrate that the region's energy supply systems are in urgent need of an overhaul. The growing population, the need for social-ecological transformation, and adaptation to the unpredictable impacts of climate change require resilient energy generation and distribution systems. To ensure this, innovation partnerships are needed to drive technological development. The Team Europe initiative on water, energy and climate, which is grouped under the Global Gateway strategy and is co-funded by Germany, plays a central role in creating an integrated regional electricity market. In addition, every effort must be made to link this initiative with new actions under the Joint Roadmap and the EU-funded Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia project in order to create synergies.

As Social Democrats, we support national and regional efforts in Central Asia to ensure stable energy supplies in the region. Energy is the key to building and maintaining prosperity for all. This process, which ultimately also involves a huge modernisation push, cannot and must not take place without consideration for the socially disadvantaged population groups and the precarious ecosystems in Central Asia.

Democracy and the rule of law: countering growing autocratisation and strengthening civil society

As Social Democrats, we declare our full support for the mandate formulated in the EU Strategy on Central Asia to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the region, as we are alarmed by the considerable deficits in the area of political rights. We want to address these points openly in our discussions with the countries of Central Asia and extend offers on how we can help these states to improve in these areas. We call upon the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to accord high priority to the protection of human rights and the establishment and protection of democratic structures and the rule of law.

This makes the agreements in this area reached at the Berlin summit with the Central Asian leaders in September 2023 all the more important: in their final declaration, the participants pledged to continue working together to strengthen the rule of law, democracy, good governance, gender equality and universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, as set out in the 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia. Chancellor Olaf Scholz reaffirmed Germany's willingness to support reforms in Central Asia through institutional capacity building, the exchange of experts and through projects. The heads of state and government reaffirmed their interest in further developing cooperation to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, to combat human trafficking, forced labour and labour exploitation, and to continue to support civil society. The Central Asian leaders stressed the importance of women's rights

and independent media. It will be important to hold the Central Asian states to this commitment and to fill the agreed cooperation with life, both bilaterally and through the EU.

The German government's feminist foreign and development policy, which promotes the equal participation of women and structurally marginalised groups in social, political and economic life, is also of great importance for cooperation with Central Asia. Empowering women means strengthening stability and security and enabling sustainable development. This is why, at all levels of our cooperation in Central Asia, we strive for a feminist foreign and development policy based on the 3Rs (promoting the rights, resources and representation of women and girls). The supposed return to tradition in parts of society, whether through appeals to religious dogma or patriarchal customs, is increasingly restricting the opportunities for many women to participate in political and social life. Domestic and sexual violence continue to be legitimised by reference to culture and tradition, while rampant corruption in the security services prevents effective protection mechanisms from being put in place.

As Social Democrats, we want to support those actors who are active in the fight against sexual discrimination. Among the latter, we also expressly include those organisations that are committed to investigating police arbitrariness and to promoting transparency in the judicial process.

In Central Asia, these actors are often to be found among the ranks of civil society, which is facing increasing difficulties in gaining a hearing for its many concerns, not least because of the recent tightening of laws in the individual countries in the region. Germany and the EU must make it their task to promote the critical engagement of civil society in the processes of change in Central Asia. This means above all visa facilitation and a stronger commitment to international development cooperation. Civil society initiatives must receive more support, both financially and in terms of political backing.

We offer the countries our support in building democratic police and judicial structures, because a functioning police force, based on the rule of law and close to the people, is the foundation for any effective and sustainable criminal policy. Trust in the police is essential for detecting, preventing and fighting crime.

We call for civil society actors – human rights lawyers and investigative journalists, environmental NGOs and feminist organisations, trade unions and political think tanks – to be given the opportunity to regularly exchange ideas and communicate their demands to a broad public in Central Asia as well as in Europe. The EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, which was held for the fourth time in Tashkent in March 2023, is one such platform that should focus even more strongly on this demand in the future.

We support police cooperation agreements that will help us improve the fight against transnational organised crime, especially drug-related crime. New approaches to prevention, education, research and evaluation are needed, especially in transit and destination countries. Developing a comprehensive approach to combating drug violence, trafficking and consumption is part of our crime policy.

We are convinced that cooperation with Central Asia must focus even more strongly on young people in the future. More than 50 percent of the region's population is under the age of 30. This is an enormous challenge for the education systems and the local labour markets, but it is at the same time an opportunity to use smart measures to build innovative forces for social and environmental modernisation.

Germany has already been active in the region for many years with its educational and cultural intermediary organisations. PASCH schools offer in-depth German language instruction, while the Goethe Institutes in Almaty and Tashkent and the language learning centres in Bishkek and Dushanbe help young people to learn German. The DAAD organises scholarships for young people from Central Asia to study at German universities. Lighthouse projects such as the Kazakh-German University in Almaty or the many university partnerships contribute to a lively academic exchange. It is desirable that these activities be further developed and provided with the necessary financial resources. There is hardly any other area where such an extensive exchange is possible as in education and science. Young academics in Central Asia need more support in accessing research funding, especially also to facilitate independent research

that will help us in Germany and Europe to gain a better understanding of the processes of change in the region. This support must be accompanied by regular meetings between young people from both regions through student exchanges and school partnerships, in order to educate a new generation for whom the other region is not terra incognita.

Regional and global security: strengthening bilateral and multilateral approaches and in particular investing in the UN and OSCE

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has not only promoted cooperation within the region, but has also challenged international alliances and alliances to reposition themselves in the region. The 5+1 meetings of Central Asian leaders with Indian Prime Minister Modi in January 2022, China in May 2023 and the Gulf Cooperation Council states in July 2023 demonstrate the interest of international actors in engaging and making their presence felt in Central Asia. China's investments as part of the Belt and Road Initiative are also an attempt to integrate and secure its own hinterland. The eastern region of Xinjiang, where China is committing massive human rights violations against the Uighurs, stands to benefit economically from increased trade with Central Asia. At the same time, Beijing is counting on cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to bind the states of the region to its security policy and to involve them in the fight against the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism and extremism. Among its primary concerns is preventing separatist tendencies at home and, in particular, keeping an eye on the ethnic Uighurs living in the Central Asian countries.

India's involvement is still relatively recent. In addition to its obvious economic interests, it is likely to be motivated by the security policy calculation of counterbalancing the close relationship between China and Pakistan and establishing cooperation in dealing with Afghanistan. India's tentative initiatives coincide with a new commitment by the Economic Cooperation Organization, founded by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, which held its 16th summit in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in November 2023. In the same month, the leaders of the member states of the Organization of Turkic States, which also includes the Central Asian states with the exception of Tajikistan, held their tenth meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan.

The region is currently approaching and joining various economic and security alliances, which is very much in line with the foreign policy tradition of multi-vectorality anchored in the region. This process of change must also be seen as a safeguard against Russia's hegemonic claim to control the three member states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan through its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Last but not least, the deployment of CSTO troops as part of the operation to suppress protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 was intended to be read as a message not to challenge Moscow's place as the guarantor of security in the region.

We in Europe must support the efforts of regional leaders to forge alliances beyond the heartland of Central Asia, while ensuring that this process also leads to increased cooperation with those structures with which we maintain close contacts. The United Nations, with its Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and the Regional Office for Central Asia of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with its missions in all five participating states, are resources that we must support in their mandates to contribute to a sustainable peace and comprehensive security in Central Asia. In particular, the OSCE, with its Permanent Council in which all member states participate on an equal footing, offers a unique platform for dialogue to develop proposals for solving the existing security problems in and around the region. Last but not least, the OSCE is the organisation that has maintained relations with Afghanistan as an official partner state from as early as 2003 and has sought to influence developments in the country within the limits of its mandate.

It is in our interest as Social Democrats to support these efforts to build a multilateral regional security order and to link them with the many bilateral and European initiatives. It is also our aim to strengthen the resilience of politics and society in order to be prepared for the challenges of the future, when geopolitical upheavals will call for new alliances and the threat of catastrophic climate change will require everyone's commitment.