

🌐 Interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan H.E. Mr. Hamrokhon Zarifi



Mr. Zarifi, the partnership with the EU is the priority direction of the Tajik foreign policy. Could you present us the bilateral EU-Tajik political relationship?

Tajikistan gives a great importance to the strengthening and extension of the relationship with the European Union. Enhanced relations with the EU are indeed among priority directions of our foreign policy. It is encouraging that political relationship of Tajikistan with the European Union has consistently been stepping up over the last years. Regular exchange of delegations and several visits of the Tajik President to EU bodies is an illustration of our willingness and commitment to further increasing co-operation with the European Union both on bilateral and on regional scales. Tajikistan recognizes European Union as its major and reliable partner on the international arena and will make every effort possible to bolster strong and long-term cooperation with this authoritative institution.

On political track, we maintain multidimensional cooperation on the bilateral basis and within the scope of different political dialogues, including EU – Tajikistan Dialogue on Human Rights which embraces major issues for our society's development, including rule of law, human rights and freedom, a practice of promoting democratic processes, and building the key elements of civil society. Enhancement of our partnership in these areas is always in the spotlight of bilateral Tajikistan – EU discussions.

This kind of political platform serves to bolster our political ties and conciliate our positions and views on the issues of mutual concern, and on major and critical matters of international agenda. Recognizing the need for more increased political relationship, the two parties are taking firm steps to facilitate political dialogue on various levels, including within the global institutions and international organizations.

Which are the main spheres of EU-Tajik cooperation?

Well, as it was pointed out, at the current stage of development of bilateral relations, Tajik–EU cooperation covers diverse areas, as varied as social protection, health, education, economic development, particularly, private sector development, trade and investment, transportation and agriculture. In its relationship with the European Union, Tajikistan proceeds from the necessity of promoting collaboration to shift relations to a much higher level and improves the living standard of the people.

We recently witnessed progress in many critical areas working with EU based on national and regional projects, boosting our collaboration in the fields of human rights, environmental protection, effective water resources management, border management and public finance reform. Given the abundant water resources of

Tajikistan and the enormous mineral reserves, energy sector and exploitation of mineral wealth, health, education, private sector development, agriculture and communication could be named as priority areas of bilateral cooperation.

As far as our cooperation in border management is concerned, the European Union under BOMCA project (*Border Management in Central Asia*) provides technical assistance to Tajik agencies in border management, where its assistance mainly focused on capacity building, advocating institutional reform through implementation of the National Border Strategy, strengthening counter-drugs capacities and upgrading border infrastructure.

The EU's support in introducing principles of an integrated border management into Tajik Border Guard Troops is extremely important and helpful which would enable to explore the opportunity of providing assistance in equipping specific border cross-points at Tajik–Afghan border.

In the current stage of development, increased regional cooperation is a key for ensuring the prosperous future of Central Asia. In this context, EU as our chief partner in the European continent would play a pivotal role in promoting links among the countries of the region, via realization of projects of regional significance.

Tajikistan's Government today, despite many challenges, makes extensive efforts to meet the basic needs of the people in these sectors. We managed, partially in cooperation with the European Union, to introduce effective reforms in these fields in order to improve the quality of basic services to the people and allow people earn benefits for lasting development of peoples, families and businesses.

How could you characterize the trade turnover between the EU and Tajikistan?

The European Union is one of the key trade partners of Tajikistan and actually Tajikistan and majority of its exports falls on the EU countries. Despite this, current level of our trade-commercial cooperation does not reflect existing mutual opportunities and potential. For instance, bilateral trade between Tajikistan and EU Member States in 2011 made up 300509,76 USD (export 65,9 million USD (65913,2) and import 234,5 million USD (234597,7).

Tajikistan, placing a due emphasis on the importance of furthering trade and economic links with the rest of the world, particularly with the EU, is making great strides towards improving an investment climate and business environment.

The EU, through different programs and strategies, is facilitating building viable and friendly business and investment climate in Tajikistan. However, there is still a need to increase bilateral trade relations and boost interactions in improving

investment climate. Proper investment climate, business friendly atmosphere and fair legal framework contribute to manage priority development and economic reforms, as well as better attracting European investments to the national economy and promote private sector development. Tajikistan seeks to further implement economic reforms. We, nowadays undertake drastic measures focused on the attraction of investments to priority sectors and encourage immediate business-to-business contacts to increase bilateral turnover. We, in cooperation with our European partners are carrying out a chain of reforms in trade and economic sectors with the aim to promote sustainable growth and stability in the country. We through effective reforms and amendments have succeeded over the last years to improve investment climate and business environment that, in accordance with the estimations and the reports of the World Bank, ranked Tajikistan among top reformers who made doing business easier. We are determined to continue these reforms to the cause of bringing big and positive changes in the life of the people and the country.

Tajikistan is highly involved in a peace settlement in Afghanistan. Which are the common EU-Tajik actions to implement the new EU Strategy for Central Asia?

Overall security and lasting stability in Central Asia are inseparably linked with the situation in Afghanistan. It means that it is impossible to ensure Central Asian's national interests, welfare of the people and the peace and prosperity of the region, without forging the peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. Tajikistan shares a common language, culture, history and religious affinities with Afghanistan, as we share a border with more than 1.400 km length which passes through rough mountainous terrain. We therefore are, indeed, deeply interested in building lasting peace and overall stability in this long-suffering and war-torn country. That's why we since very early days stand ready to unwaveringly support and help the achievement of goals posed before coalition forces and under these commitments we maintain encompassing cooperation with our international allies, including with the European Union.

Tajikistan, due to its geographic location, is in the forefront of a struggle against these challenges and during the last several years is acting as buffer country in preventing the expansion of menaces of terrorism, extremism and trafficking in narcotics. In securing border safety and the prevention of drug trafficking, we cooperate with the European Union within the scope of a number of projects and programs, inclusive BOMCA/CADAP. Our anti-drug authorities effectively cooperate with EU-funded projects for preventing narcotics and enhancing border management. EU–Central Asia Action Plan on combating narcotics for 2009-2013 makes a worthy contribution to our common fight against this challenge.

In our view, today it is extremely important to undertake more drastic measures together with the EU aimed at fostering economic rehabilitation of Afghanistan and promote its active involvement to the integration processes in the region. We are convinced that that the military way is not the only solution for the Afghan conflict. Along with military engagement, the international community should also address civilian aspects in this country, including through implementing economic, social, cultural and educational projects and developing private sector. Tajikistan believes that a review of a new EU Strategy for Central Asia for 2014–2020, given current circumstances in the region and the world, including situation in neighboring Afghanistan, necessity of promoting sustainable economic development and addressing regional challenges will contribute to the integration processes in the region and will improve bilateral relations among countries within Central Asia and with the EU.

Mr. Zarifi could you describe the assistance that the EU renders to Tajikistan under the regional strategy 2011-2013?

The Government of Tajikistan pays an increasing attention to more coordinated interactions under the EU Strategy for Central Asia. Its successful implementation has contributed to the improvement of bilateral relations of Tajikistan with EU Member States. Against this background, the EU Strategy promotes meeting core objectives, including poverty reduction, increase of standards of living, promotion of stability and security in the region and closer regional cooperation within Central Asia and between Central Asia and the EU.

Tajikistan highly evaluates the EU assistance in implementation of projects in the framework of the Strategy. For the time being, more than 150 different projects are being carried out across a wide range of sectors, regions, districts and cities in Tajikistan. It is of an utmost importance to increase the expected results and impact of projects implemented under the regional Strategy. We support the EU–Central Asia Strategy in providing assistance focused on regional and local development, carrying out economic reforms and encouraging private sector development. Tajikistan appreciates and acknowledges the EU's support for allocating 20,7 million Euro per year under the Development Cooperation Instrument indicative budget 2011-2013 for bilateral assistance programmes.

I am particularly pleased to note that a new innovative EU instrument - Investment Facility for Central Asia (IFCA) has been made available for our region. We hope under this new instrument the EU will fund vital projects in Tajikistan in the fields of energy, water and environment.

We are convinced that coordinated and consolidated efforts of the European Union and the countries of the region will increase our ability to address challenges that our governments and nations are facing. We do believe new EU Strategy for Central Asia 2014–2020 will be of vital significance in the light of development related to the 2014 troops exit from Afghanistan and promotion of socio-economic and civil engagements of the international community in this country.

Alongside the realization of the Strategy, European Union would have more valuable contribution in democratization, inter-regional cooperation development in Central Asia, elimination of man-made obstacles in people-to-people contact, free movement of goods and capital aimed at progress and prosperity of the region, that it will meet the goals of the EU Strategy for Central Asia.

How do you see the future of the EU-Tajik partnership?

My country remains open and ready for comprehensive and constructive cooperation with the European Union in all areas of mutual interest. European Union should play a bigger role in Tajikistan and in the region as a whole. EU's engagement in the region should be carried out with a clear understanding of a current situation in Central Asia and neighbouring countries, particularly in Afghanistan. We, in this context, reaffirm the importance of continued cooperation with the EU and express our satisfaction on the dynamics of the progressive development of Tajik-EU partnership. It is obvious that lasting cooperation and increased partnership between Tajikistan and EU meets the interests of both of us and facilitates advancing stability and development in the region at large.

In conclusion, emphasizing our invariable desire and Tajikistan's firm commitment to strengthen and expand the horizons of our partnership with the European Union and its Member States, I look forward to even greater development of EU–Tajikistan partnership in bilateral and multilateral formats.