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**Institute for Advanced
International Studies**



**Central Asia and European Union:
In Search of Sustainability**

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Gulnoza Ismailova**

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The book includes research on the theory and practice of contemporary relations between Central Asia and the European Union, carried out within the framework of the scientific project of the UWED Jean Monnet Center of Excellence for European Studies of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. The monograph includes sections of the authors of their countries in the region and examines the issues of comparative studies of regionalism, the EU policy towards Central Asia, the achievements and shortcomings of the European Union's strategy towards the region, the dynamics of interstate economic, cultural and humanitarian relations, challenges and threats to relations. The book is intended for researchers and students, who are interested in relations between the European Union and the countries of Central Asia, as well as interdisciplinary aspects of contemporary international and interregional relations.

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3 European Union - Central Asia: shaping resilience and capacity building

Ulugbek Khasanov

Introduction

This article discusses the relationships between the European Union and the Central Asian region and the principles for their implementation. Regional cooperation based on the EU strategy for Central Asia. The factors that led to the development of a new strategy, significant changes in regional policy, the priorities of the strategy and the possibility of their implementation in the countries of the region will be explored. Common problems for the region and the role of the EU strategy in overcoming them will be studied. It also analyses the need for EU experience in strengthening regional integration, considering the different levels of development of the countries of the region. The impact of the EU's neighbourhood policy is particularly notable, as is the shift in foreign policy from normative power to principled pragmatism. The catalyst for this change was a focus on the impact of close neighbours on Europe's security, immigration, terrorism, and economic health concurrently offering a realistic strategy for managing larger challenges of the regional and global security.

Prerequisites for the initial stage

The states of Central Asia, as well as the entire post-Soviet region, were tasked from the very beginning with addressing a number of the most challenging issues that touched practically every aspect of their daily lives. Naturally, when carrying out this duty within the framework of integration ideals, the leaders of the former Soviet Union's countries tried to draw on already-existing global experience.

Ultimately, the ideas and experience of the European Economic Community - the European Union - were in many respects the basis of the plans for the formation of a new community of states. Such an orientation towards the experience of the EU, in principle, has its own ideological grounds, since at present it is this association that is one of the main

economic centres of the modern world, surpassing the United States and Japan in aggregate gross domestic product by 20% and 50%, respectively. The EU is one of effective economic models of cooperation between states, where, in addition to economic issues, the political ones are also quite successfully resolved.

In those years, the states of the post-Soviet space have been doing their best to use the ideas and experience of the European Economic Community (European Union). So, for example, a number of Commonwealth bodies were created in the image and likeness of existing EEC institutions. For example, the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth in its composition and functions is to some extent comparable to the position of the European Council in the institutional system of the EU. All members of both Councils, whether Presidents or Prime Ministers in parliamentary systems, act as the highest executive of their respective countries. It is possible to draw certain analogies between the functions of the EU Council of Ministers and the CIS Council of Heads of Government, as well as the CIS Executive Committee and the EU Commission, although the latter has a much greater political function²⁵. Obviously, the central political role throughout the EU and Commonwealth community belongs to state and international officials, as well as the leaders of the national state executive, but not to political parties, parliamentarians or interest groups.²⁶

When developing the Treaty on the Establishment of the Economic Union, the Concept for the Economic Integration Development of the Commonwealth of Independent States, other important agreements and decisions adopted within the Commonwealth, the experience of the EU seemed to be the most suitable for post-Soviet integration. But all this refers to external borrowings. As for the essence of the matter, the past ten years have clearly shown that the possibilities for implementing the EU development model in the post-Soviet space are not only extremely limited, but simply do not exist.

²⁵ Strezhneva M. A. Social culture and political institutions: a comparative analysis of the EU and the CIS. M., 2013.

²⁶ Ibidem

On the other hand, life itself, one way or another, but objectively pushed the post-Soviet states to create various forms of integration. If only for this reason, it is too early to make definitively negative assessments of the prospects of this process. Definitely, we can only say that in the way of its implementation according to the European model, there are so far insurmountable objective and subjective obstacles.

So, for example, no matter how attractive the European experience of integration may be, it should be remembered that the European Union was created by states with a highly developed industrial potential and an established market economy. The history of the EU countries also covers a fairly long period of development of national statehood. In addition, the differences in the level of development of the founding countries of the Union were relatively small, and this core of the future EU became the most economically and technologically attractive centre of attraction for other participants.

On the contrary, in the post-Soviet space, processes of different significance and direction were taking place, negatively affecting the integration of the Commonwealth states. Unlike the EU countries, the Commonwealth states had to overcome the severe consequences of the political collapse of a single state and the all-Union national economic complex, the rupture of established production, technological and economic ties between enterprises, the destruction of a single financial and monetary system, etc. The process of establishing state institutions of power and management was complex, going through reforming the economic and social relations.

Market reforms in the Commonwealth states, considering their national specifics and orientation, further amplified the negative results of the collapse of a single state and a common economic space, since their target was fundamental changes in the socio-political system and the system of economic relations²⁷.

If we turn to a comparison with the EU, whose members at the time of the creation of the Union were countries with a market economy, then,

²⁷ Shumsky N. Prospects for Post-Soviet Integration and the Commonwealth of Independent States. - Society and economy. 2015, No. 11-12, p.274.

in contrast to them, the post-Soviet states inherited the model of a centrally-controlled economy. With the general focus of reforms on the creation of a socially oriented market economy, the reform of economic relations in the post-Soviet states is carried out according to various scenarios based on different approaches to the choice of priorities, stages and timing of their implementation, the mechanisms and tools necessary for this. This circumstance objectively reflects the differences in the socio-economic situation of states, the correlation of socio-political forces, national characteristics and traditions, the expectations of the population and the degree of its readiness for reforms.

Institutional transformations in the states of the Commonwealth are limited mainly to the tasks of power and strengthening of existing political regimes, bringing the economy out of the crisis into a phase of stabilization and recovery, and reducing social tension in society. Market reforms are carried out to the extent that the leaders of states and part of the emerging national elite understand the potential dangers of conservation of the old or new, but deformed, flawed political and socio-economic relations, and at the same time are limited by the fact that these reforms seriously affect the interests of existing and emerging new elite groups, and are also fraught with tendencies to destabilize society.

Unsettled interstate and interethnic, or even military conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia (Nagorno-Karabakh), in Georgia (Abkhazia, partly Adzharia), Moldova (Transnistria), Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan²⁸ do not contribute to the integration processes in the post-Soviet space. In its current state, the CIS is unable to resolve them either by economic or political means. Russia, without claiming to be the only peacekeeper, provides the main assistance in maintaining peace and stability in the zone of these conflicts, while not always receiving proper support and understanding from other Commonwealth states.

²⁸ See Sébastien Peyrouse, Jos Boonstra and Marlène Laruelle, "Security and development approaches to Central Asia. The EU compared to China and Russia," EUCAM Working Paper 11, 2012, 16. An example in this regard is the 'Community Security Initiative', which has been launched jointly with the OSCE in the aftermath of the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, the most important factor that largely hampered integration in the post-Soviet space was the fact that the choice of geopolitical landmarks and foreign policy relations of independent countries was carried out in the context of the existence of strong, economically and technologically developed states and more attractive centres of gravity outside the Commonwealth, including, by the way, first of all, the same EU. All members of the Commonwealth are industrially less developed countries than the states of Western Europe or the USA.

Objectively, they have a greater interest in collaborating economically with more advanced nations and economic groups. Through such collaboration, they can acquire cutting-edge technology, update, and build industrial facilities of the highest calibre. The choice of trading partners is now based on the opportunities offered and the viability of the business. At the moment, the Commonwealth is really more of a political club that allows the member states' interests to be brought together and harmonized. It can also be referred to as a defence alliance and an economic community, albeit to a much lesser level. There is currently no community of widely accepted values or enduring interests in the Ex-Soviet space.

Following the demise of the Soviet Union and the division of all-Union property, the interests and policies of the Commonwealth countries started to diverge even more as their state sovereignty increased. This process is still in progress in many respects today. Security policy, global economic relations, and foreign policy are some particularly blatant examples of this. For instance, not all external threats, whether they were local or global, were viewed as a hazard that the Commonwealth governments could all work together to counter. On the contrary, threat perceptions often do not coincide or are opposed to each other. If, say, Russia and Belarus regard NATO's approach to the East as a threat to themselves, then states such as Ukraine and Georgia, on the contrary, see it as a reliable security partner and seek a close alliance with it. The threat of Islamic extremism, both domestically and from Afghanistan, was taken seriously in the states of Central Asia and Russia, but not in Belarus, Moldova or Ukraine. The aforementioned threat of separatism, interethnic

armed conflicts is most relevant for Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Russia, and to a lesser extent for others.

Until recently, the leaders of many post-Soviet states considered the CIS as a model of cooperation suitable for the transitional stage, the period of strengthening their state sovereignty, reforming economic and social relations.²⁹ The specifics of the conditions and features of post-Soviet integration, different understanding of the goals and objectives, basic principles and pace of integration processes in certain areas of cooperation did not contribute to the transformation of the Commonwealth into a more effective regional association with appropriate interaction mechanisms. In the Eurasian space, there are still no necessary conditions for the creation of strong capable supranational integration structures. And the point here is not only that the founding documents of the Commonwealth (the Agreement on the Establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Alma-Ata Declaration, the Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States) do not endow this post-Soviet association of states or its individual bodies with any supranational powers.

In the future, in the case of transferring any supranational powers to individual structures of the Eurasian space (primarily bodies of sectoral cooperation), problems in the distribution of votes of states when they make binding decisions will still have to be overcome. If in the bodies of the Commonwealth, endowed with supranational powers and making decisions binding on all states of the Commonwealth, to provide Russia with the number of votes in accordance with the specific size of its population or economic weight, then this will leave no opportunity to influence the situation to other member states of the commonwealth.

Russia, due to its relative weakness, numerous economic, social and domestic political problems, could not - and still is not fully capable - take on the functions of coordinating the Commonwealth's general economic policy. It is no coincidence that many CIS members are increasingly focusing their views on those partners who have stronger economic and

²⁹ Joint Statement of the Heads of State of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan (Ashgabat, January 5-6, 1998). - Rossiyskaya Gazeta, January 17, 1998

political positions. Turkmenistan has practically distanced itself from the CIS, while Azerbaijan is showing less and less interest in the Commonwealth. Georgia stopped its membership in it and declares its aspiration to membership in NATO, Ukraine - in the EU. Uzbekistan was not satisfied with Russia's plans for a military presence in Tajikistan, as it has its own interests there. Only in 2000. Tashkent's position began to change somewhat in the light of the Afghan conflict and the sharp increase in the threat of international terrorism directly on its territory.

For many states, participation in the CIS looks to a large extent as a kind of fallback in case of unforeseen crisis situations, and not as a natural consequence of a fundamental choice of integration aspirations and intentions. In difficult internal political situations, for a number of leaders of the CIS countries, the existence of the Commonwealth is an additional means of strengthening their power at the national-state level. From this point of view, the presence of the CIS fits into the individualistic ideas that emerged in the post-Soviet period about the regional political regime, as about the existence of common rules of the game for national leaders, who, moreover, seek to seize a possible initiative in this area from the opposition forces.³⁰

For all that, the existing structure of the national economy, geographical proximity, historical and cultural factors will influence the level of relations between the post-Soviet states for a long time to come. There is practically no doubt that there are serious factors contributing to the integration of the post-Soviet states. But now their implementation is hindered so far by many objective and subjective circumstances.³¹

On the one hand, in economic terms, most of them cannot exist in isolation. Specialization, participation in the international division of labour and, consequently, trade with other states is the only way for them to economic well-being. On the other hand, it is in Central Asia, for example, that a capacious common market can be created, especially given the significant reserves of most types of natural raw materials, the

³⁰ For more details, see: Strezhneva M. A. Social culture and political institutions: a comparative analysis of the EU and the CIS. M., 2013.

³¹ Olga Alinda Spaiser. The EU as a Security Actor in Central Asia: Minor but not Marginal <https://www.cairn.info/revue-1-europe-en-formation-2015-1-page-83.htm>

existence of a single transport network, the experience of creating and operating a single electric power system, and main oil and gas pipelines.

In this regard, it should be noted that the goals of cooperation within the Commonwealth cover, at least formally, not only the economy, politics and security, but also culture and science, education, environmental protection. In principle, such a broad approach to the goals and objectives of interaction between the CIS countries allows individual members of the community to assert their sovereignty in those areas that they consider the most important for themselves, while not hindering the development of close ties in other areas. Obviously, even indirectly, this factor contributes to the preservation of the integration potential of the post-Soviet space and its implementation in new forms.

Be that as it may, against the background of this whole complex of conflicting factors, the Commonwealth remains the only organization that, for all its shortcomings, unites the entire post-Soviet space (with the exception of the Baltic). The Commonwealth has well-defined goals, objectives and functions, although each member state understands their meaning in its own way. Few of the states are satisfied with the Commonwealth, but there is no place to leave it yet. For most of them, this is a convenient fallback option in the implementation of their strategic plans, geopolitical orientation and integration aspirations. In principle, the mere fact of the preservation of the CIS also indicates that in the short term there is no other alternative for its members that would be equivalent to what they have within the Commonwealth.

Regional segments

The Central Asian region of the Commonwealth consists of five Central Asian republics that were part of the USSR: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan with a total area of 4 million km², with a population of over 50 million people, including about 5 million Russian-speaking population. The new states of Central Asia have common historical roots in terms of belonging to the Eastern civilization. The peoples inhabiting them, except for the Tajiks and related ethnic groups, mainly belong to the Turkic-speaking group.

Historically, it is difficult enough to draw boundaries between these peoples, and the ethno-national situation in the region was largely complicated precisely by the arbitrary establishment of administrative boundaries in the Soviet period. The peoples of the Central Asian countries, for the most part, profess the Islamic religion. At the same time, it should be noted that despite the important role of Islam in shaping the cultural community of this region, the degree of Islamization of the republics is very different.

The problems of acquiring state identity, maintaining sovereignty and territorial integrity, as prerequisites for integration, were common to all states of the Central Asian region. In the current post-Soviet configuration, these republics never existed as independent states. Since in the USSR the borders between them were established according to the administrative principle, and for centuries the territorial formations that had been formed were in the nature of valley-oasis associations there is a danger that the process of sovereignization may develop further into separatism, reinforced by ethnic and clan conflicts.

In fact, even during the period of Soviet power, the ruling elites in the Central Asian republics were very sensitive to the question of which historical regions representatives get access to the levers of real power. In principle, what is happening here is a kind of paradoxical fusion of the system of completely feudal and clan-based views on power, which was established back in the Soviet period, with nationalist mindsets. To the greatest extent, this issue escalated in Tajikistan, where “localism”, coupled with clan struggle and confrontation between various ethnic groups, led to the civil war of 1992-1997, which practically destroyed the economy of the republic and affected the situation in neighbouring states.

In principle, the republics of the region face a common task: to prevent any violation of territorial integrity, including on the territory of neighbouring states, which would be very dangerous in terms of setting a precedent. Of particular importance in this regard is the destruction of one of the important "Soviet" pillars of the political and economic stability of the states of Central Asia - the system of protecting strategic security from external and internal threats.

As analysts from Central Asia note, “in the early years of independence, the picture of the foreseeable future of the Central Asian states was, for their governments and, to a certain extent, for public opinion, more or less clear. For the states of the region, the Turkish version of development was attractive, where a society with a Muslim population chose a secular path of development, a democratic political system and a market economy”³². However, the weakness of Turkey itself revealed over the past period, primarily in the economic and civilizational fields, has led to a gradual weakening of the attractiveness of the image of Turkey and the Turkish model of development in the region. Largely under the influence of the specified sum of factors and, we repeat, the consequences of socio-political development during the Soviet period in the Central Asian states, with the exception of Tajikistan, a rather uniform political system has now developed. It manifests itself as “authoritarianism with fragments of political pluralism and some freedoms” in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and as totalitarianism in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.”³³

The crisis phenomena of the 1990s, which engulfed the economy and social sphere of the Central Asian states in the conditions of disruption of the economic ties established within the former USSR and the search for optimal models for reforming national economies, turned out to be deep and protracted, as in the CIS as a whole. Quite indicative are some statistical data that very clearly characterize the social processes of those years. Throughout Central Asia in the 1990s, there was a serious general economic breakdown and a decline in production, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were in the worst position in terms of macroeconomic indicators. In Kyrgyzstan, the republic's GDP in 1995 was 50% of 1990 level. There was a decline in both industrial (in 1995. - 35% of 1990 level), and agricultural production (by 43%). In Tajikistan, the decline in material production in 1991 amounted to 12.5%, in 1992 - 33.7%, and in 1993 and 1994 there was a catastrophic recession: the

³² Esenov M. Central Asia on the Threshold of the 21st Century. Central Asia and the Caucasus. // www.ca-c.org/datarus/esenov3/1998-shtml

³³Ibid.

damage from the civil war was estimated at 7 billion dollars, and the fall in industrial production in various industries was 50-80%.³⁴ Gross capital formation decreased in all countries, especially in Kazakhstan - in 1991-1996 gross fixed capital formation decreased by 2.8 times.³⁵

In addition, the collapse of the Soviet administrative system deprived the new states of their usual “backdoor” ways in solving emerging problems. Thus, in Turkmenistan, the program "Grain" put forward by the leadership of the republic, the implementation of which assumed the achievement of grain independence and the provision of free bread in 1997, was failed. But if in the past the problems of the created deficit were solved by directives with supplies from state reserves, then in independent Turkmenistan a wave of bread riots swept due to the lack of bread. Tension in society was relieved by large supplies of flour from Iran.³⁶

As for the realization of the foreign trade potential for solving the problems of economic development, in this area the Central Asian states faced the same difficulties as the rest of the post-Soviet countries. In the former USSR, the economies of the republics were heavily dependent not only on inter-republican ties, but also on allied state subsidies. The trade turnover of the Central Asian republics with other former Soviet republics accounted for an average of over 87% of their total exchange with the outside world.³⁷ Naturally, the countries of the region tried to overcome the difficulties that arose in connection with the rupture of inter-republican ties primarily by expanding mutual trade, searching for new markets and trading partners, as well as attracting foreign capital to implement large projects for the construction of new and reconstruction of existing enterprises. Nevertheless, we note that their initial hopes for serious financial support from Western countries and international economic organizations were far from being fully realized, which, at a

³⁴ Annakulyeva G. Trends in the Development of the Central Asian Society. Central Asia and the Caucasus. www.ca-c.org/datarus/annakulyeva/1998-shtml

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dzhabiev A. N. Economy of Turkmenistan: ways and directions of development Central Asia and the Caucasus. www.ca-c.org/datarus/dzhabiev/2013-shtml

³⁷ European Commission, Central Asia. DCI Indicative Program 2011–2013, Brussels, 2011, 14–15

difficult stage in the formation of young states, preferred to take a wait-and-see attitude.³⁸

Soon after the Soviet Union was destroyed in 1991, the idea of a Central Asian union was born. Even though all nations joined the newly established Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), further regional cooperation was deemed necessary.³⁹ They were unable to take part in the integration process because Tajikistan was engulfed in the Tajikistani Civil War (1992–1997), which was fought between government forces and different Islamist rebel organizations backed by the Taliban. Turkmenistan chose not joining the CIS or Central Asian integration in favor of maintaining its neutrality. On September 23, 1993, the remaining three republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan signed a pact to construct an economic union. On February 10, 1994, a "one economic space" was declared, and on July 8, 1994, an Interstate Council with an Executive Committee was established. In theory, the Central Asian Union is open to all CIS members.⁴⁰ The Union was given a military component as well. Tajikistan joined the CAU as an observer in 1996 while still engaged in civil conflict. A Council of Defence Ministers was established, and a peacekeeping force was established under the auspices of the UN. In September 1997, the peacekeeping force conducted its first training exercises on the soil of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The five former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan would form a new Central Asian Union, according to a proposal made by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev on April 26, 2007, to create an economic and political union akin to the EU⁴¹. The presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have thus far signed a document establishing an "International Supreme Council" between their two countries. A Treaty of Eternal Friendship has also been

³⁸ Esenov M. Central Asia on the Threshold of the 21st Century. Central Asia and the Caucasus. // www.ca-c.org/datarus/esenov3/1998-shtml

³⁹ Rumer, Boris; Zhukov, Stanislav (1998). Central Asia: The Challenges of Independence. New York: M.E. Sharpe. p. 104. ISBN 9780765632982. Retrieved 5 April 2018

⁴⁰Ibidem

⁴¹ Ibidem

signed between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. A free trade zone will also be established by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Even though the planned new union had the support of the presidents of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan by 2008, former Uzbek leader Islam Karimov flatly rejected it. But integration was once again discussed after Karimov's passing in 2016. Organizer and host Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, Sooronbai Jeenbekov of Kyrgyzstan, Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, and Akja Nurberdieva of the Turkmen parliament participated in the new Central Asian Summit on March 15 in Astana. The meeting was hosted at the Aqorda Presidential Palace by President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan. The leaders of Central Asia met for the first time in nearly ten years at this summit.⁴²

It is impossible to deny the existence of objective prerequisites that determine the necessity and reality of the integration of the Central Asian republics. There are a number of objective prerequisites that dictate the need to expand cooperation between the Central Asian republics. From the point of view of geographical position, all the republics are located in the central part of the Asian continent, far from the seas and oceans, as a result their geopolitical position is equally unfavourable, since they are completely dependent on neighbouring states in terms of access to trade routes. In any perspective, the well-being of these countries will be linked to the stability in certain states and the nature of relations with them.

In addition to the above-mentioned prerequisites for the integration of the Central Asian republics, economic prerequisites play perhaps the main role. Despite the fact that the economy of the republics, within the framework of the all-Union division of labour, had a largely one-sided agrarian and raw material specialization (taking into account their natural and climatic conditions) and served primarily the needs of the Union and other republics, many experts believe that in the course of the country's economic integration could largely complement each other: Turkmenistan

⁴²<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/fri-astana-hosts-little-publicised-central-asia-summit/>

was mainly focused on gas production, Uzbekistan - on cotton growing, Kyrgyzstan - on sheep breeding, Tajikistan - on hydropower.

On the other hand, it should be noted a number of factors that also have an ambiguous effect on the development of foreign economic relations of regional states, their economy as a whole and, accordingly, on the implementation of integration. For example, the region has rich reserves of such minerals as oil, gas, gold, uranium, zinc, etc., but they are unevenly distributed throughout the region: Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have the largest reserves. This circumstance, as well as the high costs associated with the process of extraction and processing of resources, should have pushed the countries of the region to strengthen cooperation in this area, but so far, rivalry is more likely to be seen in this area, as, for example, the development of the situation on the legal status of the Caspian Sea shows.

The creation of the Central Asian Community, and especially the Treaty of Eternal Friendship, in principle, laid the necessary legal basis for the development of integration in the region.

It appears that the region is moving toward unification at the moment, which will enable the Central Asian states to quickly find solutions to their challenges, especially those related to bolstering security. According to last year's data, Kazakhstan's GDP at purchasing power parity was \$460.7 billion, Uzbekistan – \$202.3 billion, while Turkmenistan – \$94.8 billion, Tajikistan – \$25.8 billion, and Kyrgyzstan – \$21 billion. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have had mutually complementary economies since Soviet times, including such industries as water use, energy, transport, agriculture, telecommunications, etc. All this creates a good basis for the revival of the Central Asian Union, which will allow Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to create a kind of "safety cushion" in the economy. Moreover, unlike the EAEU, it will be possible to try to involve not only Tajikistan in this association, but also Turkmenistan, with which Uzbekistan has developed good relations in recent years.⁴³

⁴³ Shustov A. Will Tashkent and Astana revive the Central Asian Union? / Eurasia Expert, February 21, 2017 <https://eurasia.expert/vozrodyat-li-tashkent-i-astana-tsentralno-aziatskiy-soyuz/>

However, recent efforts to advance regional integration did not exclude the creation of fresh foreign policy trajectories. The OSCE, Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Economic Cooperation Organization all accepted new members from the region's five states (it also includes Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan). There has been established communication with other international financial institutions like the Asian Bank, Islamic Development Bank, World Bank, IMF, and EBRD.

For example, one of the largest projects in this area was the TRACECA project. In May 1993, the states of the European Union signed the Brussels Declaration on the Development of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor or the TRACECA project (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), connecting the countries of Europe and Asia, provides for the implementation of cargo transportation through the network of railways and roads of Italy, Germany, France, Great Britain, Spain and Portugal through the Black Sea ports of Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Georgia in the Trans-Caucasus and further to Central Asia, China, Japan, South Korea⁴⁴. At the signing of the Brussels Declaration, it was stated that it was necessary to develop several alternative routes, so that it would be possible to choose the most profitable of them, depending on the types of goods and services.

Initially, it was about connecting the transport routes of the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus and the EU countries. Soon, however, China and Japan announced their participation in the proposed project. According to EU experts, the connection of the Central Asian and Chinese railways would open up additional opportunities for the development of combined transport. There would be a new line connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, which could function along with and in interaction with the Trans-Siberian Railway.

It must be admitted that the project to create an intermodal transport corridor, put forward by the European partners of the region within the framework of TRACECA, for the first time raised the issue of logistical

⁴⁴ Council of the EU, Council conclusions on Central Asia, 3179th Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 2012, 2.

unification of the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The project included the reconstruction and creation of new roads and railways, some Caspian and Black Sea ports, the creation of an infrastructure for the provision of road services, it provides for solving the problem of uniform tariffs, etc. According to experts, the communication infrastructure of Central Asia and the Caucasus did not meet the needs of their trade and economic relations. Accordingly, in order to realize the advantages of their favourable geographical position, the countries of both regions needed to make large investments in the development of transport and communication networks in a fairly short time.

In 2007, the EU adopted its first strategy for selected countries in Central Asia, entitled "The EU and Central Asia: a strategy for a new partnership". The focus was on cooperation in areas such as the environment and energy, as well as security, human rights and the rule of law. Undoubtedly, bilateral dialogue between the regions has expanded since then, and its results have been reflected in practice. In particular, the annual meetings of the ministers of the European Union and the states of Central Asia and the EU-Central Asia Permanent Dialogue on Human Rights were organized. These forums have been successful enough to analyse partnerships in specific areas and find solutions to existing problems.

EU neighbourhood policy in regional capacity building

The new impetus for regional cooperation was reflected in the first informal summit of Central Asian leaders in Astana in March 2018, which reinforced the relevance of the EU experience in developing joint solutions to common problems. Renewed efforts to develop Euro-Asian relations have increased the EU's interest in sustainable cooperation. The strengthening of relations between Central Asia and Afghanistan has set new parameters for the EU's efforts to bring peace to the country. New initiatives by some of the Central Asian states to play a more active role on global and regional issues will improve opportunities for cooperation with the European Union in pursuit of common goals.

"EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Closer Partnership" is the title of the new EU policy for Central Asia, which was adopted in

2019. Additionally, the policy seeks to identify new and expand already-existing sectors of bilateral collaboration. The new strategy's development was influenced by a variety of variables, including adjustments to its priority-setting.

While the 2007 priorities have not lost their relevance, the new strategy should consider recent developments in the region. After 2016, the foreign policy and good neighbourliness of Uzbekistan opened the door to regional cooperation, which became an important impetus for further strengthening relations with the European Union.

It should be noted that the attention and influence of the Central Asian states has increased recently to help stabilize Afghanistan. The EU Global Strategy for Foreign Policy and Political Security, adopted in 2016, has also served as another factor in the development of a new strategy for Central Asia.⁴⁵

The plan to develop a new strategy began in 2017. Then the Council of the European Union asked the High Representative and the Commission to present it by the end of 2019. This was followed by a series of consultations with the Central Asian governments, with a new strategy adopted in May 2019 and initially presented at the annual meeting of the High Representative and Foreign Ministers of the five Central Asian countries in Bishkek in July. In addition, the European Union has recognized the Republic of Uzbekistan as the 9th beneficiary country of a special system for stimulating sustainable development and good governance within the framework of the unilateral General Scheme of Preferences (GSP+).

The EU started enforcing these regulations with effect from April 10, 2021, on products imported from Uzbekistan. Comparing the GSP+ program to the present GSP standard program, Uzbekistan has got more economical benefits.⁴⁶ The abolition of tariffs on two-thirds of the products of the lines covered by the GSP creates opportunities for export growth from our country to the markets of 27 European countries and will

⁴⁵ Pantucci, R. 2018. Europe's pivot to Central Asia. RUSI Commentary. Accessed October 18, 2018. <https://rusi.org/commentary/europe%E2%80%99s-pivot-central-asia>

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uzbekistan-is-the-first-beneficiary-of-the-uk-enhanced-gsp-scheme--2>

attract additional investments into the country. In addition, the acceptance of Uzbekistan as a beneficiary of GSP+ reflects recognition of the reforms implemented by the government, supports the country in its economic development and building a more sustainable future, as well as promoting the benefits provided after joining GSP+. Uzbekistan, receiving the main benefits from this scheme and increasing its status, will now be able to increase the number of goods exported to the EU without import duties, to increase them from the previous 3,000 to 6,200 different categories and varieties.

European scholars Neil Winn and Stefan Ganzle analyzing specifics of European Neighbourhood Policy note, that “Comparing the 2007 and 2019 EU Central Asia Strategies has demonstrated that there has been a longstanding awareness for balancing bilateralism, multilateralism, and bi-regionalism in terms of the EU-Central Asia relationships. In terms of European external governance, we identified three key findings. 1) some of the EU-Central Asian normative ambitions, such as democratization of its “wider neighbourhood” has been brought into perspective with other objectives as well as the changing geopolitical context. It has not necessarily disappeared altogether from the EU’s foreign policy agenda though. 2) There is a greater awareness for non-exclusivity in the multi-level structure of the EU-Central Asia relationship both at the global, regional, and local levels. 3) Local-level players - such as the ones from other international organizations, civil society and parliaments are looked at as potential partners that help substantiate the relationship. In that sense, there is a greater “awareness” for locality of the relationship. With the opening of an EU mission to Turkmenistan the Union will also eventually be able to be more present at the “local” level, too”.⁴⁷

Most notably, the EU neighbourhood policy’s effect, the transition in foreign policy from normative power to principled pragmatism is vivid and apparent. But also, globally, the EU seems to be aiming for new markets dominated by rising major powers like China, India, and the

⁴⁷ Neil Winn & Stefan Ganzle (2022): Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy Vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience, Geopolitics, DOI: [10.1080/14650045.2022.2042260](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2042260) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2042260>

BRICS⁴⁸ while simultaneously creating a realistic strategy for managing larger challenges of global security, which focused on the influence of nearby neighbours on Europe's security, immigration, terrorism, and economic health, was the catalyst for this change. As a result, the EU prioritizes internal and external border security in its interactions with foreign parties⁴⁹.

Reflexive multilateralism as it has been reformed by the EU is also a suitable policy tool for the EU to advance its crucial interests in Central Asia at a time when China and Russia are growing in the region. The EU's and Central Asia's relations over the last 25 years have shown that pragmatic engagement is the convenient way to jointly pursue each party's interests and principles. The day when the EU attempted to impose its own form of "normative power Europe" on Central Asia has long since passed.⁵⁰

Because geography continues to influence geopolitics in the region, the revised EU strategy towards Central Asia (Council of the European Union 2019) is inadvertently following Chinese and Russian policy in the region. The interests of the EU Member States, "principled pragmatism," and resilience based on an outside-in view of international relations are increasingly guiding the EU's neighbourhood experience and attitude toward Central Asia.⁵¹

Such views of different scholars are well confirmed by the realities of the modern development of Central Asia. For example, over the past period, many changes have taken place in and around the region, while some issues have come to the fore, and some have lost their relevance. Such changes in the political, economic, social, cultural and other spheres

⁴⁸ Howorth, J. 2016. EU global strategy in a changing world: Brussels approach to the emerging powers. *Contemporary Security Policy* 37 (3):389–401. doi:10.1080/13523260.2016.1238728

⁴⁹ BOMCA. 2021. Border management in Central Asia. Accessed October 25, 2021. <https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/>

⁵⁰ Kassenova, N. 2016. The EU strategy for Central Asia: Imperatives and opportunities for change. A view from Kazakhstan. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Accessed February 7, 2017. http://www.fes-centralasia.de/files/assets/publikationen/Nargis%20Kassenova_new.pdf

⁵¹ European Union. 2016. Shared vision and common action: A stronger Europe - a global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy. Accessed June 14, 2017. http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf.

in the countries of the region, the results of which were studied in detail by the EU leadership, took these factors into account when developing a new strategy.

The change in the EU's regional strategy is connected with the reassessment by Brussels of its capabilities in Central Asia. Perhaps the EU now realizes that it no longer wants to manage regional processes on its own and that it needs to work with leading regional players on a range of issues to solve its logistical and economic problems.

Under the new conditions, it is not in the interests of Europe to actively interfere in the political life of Central Asia on the issue of "human rights" and oppose the policies of Russia and China in the region. Such an action would undermine the existing regional order, to which the EU had nothing to offer in return. Because the CSTO and the SCO guarantee the security of the region, and the Eurasian Economic Union will create a favourable transit zone. The European Union must take these factors into account.

One of the main goals of the new EU strategy is to strengthen security in Central Asia. In addition, the union is interested in expanding trade, including cooperation with energy suppliers in the region.

The strategy emphasizes the importance of the regions for each other, the need to intensify cooperation in the field of economy and security with the countries of Central Asia for the further development and integration of the European Union as a single organization.

Conclusion

The goal of the European Union is to strengthen ties with Central Asian nations. Bilateral agreements on strengthened partnership and cooperation with specific Central Asian republics will create the foundation for engagement with the European Union. In order to advance the connection between the EU and Central Asia and create programs for cooperation and development assistance, these combined contacts will help to mobilize comprehensive EU policies and tools.

Regional cooperation helps the Central Asian states to better manage their interdependence, unlock and increase their potential for

economic growth, influence in international affairs, and assert their independence and uniqueness. It is up to the Central Asian states themselves to determine the ways of developing voluntary forms of regional cooperation, and the European Union only supports these processes, based on its own experience on advantages of integration mechanisms.

EU-Central Asia Dialogue, EU-funded regional programs aim to promote joint solutions at the regional level in areas such as environment, water, climate change and sustainable energy, education, rule of law, sustainable communications, drug policy, security and prevention, radicalization, border control and promotion of regional trade.⁵²

The countries of the region, being traditional and natural parties to the negotiation process, maintain balanced and constructive relations with representatives of the Afghan government, which determines it as the main force in the international security system, where Central Asia has occupied and will continue to occupy an important determining position. In particular, this is clearly seen on the example of several international platforms: The International Contact Group on Afghanistan, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, the 6+2 and 6+3 Contact Groups are initiated by Uzbekistan and rehabilitated by the head of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev in the framework of the High-Level International Conference on Afghanistan: "Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Interoperability", held in March 2018.

Most likely, the Trans-Afghan logistics project "Termez - Mazar-i-Sharif - Kabul - Peshawar" promoted by the Republic of Uzbekistan in the near future can become the main transport route connecting the states of Central Asia along the shortest route (only 760 km.) to the Karakorum corridor and further to the Pakistani to the seaports of Karachi-Qasim and Gwadar, thereby reducing the length of almost all existing transit

⁵² Patricia Flor, "The European Union is not about imposing." Interview, Eurasian Dialogue 2, 2013, 4. See also: Peyrouse, S. 2015. EU strategy in Central Asia: Competition or cooperation? Aljazeera Report. Accessed February 7, 2022. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/12/20151269842242676.html> Rezaei, Z., and A. Haghighi. 2020. Evaluation of the European Union's transformative power in Central Asia. Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal 25 (108):1-32.

networks in the region by 30% with a projected throughput volume of cargo transportation of at least 15-20 million tons per year. The significance and effectiveness of the trans-Afghan project is associated with the synchronization of the construction of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway, which connects China with the countries of Central Asia along an alternative trans-regional route (433 km), in which the countries of the European Community are interested in.

The closely coordinated efforts of countries in the international arena in collaboration with entities like the European Union on the matters such as the peace and sustainable development of Afghanistan will undoubtedly strengthen the stability in Central Asia. Describing the regularity of such trends, S.Safoev, First Deputy of the Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan noted that today there is "... the need to create a legal and, in the future, an institutional framework for interaction on key issues of the international agenda and, first of all, to promote the socio-economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. The main factor in making the favourable environment in Central Asia irreversible is the strengthening of confidence-building measures. It is important to formulate principles, conceptual foundations for understanding the essence of processes, in the development of which a significant role is assigned not only to state and non-governmental, but also to private, business structures"⁵³.

The emergence of a new political environment in the area shows that the Central Asian nations' process of closer involvement in bolstering peace and stability in the region has become an objective reality, and openness in relations with one's nearest neighbours lays the groundwork for sustainable development throughout the entire world.

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⁵³ <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/05/13/afghanistan/>

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