

KYRGYZSTAN-EUROPEAN UNION: FACETS OF COOPERATION

Muratbek AZYMBAKIEV

*Advisor at the Department of Foreign Policy Planning and
Comprehensive Economic Cooperation,
Foreign Ministry of the Kyrgyz Republic
(Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)*

Kyrgyzstan is one of the first CIS states (after Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus) with which the European Union has signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)—a legal document which regulates the main principles in this area.¹ Before the PCA was enforced, these relations were regulated by the Temporary Agreement on Trade and Trade Measures between our republic and the European Union (signed on 28 November, 1996 in Brussels). After ratification by the parliaments of the EU member states and the Zhoroḡku kenesh of Kyrgyzstan, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement came into force on 1 July, 1999. It became the basis of bilateral relations in political, trade and economic, legal, and cultural spheres for the decade to come.

The PCA is particularly valuable in that the EU member states recognize Kyrgyzstan as a country with which they share “common values,”² and both sides are committed to “strengthening the political and economic freedoms.”³ The effectiveness of this document depends on “the continuation and accomplishment of the political, economic, and legal reforms” being carried out in Kyrgyzstan.⁴ The Agreement envisages the EU’s comprehensive approach to the need for broadening cooperation in the region as an important condition for “promoting prosperity and stability”⁵ in Central Asia. What is more, it notes the need for holding an ongoing political dialog on urgent issues of bilateral relations and on international problems. Not only economic cooperation, but also technical assistance to our republic is an important component of this partnership. Noting the significant differences in socioeconomic development, the

¹ See: *The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between European Union and the Kyrgyz Republic (PCA)* (signed on 9 February, 1995) [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/].

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

European Union recognizes the Kyrgyz Republic as “a developing and landlocked country,”⁶ whereby one of the main goals of the PCA is to eliminate “disparities through Community assistance to the development and restructuring of the Kyrgyz economy.”⁷

It should be emphasized that cooperation with the EU fully meets the national interests of our state aimed at integration into the world community and active involvement in the leading international political, financial, and trade and economic structures. In this respect, it is important to recall the important positive role the EU played in helping Kyrgyzstan to join the World Trade Organization at the end of 1998. During the negotiations to define the main parameters of our membership in the WTO, a decisive role was played by the European Union states’ (particularly its key members) support of our country. Kyrgyzstan gained favorable opportunities to intensify comprehensive relations with the EU both within the organization itself and on the bilateral level.

Relations between Kyrgyzstan and the EU have currently achieved a regular working tempo and are maintained by exchanging visits at the ministerial level and by contacts between experts and specialists of the different departments, which makes it possible to focus on mutually advantageous relations in specific areas.

In order to ensure that the provisions of the Agreement are being fulfilled, three observation structures have been created: the Cooperation Council, the Cooperation Committee, and the Committee on Interparliamentary Cooperation.

The ongoing political dialog is aimed at achieving the following goals: strengthening political relations; supporting the reforms being carried out during the transformation process to democratize society, transform the state administration structures, encourage the development of a civil society; and reinforcing security and stability in Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia as a whole. It should be noted that establishing a political dialog is a necessary condition for further strengthening trade and economic cooperation. It is not accidental that in recent years, the EU has become Bishkek’s largest trade partner.⁸ The European Union thinks it is very important that our country has accepted and is fulfilling its obligations to democratize society, form a law-based state, respect human rights and freedoms, and create a multifaceted system with free democratic elections, and liberalize the economy. An important element of bilateral contacts is retaining peace and international security, as well as observing the principles and provisions of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In this context, the EU recognizes that support of Kyrgyzstan’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity is a necessary condition for retaining peace and stability both in the region and in Eurasia as a whole.

The agreement defines a broad range of cooperation areas, and creates favorable conditions for stable and mutually advantageous development, primarily the strengthening of trade and economic ties as the foundation on which Kyrgyz-European relations are based. In economic cooperation, the EU (and our country) has singled out the following key areas: environmental protection and support of the widespread socioeconomic reforms being conducted in the republic since it gained its independence, and sustainable development of industry, agriculture, and so on, also keeping the resolution of environmental problems in mind.

With respect to the chronology of Kyrgyzstan-EU bilateral relations, it should be noted that the first meeting of the Council on Cooperation, which forms the foundation of these relations, was held in Brussels on 19-20 July, 1999. An official delegation headed by the republic’s prime minister, A. Muraliev, took part in this meeting on behalf of Kyrgyzstan.⁹ The sides confirmed their obligations to intensify political, economic, financial, and cultural relations. The EU once more confirmed its support of our country in conducting democratic reforms and transferring to a market economy. The Council on Cooperation also emphasized that peace and stability in Central Asia is of great significance for security both in Europe and all over the planet.

⁶ See: *The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between European Union and the Kyrgyz Republic (PCA)* (signed on 9 February, 1995) [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/].

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ See: Annual Reports of the Kyrgyz Republic Statistical Committee (from 1998 to present), the publication “Socioeconomic Situation in the Kyrgyz Republic” (January-December 2002), section “Foreign Sector,” pp. 222-223 [<http://nsc.bishkek.su>].

⁹ See: *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 20 July, 1999.

The Council has held a total of five meetings, which took place in Kyrgyzstan and at the EU headquarters in Brussels. The first was held on 1 March, 2000 in Brussels. The Kyrgyzstan delegation was headed by Vice Premier Minister and Minister of Foreign Trade and Industry A. Sulaimankulov.¹⁰ During this meeting, questions relating to implementation of the Agreement were discussed, including the prospects for developing relations within the TACIS, INOGATE and TRACECA programs, the Indicative Program, the Action Program for the Kyrgyz Republic, and auxiliary programs, including in education (TEMPUS), science, and statistics.

The Committee on Cooperation has held four meetings. At the last one on 27 March, 2003, our country's delegation was headed by Vice Premier Minister J. Otorbaev.¹¹ What is more, a subcommittee has been created within this structure, at which practical questions of cooperation in investment and trade policy, standardization, macroeconomics, and the protection of intellectual property were discussed in Bishkek on 12 May, 2000 and 21 June, 2001.¹²

When reviewing the Kyrgyzstan-EU relations, the development of relations within the Committee on Interparliamentary Cooperation should also be noted. Its first meeting was held on 26 May, 2000 in our country, which was visited by a representative delegation from the European Parliament for this purpose.¹³ The second meeting took place on 9-10 October, 2001 in Brussels. The Kyrgyz Republic delegation was headed by Deputy Chairman of the Zhogorku Kenesh's Assembly of People's Representatives S. Zheenbekov. The third meeting was again held in Bishkek on 3 October, 2002.

During essentially all the bilateral meetings within these structures, the European Union continues to place the emphasis on the need to continue democratic reforms and observe human rights in Kyrgyzstan as the basic conditions for developing further cooperation and rendering assistance. It should also be noted that the EU is concerned about the state of security in the region, that is, the continuing threat of international terrorism, illicit drugs and weapons circulation, and so on. In 2001, the European Union launched the Central Asia Drugs Action Plan (CADAP), within the framework of which it renders support to law enforcement agencies and departments in all the Central Asian countries engaged in combating their smuggling. The program's budget for 2002-2003 amounted to approximately 3 million euro. But after the tragic events of 9/11 and the subsequent antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan, the European Union recognized the need to link the Afghan problem with the problems of the entire region and reviewed its policy regarding the Central Asian countries, thus doubling the amount of aid rendered to them under the TACIS Program.

Technical and humanitarian aid from the European Union is extremely important for the development of the Kyrgyz Republic. In compliance with the Memorandum on Mutual Understanding between the two sides, a TACIS Coordination Bureau was opened in Bishkek on 3 April, 1992. Large funds have been allotted via the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) organized in 1992 especially for rendering emergency aid, mainly in public health and food provision. In particular, in 1996, 32 million ecu were allotted for purchasing medical supplies. And before that, in 1994-1995, grants amounting to 14 million ecu were allotted for delivering food to our country (under three programs); in 1995-1996—5 million ecu; and in 1996—10 million ecu. What is more, the program for ensuring Kyrgyzstan's food safety receives stable financing year in year out. For example, in 1997, 8 million ecu were granted for this purpose, in 1998 and 1999—8.5 million ecu each year, in 2000 and 2001—10 million euro, and in 2002—9.5 million euro.¹⁴ Since 1993, the ECHO has rendered our country a total of 25.4 million euro in gratuitous aid (mainly food and medication). This was particularly important in 1994 and 1995 when natural disasters befell the republic. In 1999, the ECHO allotted 2.2 million euro for providing the least well-off strata of the population with medication.¹⁵

¹⁰ See: *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 1 March, 2000.

¹¹ See: *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 28 March, 2003.

¹² See: *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 12 May, 2000; 21 June, 2001.

¹³ See: *Vechernii Bishkek*, 26 May, 2000.

¹⁴ See [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/kyrgyzstan/].

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Technical assistance is rendered under the TACIS program. Between 1992 and 2001, grants to the republic in this sphere amounted to approximately 63 million euro. In June 2001, a TACIS Action Program for Central Asia for 2001-2003 (with a budget of 50 million euro) was adopted. But taking into account the new conditions, this budget was doubled and focused on the following areas: support of structural, legal, and administrative reforms (state administration, democratization, education); assistance to the private sector and economic development (business, trade, the financial sector); and improving infrastructure (power engineering, transportation, telecommunications). Another 2 million euro were allotted in 1999 under the TACIS Program to eliminate the consequences of the crisis in Russia, which also affected Kyrgyzstan. What is more, several other programs are being implemented under TACIS, in which Kyrgyzstan is taking part. In particular, the TEMPUS project mentioned above—trans-European cooperation in higher education between the EU and the CIS countries—encompasses Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Our country is also actively participating in several other interstate TACIS programs in the region: TRACECA (the Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia transportation corridor); INOGATE (modernizing oil and gas pipelines in the CIS); WARMAP (water resources management and agricultural production); MERCURY (international standards and obligations); and LIEN (financing nongovernmental organization working in the social sector to support impoverished strata of the population).

In briefly summing up the above, I would like to note the following facets of Kyrgyzstan-European Union cooperation:

- There is a solid foundation for intensifying a political dialog based on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and the most favorable prerequisites are being created for filling interstate relations with new quality.
- It is extremely important that the efforts of our country's leadership aimed at developing democracy, consolidating a civil society, conducting economic reforms, and so on are met with the European Union's full support and cooperation.
- The European Union has raised the "rank" of cooperation with Kyrgyzstan to the level of partnership, which requires a careful analysis of the current relations and their prospects, as well as the adoption of a special strategic cooperation program with the European Union in areas that meet the national interests of our state. Of course, we must take into account the significant gap in socioeconomic parameters between our republic and the EU member countries. But this should not curb the progress of mutually advantageous projects.
- There can be no doubt that the EU's technical support of the economic reforms in Kyrgyzstan is a significant component of bilateral relations. At the same time, the economic component of cooperation should be raised to a new level. The potential for this is quite significant. The European Union's interest in the natural raw material and recreational resources of our country is also obvious, for the efficient use of which substantiated proposals must be drawn up.
- A serious problem is eliminating the stereotype that relations between the European Union and Kyrgyzstan are "donor-recipient" in nature. In order to do this, radical measures must be adopted to improve the Kyrgyz Republic's image as a country undergoing democratic changes and strictly adhering to the international obligations it has adopted. Here it is important to draw up a substantiated stance on all the problem issues affecting the state, nature, and level of relations.
- Kyrgyzstan's effective participation in the international antiterrorist coalition created favorable opportunities for activating relations both within the Union format, and with its individual member states in essentially all spheres of cooperation.
- The resources and influence of the EU must also be used to strengthen interstate relations in Central Asia. This will make it possible to reinforce general stability and security, and more fully activate the mechanisms of regional integration and cooperation for resolving urgent prob-

lems, primarily socioeconomic ones, which the Central Asian republics are encountering during the transition period.

- There are different ways to develop relations between the regional states and the EU countries. In our opinion, the most optimal is to establish closer contacts within the OSCE, of which essentially all the Central Asian and European Union countries are members. With this goal in mind, it would be expedient to hold a forum-dialog under the auspices of the OSCE on the topic “Central Asian and European Union States: Combating Global Threats and Challenges Together. Prospects for Interaction and Cooperation in the 21st Century.”
- In the practical vein, cooperation in the EU-regional countries format can also be enhanced through the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) by holding a CACO-EU forum. A broad range of issues, including political, economic, and cultural-humanitarian problems, will make it possible to exchange opinions and draw up practical recommendations for intensifying relations between the countries of the region and the European Union.
