EU hails inauguration of international uranium bank in Kazakhstan

Kazakh minister: Two ‘revolutionary’ stories are happening in Central Asia

Kazakhstan steps up reform efforts but says Europe still keeping distance

EU invisible at EXPO 2017 in Astana

Minister: Multiculturalism flourishes in Kazakhstan

EXPO 2017 Astana will give birth to three big projects
Kazakhstan inaugurated a Low Enriched Uranium Bank on Tuesday (29 August), backed by the IAEA. The EU, one of the project’s biggest donors, hailed it as a “success for international cooperation” on nuclear non-proliferation. EURACTIV.com reports from Ust-Kamenogorsk and Astana.

The facility in the city of Ust-Kamenogorsk, in eastern Kazakhstan, will store up to 90 tonnes of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU), enough to power a large city for three years, and sell it to IAEA members if they are unable to procure nuclear fuel elsewhere.

“The LEU Bank will serve as a last-resort mechanism to provide confidence to countries that they will be able to obtain LEU for the manufacture of fuel for nuclear power plants in the event of an unforeseen, non-commercial disruption to their supplies,” IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano said in a statement on Monday.

The facility, which will be run by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), is not strictly speaking a bank, but as several journalists saw it, a well-guarded, freshly-built, 880 square metre blue hangar, which for the time being is empty.

The bank is located at a metallurgical plant in the city of Ust-Kamenogorsk, 1,000 kilometres east of Astana. The Ulba plant is one of the world’s recognised producers of uranium, beryllium, tantalum and niobium metals.

Journalists were allowed to take pictures of everything they could see in the plant, except its fences.

The metallurgical plant was established in 1947 by Stalin as part of the project to create a Soviet nuclear bomb and establish nuclear parity.

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According to Nazarbayev, in 1991, he decided to stop nuclear testing after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) expressed concern over the dangers of continued testing. He is quoted as saying, “I was once asked what the future of the nuclear industry is. My answer was that it is my goal to make nuclear energy the future, not the past.”

Nazarbayev added, “The nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk were a mistake and an error. They caused environmental and health issues, and were a source of concern for the international community.”

By proposing that the IAEA host the international uranium bank in Kazakhstan, the country made its latest contribution to nuclear non-proliferation efforts, Nazarbayev said.

Even the most advanced digital economy will need energy, he explained, adding that uranium was its most concentrated and most effective form. 50 nuclear power plants are being built currently, and some 500 are expected to be built by 2030, while nuclear technologies modernise, he added.

The choice of Kazakhstan as a location for the Low Enriched Uranium Bank is a recognition of the quality of our nuclear sector,” Nazarbayev commented, pointing out that according to studies, the country holds up to 30% of the world’s uranium reserves. He appeared to link nuclear to green energy, in reference to EXPO 2017, whose motto is the “Future of Energy.” EXPO 2017 was inaugurated in June and will continue until 10 September. It has already attracted more than 3 million visitors.

Kazakhstan holds the world’s second largest reserves of uranium after Australia and has been the biggest uranium producing country since 2009. In 2013 Kazakhstan’s output stood at about 38% of the world’s total uranium production.

Yukiya Amano, the IAEA director general, said he was “extremely grateful” to Kazakhstan for volunteering to host the LEU bank. He also thanked the major donors for the project – the USA, EU, Kuwait, UAE, Norway, as well as China and Russia – who committed to allowing the transit of the fuel through their territories to their neighbour Kazakhstan.

The largest donation, of $50 million, actually doesn’t come from the US as such, but by billionaire philanthropist Warren Buffett, who said there was no better investment than helping reduce nuclear proliferation. The total donations amount to $150 million.

Amano explained that the IAEA decided to establish the LEU bank in December 2010 as a mechanism of last resort for member states which could experience a supply disruption “due to exceptional circumstances”, and which are unable to secure nuclear power fuel from the commercial market.

Owned and controlled by the IAEA, the LEU bank will be a physical reserve of up to 90 metric tonnes of LEU suitable to make fuel for a typical light water reactor of 1,000 MW for three years.

Jacek Bylica, the EU’s special envoy on nonproliferation and disarmament, said that the European Union was proud to be a major supporter of the LEU bank, calling the establishment of the LEU bank a “success of international cooperation”.

“This is really an example of effective multilateralism,” he said, adding that the EU was proud to have contributed €24.5 million to the project – €20 for the purchase of the fuel, and €4.5 million for ensuring the security of the storage.

“Multilateral approaches to the nuclear fuel cycle have the potential to provide countries who have decided to develop nuclear energy with an alternative to the development of national nuclear fuel cycles, by avoiding proliferation risks,” he said.

**WHAT’S THE BIG IDEA?**

EURACTIV asked questions both at the site in Ust-Kamenogorsk and at the Astana ceremony about the possible use of the project in negotiations with rogue countries, such as Iran in the recent past and North Korea at present.

Amano strongly denied any link between the LEU bank and any such cases, as other officials from his
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agency previously did. But Ernest Moniz, a former US energy secretary (May 2016 – January 2017), who attended the press conference, said it was important for the international community to have instruments to persuade some countries not to pursue nuclear enrichment programs.

The LEU bank would indeed provide the international community with such an instrument, although by rule the beneficiaries should subscribe to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

An EU diplomat who asked not to be named told EURACTIV that it was a "secret de polichinelle" (a secret known to all) that the idea of the LEU bank was born in the context of the Iranian nuclear weapons negotiations.

US Secretary of State John Kerry praised Astana’s role in the Iran deal brokered in July 2015, after Kazakhstan’s bid to host the bank won wide support.

Another diplomat said that by positioning itself as a major “peaceful” nuclear power, Astana was playing its cards well, to become the leading player in the low enriched uranium business.

A tender for the acquisition of the 90 metric tonnes of LEU to fill the bank will be launched soon and Kazakhstan is expected to make a strong offer.
Kazakhstan’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Roman Vassilenko, sheds light on important new developments in Central Asia, little known in the EU, and on the role of his country in major international issues.

Roman Vassilenko served as a diplomat at the Kazakh Embassy in the United Kingdom in 1996-1999, followed by seven years in the Kazakh embassy in the United States. He was appointed as Ambassador-at-Large in 2013 and as deputy foreign minister in 2016.

In a wide-ranging interview with EURACTIV.com’s Senior Editor Georgi Gotev, Vassilenko said:

• China-Europe cargo traffic via Kazakhstan has grown immensely since 2011
• Five Central Asian states have turned from tension to friendly relations
• Kazakhstan to chair UN Security Council from January 2018
• The EU helps with investments, political support
• Kazakhstan is a major peace mediator

What is new in Kazakhstan? What do you think the people in the European Union and in the West, in general, fail to notice?

I am not sure how much they have noticed but indeed, there are big stories that are happening in Kazakhstan and in our part of the world.

The first is the reconnection of Central Asia with the rest of the world. In terms of transportation, in terms of restoring the Silk Way, if you will, in modern ways. I was recently in Berlin, to participate in an OSCE conference on economic matters and on connectivity – this is the buzz word now in this part of the world.

I was looking into statistics, and I was truly amazed because this is nothing short of revolutionary in terms of container traffic via Kazakhstan to Europe and back. In 2011 there were only 1,200 containers TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) transiting Kazakhstan’s territory. In 2016 we had 105,400, which is an 80 times growth. We expect this number to continue to grow and in 2020 I think it will reach 2 million containers, another 20 times growth in three years.
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**But where does this come from?**

I think it comes from the construction of rail within Kazakhstan, also in China, and from the intensive work of all the railway administrations of all countries on the route – China, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Poland, Germany. This is one route.

The other route is China, Kazakhstan, across the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Bulgaria and Romania. There are two companies that have been established, in which railways companies of all these countries are partners. One is called United Transports and Logistics Company, consisting of China, Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus. The other one is Trans-Caspian International Transport corridor. Within these institutions, they agree on common tariffs, profitable for all. And although Russia is under sanctions from the EU, they are interested in reaping the benefits of these projects.

And of course China’s Belt and Road initiative. I’m talking about railways, but there are also roads that have been built. In Kazakhstan, this year we will complete the construction of our segment of the Western Europe-Western China highway, a 7 thousand kilometre highway.

**How big is Kazakhstan’s segment?**

It’s 2,700 kilometres. It is almost finished, and it is something that didn’t exist in the past. This will again contribute to the increased volumes transited via Kazakhstan. It’s a four-lane highway, meaning two lanes in each way.

Also, as a result of reducing administrative burdens, the transit of goods has become much faster. Goods like computers produced in China for Hewlett-Packard are produced in this country’s mainland. So instead of shipping them to the coast, loading them on ships and waiting for 45 days until they reach Europe, the new route is 11 days. And Kazakhstan’s Temir Zholy [the national railway company of Kazakhstan] is the driving force in this because they work with producers in China and consumers in Europe to find matches.

**Meaning that trains should not run empty on the way back?**

Exactly. In Europe there are four big destinations, the biggest one being Duisburg, reached by the majority of these trains. The biggest challenge is to find goods to be shipped to China. They are already able to load 50% of the trains with goods back to China. As an example, a fully refrigerated train was loaded with high-quality French wines to China. They need to be very ingenious for that.

So this is one of the biggest stories that is taking place in our part of the world. I think it was an American journalist who called Kazakhstan “the buckle in the belt”, for the belt and road. And it is indeed if you look at the map.

**Kazakhstan connected the dots in terms of infrastructure. The next step is probably the hubs.**

The first hubs are there already, it’s Horgos [at the railroad crossing with China, also called “dry port”]. This is where the wheels of the railroad wagons are changed, as the width of the railroad in Kazakhstan is larger than in China. This is also where trains are “repackaged”, if they are not fully loaded]. The other one is Aktau, a sea port on the Caspian Sea [where the trains are loaded on ferries and where petrol is loaded on tankers].

**And the second biggest story?**

The second biggest story in Central Asia is the very different dynamics in the relations between all five member states [Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan]. This was conditioned by the changing positions of Uzbekistan, our closest neighbour, since September last year [Uzbekistan’s leader Islam Karimov died in 2016 and his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev is pursuing a less autocratic path, which seeks to reform and liberalise the country].

Somebody said “winds of change are blowing in Central Asia” if you recall the famous song of the Scorpions, which was about Perestroika, but here it’s a bit similar.

There is a newly-found desire of all five states to resolve the issues that have accumulated in the two-and-a-half decades of our independent life. I mentioned the relations of Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan, but there are similar positive trends in Uzbekistan’s relations with other countries in Central Asia. And Uzbekistan is the central country, bordering all other four countries, including Afghanistan.

Speaking of Afghanistan, I should say that Kazakhstan has implemented its programme of educating 1,000 Afghan students in our universities, to the cost of $15 million. This is a program the Afghan government is very keen to continue, and maybe this is an area where we could cooperate with the EU. We train Afghans in peaceful professions, they go back to their country, none of them stays in Kazakhstan or emigrates to Europe. And it is very economical – education here is much cheaper than in Europe.

Kazakhstan hosted the Uzbek president three times this year alone. The first was a state visit resulting in the signing of 75 commercial agreements, totalling one billion dollars. It may not sound huge, but this is against the background of the figure of the annual trade, which is 2 billion. The second visit was with our president, continued on Page 9.
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in the southern region of Shymkent, where I come from. But for the Uzbek president to arrive, he only needed a 30-minute drive from Tashkent, just across the border. And then he visited Kazakhstan for the opening of EXPO2017, last June. Before the end of the year, we expect more meetings at the highest level again. Also, the intergovernmental commission met several times, and usually it meets once a year. This is where issues like agreeing on tariffs, exchange rates, establishing trade houses and opening border crossings, and there is progress in all fields. Now we have reopened two border crossings that were closed years ago, not at our initiative. And there has been a high-speed train route launched between Almaty [the former capital of Kazakhstan] and Tashkent.

I mention all of that because it has helped us in our work in the UN Security Council [Kazakhstan was elected to a non-permanent seat on the UNSC and is serving a two-year term since 1 January 2017. In January 2018, it will chair the UNSC where we say, and not without good reasons, that we represent Central Asia there and their interest, and we regularly coordinate. That’s why we intend to use our Presidency of the UNSC in January 2018 to focus on Central Asia and especially on Afghanistan.

But to understand the progress one has to be reminded that our foreign ministers [of the five Central Asian countries] met for the first time only last year. We are very encouraged and believe this trend will continue. Definitely, this is the second biggest story about what is happening in this part of the world.

And where is the EU in all this?

The EU is generally supportive of all of that because it benefits them as well. In terms of transport infrastructure, the main beneficiary is Germany, as the largest destination and processing centre. There is also this 16+1 initiative [a format initiated by China aimed at intensifying and expanding cooperation with 11 EU member states and 5 Balkan countries — Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Macedonia — in investments, transport, finance, science, education, and culture.] And on the political level they are supportive and quite excited by the developments, at least this is what I could see.

In terms of a legal basis of our relations with the EU, in 2015 we signed the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, called a “second-generation agreement” and replacing an older one. I don’t think there is another country which has signed such an “enhanced” agreement. This is of course not an association agreement, and we are not looking for such a type of agreement. But what such agreement does is that it creates the format for the expanded cooperation between Kazakhstan and the EU in 29 areas. It is 300-pages long, with more than 200 devoted to trade. This speaks about the value of trade for both parties.

The agreement is enforced provisionally, after Kazakhstan and the European Commission approved it. This means that only those provisions that are prerogatives of the Commission are enforced, and trade is among them. For the agreement to enter fully into force, it has to be ratified by all the 28 member states and by the European Parliament.

How many countries have ratified?

Sixteen have ratified, 12 are remaining, as well as the European Parliament, which will take up the issue in October-November this year. The EU is Kazakhstan’s largest trade partner, accounting for 50% of our trade, and also 50% of our investments, is the EU. Speaking about individual countries, our three biggest trading partners are Russia, Italy and China.

What about your country’s participation in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union [in which the founding members were Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, later joined by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan]?

In 2016 Kazakhstan chaired the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and we wanted to launch the process of dialogue EAEU-EU. It didn’t work. This is an issue our president discussed with Jean-Claude Juncker and with Donald Tusk in March 2016 in Brussels. At that point, it was said that maybe at some point in the future this could be a good idea, but not now, given the political relations with Russia, the largest member of the EAEU [Russia in the meantime annexed Crimea]. We thought [the decision to postpone] was unfortunate. And also we were told launching such a dialogue is a prerogative of the EU members.

However, the Eurasian Economic Commission has been given a mandate by the EAEU members to launch such a dialogue with the EU on technical matters. We are not talking about grand political schemes. But there are two integration initiatives, one is 60-years old [the EU], the other one is more recent [the Eurasian union], but the idea behind both is to remove trade barriers, to create common a market, and it would be only logical for them to agree on tariffs etc.

This is something that will still be done, maybe not as quickly as we would hope, given the current political stand-off between the West and Russia, which we think is unfortunate, and for putting an end to which we have been campaigning for years.

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already. We understand of course the political situation in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has to change and the fulfilment of the Minsk agreements needs to take place.

Is this the reason why Kazakhstan is mediating in the case of the crisis in Ukraine, also maybe in the case of the Syria war?

In the case of Ukraine, this is an issue that cuts across our society. In Kazakhstan, there are 4.5 million ethnic Russians, and about 300,000 ethnic Ukrainians. In the past, nobody distinguished between them. My last name is Vassilenko, it’s a Ukrainian name, but I have Ukrainian, Polish and Russian blood.

Since 2014 we were shocked to see the violence in Eastern Ukraine. And that’s why the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has been so keen to mediate. He helped arrange the first meeting in Minsk, in August 2014, and then “Minsk-2” [February 2015] could have been “Astana-1” because there was an agreement between all for that, we even prepared all the facilities. Then it was said it would take place in Minsk again, and we said that’s fine, as long as it produces a result, which it did.

The Minsk agreements are the only viable foundation for the resolution of this issue, the problem being that they are not fully implemented. We are so keen for resolving this issue because we are affected indirectly, but in a very major way, by this stand-off between Russia and the West.

Bad timing?

The Eurasian Economic Union, established under the Treaty of Astana of May 2014, and launched in January 2015, is a good and prudent initiative, in terms of creating a common market between its participants. But as you say, it was launched at the worst possible time, because Russia was under sanctions, and reciprocal sanctions were introduced. This affected the early two years of our economic union. Our economies faced strong headwinds. We did not face a recession, but we saw a major reduction in our mutual trade and in our trade with the Western countries.

Regarding Syria, the economy has nothing to do with our motivation. This is purely a desire to help resolve the 7-year-old civil war. We were offered to host those talks, we gladly accepted, and we have hosted five meetings already of the so-called Astana process. We see it as complementary to the Geneva process. Our role is to be a host for the Syrian government and the Syrian armed opposition, who met for the first time in seven years here, and the three guarantor states, Russia, Turkey and Iran, and the United Nations.

Of course, this would not have been possible if Kazakhstan, if our president didn’t help Russia in Turkey, after Turkey downed the Russian bomber at the border with Syria [24 November 2015]. Then again, we wanted to help these two important partners, because the deterioration of their relations was affecting us. Russia is our largest trading partner, Turkey is an important economic partner, but also close culturally, because of Kazakhs and Turks being of the same Turkic-speaking group, and Turks considering the steppes of Kazakhstan the homeland of their nation.

There was this famous expression – if Russia sneezes, we catch a cold. That’s true. You cannot jump above that.
Ask the average European what the world’s biggest landlocked country is, or was the last to leave the Soviet Union, and chances are they will not know it’s Kazakhstan.

But Kazakhstan’s intense efforts to reform its economy and society and attract foreign investment still go largely unnoticed in Europe, even though the country – the motor of Central Asia’s economy – is increasingly becoming a relevant international player.

This year it became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, while its capital Astana hosts the international exhibition EXPO 2017, dedicated to ‘Future Energy’.

As of Tuesday (29 August), Kazakhstan is also the seat of the world’s low enriched uranium bank, owned by the International Atomic Energy Agency. And it was Kazakhstan that initiated a UN resolution which proclaimed 29 August the International Day against Nuclear Tests.

MODERNISATION IN FULL SWING

Beyond the modernisation efforts is a bold claim: Kazakhstan aims to join the world’s top 30 most developed countries by 2050.

Kazakhstan has been criticised by the West for its human rights record, the media situation and the Soviet-style functioning of the judiciary. In the meantime, the country’s President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has initiated a devolution of powers from the presidential institution to the parliament and the government.

A constitutional reform took place in March, but there are still several laws to be amended, before the constitutional changes take effect.

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For the reform of the judiciary system, the independence of the judges will be strengthened by making sure that they cannot be removed from office. EURACTIV.com has been told Kazakhstan is fully aware of the need to overhaul its judiciary system if it wants more investment, beyond oil and gas.

A second branch of the modernisation concerns the economy – to invest in human capital and to develop new industries, without forgetting the traditional ones.

NATIONAL IDENTITY

The third branch of the modernisation concerns national identity. A symbolic move is the plan to abandon the Cyrillic script and replace it with the Latin alphabet to facilitate contact with the rest of the world. This, however, will be done gradually.

Unlike the Slavic nations, for which Cyrillic has been a natural choice, Kazakhstan is a Turkic nation. Arabic had been used, until Latin alphabet was introduced in 1929. In 1940 Stalin imposed the Cyrillic, a second change of the script in a very short time.

Right now, the Kazakh alphabet, still based on the Cyrillic script, has 42 letters, as opposed to 26 in Latin. A special commission has been put in charge of finding a solution.

Nazarbayev first raised the idea of a switch to Latin in 2012. This year he formulated it more clearly, stressing that this would be a gradual process. The switch has nothing to do with the place of Russian in the Kazakh society, which is effectively the second official language.

What Kazakhstan aims to achieve is to become a nation with three languages: Kazakh, Russian, and English, as the language of international business. A program called “Trilingual education” is implemented from the kindergarten age.

EU MOVING SLOWLY ON KAZAKH MARKET

And yet, for all the recent reform efforts, the EU has been slow to take the cue and therefore risks seeing the Kazakh market of 18 million people won by others, its ambassador to Belgium told EURACTIV.

“We are interested in European presence in our countries, markets, society... but we are not a priority for the EU. The niches that we are saving for Europe are filled with other countries, Japan, Korea, China, Russia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey. Europe is very slow in establishing its presence on new markets in Central Asia,” Ambassador Almaz Khamzayev said.

“Relations [with the EU] are improving but not fast enough. Businesswise, the European private sector, companies are losing a lot. The train is going fast and they lag behind,” he told EURACTIV on the sidelines of a conference named Kazakhstan: Entering a New Era of Modernisation, held in Brussels on Tuesday (29 August).

Iveta Grigule, the head of the European Parliament’s Kazakhstan Delegation, praised the country’s role in regional stability and security. She said Kazakhstan’s relations with the EU’s diplomatic service (EEAS) were excellent, but less so with the Parliament, which has urged Kazakhstan to improve its human rights, religious and media freedoms.

“Sometimes I feel that two main bodies of the EU are going in different directions in relations with third countries... Some of my colleagues don’t even know where Kazakhstan is but they have an opinion of this country,” she told the conference.

NOT A PUBLICITY STUNT

Pierre Borgoltz, a former EU diplomat for Central Asia, said Kazakhstan’s new modernisation wave, including business and judicial reforms initiated by long-reigning president Nursultan Nazarbayev, was “not a publicity stunt”.

“All this engagement is not pure posture, it is real engagement. The domestic reforms are going hand in hand with increasing international engagement,” Borgoltz told the conference.

Human rights watchdogs have for years highlighted Kazakhstan’s patchy human rights record. Amnesty International said in its latest report that rights to freedom of expression, of peaceful assembly and association, remained restricted. “The authorities used criminal prosecution to target social media users and independent journalists.”

Ambassador Khamzayev said it was a matter of misperception drawing on previous decades and not taking into account the latest democratic efforts.

“The perception is lagging behind reality and we understand that. We are keeping every institution in Brussels informed of all the changes, explaining our approaches in changing our democratic society, creating new institutions, NGOs. But today, everything is on the net – push the button and you will see about our human rights,” he concluded.
Most EU countries have national pavilions at EXPO 2017 in Astana, dedicated to the theme of “Future energy”. But the EU’s action in terms of energy choices for the future and the Union’s leadership in tackling climate change are not visible in those national pavilions, as EURACTIV has seen.

EXPO 2017 is the first thing the newly arrived notice after landing in Astana. A giant crystal globe dominates the city’s skyline as soon as you take the highway from the airport toward the centre of Kazakhstan's modernistic new capital. I ask the driver what it is, he replies “EXPO”. The Kazakhs have made it big. The energy-rich country is eager to host major events and is not shy in spending. The infrastructure built for the EXPO undoubtedly costs billions. A first return is already obvious: the EXPO is full of people, families with children or young couples, who appear to enjoy immensely the exhibitions and the many shows and concerts organized there.

Before I arrived, the organisers greeted the three-millionth visitor, a figure which appears to exceed the initial expectations. I arrived at the EXPO early in the morning, when it was almost empty, and was wondering whether this was possible. Very soon I got the answer, as the place became crowded and huge queues formed in front of some of the pavilions.

But the largest queue is in front of “sharik”, or “the sphere” in Russian, as people commonly call the structure hosting Kazakhstan’s national exhibition. Russian is widely spoken and, as a Russian speaker, I can overhear conversations as we slowly advance toward the lifts. Some of the visitors have already been here and advise others what the “must see” places are. Obviously, the price of the ticket (an equivalent of €11), seems like a good deal.

By hosting EXPO 2017, Kazakhstan officially wanted to reach two goals: to bring home the world’s best expertise in clean energy and renewables, and to make its population sensible to the issues of climate change.

One must keep in mind that Kazakhstan is extremely rich in fossil fuels. But the country has not only

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subscribed to the Paris agreement, it is making it a priority to change its patterns of energy consumption. Indeed, in many places in Kazakhstan, the sun shines 300 days a year, and there are locations where, I was told, the winds never stop. This potential is obviously immense.

Kazakhstan holds up to 30% of the world’s uranium reserves. It does not yet have any nuclear power stations, but the clear ambition is to develop this sector, seen by the country’s authorities as “green”, also because the new nuclear techniques are expected to be much more environment-friendly.

The participating EU countries are Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, UK. Groups of countries are represented in so-called “Plazas”: “Plaza Africa”, “Plaza Pacific”, Plaza “South America”, “Plaza Caribbean countries”, “Silk Road”.

In the French pavilion, the message is clear: this country is a leader in nuclear technologies, just what Kazakhstan needs.

Other EU countries chose different messages. For Germany, the future of energy is wind and solar, and electric vehicles. Poland highlights “blue coal” technologies, presented as environment-friendly. The Netherlands banks on its traditional windmills and the modern wind farms. But there is no EU pavilion and nowhere could I see a message about the Union being a leader in tackling climate change, and almost nowhere did I see any mention of the Paris agreement.

In the German pavilion, I introduced myself as a journalist and asked if the EU and the Paris agreement were mentioned anywhere at all. The answer was no, but Valentina, an Austrian national in charge of communication in the German pavilion, gave me a 40-page brochure called “German Pavilion EXPO 2017 Astana” (not available to visitors) in which the Paris agreement is mentioned on page 28. The German Federal government is mentioned dozens of times, but EU doesn’t appear anywhere.

When I asked the same question at the Netherlands pavilion, the answer of the Dutch young woman in charge was “No, we don’t mention this, but why should we? We have so many other important things to show.”

Everywhere in the pavilions of major EU countries, the big energy firms, which are also sponsors, appear to take centre stage, and there is no room left for any such thing as EU policies or EU action and initiatives.

Among the EU member countries’ pavilions, the largest queue I saw was in front of the German pavilion.

Austria is also one of the public’s favourites, as its pavilion is the most ludic – I took photos of people and their children having a great time with swings or other workouts.

Some EU countries are absent. As a Bulgarian and Belgian national, I doubly regret that there was no Bulgarian or Belgian pavilion. (The Bulgarian ambassador told me that despite his many efforts, Sofia didn’t find the funds.) If there were an “EU Plaza”, maybe my two small countries would have had a corner there? For God sake, the Caribbean has a “Plaza”, Africa has a “Plaza”, and the EU hasn’t??

My other regret is that I missed the Beatles concert because I had to catch my plane. Not the real Beatles, of course, but a very good cover group brought to Astana by the UK pavilion.
Yerzhan Ashikbayev, Kazakhstan’s deputy foreign minister, spoke to EURACTIV.com about nuclear disarmament, relations with the big powers and his country’s example when it comes to multiculturalism.

Yerzhan Ashikbayev was appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan in 2013. He previously served as deputy head of the prime minister’s office, head of foreign policy at the office of the president, and head of the foreign minister’s Chancellery. In his role as deputy foreign minister, Ashikbayev is responsible for relations with the UN and the Americas.

In a wide-ranging interview with EURACTIV.com’s Senior Editor Georgi Gotev, Ashikbayev said:

- Today’s Kazakhstan is much better in human rights, democracy than a decade ago;
- Multiculturalism flourishes in Kazakhstan as it has no alternative;
- No change in relations with the US since Trump took over;
- Russia, China and the US are

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Kazakhstan's foreign policy pillars.

The EU is in crisis, or at least it doesn’t look very attractive these days. Your country has a “multi-vector” foreign policy, meaning that it maintains good relations with all major players. But aren’t you more attracted to the East, simply because the EU is not in a very good shape?

Very tough question, that’s why I will not answer it as a diplomat, but as a citizen of Kazakhstan. Of course, China is a huge window of opportunity for us, and we benefit immensely, as does the international community, from this Chinese growth of the past three decades. During this time, China became a global superpower and Kazakhstan, as a neighbour of this dynamically developing nation, is benefiting from that. I don’t need even mentioning the Belt and Road initiative, it’s simply because we have such a good and constructive neighbour that we managed to establish an excellent relationship with our Chinese counterparts on so many bilateral issues.

But having said all that I should challenge your statement that Europe has become less attractive for Kazakhstan.

If you analyse our strategic development documents, they incorporate European values, they incorporate the European standards of living, the quality of life, and overall the civilizational development of Kazakhstan is in the direction of these European standards.

But Europe criticises your country, in the area of human rights, precisely what you call standards...

No one is perfect. We appreciate when this criticism is constructive. We clearly understand our own shortcomings. But this is a continuing process. If someone compares Kazakhstan of ten years ago with its current shape, there is no doubt that we perform better in almost every single aspect of our development. I often speak of democratic values with our overseas partners...

You are responsible for relations with the US...

With North, Central and South America.

But Trump’s America doesn’t need to be so much focused on values...

Well, that does not remove the issue from our bilateral agenda. But this is in the best interest of my nation. Kazakhstan has set itself the very ambitious goal of becoming one of the 30 most developed nations [by 2050]. And it’s not only economic indicators that will take us there...

...it’s also about the judicial system...

Not only the judicial system. It’s about the entire society in which every citizen would enjoy comfortable, safe, prosperous life, and this is what lies as the essence of our domestic policy, the foreign policy being the continuation of it.

So you are not offended when your Western partners speak of democratic standards...

It’s a two-way dialogue. The problem arises when it’s a one-way dialogue. But we have so much to share with the European nations. Now in Europe, many speak of the crisis of multiculturalism.

Indeed.

But here in Kazakhstan multiculturalism not only exists, it flourishes. And we are genuinely surprised when we are asked why we pursue this policy, why against the background of the crisis of multiculturalism in Europe do we continue along that path. The answer is simple: the make-up of our society of over a hundred ethnic groups, Kazakhstan historically being in the northern part of Islamic civilization, but at the same time for centuries interacting with Orthodox Christianity, with Confucianism, with Buddhism. It’s a way of life, I should say. And there are so many ethnic groups which went through very difficult times. During the Soviet period, entire ethnic groups were relocated, just because of the decisions of the USSR leadership. Chechens, Germans, Koreans, entire ethnic groups were moved to Kazakhstan...

Stalin moved the Tatars from Crimea to Kazakhstan...

Indeed, and they were not moved to prepared settlements, but to the steppe where the trains stopped. And they had to survive in very harsh conditions, but they couldn’t have made it without the help of the Kazakh people. This is to say that we don’t see any other scenario, in such a diverse society, than to harmonise the co-existence of those groups.

EU diplomats admit that the Union has made mistakes in the recent past by trying to export democracy, and that it’s better to have stable countries in our neighbourhood...

Nowadays we more often talk of partnership and cooperation, than of requirements as in the past. I think the international community is learning from its failures. Seven-eight years ago, there was a huge hype about the Arab Spring. Well, changes don’t come overnight. They require a very intelligent, meticulous approach.
and political will to change. This is modus vivendi for Kazakhstan. Also, being landlocked means that you are dependent on your neighbours.

And you have good relations with all your neighbours...

We have good relations with any country of the world, and especially with our neighbours, because security, stability, prosperity cannot and should not come at the expense of others.

Speaking about stability and security, there are two problems in Europe. One is the migration crisis, and speaking about the Arab Spring, I hear from EU diplomats that they now miss Gaddafi. And the other one is terrorism, and it looks like we in Europe have to get used to it. How does this situation look, seen from here?

The view from Central Asia and from Kazakhstan is that whatever has been done has been a terrible mistake. That’s why my president underlined the necessity to preserve the statehood under any condition, when dealing with Iraq, or Libya, or any other failed nation. We saw many failures because of poor judgement what would follow next. And “next” was more tragic than the previous situation.

Isn’t it worrying that our political correctness in the West means that there is little analysis of the mistakes done?

The judgement should be yours.

Kazakhstan is not part of the Eastern Partnership, an initiative which political correctness doesn’t allow me to qualify as a failure...

I should say Kazakhstan was eager to replicate some of the main substances of the Eastern Partnership within its bilateral cooperation with the EU, because part of its stimulus package is access to the EU single market, visa-free travel, this is what our society desires. But at the same time, we realise that our Russian friends and partners see NATO enlargement in very strict security terms.

You have a very prudent policy vis-à-vis NATO. You have a very long border with Russia...

Over 7,500 kilometres.

So it’s extremely wise to stay away from NATO?

Kazakhstan is an independent nation. We have an excellent partnership with NATO. We participate in the “Partnership for Peace” and a number of other instruments, in the sphere of peace-keeping...

Anti-terrorism?

Including. We are very pragmatic and we don’t see a problem when we tackle certain issues, if this is in the best interest of this nation and does correspond to the overall understanding of how to respond to certain problems, we are fine to go along.

Ukraine was less prudent, and Russia saw Ukraine, which also has a long border with them, becoming an ally to the US...

I’m a diplomat, it’s up to experts to draw conclusions. What is happening now [the Eastern Ukraine conflict] is yet another very tragic dividing line in the Euro-Asian space. Astana hosted the first and so far only OSCE summit in the 21st century in 2010, the main goal of which was indivisible security for everyone in this huge area from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Unfortunately, it was only a few years after this very successful summit that new dividing lines appeared.

I will ask an undiplomatic question, does your country see a change since Donald Trump become a president?

So far, no. We are continuing our cooperation with the US, and we see a continuity. There are certain issues that may be redesigned or re-thought by the Trump administration, but so far we don’t see them as changing the nature of our strategic partnership. Our foreign policy pillars are three: Russia and China, as our biggest neighbours and great nations, and the United States. This is what we call a stable construction. Because with two legs it won’t be stable. We need a third leg.

The EU is not a leg?

When this concept was proposed at the very early stage of our independence [1991], the European Union was in the making. Now we increasingly see the EU as another pillar. Of course, there are certain reasons for that. The foreign trade of my country with the EU accounts for a half of our foreign trade, and so do foreign investments. There are other pillars, as our cooperation with the Islamic world. And in the future, India will be much more active in this part of the world. The more diversified cooperation we have, the better for everyone. It’s not only about security, it’s mainly about economics. And we are open to diversified cooperation with any country.

You mentioned pillars. I have seen Trump towers in the region. But not here, although Astana seems to be the right place for extraordinary buildings.

[Laughs] Well, he might decide to invest in Kazakhstan, given the rapid development of the city. We truly Continued from Page 16

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believe that Kazakhstan presents huge opportunities for the business community. We are trying to turn our land-lockedness into land-linkedness. We are trying to maximise our gains from our geographical location. We are waking up not only to the construction of physical infrastructure, meaning railroads, highways, but also to diminishing red tape, bureaucracy, so that border crossing points won’t be a barrier, but a smooth transition point.

For Kazakhstan, nuclear disarmament is a very high foreign policy high priority. Can you explain?

Our experience with nuclear testing at the Semipalatinsk testing site, and the terrible consequences we have to live with, not only now but for future generations, means that we have a moral responsibility and moral right to demand a world free of nuclear weapons.

I heard your president’s speech the low enriched uranium bank was launched, but is it realistic to imagine full nuclear disarmament? Russia and the US may reduce their arsenals, but is it possible to imagine that they will get rid of them?

Again, this is where so many countries have different opinions. 122 countries signed, or rather agreed on the text and are expected to sign, the nuclear ban treaty. Again, it’s a compromise, some of these countries are pushing for more radical steps.

Kazakhstan is very pragmatic. What we are proposing is that we need the engagement of everyone, because the world just cannot afford such a risk. It needs political will and courage to understand that the mentality of the Cold War era will inevitably die, if not in the coming years, in the coming decades. Even on a small scale, a nuclear war would be devastating.

Nuclear weapon states should realise that 122 nations having agreed on the text give an overall message that they are no longer willing to live under the risk of nuclear annihilation.

Regarding chemical weapons, the world learned the lessons of World War I. Why on earth should the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki not be learned?

I will challenge you with the case of Ukraine who gave up its nuclear arsenal, and part of its territory was annexed. Would Russia have annexed Crimea if Kyiv had nuclear weapons?

I can give you the opposite example of Kazakhstan. [Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus gave up their Soviet-time nuclear arsenals.]

But you don’t have Crimea.

If you take a look at history, there have been some irresponsible politicians in Russia, and even the famous writer Solzhenitsyn claimed that half of the territory of Kazakhstan was Russian. And some of those claims coincided in terms of timing with the issue of Crimea you mentioned. But we are doing fine with Russia. And we are trying to evolve our partnership in a way that is mutually beneficial. Belarus is another example. We truly believe that Kazakhstan, by giving up its nuclear arsenal, the fourth largest at its time and bigger than the arsenals of France, UK and China combined, is better off now, with foreign investments, with our openness. The alternative would have been to become a pariah state. Each and every nation should be responsible, in the longer term. Will the US, Russia or UK, be less prominent without nuclear weapons? I don’t think so.
EXPO 2017 ended on 10 September, having gathered participants from 115 countries and 22 international organisations, providing a unique platform for a debate on best technologies for the future of energy. Roman Vassilenko, deputy foreign minister of Kazakhstan, tells EURACTIV about his country’s plan to build on the exhibition’s success.

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