

Event Report

**Rising Extremism in Central Asia? Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia**

Briefing Seminar

*9 February 2016*

At a time when terrorist threats and the emergence of religious extremism are affecting Europe and Central Asia, a common framework for action founded on a mutual learning process is necessary to tackle this salient issue. In Central Asia, the variety of coexisting cultures, nationalities and religions presents an interesting, yet challenging environment. Despite having a common goal, the five republics all rely on different policies for preventing religious radicalization – a fact which makes it all the more important to understand the different approaches. In fact, seeing as Central Asia is becoming a region of growing interest for both the West and the East, a deeper comprehension of this region is required if security and stability need to be achieved.

As a platform for the promotion of dialogue and mutual understanding between Europe and Asia on affairs of strategic importance, EIAS hosted this seminar, aimed at exploring the multifaceted aspects of religious diversity in Central Asia and the security challenges hereto related. With the rise of extremist religious movements all over the world, indeed it becomes increasingly important to describe the specific role that Islamic communities are playing in this region. In particular, the event served to present an extensive analysis of the internal and external factors that could lead the “Heartland” to become an unstable environment, highlighting the centrality of this region for global order.

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## **Introduction**

Within the framework of the EU-Central Strategy Review, EIAS organized this seminar to present the briefing paper *“Rising Extremism in Central Asia? Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia”*. After welcoming the panellists, Mr David Fouquet highlighted the importance of Central Asia in the international arena. In particular, he explained the necessity of learning and studying more about the five republics, to gain a better understanding of this strategic region for international relations. To provide an alternative and critical approach to analyse this particular region, the Chairman welcomed Mr Konur Alp Koçak from the European Parliamentary Research Service; Ms Julia Ebner from the Quilliam Foundation; Ms Rashmi Thapa, Partnership Manager of Search for Common Ground; and the director of the European Network Against Racism, Mr Michael Privot.

EIAS researcher Mr Sebastiano Mori, co-author of the research paper together with Mr Leonardo Taccetti, introduced the findings of the Briefing Paper. The two researchers began their study from the assumption that European and Eurasian Security are indivisible, as also claimed by one of the most important experts on Central Asia, Dr Stephen Blank. Accordingly the intention of the research was to identify and analyse the internal and external factors that could lead Central Asia to become an unstable environment in a region that is essential for global order.

Mr Mori explained in detail the factors that lead Central Asia to become an area of incredible geostrategic importance. First of all its geostrategic importance, being at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, Central Asia has always been considered as the “Heartland”. Secondly, the abundance of energy resources that is attracting the major international companies to the region. Thirdly, the renewed economic development of the five republics; and China’s One Belt and One Road initiative, which seeks to enhance connectivity along the Eurasian landmass.

According to the EIAS Researchers, taking all these factors into consideration increases even more the strategic value of this region for the big international players. Indeed, once again, this complex “chessboard” between the Caspian Sea and Western China seems to be the theatre of a “New Great Game” between Russia, China, United States and Europe. Although this approach is very fascinating, according to Mr Mori, it could easily lead to the discontinuing of the five republics as proactive players of this complex framework.

Historically, Central Asia has always been identified as a whole single entity instead of five different republics. A great mistake, according to the EIAS researches, that has led

to misunderstandings regarding the peculiarities of the local cultures. Although sharing a common historical heritage, the Central Asian countries have different societies, each of them with a distinctive political and economic approach.

Recognising the strategic value of the region, the ultimate aim of the briefing paper is to identify the internal and external factors such as the withdrawal of the ISAF mission from Afghanistan and the rise of Daesh, that could lead Central Asia to become an unstable environment in an area that is essential for global order.

In this intricate context it becomes even more vital to have a stable and secure region, avoiding the rise and the spread of menaces for internal security, as stated by Mr Mori. Fully aware of this, the intention of the EIAS researchers was to create an accurate picture of the rising extremism within the five republics.

Although there is a lack of an internationally agreed definition of violent extremism and terrorism, in order to provide an in-depth analysis the authors used different tools to create an accurate picture of the Islamic communities of Central Asia and their current issues. According to Mr Mori, the research aims also to underline the importance of preventing the formation of terrorist organizations within the five republics for international security.

As stated in the paper, to avoid the spread of radicalization, a more inclusive and integrative society must be created. A crucial role in this particular issue will be played by education and grassroots movements, which can drive younger generations away from falling prey to terrorist organisations.

The EIAS researchers are firmly convinced that although highly preoccupied by, and devoted to the complex issues emerging along its Southern and Eastern borders, a global actor such as the European Union should embrace a worldwide mentality and focus also on the old path of the Silk Road.

Within this vital framework for the EU, a more balanced approach mixing soft policies and investing in human capital can be the right strategy to secure the Heartland. The EU must actively contribute towards cultural exchanges and people-to-people dialogue and exchanges, to create a meaningful cooperation with Central Asia countries, leading to a safer international environment.

## **Panel Discussion**

The first speaker, Mr Koçac from the European Parliamentary Research Service, spoke on Brussels' perceptions on security and stability in Central Asia.

He, then, mentioned the Adoption of the *Strategy for a New Partnership* in 2007 aimed at recognising the increasing importance of Central Asia for EU, in terms of security, stability, governance and energy diversification. Mr Koçac underlined the fact that in the 2008 Review, terrorism, radicalisation and extremism were not among the issues of concerns regarding Central Asia. The mentioned words appear for the first time during the First EU-Central Asia Forum on Security Issues in September 2008, in which concrete policy lines for a joint action were set up in order to combat terrorism and extremism. A crucial moment in these joint assessments is represented by the developments in Afghanistan, which caused the following reviews, in 2010 and 2012, to contain increased

concerns regarding security issues. In 2013 the EU and Central Asia established the High Level Security Dialogue (HLSD) as a mechanism to address security issues of shared concern, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, border control and extremism. More recently, the 2015 review identified once again increasing security challenges concerning radicalisation and extremism. Mr Koçac stressed on the fact that most of these concerns stemmed from the instability of Afghanistan as a result of Pakistan's counterinsurgency operations.

Regarding further challenges to seriously take into account as factors that nourish radicalisation in Central Asia, Mr Koçac mentioned climate change, food security, uncertain leadership successions, endemic corruption and political repression. Indeed, Mr Koçac highlighted the fact that a socio-economic deterioration can easily lead to the radicalisation of the society and the rise of extremisms. Moreover, the speaker raised doubts on whether actions undertaken by governments in Central Asia are directed towards fighting extremisms or rather to crackdown on opposition forces. Mr Koçac concluded his remarks with the following question: "To what extent the threat of extremism/terrorism in Central Asia exaggerated?" In this sense, he believes that the threat, and the perception of it, is more external than domestic.

Ms Ebner began her speech by briefly introducing Quilliam Foundation, a counter-extremism think tank, founded by two former jihadists, and whose main scope is to challenge extremist ideologies and narratives. She also gave definitions for the often misinterpreted words 'Islam' and 'Jihad', whose meaning is exclusively religious provided that the suffix -ism is not added to them. In this case, in effect, the two mentioned words, becoming 'Islamism' and 'Jihadism', assume a political significance. Ms Ebner then spoke about the radicalisation process, which she believes to be characterized by four main elements that are usually exploited by charismatic recruiters in order to attract potential jihadists: ideologies, grievances, identity crises and narratives.

As for the grievances, according to the Ms Ebner, these are coming from many sides, due to historical reasons (e.g. USSR, China, Western countries), and they coincided with the emergence of transnational movements and ideologies (e.g. Al Qaeda). Identity crises, instead, mainly emerged with the collapse of the USSR.

Ms Ebner then talked about the Islamic movements panorama in Central Asia. Indeed, there are several different Islamic groups in the region, whose degree of extremism varies, with the consequence that each of them has its own peculiarities regarding goals and strategies. Among the more moderate ones Ms Ebner mentioned the Gülen Movement, Tablighi Jama'at, and the Islamic Renaissance Party. On the more extremist side of the movements' sphere she identified the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Turkestan Islamic Party (which has links with Al Qaeda and the Taliban), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (which pledged allegiance to Daesh), and the Islamic Jihad Union. In the middle of the extremism degree scale she placed Hizb ut-Tahrir, a movement that is particularly strong in Uzbekistan and that, although not being characterized by violence means, sometimes makes use of extremist anti-Zionist and anti-USA rhetoric to justify violent actions.

In concluding her intervention, Ms Ebner touched upon the tools to adopt in order to tackle extremism. In this sense, she stressed on the importance of the soft end solution, which is represented by counter-narratives in order to combat Daesh propaganda.

Rashmi Thapa from Search for Common Ground (SCG), focused her presentation on what works for countering violent extremism. In particular she explained the fruitful approach of SCG, individuating four pillars to face terrorism. The first action to avoid the spread of radicalization is prevention. Engaging youth is the key to communicate with marginalised groups, who are at risk of being recruited by extremist movements. In particular prevention, can obviously be achieved working with schools and grassroots movements.

The second pillar of the approach used by SCG is disengagement. Working with actions that support people currently or previously engaged in violent extremism, including convicted prisoners or returned fighters to choose alternative non-violent pathways going forward. In particular Ms Thapa explained the successful work of SCG in prisons in Indonesia and Morocco supporting disengagement and preventing recidivism.

According to Ms Thapa the third important pillar to counter extremism is to improve state response. In particular governments should embrace actions to work collaboratively with non-state actors and expand the portfolio of policy options available.

The fourth pillar, explained by Ms Thapa, highlights the importance of a credible and constructive narrative to reduce the appeal for violence as an option. Increasing the appeal of alternative, constructive pathways for addressing grievances and collaborative problem solving is an important step to create an inclusive society according to SCG. NGOs and civil society must actively participate within Youth-Produced Communications to cover and discuss sensitive topics and reframe problems towards a wide participation in collaborative solutions.

Ms Thapa concluded her presentation, giving some recommendations on Central Asia for the rising political concerns about youth radicalization. There is much room for improvement in the state's prevention mechanisms and communication to groups at risk according to the SCG specialist. In particular Ms Thapa highlighted the need to increase joint collaboration of the law enforcement, security, state, religious leaders with youth and women to undertake efforts to prevent radicalization and extremism in the local communities.

Mr Michael Privot started by arguing that the religious dimension of radicalisation comes at the very end of the process. He explained how radicalisation is a phenomenon that affects the whole European society and that since the financial crisis, life conditions in Europe concerning child mortality and life expectancy deteriorated for the first time since the Second World War. Mr Privot continued by comparing two forms of radicalisation with a common nature: far right and jihadist parties. According to the speaker, there is just a difference in the degree of production of violence between these two ideological movements. The worrisome situation in the EU Eastern countries or the recent events in Sweden, where massive attacks on the refugees occurred, could lead in 3-4 years to the development of organized far right groups that are waging violent actions.

Mr Privot then defined Jihadism as "cute" as it is currently the most easily accessible narrative of violent radicalisation available on the market. Indeed, it is very easy to look for information on Internet regarding Jihadism and find conceptual tools to wage a war against society at large. This also explains why figures show a high number of converts that are quickly radicalised and switch to Islam and then join Daesh. He argued that jihadist groups promote the dichotomist narrative of the little David (them) fighting against Goliath (their societies). This is the narrative they are using which is attracting

many youngsters, both to join far right parties or Daesh. The motivations that drive people – primarily from lower classes - to join such movements is due to lack of feeling of inclusion into the society; the high unemployment rate and overall lack of opportunities.

Mr Privot argued that the EU has to develop actions. Narrative is important, but according to the speaker, concrete policies make the difference in every day life.

Mr Privot concluded with the European perception on Tablighi Jama'at, Sufism and Gulen Movement. Tablighi Jama'at is sworn to Salafism, and even if Salafism is not bad per se, the political ideology that the movement promotes, aims to reform society.

The panel discussion was followed by a video contribution via skype from Mr Keneshbek Sainazarov, Country Director of SCG based in Kyrgyzstan. Thanks to the intervention of Mr Sainazarov, the audience was able to have a direct perception on the current situation on Central Asia. During his speech, Mr Sainazarov was able to give the audience a detailed picture of the complex framework known as the "Heartland". In particular, Mr Sainazarov explained the importance of establishing a dialogue platform within this key region for international security.

Report prepared by Mr Sebastiano Mori, Junior Researcher, EIAS