



IPRIS Viewpoints

JUNE 2012

Terra Incognita: Portugal and Central Asia

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If everything goes according to plan, before the end of 2012 the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs (MFA), Paulo Portas, will visit Kazakhstan. His interest in visiting the country is easily explained. Together with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Kazakhstan is perceived to represent a window of opportunity for the Portuguese economy, bearing in mind its financial muscle and natural resources.¹ Yet, if we take into account that Portugal does not have a resident ambassador in Kazakhstan – nor in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – and if we also consider that until now the bilateral relationship has had little political and economic substance, then one might wonder if this window of opportunity is real, or just wishful thinking.

The Portuguese interest in Central Asia follows the European trend. With the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, suddenly the European Union (EU) was faced with the need to develop a strategy around Russia, the countries of Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. In the following decade, the EU concluded ten similar partnership and cooperation agreements (PCAs), namely with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Moreover, since then the five Central Asian states became beneficiaries of the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP). During the 2000s, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the war in Afghanistan, and other major geopolitical develop-

ments, the EU started to perceive Central Asia as a region of "fundamental geostrategic importance". Central Asia thus came to be understood as "a bridge to China as well as to Afghanistan and the Middle East".²

Germany and France in particular took a leading role in the EU approach to Central Asia. It was in the European Council held in June 2007, i.e. during the German presidency of the Council, that the relations between the EU and Central Asia were upgraded with the adoption of the "European Union Central Asia Strategy for a New Partnership".³ Likewise, it was during the French presidency of the Council in September 2008 that the "EU/Central Asia Forum on Security Issues" was convened. The Forum focused on three main issues: terrorist threats and nuclear non-proliferation, the fight against human and drug trafficking, and energy and environmental security. In the Forum's final joint declaration – Portugal was represented by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Luís Amado (2006–2011) – the EU and Central Asian participants pledged to strengthen political dialogue between the two regions.

Following that pledge, Luís Amado visited Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in April 2009 and, Kazakhstan in July 2010 during the OSCE informal ministerial meeting. While explain-

1 Sofia Rainho, "Portas Volta à Rota do Oriente" (*Sol*, 25 May, 2012), p. 10.

2 "Regions: Central Asia" (European Commission).

3 "The European Union and Central Asia: The New Partnership in action" (European Union, June 2009).



ing the purpose of his visit, Luís Amado was quite clear: “As a member of the EU and NATO, Portugal necessarily had to follow the important relationship that the two organizations had with Tajikistan”, as well as with the other Central Asian states.⁴ Luís Amado did not, however, confine the objectives to the multilateral framework, or to short-term goals. He stressed the bilateral importance of the visits in order to “promote the relationship between Portugal and one of the most important regions for Europe and a region with great potential to deepen economic and political relations”.⁵ In statements made at the time, he recognized that relations between Portugal and Central Asia had little substance. For example, while in Tajikistan, Luís Amado acknowledged that Central Asia was a region with which Portugal had no significant relationships. Portugal and the Central Asian states do not know each other, he noted, trade relations are still not significant, and as a consequence “we are in a phase where it is necessary above all to consolidate a good political relationship”.⁶ In other words, Luís Amado was aware that these were just the first steps in the process of consolidation of bilateral relations, and that it would take considerable time until there were tangible results. First, and before one could consider a more solid relationship, Portugal would have to catch up with its European competitors.

Thus, the planned visit by Paulo Portas to Kazakhstan can be understood as another step in the consolidation of bilateral relations, in fact continuing the political process initiated by Luís Amado. Without waiting for results to be significant in the short run, the visit would be another step in

a strategy to deepen mutual political understanding. Some observers, though, seem to think that a window of opportunity has already arisen. They minimize the fact that there are 20 EU member states that have already an embassy in Kazakhstan, and Portugal is not one of them. Unlike around two-thirds of the EU member states, Portuguese diplomatic relations with Central Asia continue to be operated from Moscow. Moreover, they also ignore that bilateral trade and investment is quite low. In 2011, Kazakhstan ranked as the 130th market for Portuguese exports, and between 2000 and 2010 the variations that took place did not change the overall low weight of the bilateral trade relations.

These observations should not be construed as a criticism of the deepening of diplomatic, political, and economic relations between Portugal and Central Asia. Instead, they are a critique of hasty and superficial approaches, and must be interpreted as a warning against false hopes. From the Portuguese point of view, the challenge and the obstacles are deeper than the mere absence of common political and economic interests. Furthermore, Portugal and Central Asia do not have strong historical ties, or a common cultural heritage. As a result of all this, the number of Portuguese living in Central Asia is completely irrelevant.

Just because Kazakhstan has financial muscle and natural resources, this in itself does not create a window of opportunity. Even if it did, then it is necessary to have the right tools to take advantage of it. Unfortunately, for now, Portugal does not have them. Of course, in terms of economic diplomacy and in the broader context of the global diplomatic bilateral relationship, it makes sense for Portugal to try to strengthen its relations with Central Asia. Yet we must not lose perspective. Like it or not, as far as Portuguese diplomacy is concerned, Central Asia must first cease to be *terra incognita*, and this requires time, attention and patience.

4 Maria de Deus Rodrigues, “Portugal e Tadjiquistão acordam reforço das relações políticas” (*Lusa*, 17 April 2009).

5 “Luís Amado visita Uzbequistão” (*Lusa*, 15 April 2009).

6 Maria de Deus Rodrigues, “Portugal e Tadjiquistão acordam reforço das relações políticas” (*Lusa*, 17 April 2009).

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