

## EU-TURKMENISTAN TALKS: BRUSSELS SEEKS COMMON CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

By Erica Marat (04/30/2008 issue of the CACI Analyst)

The April 9-10 meeting in Ashgabad between the EU "Troika" and Turkmen officials has marked yet another step towards the implementation of the EU-Central Asia partnership strategy. According to "Troika" officials, Turkmenistan is willing to supply gas to the EU's Nabucco pipeline project. Yet the success of the Nabucco pipeline is contingent on a myriad of factors, with skeptics doubting the project will be realized. Besides its economic feasibility, Nabucco's success will depend on Turkmenistan's relations with its biggest gas client – Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan's decision to participate in the project, and the EU's domestic pressures that prioritize human rights and democratization processes ahead of strategic cooperation.

**BACKGROUND:** The EU "Troika" delegation was represented by Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, EU Special Representative for Central Asia Pierre Morel, and EU External Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner. Engaging Turkmenistan into the Nabucco pipeline project represents part of the EU's broader strategy in Central Asia, formulated alongside the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the EU's goal to assure energy security in the 2010-20s. The Nabucco pipeline plans to supply gas to Europe from Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Kazakhstan. After being introduced by the German Presidency in 2007, the EU Central Asia partnership strategy has become a foreground indicator of the EU's changing policy towards its neighbors in the East. Germany's achievement in formulating the strategy and attracting the EU's attention to the Central Asian region within the ENP marked one of Germany's major successes during its January-June 2007 EU presidency. Together with Morel, the German Presidency was able to effectively engage all 27 EU members into a debate over the strategy and its consequent endorsement. The strategy was adopted by the European Council in June 2007, and since then the EU has moved into the implementation stage.

According to representatives from the German Foreign Ministry, the results accomplished by the two consequent presidencies – the Portuguese and Slovenian – exceeded initial expectations. Both EU members continued Germany's course of action in 2007-2008. To date, no EU partner has reported a misdeed or expressed discontent in the strategy's early implementation phase. More EU members expressed interest in expanding diplomatic presence in the region. Furthermore, France seems enthusiastic about continuing implementation of the Central Asia strategy, during its presidency scheduled for July-December 2008.

Despite the fact that most EU members agree on Europe's need to diversify its energy resources and decrease dependence on Russian gas, they split into hardliners and softliners when it comes to the EU's partnership with the Central Asian states. While some members emphasized the importance of strategic cooperation with resource-rich Central Asian countries, others view the poor human rights record and authoritarianism there as an obstacle for a greater EU engagement. The UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden in particular, argue for paying greater attention to democratization processes in the Central Asian states before energy trade is considered. The EU's new member states in particular are in favor of economic sanctions towards some Central Asian states, in a similar way that sanctions would be posed "on Burma or African states." According to Dr. Andrea Schmitz from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, the current EU and Central Asia partnership strategy document represents the smallest common denominator among the EU member states with regards to the engagement in the region.

**IMPLICATIONS:** Turkmenistan's president Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov visited Brussels in November 2007 and promised to visit France this year, which is already a telling sign of changes in his foreign policy and intensifying relations with the EU. However, some EU officials admit that Turkmenistan has been a difficult partner due to the absence of a "culture of dialogue" in the country during a nearly fifteen-year policy of international isolationism. The potential capacity of Turkmenistan's gas imports remains uncertain – though an independent survey is under way – and important details of the Turkmen government's recent deal with China on building a gas pipeline is also unknown to the EU. According to experts from the EU Parliament's Delegation in Central Asia, so far Turkmenistan was able to play the EU's interest in its gas for its own benefit. By showing interest in cooperation with the EU, Turkmenistan increased the gas prices paid to it by Russia's Gazprom in December 2007.

According to some EU officials, in case the EU will be unable to achieve its goals in the energy partnership with Central Asia, there is a high possibility that the implementation of the strategy's human rights, rule of law, and democratic reforms will slow down as well. However, if the EU shows itself able to broker deals with Turkmenistan, some EU officials see a danger of the political consequences of such engagement. The EU might encounter criticism from local NGOs for overlooking state authoritarianism and the human rights record.

The future success of the Nabucco project is contingent on a variety of factors, some of which are not related directly to Turkmenistan. Turkey is a major player which the EU must consider while planning Nabucco. Unlike the EU, the Turkish government sees the role of Turkey as more significant in the Nabucco project than just being a transit country, and both sides yet have to negotiate their political and economic cooperation conditions. Turkey's potential EU membership turns the EU-Turkey talks over Nabucco into a political issue. The Ukrainian government has been making use of the EU's strained relations with Turkey over its membership application status and, in particular, over the Nabucco project. Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has been promoting the Black Sea corridor for the Nabucco pipeline leading from Georgia to Ukraine and further to western Europe.

EU-Russian relations are indeed another important factor in the EU Central Asia partnership strategy. While EU members realize the importance of Russia in the EU engagement in Central Asia, the strategy does not specify what role Russia will play in the EU-Central Asia relations. This shortage practically leaves room for deciding how and when Russia will be incorporated in EU-Central Asia relations. The EU insists that it is essential to maintain a transparent approach to the Central Asian states by treating Russia as an ally with similar goals in the region. For instance, the EU calls for Russian assistance in integrating the Central Asian states in international politics and economy. But the Kremlin considers the EU's plans on Nabucco as a political project that lacks economic viability. For instance, Sergei Kulik, Head of the Russian Department of Relations with the EU, argues that the EU presents its strategy towards Central Asia as purely humanitarian, namely, to help the region to alleviate poverty and build democracy. But he insists that the EU's real interests are driven by energy resources in Central Asia. Kulik further comments that Nabucco will likely succeed.

**CONCLUSIONS:** To date, the EU strategy in Central Asia has been a difficult balancing act for the EU presidency, the EU Commission and the EU High Representative for Central Asia – not to speak of member states. Since June 2006, the EU has achieved greater results than either optimists or pessimists had initially expected. The EU-Turkmenistan energy partnership is yet to gain its momentum in

coming months, while many challenges still lay ahead. To a great extent, Berdymukhammedov's own interest in building cooperation with Europe will predetermine the success of the Nabucco project. Potentially, Uzbekistan might also become a high priority for the EU. Uzbekistan's gas exports can possibly be linked to the Transcaspian corridor. With that, the EU is facing a daunting task of promoting human rights and democratization in the Central Asian region, in part to meet the demands of some of its members and local NGOS. Importantly, the EU recognizes that each Central Asian state is a separate entity with its specific traits that requires a tailored approach. However, EU officials have not yet sorted out the relationship between Europe's various interests in Central Asia's energy, security, and democratization. Until they do so, the confusion regarding European interests is likely to prevent a coherent policy from emerging.

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