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**LEADERSHIP THROUGH
THE EUROPEAN UNION
COUNCIL PRESIDENCY:
LATVIA AND CENTRAL ASIA**

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Abstract

This report offers additional insights into how small states punch above their weight in the European Union (EU) through the Council presidency. It draws lessons from the Latvian presidency during the first half of 2015. Specifically, it is analysed how Latvia pursued Central Asia as the presidency's priority. Findings show that as the office holder, Latvia achieved its goals. Its leadership in the EU Central Asia dossier was visible. Latvia pushed for an updating of the EU Central Asia Strategy, moving towards a more strategic and goal-oriented Union approach, and promoted the EU practical engagement in the region. Latvia's success was made possible by its close cooperation with EU institutions, using like-minded coalition with Member States, and by persuasive advocacy in Central Asia. Findings show that despite the strengthened role of EU institutions in the post-Lisbon external action system, the Council presidency remains an important source of power for small Member States to exert influence within the EU.

1. Introduction

Small Member States tend to rank the Council presidency as the most important source of power.¹ However, there have been concerns their chances in the post-Lisbon external action system have diminished² since the power balance has shifted away from the presidency to EU institutions. This article explores the performance of the Latvian presidency in EU external action. Latvia is one of the smallest Member States and held its first Council presidency in the first half of 2015. How did Latvia live up to its ambition to reinforce the EU Central Asia agenda, which was one of the top priorities of its presidency?

Latvia regarded the presidency as an opportunity to shape EU agenda in line with national priorities. In EU foreign policy Latvia wanted the Union's active engagement to increase in the Eastern Partnership and with Central Asian countries. Having been part of the former Soviet Union, Latvia was one of the strongest advocates within the European Union for bringing these post-Soviet regions closer to the EU.

In the case of Central Asia, Latvia pushed the region into the EU's active agenda. With the presidency approaching Latvia intensively advocated for its plans. Emphasizing region's geostrategic importance, Latvia felt the Union could do more to seize economic opportunities while also helping the region to address security challenges. In a situation with influential powers China and Russia increasingly dominating the region, the EU needed to reshape its approach to maintain its presence on the ground. Latvia expressed its willingness to use the presidency to bring dynamism in the EU Central Asia dossier. However, for Riga it was not easy to persuade EU partners to pay extra attention to Central Asia. The region is far from being a priority for the EU in its crowded and crisis-driven foreign policy agenda.

Despite initial obstacles, Latvia succeeded in mobilising EU support. On Latvia's insistence, a strategic debate regarding EU policy *vis-à-vis* Central Asia took place, followed by a review of the EU Central Asia Strategy resulting in a recalibrated approach. Latvia's leadership was

¹ Tallberg, J. (2010). The Power of the Chair: Formal Leadership in International Cooperation. *International Studies Quarterly*, 54 (1), 241-265

² Tallberg, J., Beach, D., Naurin, D. & Tiilikainen, T. (2011). *Makten I Europa: Demokratirådets rapport 2011*, Stockholm: SNS Förlag

essential to advance regional high-level policy dialogue, especially on security and anti-terrorism issues, education, environment and rule of law. EU - Central Asia regional platforms and programmes for border management were launched with Latvia in leadership, and new initiatives were undertaken. Thereby Latvia successfully used its presidency potential to raise the profile of Central Asia, and, despite the complex environment, provided clear tangible results.³ Importantly, by promoting the Central Asia dossier, Latvia carved a niche for itself in EU foreign policy-making and punched above its weight.

This article elaborates on the concrete achievements of the Latvian presidency and the conditions under which it could attain its goals. In doing so, it applies the framework developed by Bunse (2009)⁴ for analysing small state influence through Council presidency. First, the article identifies the link between Latvia's domestic interests and the priorities of its presidency. Second, it looks at the leadership environment – distribution of Member States' preferences and institutional hurdles. Third, it revises specific achievements from the Latvian presidency. Finally, it explores conditions under which a small state presidency can succeed in utilizing its power potential. Lessons learned from the Latvian presidency are useful for other small state presidencies.

2. The Presidency's Goal – A More Active EU Policy in Central Asia

Latvia's interests and comparative advantages in Central Asia

Why did Latvia decide to focus on Central Asia – such a geographically distant area? No other Member State has placed Central Asia as high in the agenda of its presidency. Unlike others "Latvia is traditionally strong in Central Asia,"⁵ with historical ties forged during the Soviet period. Over the years opportunities for developing contacts appeared and historical ties transformed into mutually beneficial cooperation.

As Central Asia has developed economically, Latvia's businesses have sought to achieve new markets in the region. Latvia succeeded in building good political dialogue and developed mutually beneficial economic ties, in particular with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the largest countries in the region. Latvia opened embassies in both countries. Apparently Latvia's success was possible due to taking a pragmatic approach and respecting regional realities. As a small country Latvia avoided taking a paternalistic approach, thereby building trust among Central Asian partners. As one Latvian representative explained:

*Latvia has a good knowledge of how to talk to and persuade Central Asian partners. Latvia is perceived there as a friend, including at the highest political level. It has many 'alive' contacts.*⁶

Another key area of cooperation was regional security given Latvia's involvement with NATO operations in Afghanistan and efforts in stabilising the region. Afghanistan's spill-over risks to

³ Hereby the author does not agree with M. Andžāns (2015, pp. 33) that during the Latvian presidency "there were no bold and tangible results apart from the review of the EU Central Asia Strategy and renewal of the EU Special representative for Central Asia and several individual and multilateral engagements", http://www.liia.lv/site/docs/LIIA_Yearbook_2016.pdf

⁴ Bunse, S. (2009). *Small States and EU Governance. Leadership through the Council Presidency*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Interview, MFA of an EU Member State, 15.12.2015

⁶ Interview, organizer of the Latvian presidency's high-level EU-Central Asia meeting, 12.10.2015

Central Asia was a matter for their concern. Security and stability is also a precondition for making use of trade and economic opportunities.

Partially due to NATO's mission in Afghanistan, Latvia's cooperation with Central Asia became active in the transport-transit sector. With its strategic location next to the Baltic Sea, Latvia evolved as an important transportation hub in the NATO-sponsored Northern Distribution Network (NDN) - a route from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Northern Europe. In 2013, around a half of Afghanistan bound transit via the NDN passed through Latvia. With NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan Latvia sought to commercialise this transport corridor including efforts to engage in the so-called Silk Road initiative with China, aimed at developing Eurasian land transport connections. The Latvian Foreign Minister expressed hope that in the future the NDN "will become a trade route linking Europe with Central Asia and the Far East".⁷

Education was another area which gained importance. When Central Asian partners 'looked to the West' for education possibilities, as an alternative to Russia, Latvia was an obviously popular place to study. As Latvia was actively seeking to 'export' education to the region, Central Asia student numbers are one of the highest among foreign students in Latvian universities. Riga School of Law additionally offers a study programme for Central Asian countries.⁸

Given these bilateral ties, Central Asia evolved as Latvia's niche region in the EU and NATO. Latvia substantially strengthened its capacities as a mediator when it undertook broader international responsibilities by representing the EU and NATO in the region. In 2010, Latvia fulfilled the tasks of the local EU presidency in Uzbekistan, and later assumed NATO Contact Point duties in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Latvian experts successfully participated in EU technical assistance programmes in Central Asia.

The above-mentioned international responsibilities and knowledge of the region raised Latvia's confidence to become a bridge-builder. Considering its comparative advantages, Latvia saw the Council presidency as a window of opportunity to promote Central Asia in the EU. This way Latvia could also carve out a niche in EU external relations, often perceived as a "small state's smart strategy in exerting influence in the EU".⁹

EU policy on Central Asia

For the EU, Central Asia is a geographically distant region with few Member States' interests involved.¹⁰ It was only in the 1990s the EU started building relationship with Central Asian countries through bilateral agreements. Major changes came in 2007 when the EU adopted its Central Asia Strategy for a New Partnership. The EU aimed at supporting Western allies' efforts in stabilizing Afghanistan and its surrounds. It also has "clear interests to gain access to Caspian energy resources"¹¹ in this energy-rich area. The EU Strategy set ambitious goals and employed its standard toolbox to reach them. It established the position of EU Special Representative for

⁷ Edgars Rinkevics: Latvia Contributes to the EU-Central Asia Dialogue, European Dialogue (24.12.2012), <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/eu-central-asia/Edgars-Rinkevics-Latvia-contributes-to-the-EU-Central-Asia-dialogue>

⁸ Interview, Latvian MFA, 05.10.2015

⁹ Wivel, A. (2010). *Small States in Europe. Challenges and Opportunities*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing

¹⁰ Boonstra J. (2015), *Reviewing the EU's approach to Central Asia*, EUCAM, http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_ictcontent/EUCAM-PB-34-Reviewing-EU-policies-in-Central-Asia-EN_01.pdf

¹¹ Petersen, A. and Barysch, K. *Russia, China and Geopolitics in Central Asia*, http://camegieendowment.org/files/petersen_cer_eng.pdf

Central Asia, opened EU diplomatic representations in the region, and offered technical assistance programmes and regional platforms.

Nevertheless, the EU attempts yielded modest results. The Union's engagement in Central Asia was criticized as 'underwhelming'.¹² In the area of regional security, apart from some easing of tensions among neighbours, regional challenges – border and water conflicts, drugs and human trafficking – remained. EU success in the energy sector was limited. Eventually, due to a lack of progress in developing the Trans-Caspian pipeline, the EU decided not to open a diplomatic representation in Turkmenistan.¹³ The EU's 'normative power' approach also failed, as did EU technical assistance programmes.¹⁴ EU emphasis on fundamental freedoms seemed to be unproductive. Local leaders became suspicious of the EU's intentions as they saw a danger for 'coloured' revolutions and 'Maidan scenarios' being repeated. It would seem the EU lacked understanding in regional realities.

Meanwhile, there have been substantial geo-strategic shifts in the region from 2007 when the EU Central Asia Strategy was established. With NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan and increased instability risks, the growing influence of China, and Russia's interest in maintaining control over the region, the EU remained a marginal player on the ground.

While EU impact was limited, the five Central Asian countries seemed to be interested in maintaining ties with the EU due to increasing worries about the influence and intentions of 'big players'. Different from China, Russia and the US, the EU has been perceived as a relatively uncontroversial player.¹⁵ The EU gave Central Asian countries room to manoeuvre. For instance, Kazakhstan declared its commitment to a multi-vector foreign policy and, despite being part of the Eurasian Economic Union, stressed relationship with the EU to be important.

Therefore, despite the difficult conditions the EU had to reconsider how to better maintain a presence in the region. In this situation Latvia considered its experience, expertise and well-established contact network in Central Asia could benefit the EU. Latvia saw its Council presidency as an opportunity to enhance the EU–Central Asia dossier, shifting towards a more pragmatic and result-oriented EU policy.

Setting Central Asia on the presidency's agenda

When Latvia took the initiative to promote Central Asia the decision was carefully evaluated beforehand. Apart from its domestic interests and comparative advantages in the region, distribution of Member State preferences played a crucial role. According to one Latvian diplomat:

*Central Asia is peripheral region; there is no competition among the Member States; Latvia, given its own national interests, expertise and knowledge about the region, sought to build this as its niche region in EU foreign policy.*¹⁶

¹² Melvin, N. (2012), *The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy*, EUCAM, http://fride.org/descarga/PB_28_Eng.pdf

¹³ Boonstra J. (2015), *Reviewing the EU's approach to Central Asia*, EUCAM, http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_ictcontent/EUCAM-PB-34-Reviewing-EU-policies-in-Central-Asia-EN_01.pdf

¹⁴ Voloshin, G. (2014), *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia*, Palgrave, McMillan

¹⁵ Brattberg, E. (2013), *Europe, Afghanistan, and the Transatlantic Relationship after 2014*, SIPRI, <http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRI13wcaEB.pdf>

¹⁶ Interview, then Latvian Permanent Representation, 01.09.2015

An EEAS representative confirmed that others' preferences were essential as to why Latvia had a good chance to promote the Central Asian region during its presidency:

*Few EU Member States are interested and consider the region important. This strengthened Latvia's confidence to opt for Central Asia as its 'niche region' to build its own profile in EU foreign policy.*¹⁷

It has to be noted that initially Latvian policy makers only had a vague idea about how to pursue the chosen priority. Latvian officials pointed out that Central Asia's return to the EU's map of world politics "to a great extent was driven by Latvia's efforts".¹⁸ At the presidency's agenda-setting stage, the Latvian representatives sought persuading partners about the region's geostrategic importance, and reminded of the huge economic potential as a key transit route and exporter of energy resources. At the same time they pointed at the EU's need to take into account the realities on the ground and to move towards a more strategic approach.

Drawing on the EU Central Asia Strategy of 2007, Latvian incoming presidency put forward the main priority areas – security, economic development, education and the transport-transit sector. Latvia promised to raise the visibility and impact of the EU in Central Asia.

2. Obstacles: Others' Preferences and Institutional Hurdles

The presidency's leadership environment can be characterised by other Member States' receptiveness to the proposed initiatives, that is - their preferences, and institutional hurdles. Conflicting preferences may constrain a presidency's ambitions. Also, institutional hurdles such as blurry roles between the presidency and EU institutions, and overlapping functions between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and European Commission resulting in 'turf battles' in EU's external action¹⁹ could complicate the presidency's work.

First, with regard to the receptiveness of other Member States, in Central Asia there was a vacuum of preferences. Hence there was no enthusiasm to include Central Asia in the EU's foreign policy agenda which was already packed full. Starting in 2014, before and during the Latvian presidency, the EU's main attention was devoted to the Eastern neighbourhood and conflict in Ukraine. It could have been risky to place too much emphasis on Central Asia as it may have taken the attention away from the Eastern Partnership and Ukraine. The EU made efforts to stop Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. Latvia also pushed for an active EU role in Ukraine, as well as a more ambitious Eastern Partnership agenda.

No less important were the preferences of Central Asian countries. The Latvian presidency's initiatives could easily fail due to lack of support in Central Asia. It was no secret there was a wide gap in understanding between the EU and Central Asian partners on what each side wanted from the cooperation. It was particularly visible when the EU was pressuring Central Asian states to respect principles of democracy or join regional cooperation formats. Also, the

¹⁷ Interview, EEAS, 19.09.2015

¹⁸ Eastern Partnership and Central Asia relations rank high on the agenda of the Latvian Presidency (13.01.2015), IncrEAST, <http://www.increast.eu/ru/1867.php>

¹⁹ Edgars Rinkevics: Latvia Contributes, European Dialogue (24.12.2012), <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/eu-central-asia/Edgars-Rinkevics-Latvia-contributes-to-the-EU-Central-Asia-dialogue>

preferences of Russia and China may have constituted an obstacle for the Latvian presidency if these influential powers had perceived its activities as confrontational.

Second, with regard to institutional hurdles as a result of the new 'collective leadership' in the post-Lisbon external action system²⁰ the presidency is often perceived as merely assisting EU institutions. Indeed, when Latvia presented its plans in Brussels it received warning signals from EU institutions regarding shifted roles. As described by a Latvian representative,

*Initially Latvian plans on Central Asia were not welcome in Brussels. Instead, we were told to respect the new realities under Lisbon Treaty that the presidency only assists the EU institutions.*²¹

In addition the incoming presidency faced changes from the new EU institutional cycle. The new High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini began her duties only shortly before the presidency. The shape of the new Commission remained unclear until late autumn 2014. With Brussels in a waiting phase, important EU foreign policy decisions were pending. The expected regular review of the EU Central Asia Strategy was delayed, and the mandate of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia was not re-established. EU foreign ministers had not discussed EU-Central Asia relations in a long time.

Summing this up, the EU institutional environment was not favourable for the incoming presidency. With few Member States interested in Central Asia and reluctance in EU institutions it was challenging for Latvia to raise the Central Asia profile. These obstacles, in combination with constraints imposed by Latvia's small size and lack of experience in holding the Council presidency, may have easily led to a failure in achieving its presidency's goals for Central Asia.

3. Overcoming Obstacles: A Strategic Process

When setting the agenda the incoming presidency first needs to generate confidence among EU partners. Here the country's reputation is important. In Latvia's case it had no prior experience of holding the presidency and had never been particularly visible in advancing a specific EU foreign policy dossier.

The presidency can use a number of strategies in the pursuit of its goals. A crucial way to proceed is consultations with EU partners²² and respective third countries. Consultations help to detect others' national preferences and gain support from like-minded States.²³

Mobilising support in Berlin, Brussels and Central Asia

To mobilise the partners' support Latvia at an early stage held intensive *tours des capitals* in EU and Central Asia and approached EU institutions. According to a high-ranking Latvian diplomat,

²⁰ Van Hecke, S., and Bursens, P. (2014) *The Council Presidency and the European Union: Towards collective leadership in the EU*, in Foret, F. and Rittelmeyer Y., *The European Council and European Governance*, Routledge

²¹ Interview, then Latvian Permanent Representation, 01.09.2015

²² Bunse, S. (2009). *Small States and EU Governance. Leadership through the Council Presidency*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

²³ Björkdahl, A. (2008). Norm advocacy: a small state strategy to influence the EU. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15 (1), 135-154

*It was not the case that Latvia came out with its plans without the political backing from others. Germany was very positive, as well as the Baltic States, and Italy from the Southern EU partners.*²⁴

Consultations started in Berlin. In the case of Central Asia, Germany played a key role; not only was it the most influential but also the most interested Member State. Germany was the initiator of the EU Central Asia Strategy during its Council presidency in 2007. When Latvian diplomats approached their counterparts in Berlin they received support. Germany was equally interested in a more active EU policy in Central Asia. Further support came at the end of 2013 when Frank Walter Steinmeier returned to office as the Foreign Minister. He had personally played a major role in launching the EU Strategy in 2007. Apparently Steinmeier was interested in vitalizing the Strategy therefore Latvia's plans suited German interests.²⁵ Berlin helped by practically facilitating Latvia's work on Central Asia by sending its national expert to Riga to assist in the presidency.²⁶ Preference convergence and prospects of an *ad hoc* coalition with this influential Member State was essential for Latvia. Germany's political backing substantially improved its chances to gain other's support.

From then on the process gained momentum. Latvia held continuous consultations in other EU capitals. It received general support in Rome, Paris, Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn, Vilnius and Warsaw. Even if these consultations indicated minor EU partners' interest in Central Asia, it also meant they would abstain from obstructing the Latvian presidency's work.

In 2012-2013, to advocate Latvian presidency plans, Latvian foreign policy elite travelled extensively to the Central Asian region. Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs presented plans in Astana, Tashkent and other capitals. The Minister referred to Latvia's previous advocating efforts when it "was instrumental and helpful to [...] Central Asian states achieving their priorities".²⁷ While Central Asian partners expressed their support to Latvia, at the same time they were critical about the EU's approach. They wanted the EU to build a real partnership, respecting Central Asian countries' actual needs, and understanding their difficult geopolitical choices. What this meant was Latvia received general support and the encouragement to do more. Overall, this support in the Central Asian capitals raised Latvia's confidence when presenting its plans to EU partners, and EU institutions in particular.

Well ahead of the presidency Latvian diplomats sought out contacts in EU institutions, especially in the EEAS and the Commission. The EEAS has a monopoly on policy initiatives, and the Commission on EU development assistance. This meant close cooperation with both of them. Latvia presented its plans and comparative advantages: valuable expertise of the region, the well-established contact network, and resources at its disposal. However, to the Latvian representatives' surprise, its ideas initially were welcomed reluctantly. According to one Latvian official:

²⁴ Interview, Latvian MFA, 05.10.2015

²⁵ Foreign Ministers of Latvia and Germany discuss crisis in Ukraine, 11.03.2014, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/developments-in-ukraine/position-of-latvia-on-the-developments-in-ukraine/372-latest-news/13599-foreign-ministers-of-latvia-and-germany-discuss-crisis-in-ukraine>

²⁶ State Secretary Andrejs Pildegovičs meets with the State Secretary of the German Federal Foreign Office, 28.11.2014, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/42675-state-secretary-andrejs-pildegovics-meets-with-the-state-secretary-of-the-german-federal-foreign-office>

²⁷ Edgars Rinkevics: Latvia Contributes, European Dialogue (24.12.2012), <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/eu-central-asia/Edgars-Rinkevics-Latvia-contributes-to-the-EU-Central-Asia-dialogue>

*When the Latvian experts met the EEAS for the first time, we were warned not to interfere in the on-going EU activities in Central Asia.*²⁸

While it can be explained by the fact that Latvia did not have a reputation for holding the presidency, it is also possible that EU institutions wanted to keep the central role. Apparently it took quite some time and intensive consultations to gain support in Brussels. Efforts to engage in cooperation with EU institutions achieved success when they felt safe that the Latvian presidency would not hinder their work but instead cooperate closely. The Latvian diplomat observed that:

*When the EU institutions realized that the Latvian presidency is an opportunity rather than an obstacle, their attitude substantially changed. With its support they gained political backing.*²⁹

The later openness of the Commission and the EEAS was a push to proceed. During consultations in Brussels, Latvia integrated its domestic interests and ideas with EU common priorities. The Commission became a major partner of Latvia. Later it appeared the Commission lacked Member States' political backing. Although EU programmes were running in Central Asia and the Union had substantially increased the financial envelope from 2014 – 2020, the Commission faced difficulties in implementing these programmes. The Commission therefore indicated the presidency's support might be helpful. Given Latvia's high-level contacts in Central Asia, it could be useful as a bridge builder.

Latvia managed to engage relevant partners in a constant dialogue. Overcoming the EU institutions' initial reluctance and getting backing from Member States were the most important steps taken to anchor Central Asia in the EU agenda. This was achieved through Latvia's close contacts established more than a year ahead of the Latvian presidency.

Denationalising the Central Asia priority

As with every presidency Latvia faced a dilemma on what might be realistic to achieve over the six short months. While vague at the outset, Latvia gradually filled its Central Asia priority with concrete substance. Here the strategic process of pre-presidency consultations was essential. It helped figure out concrete initiatives to reinforce the EU Central Asia agenda. The Foreign Ministry as the main coordinator moved rapidly to engage domestic stakeholders and mobilise available resources. Governmental bodies, as well as non-governmental actors, became involved.

Through the consultation process, Latvia merged the country's own preferences with EU priorities. As mentioned earlier, Latvia's domestic interests in the region have focused on seizing economic opportunities. While as a potential regional transit hub Latvia experienced competition from neighbours, in the area of regional security its preferences were consistent with the EU's general priorities. According to Minister Rinkēvičs Latvia "fully shares the EU interest in security, stability and the rule of law in Central Asia. The areas of common interest are political dialogue on counter-terrorism, (...) improving border management and fighting drug trafficking".³⁰ Likewise, Latvia shared EU common interests in the education sector. On top of that Latvia and

²⁸ Interview, then Latvian Permanent Representation, 01.09.2015

²⁹ Interview, then Latvian Permanent Representation, 01.09.2015

³⁰ Edgars Rinkevics: Latvia Contributes, European Dialogue (24.12.2012), <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/eu-central-asia/Edgars-Rinkevics-Latvia-contributes-to-the-EU-Central-Asia-dialogue>

other like-minded Member States wanted the EU to redefine its relationship with Central Asia and review EU political objectives in the region in light of changed developments.

In 2014, during the pre-presidency consultation process, Latvia actively advocated for the need to update the EU Central Asia Strategy. Already in the preparation stage of the Presidency, Latvia approached the European External Action Service responsible for policy initiatives. Latvia signalled that Central Asia had been missing from the EU foreign ministers' debate for too long. It tried to persuade the EEAS the EU needed to move into 'strategic' mode and to launch the expected regular review of the Strategy. Yet, it appeared "the EEAS was not planning the review, and no one knew when it could be expected".³¹ Another unpleasant surprise was in the summer of 2014 when the High Representative did not prolong the mandate of the EU Special Representative in Central Asia. Latvia became increasingly wary of its presidency's eventual deliverables.

In this situation, indirect strategies helped to motivate the EEAS to take a more active stance. Latvia worked closely with Germany and others, introducing Central Asia in public discussions. As an upcoming presidency Latvia, together with like-minded Member States and EU social partners, arranged public discussions, where the EEAS representatives were asked to provide their input. Visibility events, public discussions, expert seminars and conferences took place in Brussels, Berlin, Riga, Stockholm and Helsinki, involving key foreign policy experts and leading academics.

Latvian policy-makers also stimulated EEAS work through the European Economic and Social Committee. In 2014, the Committee received a request from the upcoming presidency to provide a so-called civil society opinion on the forthcoming review of the Strategy.³² During the Committee's drafting work Latvia actively injected its ideas. When the Committee published the opinion in December 2014 it to a great extent reflected Riga's priorities. It emphasised the need to focus on goal-oriented cooperation in such areas as education, energy, transport, environment and trade. Committee opinion served as a catalyst for the Strategy's review process later on. In result, while sceptical at the outset the EEAS later became actively engaged in the formal review process of the Strategy.

As part of confidence building measures Latvia also held public expert discussions in Moscow. The aim was to send a message to Russia about the non-confrontational nature of Latvia's initiatives in Central Asia, given its interests in the region. In March 2015 the presidency together with the Russian International Affairs Council held a seminar "Prospects for EU–Russia Relations under the Latvian Presidency", which among other issues covered Russia–EU cooperation in Central Asia.³³ It helped avoid Russia's mistrust and negative attitude towards Latvian activities.

Evidently, Latvia's expert discussions including the public ones on Central Asia were useful to mobilising support for its presidency's priority. As highlighted by a Member State official,

Latvia did a good job organizing many events, raising public awareness of EU-Central Asia relations and raising its own profile within the EU. Early contacts with institutes for international

³¹ Interview, then Latvian Permanent Representation, 01.09.2015

³² EU-Central Asia Strategy, Public Hearing, 3.12.2014, European Economic and Social Committee, <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-eu-central-asia-strategy>

³³ RIAC holds seminar on "Prospects for EU-Russia Cooperation under the Latvian Presidency", 17.03.2015, http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=5454#top-content

*affairs and think tanks were crucial in organising a string of highly visible seminars and conferences.*³⁴

Latvia worked not only on strategic debate on Central Asia, but focused on concrete deliverables. In Riga there was an understanding that the presidency provided a unique opportunity to anchor the country's long-term engagement in the region and strengthen its expert status in the EU.

Regional security became a key area. Firstly, security was advanced in the updated Central Asia Strategy. Moreover, Latvia supported the EU's practical engagement in the region through the EU border management programme BOMCA, aimed at strengthening the external borders of the five Central Asian countries. Since 2007 Latvian experts had participated in the programme and with the new phase of the BOMCA three-year period approaching in 2015 Latvia took the initiative to apply for the leading role in implementing the programme. Latvian government allocated national co-financing and mobilised important stakeholders including the State Border Guard. Following the intensive preparatory process Latvia was appointed as the leading nation of the BOMCA. In this way Latvia, for the first time in history, took the lead role among Member States in implementing the EU programme.³⁵

Latvia also pushed for a stronger focus on anti-terrorism. Central Asian countries have been increasingly alarmed by the situation in Afghanistan and the rise of terrorist militants, especially in the areas bordering Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. To promote regional dialogue on terror threats, Latvia put forward a new initiative under the EU–Central Asia security dialogue on anti-terrorism issues. Latvia made extra efforts towards advocating the new initiative in Central Asian governments. This Riga-based activity was complementary to NATO counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan and the wider region.

Further, education was a focus area. It is worth mentioning Latvia considered cooperation in education as the best way to indirectly promote European values among younger generations. The relevance of education as an area of cooperation was recognized by Central Asian countries as well as they needed – and still do – a qualified labour force for which a reform of higher and vocational education systems was a prerequisite.³⁶ The focus on education suited the EU common agenda perfectly. However, despite the mutual interest problems persisted.

Back in 2007 the Central Asia Strategy placed education as a priority, yet it failed to increase policy dialogue, thus “prospects were bleak”.³⁷ At the same time the EU continued investing in education. It had increased its financial envelope for Central Asia for 2014 – 2020 to support education reforms. Yet the Commission signalled that it lacked political support on the ground. Subsequently the Commission asked Latvia to undertake the lead role in arranging the EU–Central Asia education ministers' meeting. Latvia moved quickly in launching preparations. It involved intensive coordination activities on Latvia's side, and mobilising EU institutions. It also

³⁴ Interview, MFA of an EU Member State, 15.12.2015

³⁵ EU-Central Asia Strategy: at the crossroads of growth in two continents, <https://eu2015.lv/news/insights/2439-eu-central-asia-strategy-at-the-crossroads-of-growth-in-two-continents>

³⁶ Apokins, I. (2015) Reviewing the EU Strategy for Central Asia: Results and Future Prospects, <http://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2015-1-page-10.htm>

³⁷ Axyonova, V. (2013) The EU Education Initiative for Central Asia five years on: lessons learnt? , EUCAM, http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-PB-30-EN-Education.pdf

required advocating efforts in Central Asia to ensure their highest-level participation and political commitment.

Furthermore, Latvia sought to push the transport and transit sector on the EU active agenda, given its interests in transcontinental connections with Central Asia as a potential bridge between China's western province Xinjiang and Europe. For Latvia the presidency might provide a golden opportunity to bring all interested parties together in policy dialogue. The Commission as well as Member States were supportive to the idea of the high-level event, thus Latvia sought to arrange the transport ministers' meeting with Central Asia's participation.

Promotion of the rule of law turned out to be an essential part of the presidency's work too. Latvia had experienced problems in its bilateral investments in the region, therefore was interested in EU's emphasis on transparent rules and regulations for a favourable investment climate in Central Asia. Latvia therefore aimed at supporting the initiatives under the EU-Central Asia Rule of Law Platform. Together with Germany and France planned training of Central Asian experts and judges.

Finally, green technologies and renewable energy gained importance. This area was of particular interest for Latvian businesses working in Central Asia. The presidency's ambition was to organize a high-level Green Bridge Forum, involving politicians, officials and experts, as well as the business community. While the Commission was sceptical at the outset after intensive consultation rounds in Brussels and in the EU capitals, Latvia gained support. This seemed to become one of the most ambitious and complex presidency events.

During the intense pre-presidency's consultation process Latvia merged its domestic interests with the EEAS and Commission's plans. Thereby it denationalised domestic interests while at the same time seeking to maximally contribute to EU policies.

4. Revision of Achievements

The following presidency's achievements are noteworthy. A review of the EU Central Asia Strategy was accomplished. The EU Special Representative for Central Asia position was re-established in spring 2015 which signalled renewed EU interest in the region.³⁸ New cooperation formats were established, enhancing existing EU - Central Asia dialogue. The first EU - Central Asia Education Ministers meeting was a major success, producing concrete results. Various high profile events were arranged strengthening security contacts and establishing greater trade.³⁹ The Latvian Foreign Minister chaired the EU Cooperation Councils with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on behalf of the HR/VP. The EU - Kazakhstan Cooperation Council resulted in EU support for Kazakhstan to join the World Trade Organization. One of the main EU programmes in the region - the border management programme BOMCA 9 - was launched for the next three-year period with Member States in charge of its implementation.

Review of the Central Asia Strategy

³⁸ Gross, E. (2015), Recalibrating EU-Central Asia relations, SSUE, No 16/2015, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_16_Central_Asia.pdf

³⁹ Latvian presidency and EU policy towards Central Asia, 28.04.2015, <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/content/latvian-presidency-and-eu-policy-towards-central-asia>

Prior to the formal review process of the Central Asia Strategy launched in January 2015 the incoming presidency initiated the targeted debate considered as a necessary first step. The debate focused on how the Union should position itself in the region given the new geopolitical context. The debate revealed overall EU engagement in Central Asia had a limited impact. At the same time it appeared the EU was a strategically important partner for them yet the EU had to change its approach. The main conclusion was the EU needed a more tailored approach, respecting local interests and possibilities. The EU needed to focus on goal-oriented cooperation, and to seek synergies with large powers' activities in the region.

One concrete outcome of this strategic debate was the Latvian – German non-paper. Drawing on findings from the informal expert discussion, Latvia and Germany produced a joint non-paper as a contribution for the upcoming review process of the Central Asia Strategy. It put forward concrete recommendations. According to an EU representative:

The review of Strategy was an important step forward for the Presidency, with the Latvian - German non-paper being the most important contribution to the drafting process driven by the EEAS.⁴⁰

At the beginning of 2015 when the EEAS initiated a formal review process in the EU Council, Latvian - German proposals received Member States' broad support and later became integrated in the EU Council Conclusions for the Central Asia Strategy. In this context, the EEAS representative highlighted the Council presidency's political leadership:

In case of the Central Asia Strategy, Latvian leadership was very useful. The Latvian – German contribution was not only stimulating the debate, but it was also intellectual. It helped to structure the debate, based on the lessons learned, orientation, and priorities for the future cooperation. It was exactly what we expected from the Member States.⁴¹

Conclusions on the reviewed Strategy were adopted in June. They emphasised the need for a more tailored EU approach. The EU expressed willingness to engage in a win-win partnership with the five countries. Likewise, the EU promised to seek synergies with Chinese and Russian engagement in the region in the areas of security, transport and energy, and to explore opportunities arising from 'silk road' initiatives. Given the EU's limited resources it set less ambitious and more realistic goals while also seeking to win support from partners in Central Asia. Thereby the outcome of the review clearly reflected Latvia's views, Central Asian partner's concerns, and contributed to the EU policy that would guide its practices in the region. As summarised by an EU diplomat,

The Presidency's efforts, drawing the EU's attention to Central Asia, were one of its most important achievements. With the renewed Strategy as a guideline, the EU could ensure that the region remains as a part of EU foreign policy.⁴²

Security

In the area of security, one of Latvia's main achievements was probably in the EU Border Management Programme BOMCA 9. Latvia's leading role in the consortium implementing the

⁴⁰ Interview, MFA of an EU Member State, 15.12.2015

⁴¹ Interview, EEAS, 19.09.2015

⁴² Interview, MFA of an EU Member State, 15.12.2015

programme shows Member States have higher stakes in EU programmes than previously hired consulting companies by the Commission. As described by a Member State representative,

*By taking the lead in the BOMCA programme, Latvia is sending a strong political signal to the world that it takes EU-Central Asia cooperation seriously and is willing to commit its own resources.*⁴³

The BOMCA 9 programme for a three-year period was launched in autumn 2015 in Bishkek. The EU succeeded in maintaining a regional approach which was essential to cope with common security challenges. Despite their initial reluctance all five Central Asian countries will take part in programme. This was possible due to Latvia's advocating efforts in Central Asian capitals.

Another contribution by Latvia was regional dialogue on counter-terrorism. The high-level expert seminar took place in Brussels in March 2015. This was the first EU seminar of this kind addressing challenges posed by the threat of global terrorism to the Central Asian region, including the phenomenon of foreign fighters and the activities of ISIL/Daesh. This event was a follow-up to the EU and Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue in Dushanbe in March. The regional seminar on anti-terrorism resulted in recommendations, drawing up further possible priorities and joint activities in counter-terrorism.⁴⁴

Education

Education turned out to be one key sector where Latvia contributed to the main event: the first EU – Central Asia education ministers' meeting in Riga in June 2015. For Latvia arranging this high-level event was a demanding exercise given that previous EU efforts to establish policy dialogue with local governments did not produce results.⁴⁵

With the ministerial meeting in June in sight, several senior official meetings convened in the EU and Central Asian countries. The Joint Communiqué for the Riga ministerial meeting and action plan in the field of higher and vocational education were prepared. On 25 - 26 June 2015 the First EU – Central Asia Meeting of Ministers for Education took place. The meeting sent a strong signal that education is a key priority area. Evidently EU institutions and Member States appreciated the Latvian presidency's contribution. As a national expert of an EU Member State evaluated,

*The most significant achievement of the Latvian presidency was in the area of education. Central Asian governments are aware of the deficits in their educational systems, they have invited the EU to cooperate more closely and to increase its input".*⁴⁶

The first EU – Central Asia education ministers' meeting was not just a networking event but brought concrete results. All leaders agreed on common higher and vocational education priorities and endorsed the Roadmap of Activities under the Central Asia Education Platform (2015 - 2018).⁴⁷ Undoubtedly this constitutes a significant outcome for the Latvian presidency.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Latvian Presidency of EU Council organises first EU-Central Asia Seminar on counter-terrorism, 26.03.2015, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/45672-latvian-presidency-of-eu-council-organises-first-eu-central-asia-seminar-on-counter-terrorism>

⁴⁵ Axyonova, V. (2013) The EU Education Initiative for Central Asia five years on: lessons learnt?, EUCAM, http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-PB-30-EN-Education.pdf

⁴⁶ Interview, MFA of an EU member state, 15.12.2015

⁴⁷ Joint Communiqué of the First Meeting of Ministers for Education, 25 – 26 June 2015, http://www.izm.gov.lv/images/presidency/communiqu/Communique_roadmap_EU_CA_26062015_EN.pdf

Sustainable development

The presidency advanced a new initiative - the high-level Green Bridge Forum in Riga in March 2015, focusing on renewable resources and clean technologies. Given the environmental challenges in the Central Asian region, dialogue on these issues was highly relevant. The Forum brought together governments and businesses⁴⁸ and was supported by the Commission, the EEAS, and EU – Central Asia Environmental Platform.

In the area of transport, the reviewed Central Asia Strategy focused on energy and transport sectors and aimed “to facilitate links along the Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia transport corridor.”⁴⁹ In terms of political dialogue in the transit sector Latvia also reached some results by arranging the third ASEM Transport Ministers’ meeting in Riga. As described by a Member State diplomat,

*Latvia did quite well in raising public awareness of the existing transport links between Europe and Central Asia. In March, Latvia held the [ASEM transport] ministers’ meeting in Riga. However, it seems there was not much progress beyond that.*⁵⁰

In sum, the Latvian Presidency’s work was beneficial for the whole European Union, bringing new dynamism in EU relations with one of its strategically important regions.

5. The Way Forward

Latvia played a crucial role in vitalizing the EU – Central Asia agenda. However, how sustainable are the results of a six-month presidency? Whether we like it or not EU institutions alone without Member States’ leadership cannot provide the same commitment to EU policy.

Latvia’s work is unfinished, as correctly pointed out by a Member State official:

*There is a risk that the EU, with its foreign policy driven by crises, will turn its attention away from Central Asia. So it seems that Latvia’s work is not finished if it wants to keep Central Asia on the EU’s foreign policy agenda.*⁵¹

Indeed, if Latvia wants to capitalise on its presidency’s achievements, it should remain in charge of its niche region. Latvia should continuously build on its established reputation and focus on “concrete and tailor-made deliverables”.⁵²

Initial observations show that while the presidency is over Latvia remains actively engaged in almost all EU policy initiatives in Central Asia. Firstly, by undertaking the leading role at the consortium, implementing the BOMCA programme for 2015 – 2018, Latvia ensured its continuous engagement in the region. These new responsibilities in BOMCA allow Latvia not only to profile itself as a leader in advancing EU foreign policy initiatives, but also to strengthen its own administrative capacity to assume similar international tasks in the future.

⁴⁸ EU-Central Asia Strategy: at the crossroads of growth in two continents, <https://eu2015.lv/news/insights/2439-eu-central-asia-strategy-at-the-crossroads-of-growth-in-two-continents>

⁴⁹ Council conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia, 22.06.2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/22-fac-central-asia-conclusions/>

⁵⁰ Interview, MFA of an EU Member State, 15.12.2015

⁵¹ Interview, MFA of the EU Member State, 15.12.2015

⁵² Potjomkina, D. (2016), *Peace, Trade, and European Resources: Latvia and the Eastern Partners in 2015-2016*, Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook, http://www.liia.lv/site/docs/LIIA_Yearbook_2016.pdf

Further, Latvia's efforts in advancing education cooperation with Central Asia resulted in further engagement. Latvia, along with Poland, assumed a leading role in the EU-Central Asia Education Platform.⁵³ Likewise, in the area of sustainable development, the Latvian clean technologies' association *Cleantex* established numerous long term contacts in the region, and as a partner in the EU-Central Asia Environmental Platform is continuously engaged in policy dialogue on environmental issues. Similarly Latvia achieved partner status in EU-Central Asia Rule of Law Platform hence the country's experts continuously support the administrative capacity building in the five Asian countries.

In the area of transportation, Latvia seeks to advance EU high-level dialogue with Central Asia and China, focusing on future Eurasian transport interconnections. Latvia exerts continuous efforts in lobbying its domestic preferences. One such example is efforts in the so-called '16+1' format, involving the cooperation of China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries. Latvia became the coordinator for the transport and logistics sector in the '16+1' format, and will host the leaders' meeting in autumn of 2016. This is visible proof of its continuous efforts to attract foreign transit, including from Kazakhstan.

The review of the EU Central Asia Strategy provides another example of the Latvian presidency's legacy. By arranging the public debate on the EU's more targeted strategy towards the region, involving European and Central Asian politicians, experts and academics, Latvia gained the reputation as an expert in this EU foreign policy direction. In 2016 the EU will draw up the EU Global Strategy - an overarching EU policy aiming for improved action in implementing individual strategies. Here Latvia is actively engaged using its recent experience with reviewing the Central Asia Strategy. For instance, Latvia injects national ideas in the EU's Global Strategy through organizing the public discussions on Central Asia Strategy during the first half of 2016.

All this indicates Latvia seeks to capitalize on the presidency's achievements in Central Asia. However, without the presidency's 'soft power' it could be a challenge for Latvia to maintain its entrepreneurship on the Central Asian dossier. It remains to be seen whether Latvia as an ordinary Member State could keep the pace. The previous studies reveal that Member States have more influence in the presidency position, while "no longer in a chair, the presidency priorities are no longer at the centre of EU debate" (Bunse, 2009).⁵⁴

6. Conditions for Success

A number of conditions account for the Latvian presidency's success with advancing its Central Asia priorities: receptiveness of other Member States and like-minded coalitions, close cooperation with EU institutions, and persuasive advocacy in Central Asia.

With regard to the receptiveness of other Member States, Latvia was fortunate. It met no objections from EU partners, while having a preference convergence with influential Member State Germany. Latvia efficiently used this like-minded coalition: "close cooperation with Germany was clearly visible throughout the presidency with ministerial visits to Riga and

⁵³ Joint Communiqué, Riga, 25 – 26 June 2015, http://www.izm.gov.lv/images/presidency/communique/Communique_roadmap_EU_CA_26062015_EN.pdf

⁵⁴ Bunse, S. (2009). *Small States and EU Governance. Leadership through the Council Presidency.*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

coordination of positions before EU working groups, COREPER and Council meetings in Brussels".⁵⁵

Concerning the EU institutional environment, it was initially challenging for the incoming presidency. However, Latvia handled the situation skilfully. Later its cooperation with EU institutions was extensive. The EEAS and the Commission became important allies. Latvia's intense cooperation with EU institutions and its readiness to play a leading role, when asked, was an essential condition for success. According to an EEAS official:

*Presidency was able to mobilise EU institutions. Everyone wanted to do their best. We had very good relations. Latvia always took the initiative. The presidency's mobilisation was extremely successful.*⁵⁶

Furthermore, Latvia's mediating skills in Central Asia was a key condition for its presidency's success. Its advocating efforts in Central Asia helped ensure support and high-level participation from all five countries in EU policy initiatives. Latvia proved itself as a successful bridge builder.

As pointed out by Latvian officials other conditions that helped the Latvian presidency overcome its size constraint included early preparations, providing additional national resources (both financial resources as well as human resources), and efficient organization. The Special Task Ambassador position for Central Asia was very helpful to presidency purposes. Relevant government institutions, not only the Foreign Ministry as a coordinator but the Ministry of Education, the State Border Guard, and various non-governmental actors such as the Latvian Institute for International Affairs were engaged. This committed action helped Latvia's presidency to achieve tangible results.

Conclusions

This article explored how Latvia used its presidency's potential to influence EU external action in its areas of interest. It constructed a clear link between the domestic and presidency priorities. Latvia tried to introduce new initiatives that reflected its geostrategic and economic interests. Latvian presidency was not frightened by unfavourable leadership environment and its limited resources and lack of experience in holding the presidency.

Latvia, despite its small size and challenging environment, succeeded in raising the Central Asian profile in the EU. This to a great extent confirms the conclusions of Bunse (2009)⁵⁷, and Kajnč and Svetličič (2010)⁵⁸ that size is not important but Member State's 'soft skills' are. Findings also confirm the conclusions of Copsey and Pomorska (2010)⁵⁹ that conditions for the presidency's ability to exert influence is not only in its structural power but the intensity of its national preferences, skill at alliance building, persuasive advocacy, and the receptiveness of others.

⁵⁵ Interview, MFA of the EU Member State, 15.12.2015

⁵⁶ Interview, EEAS, 19.09.2015,

⁵⁷ Bunse, S. (2009). *Small States and EU Governance. Leadership through the Council Presidency.*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

⁵⁸ Kajnč, S. and Svetličič, M. (2010), What it Takes to Run an EU Presidency: Study of Competences in Slovenia's Public Administration, Administrative Culture, 2010, <http://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=211118>

⁵⁹ Copsey, N. and Pomorska, K. 2010. Poland's power and influence in the European Union: The case of its eastern policy. *Comparative European Politics*, 8 (1), pp. 304–326.

Thereby under favourable conditions, a small state can use the presidency's potential to exert its influence in the EU. In the case of Central Asia, Latvia's use of the like-minded coalition, close cooperation with EU institutions, and persuasive advocacy were instrumental. By carefully selecting its niche region and relying on the above strategies Latvia was able to generate a positive outcome. Latvia's case also shows that while promoting the EU's common goals, it also shaped EU agendas in line with its own national preferences.

The analysis of Latvia's case allows us to draw conclusions about the post-Lisbon EU external action system too. The findings show that the presidency's role lies not only in providing assistance to EU institutions but also in ensuring political leadership to guide EU policy initiatives. In the words of an EEAS official:

*The EEAS and the Commission are not political bodies, but only a tool. Guidance should be provided by Member States. Every Council presidency can use Latvia as an example on how the presidency's political leadership helps promoting the EU's common interests.*⁶⁰

The question of European leadership remains relevant. In a rapidly changing global environment Member State political leadership is vital for advancing the EU's strategic interests. As summarised by the above EEAS official all Member States, including the small ones, should be leaders in EU policies:

*We do not need all the 28 members. On the basis of expertise, thematic and geographical interests, it is enough with two countries to ensure the political leadership. Latvia serves as a good example.*⁶¹

To conclude, Latvia as a presidency managed to give new impetus to EU – Central Asia cooperation. It proves that even inexperienced small states such as Latvia have encouraging results. This confirms the Council presidency not only remains an important source of power for Member States but also is a key institution for successful functioning of the European Union.

⁶⁰ Interview, EEAS, 19.09.2015

⁶¹ Ibid.