



*Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

1.6.2023

MISSION REPORT

following the 10th EU-Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation
Committee (PCC), 15-17 May 2023

Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-
Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with
Turkmenistan and Mongolia

Members of the mission:

Andris Ameriks, 1st Vice Chair	(S&D) (Leader of the mission)
Atidzhe Alieva-Veli, 2nd Vice Chair	(Renew)
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Introduction

The Delegation for Relations with Central Asia (DCAS) paid a visit to Dushanbe and Bokhtar from Monday, May 15, to Wednesday, May 17, 2023, to hold the 10th EU-Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) and a number of meetings with a variety of interlocutors from Tajik institutions, civil rights organizations, and society sectors such as education and business.

Before the departure of the mission, on March 20 in Brussels, Dietmar Krissler, Head of Division Central Asia, EEAS, and the Tajik Ambassador to the EU, H.E Mr Erkinxon Rahmatullozoda, briefed the EP Delegation in a preparatory meeting.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the last mission by the DCAS to Tajikistan took place in 2019, while the Tajik Parliament visited Brussels in May 2022.

Context

Tajikistan is facing unprecedented challenges in its recent history: the sudden and unexpected change of international status of its main ally and economic partner, Russia, and an "impossible neighbour" such as Afghanistan. Even the relations with Iran, with which Tajikistan shares language, historical, and cultural ties, are now to be reconsidered under the current polarization of international relations, which has put Tajikistan in a delicate geo-strategic position. Border tensions with Kyrgyzstan, which caused several casualties in the past two years, are still unsolved. The region is undergoing profound changes, with a season of constitutional reforms in most of the Central Asian countries (but not in Tajikistan), often aimed at consolidating current power, and Kazakhstan on the edge of an open revolution one year ago. China's presence is increasingly assertive, both politically and economically. At the foot of the Himalaya's melting glaciers, Tajikistan is also under direct threat from climate change. The country has strong national cohesion. However, the space for human rights defenders and independent voices is increasingly limited.

In this problematic context, bilateral relations with the European Union are not additional reasons for stress for Tajikistan but come as part of possible solutions, such as the recent submission of an application to obtain a GSP+ regime and the continuous political and economic cooperation, including the direct dialogue between the European Parliament and the Majlisi Oli.

Meetings

In only two working days in the capital, the Delegation managed to have a long and lively Parliamentary Cooperation Committee with the Majlisi Oli, meetings with the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Justice and Defense, and meetings with the Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs and for Economic Development. A long exchange of views took place with one of the main Leaders of the Afghan Resistance. The EP Delegation discussed the worsening of the human rights situation with Civil Society Organizations and paid visits to factories and a remarkable educational centre also funded by the EU.

The full program is attached at the end of this report (see *Annex II*).

Bilateral relations

During both the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) and most of the Government meetings, the main request by the Tajik interlocutors has been to receive a positive and quick response to their application for the GSP+ trade tariff. Tajikistan has a number of points to make in arguing that it is one of the first Central Asian countries to join the World Trade Organization and that other countries in the region enjoy GSP+, although it does not present a better record in terms of human rights. From an EU perspective, the ratification, implementation, and related monitoring of the 27 required international conventions implies the structuring of a permanent dialogue with the Tajik authorities and an effective instrument for promoting environmental sustainability, labour rights, and human rights. As consistently pointed out by the EP Delegation, the European Parliament will have to carefully examine whether Tajikistan fulfils all the requirements.

Less discussion took place about the launch of the negotiations for the new EU-Tajikistan Enhanced Partnership Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), which, following the guidelines agreed by the Council last December, is in its very first steps. Equally, compared to previous visits, the Tajik side did not emphasize the 2030 National Development Strategy.

However, it was very clear during the meetings that the Tajikistan Authorities are well aware of the need to modernize society - sustainability, digitalization, and better legislation aimed at creating employment opportunities for the younger generation and human development. The goal is to reduce the dependency of migrants' remittances to 5–10% of GDP by 2030, to reduce the share of migrants in Russia by increasing the one in countries such as South Korea, the UK, and the EU, and to upgrade Tajikistan to the list of middle-income countries. There is full recognition that the European Union, more than any other international partner, is in the best position to offer effective cooperation in all those fields. The new world polarization, as in other Central Asian countries, is challenging Tajikistan's traditional positioning. In this regard, the development of bilateral relations with the European Union is even more strategic since the

country, as put by one interlocutor, "doesn't wish to fall once more on the wrong side of the wall".

Human rights

As pointed out by the EP Delegation, the vote of the European Parliament on the accession to GSP+ will also take into consideration a scrutiny of the current situation in terms of the rule of law and the expansion of fundamental freedoms. Unfortunately, in terms of human rights the country looks to be heading in the very wrong direction, in spite of a feeling of national cohesion. The situation in Gorno-Badakshan, or "Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region," remains critical and confused, with abuses of activists, more restrictions imposed on NGOs, a lot of smuggling activities across the border with Afghanistan, and the government's efforts to favour investments in the region.

The number of genuinely independent NGOs able to work in the country is decreasing; registration of new ones is almost impossible, due to a plurality of administrative obstacles, which are used as harassment.

Funding from external sources is also increasingly restricted, and additional administrative burdens discourage donors from supporting Tajik entities (it was mentioned, as an example, that the Netherlands contributes five times more to Kyrgyz NGOs than to Tajik ones).

There is no real independent media, although access to foreign sources - Western, Russian, or from other regions is free. The number of lawyers available in the country is very modest (the Delegation received different figures on this), and the ones able to deal with human rights legal issues are just a handful of them. As far as judges go, in fact, those are under direct control of the executive.

The Majlisi Oli has adopted a Legal Education Program and a Human Rights Action Program, as well as a number of amendments for the establishment of a Human Rights Commissioner. There is also a plan to increase the number of female investigators to improve law enforcement against domestic violence, a well-spread phenomenon in the country, although, as pointed out by a MP, "there is more domestic violence in France than in all of Central Asia". Several interlocutors used as a justification for not being in position for a real opening of society the lasting consequences of the civil war of the 1990s and the presence of Islamists in the country - an argument that has been used for the last twenty years.

In this gloomy picture, young people do not take part in advocacy activities since this can be prejudicial to their own future. While the European Union remains crucial for its active support of the few still active Civil Society Organizations and for engaging with the Tajik Authorities through the Human Rights Dialogue, the power remains in the hands of the President. His picture is everywhere, far more than in other Central Asian countries, and even during a visit

to an EU-funded vocational centre, students sang and recited poems in honour of him in front of DCAS Members.

Russia seen from Dushanbe

The Russian aggression in Ukraine is almost a taboo topic in the Tajik media, and public opinion is divided between those who rely more or only on Tajik sources and those, mostly the new generation, who follow the news on international and foreign channels.

The recent decision by the Duma to recruit Russian citizens with double nationality creates serious concern in Tajikistan, and during meetings with both Parliamentarians and Ministers, there was interest and openness in listening to the position of the European Parliament and its strong condemnation of Russian aggression combined with the different instruments to support Ukraine.

Tajiks also appreciated the emphasis expressed by the EP Delegation on the importance of differentiating Putin and his circle from Russian citizens and the crucial contribution of Russian society and culture to the European legacy and family. However, sanctions were criticized: "no country has ever changed its position because of imposed sanctions", "only America is winning from the sanctions". Sanctions, and notably the risk of being targeted by secondary sanctions, are a sensitive issue in the country. From its perspective, the Tajik side has reiterated its deep "regret" about the situation, its well-established friendship with both Moscow and Kiev, its neutrality in the conflict, and its commitment to the UN Charter. The Tajiks stressed that negotiations are the only way out of the conflict and that the United Nations is the only body in position to offer some serious mediation. Some even mentioned the role of "Russian propaganda" in the country, Moscow's "mistaken decisions", and clearly said, "We call it a war". It was also stated that Ukraine is a "full independent country with a legitimate government, entitled to its unity and territorial integrity".

Yet Tajikistan has, probably more than other countries in the region, strong ties with Russia. "We are also linked to Russia mentally", said one interlocutor. At least a quarter of the GDP comes from the remittances of migrants in Russia, and, as it was pointed out, "every action we take can have negative consequences for the more than one million Tajiks working in Russia". Not to mention that not only is the biggest Russian military base located in southern Tajikistan, but it is also considered a crucial defensive asset for possible border tensions with Afghanistan.

It should also be considered that, compared to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan has not gone through similar economic growth since the beginning of the war and, despite not having a customs union with Russia, is not a pivotal country for circumvention of sanctions.

Afghanistan and regional context

Traditionally very vocal against the Taliban and their unlikely neighbour Uzbekistan, at almost every single meeting Tajik interlocutors made the point that the international community should not have any illusions about possible improvements and concessions on basic rights by Kabul.

Tajikistan also worries about an estimated force of 8.000–10.000 Jihadists based close to the border and ready to enter Tajikistan. Many of them are likely to be related to or have family connections with Tajik terrorists who fought during the civil war and now wish to enter their homeland.

In a meeting with Afghan National Resistance Leader Hamad Massoud, the Delegation could learn about military and political forces still opposing the Taliban inside the country. The Afghan Resistance benefits from some support from Tajikistan, although in a very cautious and somehow ambiguous way. The Resistance believes that, notably in the north of Afghanistan, the Taliban lost their entire consensus due to increasing poverty and a lack of education or health services. Equally, the Resistance does not believe that the Taliban can compromise on any request by the international community: the combination of adherence to misunderstood religious principles and lack of education in their own ranks made the Taliban a unique case in the international community and, as described, "an impossible partner", and "an unreliable interlocutor". Far from offering any "inclusive government", the Pashto-led Taliban would rather implement systematic discrimination against all other ethnic groups. Concerning the unexpected surrender by the Afghan National Army during the quick Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021, both Tajik and Afghan interlocutors agreed that the Leadership left the army with no orders. Like the US Administration, Washington also preferred not to engage in any fighting with the Taliban, counting on a more inclusive and moderate policy by the Taliban—a wrong assumption.

Nevertheless, Tajikistan supplies Afghanistan with electricity, which is duly paid for by the Taliban, in order to alleviate the people's conditions in the country. Similarly, the border is open for cargo movement. Dushanbe does not oppose the construction of a railroad connecting Termez (Uzbekistan) with Kabul (Afghanistan) and Peshawar (Pakistan), since it believes that more infrastructure can benefit Tajikistan's trade routes and open the country to more external influence. Smuggling remains an issue of concern, and trafficking of narcotics has increased by more than 30% in one year.

As bluntly put by a Member of the Government, "Tajikistan is the most exposed country to the Taliban", who represent "the "key factor of instability for the entire region "with a "very dark scenario in perspective". Not without surprise, Tajikistan values the presence of a strong Russian military base in the south of the country as, through the mechanism of the Collective Treaty Security Organization, reliable and immediately available assistance in case of an outbreak of hostilities along the 1.4000 km long border with Afghanistan.

Although very different, the Tajik-Kyrgyz border is another area of tension, following the violent clashes of 2021 and 2022, which provoked hundreds of casualties. "A heritage of the Soviet Union", as labelled during the PCC, the lack of clear demarcation of the border between the two countries is still a matter of mutual mistrust. Yet, political activities now prevail over military operations, and the Tajik side emphasizes that diplomatic efforts are being carried out by both sides and that any further violence is to be excluded.

The role and follow-up of the European Parliament

The European Parliament will play a significant role in assessing the overall situation of the country and eventually taking a decision about the granting of GSP+ to Tajikistan. Equally, in an effort to monitor the circumvention of EU sanctions imposed on Russia, the European Parliament will have to closely follow the data and the indicators related to Tajikistan. In Afghanistan, all actions of the European Parliament should recognize the specific role played by Tajikistan, which is also one of the countries most affected by the impact of the humanitarian and political disaster caused by the Taliban. The European Parliament should also consider engaging with the National Resistance as one of its interlocutors in dealing with Afghanistan.

Tajikistan is also a perfect case of a country in need of the external dimension of the Green Deal, including its parliamentary diplomacy dimension.

Last but far from least, the European Parliament has to step up its scrutiny of the human rights deterioration in the country, stressing that the improvement in this area is a matter of essence in further enhancing the bilateral relations between Tajikistan and the European Union.

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**10th EU-Republic of Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) Meeting
Dushanbe and Bokhtar
Tajikistan**

15-17 May 2023

Final List of Participants

DCAS Members

Mr Andris AMERIKS, 1st Vice Chair	S&D	Latvia
Ms Atidzhe ALIEVA-VELI, 2nd Vice-Chair	RENEW	Bulgaria
Mr Ivan DAVID, DCAS Member	ID	The Czech Republic
Mr Thierry MARIANI, DCAS Member	ID	France
Mr Christian SAGARTZ, DCAS Substitute Member	EEP	Austria

Secretariat

2 Staff

Political advisors

2 Staff

Interpreters (RU/EN/TJ)

2 Interpreters



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Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

European Union - Republic of Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC)

10th meeting

15 – 17 May 2023

Dushanbe and Bokhtar

FINAL PROGRAMME

Monday, 15 May 2023

10:30 - 11.30	Briefing by the Head of the EU Delegation in Tajikistan, Mr Raimundas KAROBLIS
11:30 - 12.30	Meeting with representatives of Tajik NGOs working in the field of human rights and democracy
	Lunch
15.00 - 17.30	10th EU-Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee Head of Tajik Delegation: Ms Dilrabo MANSURI Head of EP Delegation: Mr Andris AMERIKS
18.30 - 20.30	Official reception (hosted by the Tajik side)

Tuesday, 16 May 2023

10.00 - 11.00	Meeting with H.E. Qohir RASULZODA, Prime Minister of the Republic of Tajikistan
11.30 - 12.30	Meeting with Colonel General Sherali MIRZO, Minister of Defence
	Lunch
13.30 - 14.30	Meeting with Mr Muzaffar ASHOURIYON, Minister of Justice
16.00 - 17.00	Meeting with Mr Sharaf SHERALIZODA, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs
17.30 - 18.30	Meeting with Mr Zavqi ZAVQUIZODA, Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Trade
19.00 - 21.00	Dinner hosted by the EP Delegation Chair Mr A. AMERIKS for the Parliament of Tajikistan

Wednesday, 17 May 2023

08.30 - 10.30	Departure from Dushanbe to Bokhtar city
10.30 - 12.30	Field visit of several local businesses and factories in Bokhtar city accompanied by the Deputy Governor of the region and the Mayor of Bokhtar city
13.00 - 14.30	Working Lunch with the Local Authorities and Leadership of Bokhtar city
14.30 - 16.30	Visit to the EU funded project - "Cultural and Education Centre Tomiris"/ Innovation Lab
16.30 - 18.00	Departure from Bokhtar city back to Dushanbe
18.30 - 20.00	Meeting with Afghan National Resistance Leader Mr Hamad MASSOUD on the situation in Afghanistan - political and economic situation in the country after Taliban takeover Venue: Hilton hotel

FINAL AGENDA
10th European Union - Republic of Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC)
Monday, 15 May 2023 (15:00-17:30)
Dushanbe

1. Opening of the working session, opening speeches:

- Ms Dilrabo MANSURI, Head of the Delegation of Majlisi Oli, Co-Chair of the 10th EU-Republic of Tajikistan PCC,
- Mr Andris AMERIKS, Head of the Delegation of the European Parliament and Co-Chair of the 10th EU-Republic of Tajikistan PCC

2. Adoption of the agenda

3. Adoption of the draft minutes of the 9th meeting of the EU-Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, held in Brussels (European Union) in 2022

4. State of play of the EU-Republic of Tajikistan cooperation and developments in the European Union and in Tajikistan, with focus on:

1) Impact of the war in Ukraine and related sanctions:

Speaker from the Tajik side: the Chairman of the Committee of the Majlisi namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan for international affairs, public associations and information - Saidmurod FATTOHZODA.

2) Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) and EU/Tajikistan trade and economic relations, market access and related technical cooperation:

- Speaker from the Tajik side: the Chairman of the Committee of the Majlisi namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan on Economics and Finance - Mahmadali QURBONZODA.

3) Economic and social reforms, their implementation and investment climate:

- Speaker from the Tajik side: the Chairman of the Committee of the Majlisi namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan on social issues, family and health protection - Sumangul TAGHOYZODA.

5. EU and Tajikistan regional policy on Central Asia, with focus on:

- **Situation in Afghanistan:**

- Speaker from the Tajik side: the Chairman of the Committee of the Majlisi namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan on law and order, defense and security Rustam SHOHMUROD.

- **Border disputes:**

- Speaker from the Tajik side: the Chairman of the Committee of the Majlisi namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan on law and order, defense and security Rustam SHOHMUROD.

- **Connectivity, transport and infrastructure projects:**

- Speaker from the Tajik side: the member of the Majlisi Committee namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan for energy, industry, construction and communications – Rustam RAHMATZODA.

- **Environmental policy and water resources management:**

- Speaker from the Tajik side: the Chairman of the Ecological Commission of the Majlisi namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan Muhammadrahim YUSUFI.

6. Human rights, Rule of Law and social policy, including the empowerment of civil society and fundamental freedoms

- Speaker from the Tajik side: the Chairman of the Committee of the Majlisi namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan on legislation and human rights – Ravshan RAJABZODA.

7. Date and place of the next meeting