

## COMPASS Policy Brief

### Peter Burian: The assessment of activities and prospects for European Union - Central Asia cooperation

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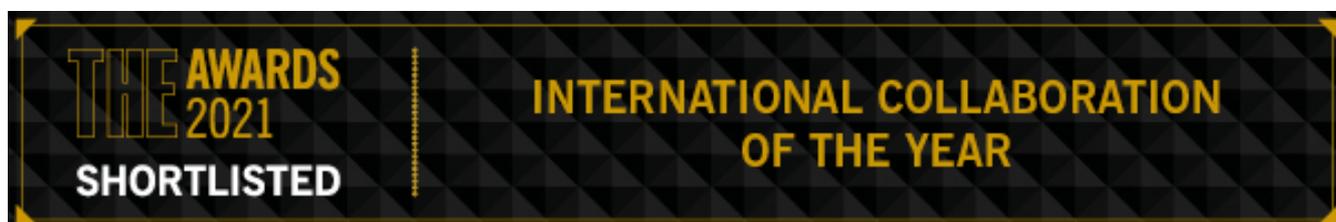
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**GCRF COMPASS Project** (ES/P010849/1, 2017-21) is an ambitious UK government capacity-building funding initiative, aiming to extend UK research globally and to address the challenges of growth and sustainability in developing countries. Notably, the COMPASS project led by the University of Kent, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, seeks to establish the ‘hubs of excellence’ at the top-level Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to enable them to become the centres for knowledge-sharing and transfer for *research integration, impact governance, and sustainable communities*.

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# **PETER BURIAN: THE ASSESSMENT OF ACTIVITIES AND PROSPECTS FOR EUROPEAN UNION - CENTRAL ASIA COOPERATION**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*The mission carried out by Peter Burian, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia from 2015 to 2021, is generally positive. The period of his representation is characterized as stable, effective, executive, meeting the requirements entrusted to the Special Representative. Certain risks and challenges that have emerged against the backdrop of Covid-19 have, to a certain extent, influenced the activities of the EUSR, as well as the situation around the world. However, this situation did not have a significant adverse impact on the implementation of the goals and objectives set for the EUSR and its team. This is evidenced by the results that have been achieved during the period of Burian's activities, which will be continued and implemented under a new Representative, Ambassador Terhi Hakala. The EUSR in Central Asia is an example of the EU's interest in long-term cooperation with the region.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, Central Asia region, European Union Special Representative, Peter Burian, New Strategy, visits, foreign policy, border and water issues.*

**Abbreviations:** *EUSR - The European Union Special Representative; EU – The European Union; PCA – The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement; EPCA - Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement; GSP+ - The Generalized System of Preferences.*

## **BACKGROUND**

The European Union Special Representative (EUSR) plays an important role in the regulation and development of relations between the EU and the Central Asian region. Despite the rather modest

presence of the EU in the region, both financially and in other directions, the EU seeks to retain its certain influence in the region. The key link for this is the EUSR. Over the past six years (2015-2021), the EUSR was Peter Burian (Slovak diplomat), who has had a positive impact and has a personal contribution to the development of the EU's relations with the Central Asian countries both at the bilateral level and with the region as a whole. On 15 March 2015, High Representative Federica Mogherini nominated Peter Burian as the EUSR for Central Asia, with the aim of securing a high-level EU Permanent Delegation. In appointing Ambassador Burian to office, Deputy High Representative Federica Mogherini noted that Peter Burian's appointment shows the continued cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, which contributes to ensuring EU participation in key areas of mutual interest, such as the rule of law, security, energy, water resources, education and human rights. For the EU, Central Asia is a strategic region. The EU demonstrates willingness to support the transition process in neighboring countries such as Afghanistan, where a lot of effort is required to consolidate democratic transition.

Considering the fact that due to the presence of other large states in Central Asia, the EU seeks to cooperate on specific projects in which concrete results can be achieved. In addition to a limited number of economic projects and cooperation in the field of security, the EU focuses its attention on education, continues to contribute to improving the human rights situation, to strengthening political and financial support for civil society, and the rational solution of border and water issues. Assistance in solving these issues has always been on the agenda of Peter Burian's program, which also remains relevant today. The aim of this policy brief is to identify the main achievements and shortcomings of the activities of the EUSR for Central Asia.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE**

Since the establishment of the position of the EUSR in Central Asia in 2005, each appointed delegate has been striving to cope with their duties at a high level. The main tasks of the special representative include strengthening the political coordination of the EU with the countries of Central Asia, monitoring the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia and supporting regional security. Peter Burian continued the political activities of his predecessors, which covers the implementation of all the questions and goals set by the participants. The European impact on the region is ambiguous and also varies greatly from country to country. In addition to a regional approach to a specific problem, the EU needs bilateral cooperation with the countries of the region. Based on the needs and requirements of the countries of the region, each of them needs an "individual" approach. This is also one of the main goals of the EUSR and his team.

First, the active work of Peter Burian in Central Asia should be noted. From the moment of his appointment as the EUSR in Central Asia on April 15, 2015, Peter Burian began intensive interaction with the governing bodies of the countries of the region as well as with the representatives of civil society. Ambassador Burian made regular tours of the region. Regular visits and tours around the region have demonstrated his interest in the implementation of the issues on the agenda. Burian began his visits to Central Asia countries from the first days after his appointment to the post. For example, on July 20-21, 2015, Ambassador Burian made his first visit to Tashkent. During his visits, Ambassador Burian held meetings with heads of government departments, and within the framework of the programs he met with representatives of civil society, European business, international organizations present in the CA countries.

Second, the adoption of the New EU Strategy for the Central Asia Region in 2019 was implemented during Burian's representation, which shows he played a direct role in the development of the New Strategy. The new EU Strategy for the Central Asia region was called "EU and CA: New Opportunities for Strengthening Partnership". This strategy is a logical continuation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia 2007-2013. The main priorities of the New Strategy are partnership for sustainability, cooperation for prosperity, intensive joint work, stable development, and a closely interconnected economic and political space. As the EUSR in Central Asia, he assisted in the consideration of problematic and controversial issues existing both between the EU and Central Asia region, and between the Central Asian countries themselves, so that the EU could provide support in solving existing problems. This concerns, first of all, the problems of water and border issues. According to Burian, the updated EU Strategy for Central Asia is the foundation on which future cooperation between the EU and Central Asian partners is built. In the New Strategy, unlike the previous one, the interests, goals and objectives of the EU in the region are defined in a more precise and specific form, so that their implementation is real. The new EU Strategy for Central Asia calls for the EU's readiness to expand cooperation in all areas with a particular emphasis on the rule of law, promoting accountability and supporting Central Asian countries in their fight against corruption.

Third, another important achievement during the period of Burian's chairmanship was the signing of an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). Long before the appointment of Peter Burian to the position of EUSR, a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was concluded between the CA countries and the EU. In the period 1994-1996, the EU concluded the PCA with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which entered into force in 1999. In 1998, the PCA was signed with

Turkmenistan, following the one with Tajikistan in 2004. The PCA with Tajikistan entered into force in 2010, but the PCA with Turkmenistan has not yet entered into force. However, an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with the EU and Kazakhstan was signed in 2015. Kyrgyzstan expresses its desire to sign an EPCA with the EU by the end of the year. Also, on June 28-30, 2021, in Tashkent, representatives of Uzbekistan and the EU, within the framework of the working group on trade issues, held the eighth round of negotiations on a draft new bilateral Agreement on EPCA. It should also be noted that Uzbekistan received the status of a beneficiary country of the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP+). Peter Burian said that Uzbekistan, following the planned trajectory, could become the economic leader of Central Asia.

Despite Burian's vigorous activity in Central Asia and many positive achievements, certain questions remained that were not fully resolved during his period as Special Representative. The following section points out three of these issues.

First, border problems have always been a sensitive issue in relations between the countries of Central Asia. In this regard, the issues of borders between the Central Asian countries played an important role in the program of both Peter Burian and his predecessors. According to Burian, the first step in the peaceful coexistence of neighbors is to clearly define the borders of the countries in Central Asia, but gradually the very importance of the border should decrease. Regional cooperation makes it possible to resolve conflicts that arise from time to time between the Central Asian countries. Border and water issues should be jointly resolved by the countries of the region. It is important for the EU that the Central Asian region remains stable and uses all its potential as a connecting link between Europe and Asia. According to Burian, the role of borders in solving regional problems should gradually decrease, and become more symbolic. One should not rely only on historical facts, since it only complicates the process of solving the problem. Currently, one should proceed from new knowledge, methods that will contribute to the rapprochement of citizens. Through cross-border cooperation on various issues and through the development of trade, it is necessary to promote such a process that borders facilitate the free movement of people, solve problems and at the same time prevent drug trafficking and smuggling.

Nevertheless, security issues in terms of border control and drug transit are an integral part of the EU's foreign policy. Taking into account the situation in Afghanistan, neighboring to Central Asia, if serious security problems arise in Central Asia, the EU will be one of the first to experience their consequences. Central Asia has borders with Afghanistan and, in this regard, is subject to risks ranging from illegal drug trafficking to threats of terrorism and extremism. In this regard, in its foreign policy, the EU adheres to

the role of coordinator of the effectiveness and results of programs. Such programs include BOMCA and CADAP, which are instruments for the implementation of the EU security policy. Thus, border and security issues are areas that still need to be invested in to achieve the desired result.

Second, climate change is currently playing an important role on the agenda of virtually every country in the world. Climate change requires joint problem solving. The rational use of water resources was sharply considered in the Burian program. Burian argued that it is very important to promote cooperation on the rational use of water resources, as scientists predict a disaster that could occur in the Caspian Sea. The Ambassador has repeatedly stressed the need for countries to not only use water more economically, but also to agree on a fair division of water resources and access to them, so that the interests of the countries of the upstream and downstream of mountain rivers are taken into account. At the same time, Burian believed that both on border issues and on water issues, agreements should take into account the interests of the local population, in addition to the political will at the level of the country's states. This area of cooperation also needs further improvement and possible EU assistance.

Third, during his office, Burian paid some attention to the development of the economies and the legal system of the Central Asian countries. For the EU, stability in the Central Asian region is an important indicator. The EU has sought to intensify its cooperation in support of economic modernization. On the part of the EU, one can see the desire to contribute to the development of a more powerful and competitive business environment aimed at creating new jobs in the region. According to Burian, Central Asia should use all its capabilities as a connecting link between Europe and Asia. The region should carry out reforms that will help improve the climate for business and investment. However, the presence of other states in the region and the existing competition complicate the EU's assistance in developing the economic environment. It also depends on complex legislation and administrative procedures in the Central Asian countries, which in turn can lead to some extent to the development of corruption and the informal economy.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the results of the expiration of the term of the EU Special Representative, it can be concluded that Peter Burian continued the mission of his predecessors in this position quite steadily. Burian's activity has a positive assessment in Central Asia. Peter Burian made a definite contribution to strengthening relations between the regions, which is the primary task of the EU Special Representative. One can observe a significant intensification of political dialogue and comprehensive cooperation between Central Asia and the EU in recent years. Burian left behind a foundation that can serve the further

development of relations between the regions, assistance to the development of civil society in Central Asia. The new Representative should continue and develop the initiated transformations, taking into account his ideas and proposals for further fruitful cooperation and strengthening of relations.

However, the issues that were put on the agenda of Burian and his team did not fully find their solution and implementation, due to certain unresolved issues between the CA countries, with the situation with the pandemic Covid-19.

- Regarding the development of economies and the legal system in CA countries, it should be noted that EU investors are interested in implementing their activities in the CA market. In this regard, it is necessary to improve the interconnectedness of the region and create favorable conditions for the convergence of legal systems.
- Along with strengthening regional cooperation, it is advisable to support the efforts of countries in the field of environmental protection and water resources management. The problem of water resources remains one of the main problems of the countries of Central Asia.
- It is necessary to provide assistance in carrying out legislative reforms in Central Asia, introducing the principles of a “green economy”, new technologies and increasing the potential of specialists.
- Paying attention to the development of the educational sector of the Central Asian region is of significant importance. It is expedient for the EU to take a more active part in the spheres of society, culture, youth and education. In doing so, it will strengthen its soft power approach by promoting development in the social and humanitarian sphere.
- EUSR and CA countries should have mutual trust in each other. For its part, the EU should become a strong and reliable partner in the processes of transformations and reforms in Central Asia. CA countries, both at the bilateral and regional levels, must create favorable conditions for carrying out certain reforms and changes, in all areas where it is necessary.

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