

Ms. Marilyn Josefson, Ambassador of the European Union, Head of the European Union Delegation to Tajikistan, in an exclusive interview for CABAR.asia, shared her thoughts about ongoing projects in Tajikistan, the new EU strategy for Central Asia and understanding of regional cooperation.

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Marilyn Josefsson, Photo: asiaplustj.info

On November 20th, 2018, you presented your credentials to the President of Tajikistan, respected Emomali Rahmon, and said that you have the opportunity to contribute to “security, sustainable water and energy management, innovation and technological progress, uniform and sustainable development, as well as the development of an international order based on rules, the rule of law and human rights.” Do you think you managed to achieve your plans?

Well, I have not even been in Tajikistan for two years yet, so, I still have some time to go. (Laughs) I think, yes, we have managed well. There are two major things we have done. The first one is deepening relations in all those areas that you mentioned, and the second - working in completely new areas. We cooperate with Tajikistan in various areas. For instance, we have co-sponsored the Water Conference in Dushanbe, we are starting just now, as part of the COVID-response, a program on water management in Istaravshan, another one in Kulob. We have agreed to build a hydro power plant in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). These are just few new things since I have arrived. On human rights, we have started new projects with civil society, actually three new projects. We co-sponsored Tajikistan’s first Prison Reform Conference. We signed with Penal Reform International a project for monitoring prisons and implementing reforms of the Tajik penitentiary reform. We have started another project to strengthen local civil society. We have done a lot to promote gender equality. On security, we also launched two new projects, one strengthening the training capacity of the Committee of Emergency Situations, and another one related to prevention of violent extremism and spread of radical messages in the news and media. I think we have done quite a lot in all those areas.

I read that you were born in Sweden. Do Sweden and Tajikistan have something in common?

I think we have many things in common. Where I see the similarities between the Tajiks and the Swedes is first in the size of our countries. We are small countries - Sweden has 10 million, Tajikistan has almost 10 million people. Most people here as most people in Sweden live in cities. You have beautiful mountains in Tajikistan; we have big forests where people do not live. The other thing, common with Tajik people is that Swedes like nature a lot, to be out in nature, go into the mountains; we both are the kind of simple down-to-earth and nature-loving peoples. I find a big similarity. In Tajikistan, you have much more young people here.

In May 2019, the EU adopted a new strategy for Central Asia. What do you think about this document? In your opinion, what are the main changes that this document will bring in the EU's foreign policy towards Central Asian countries, especially about Tajikistan?

For me, the biggest quality of the new strategy is that it more ambitious than the previous one in terms of what we want to do together as partners. The previous was more technical, this one is more political, looking at areas where we want to strengthen our partnership for resilience. Now, the focus EU engagement in Tajikistan turns towards strengthening resilience. This means, for instance, climate change, where we look at many issues - melting glaciers, mudslides, flooding. We have a common ambition to push the global climate change agenda, but also to work specifically in Central Asia and in particular Tajikistan.

I already mentioned the hydropower plant we build in GBAO, and we are discussing others. This is a very good investment in what we call the "green economy". Instead of using coal or wood, invest in hydropower, the green electricity. We need electricity for our economies and our society, but the greener the better. It is also important to create corridors among Central Asian neighbours, so electricity and water can flow between the countries.

We are moving into a digital era now. The new jobs, especially for the young people, will not be manual jobs, they will be digital. Like it has been in India, Brazil, many Scandinavian countries. The best way to build resilience is to create jobs. In the long term, the current migration of so many young Tajiks is not sustainable. I believe that the best investment is to create new economic spheres, where people can have jobs in their own countries. If you look at Europe, we have for instance Estonia, a very small country, but where 100 % of public administration is digital. So, one of our projects here looks at this experience and ways to digitalise education services, medical services and public administration in

Tajikistan.

What is good about the new strategy is that it looks where we have shared interests, also in the political areas, like security elements, counterterrorism, drug trafficking related issues. Whatever happens in Afghanistan will spill over not only to Tajikistan but also to the whole region. Therefore, this is an area where Europe and Tajikistan have an interest to work together. We co-sponsored one counter-terrorism conference in Dushanbe last year, and we will continue. Of course, we do a lot between these conferences also. To sum up, the new EU Central Asia Strategy is working well.

EU is allocating 20 million euros for the Sebzor hydroelectric station project in Badakhshan, which should further increase Tajikistan's potential for green energy in rural areas. Are there any other such large-scale EU projects in Tajikistan?

The construction of Sebzor HPP is the first one we finance since my arrival to Tajikistan. We have also different kind of support to the Nurek HPP to rehabilitate the sanitation systems, because investments have been lagging behind since the Soviet Union times. What is interesting with the Sebzor is that it will create a capacity to export electricity to Afghanistan, and even Pakistan. Another HPP that we consider investing in is "Kayrakkum", which is actually bigger, double the size of Sebzor. We are currently discussing with the European Investment Bank the financial aspects of eventual renovation of this hydropower plant, with our contribution. We have actually signed an agreement, now it is at phase of environmental impact study, which have to be done before refurbishment works can start.

On April 1st this year, you had a meeting with the Minister of Economic Development Zavqizoda Zavqi Amini and the Deputy Minister of Finance Yusuf Majidi. The main agenda of the meeting was to provide EU financial assistance to Tajikistan to prevent the consequences of the spread of coronavirus. You said that the EU, in response to a request from the Government of the Republic, will provide additional financial assistance in the amount of EUR 48 million in the form of a grant and a loan of EUR 30 million from the European Investment Bank. Where does this money go and does the EU have any mechanisms to control the correct spending of grants?

Yes, we do, we know exactly and can follow where the assistance goes and who is implementing and spending what. In rough figures 24 million of this amount goes to education sector, some of this went to roll out distance learning that we did with UNICEF, when schools went on quarantine. Another part will go to strengthen education in general and yet another for the emergency - the public health awareness campaigns about how to

protect yourself from COVID-19. We have also supported the number of primary schools, boarding schools and orphanages with antiseptics, facemasks and other emergency needs.

Important part of our aid will go to long-term measures, because due to the crisis migrants will come back from Russia or Turkey, and they will need to maybe develop new skills. The economy will most probably slow down here like in other countries, so you will have people in need of new kinds of education: vocational or academic. Therefore, this is the long-term part of the response in the education field. We have also brought 80 tons of equipment together with UNICEF, everything from ventilators to personal protection equipment. We published which hospitals received what and the precise amounts. In total, the aid was distributed to 153 different hospitals in Tajikistan, it was the delivered by the Red Cross. The non-emergency support is going to strengthen the health system. For instance, the WHO implements will strengthen the coordination capacity for infectious deceases with EU funds. Other parts are implemented by GIZ, by KFW, also in full transparency. Finally, additional smaller funding supports different initiatives, mostly via UNICEF for the emergency response, but also some ministries to provide public awareness campaigns. In addition, BOMCA, our border management programme - provided border guards with antiseptics and masks, because, on the border they are on the front line, checking the trucks coming in.

Do you consider if it's possible to join collaboration in Central Asian integration projects, that are promoted by Russia, China and others?

To be honest, I think regional integration in Central Asia has to be driven by the Central Asian countries themselves.

I think whether it is the European Union, Russia or China, we are partners; we are not supposed to be drivers of this process.

Since the political change in Uzbekistan, we have a completely new political environment in the region. We see Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan to be very active in pushing for such cooperation, not in every area, but in many. What we, as the EU, can do is to share our experience. Because the entire European project is about regional integration in economy, labour and financial markets. In this regard, I think we can serve as an example. We can share expertise and good practice on what works and what does not, offer advice, but Central Asian countries need to decide themselves in what direction they want to go, and we will support you, not interfere.

In 2018, in an interview with Radio Ozodi, you emphasized the importance of improving relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. What is your position on

this now?

I think the relations are working very well. For instance now, during the COVID crisis, the two countries had a very close dialogue and despite the closing of borders, there has been exchange of assistance between the two countries. I think it is a very positive dynamic. It is also the natural one, because of so many Uzbeks live here and so many Tajiks living in Uzbekistan, people, goods and jobs flow very naturally. I find it very encouraging.

Do you think the regional cooperation of the Central Asian regions is taking place? If so, how would you like to see this process? And, finally, does the EU have interest to unite the region within a single community, with the participation of all Central Asian countries without third parties such as Russia or China?

To be honest, there are many challenges that the Central Asian countries face. What we are promoting is also a greater cooperation with Afghanistan, Tajikistan is well positioned for that. Closer integration can be beneficial, on the basis of where the five countries want to progress together. We see this dynamic and are encouraging it, and we also believe that there is a potential for regional cooperation to be much broader. For example, the custom policies, the tax policies and the different, standards for agricultural products are not harmonised. Tajikistan can easily export agriculture product, fruits, or nuts to Uzbekistan, but maybe not to Kazakhstan, because of standards. On such things, we think the countries could work together to set common standards and benefit from easier trade. It is also important that many countries work on WTO standards, it would help not only regional integration, but also global integration.

We have an interest to support the socio-economic development of countries in Central Asia and to increase mutual trade relations between the regional and the European Union. That is why the standards are important - to export goods to Europe certain common standards are required, without which you cannot unfortunately access European market even if you have good product and people that can provide them. The other important aspect is relations with Afghanistan. We are keen to see the whole region develop towards peace and security, and we believe that if Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan tie in Afghanistan and engage it in economic cooperation, it would help to promote peace and stability in the region. This is another common objective we share.

donor.



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