

REGIONAL POLITICS

**THE EU IN CENTRAL ASIA:
STRATEGY IN THE CONTEXT OF
EURASIAN GEOPOLITICS**

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The European Union is slowly but surely becoming an entity able to pursue a coordinated foreign policy. Every geopolitical actor needs a strategy that can be applied both to all other big actors (the U.S., Russia, and China) and to the regions affecting Europe's security and prosperity (Central Asia is one of them). The Central Asian region is unique in the fact that it is "impacted" between the EU's largest and most important neighbor (Russia) and an emerging

megapower (China).¹ This means that the EU's regional policy is strongly affected by its relations with both powers. Here I intend to assess the EU's political prospects in Central Asia in the context of the relations among the European Union, Russia, and China.

¹ The term was used by Victor Bulmer-Thomas, former Director of Chatham House in his valedictory lecture "Living with Two Megapowers: The World in 2020" delivered on 6 December, 2006.

**The EU "Neighbors of Neighbors" Policy
in the Making in Central Asia**

So far the EU does not have a more or less complete Central Asian policy. Despite the fact that the TACIS program, which has been underway since 1991, brought over 1 billion Euro to the local

countries in the form of financial aid, United Europe has just become aware of the region as a very specific part of the post-Soviet expanse and of its geopolitical challenges.

In the 1990s, Europe regarded Central Asia as the most backward and undeveloped part of the CIS, unprepared to embrace Western standards and values. It was generally perceived as a source of non-traditional threats to European security (narco-traffic, WMD proliferation, epidemics, and migration). As distinct from the United States, Europe was, on the whole, not very impressed by Central Asia's geostrategic location in Eurasia and preferred to concentrate on Russia and the "western" CIS republics.

In the wake of 9/11 and in connection with the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the region moved into the center of the international coalition's strategic plans. Later, in the context of EU expansion of 2004 and 2007 and Europe's revived fears about its energy security caused by the January 2006 gas conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the interest in Central Asia became even greater. Within the framework of the counterterrorist operation and with Russia's consent, NATO countries set up their military bases in Central Asia: the U.S. deployed its military at the Manas airfield in Kyrgyzstan and in Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan; Germans came to Termez in the south of Uzbekistan, while the French appeared on the Tajik-Afghan border.

The EU's enlargement made the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan in particular) "neighbors of neighbors" of the European Union. Central Asia, which borders on the Southern Caucasus across the Caspian, has become part of Europe's sphere of special interest. Part of the interest Europe is paying to those "western" CIS countries that are demonstrating their Euro-Atlantic orientation on an increasingly greater scale is reflected in the EU's interest in Central Asia.

The Russia-Ukraine gas conflict caused a lot of concern in Europe. It does not like the current political trends in the Russian Federation, which is gradually moving away from democracy and becoming a more nationalist-minded country indulging in Great Power sentiments. If these trends develop, Russia might use the energy resources (gas in particular) it delivers to Europe as a political lever. Today, half of the imported gas comes to Europe from Russia; in future Europe's increased demand for fuel might make it even more dependent on potentially unreliable Moscow. The danger is too grave to be ignored: fuel sources should be diversified. Brussels looks at Central Asia as one such source.

These factors compelled the European elite to wake up to the need to arrive at a reasonable Central Asian strategy.

Today, the European leaders are busy revising their relations with Central Asia and the general situation there; they are assessing the prospects for cooperation with other actors (states), as well as the prospects for the EU's Central Asian policy.

Hedi Wegener, Chairperson of the German-Central Asian Group in the Bundestag, has described Europe's policy in Central Asia in the last 15 years as "rather aimless, unplanned and uncoordinated" and demonstrated cautious optimism by saying: "Europe's patchwork of relations with the Central Asian states" will transform into "a more strategic one that could help to stabilize this volatile region."²

The following documents provide a general idea of Europe's Central Asian policy:

European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007-2013 (Strategy 2007-2013 for short) elaborated under the guidance of Germany during its EU chairmanship and adopted in 2007, and a Joint Discussion Paper on the Strategy for Central Asia (Project) adopted in January 2007.³

² H. Wegener, "Central Asia: At Last Europe May Be Getting its Act Together," *Europe's World*, No. 5, Spring 2007, p. 16.

³ See: *European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007-2013*, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/ceeca/c_asia/index.htm], 14 May, 2007; Joint EUSR-General Secretariat. *Joint Discussion Paper on the Strategy for Central Asia (Project)*, available at [<http://www.kub.kz/article.php?sid=17234>], 28 April, 2007.

Strategy 2007-2013 demonstrates a broad approach to security, which means that it stresses that security and development are tied together. The EU intends “to promote the stability and security of the countries of Central Asia, to assist in their pursuit of sustainable economic development and poverty reduction and to facilitate closer regional cooperation both within Central Asia and between Central Asia and the EU.” To achieve this money will go to three priority spheres:

- (1) Central Asian regional cooperation and good neighborly relations (networks; environment; border and migration management, the fight against international crime, and customs; education, scientific and people-to-people activities);
- (2) reduction of poverty and increase in living standards;
- (3) promotion of good governance and economic reform.

This approach to the security and development issues is in line with Europe’s general security strategy of December 2003, which treated “a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union”⁴ as a priority. Europe has obviously shifted the emphasis from the military-political to non-traditional security aspects achieved through good governance.

This approach does not presuppose the direct confrontation and animosity typical of the traditional approaches to security that divided countries into friends and foes. It does presuppose, however, rivalry which brings to mind the Cold War ideological rivalry. Values, organizational principles, and standards cause dissent and contradictions in international relations.

The relations between the European Union and the Soviet successor states, including the Central Asian republics, are a vivid illustration of this. The Europeans insist on political and economic reforms Western-style, while the Central Asian countries and Russia insist on their “special ways” and on the temporary nature of their present lagging behind (the long road Europe covered before it reached its present development level is one of the favorite arguments).

Little by little the ideological confrontation is spreading to all other fields to degenerate into familiar geopolitical rivalry over the spheres of influence and interest. In the case of Central Asia, these are the military bases deployed to support the campaign in Afghanistan and the energy issue. While rejecting the idea of the “new dividing lines in Europe,” the EU is aware of the grim reality of the revived bitter geopolitical competition between Russia and the West.

While Strategy 2007-2013 mentions in passing Europe’s increasing dependence on imported energy fuels and the important role the oil- and gas-rich Central Asian countries may play in reducing this dependence, the document dated January 2007 pays much more attention to the need to create energy corridors between Central Asia and Europe via the Caucasus. It points to the “strong ambitions of Russia and China,” two “strategic heavyweights” interfering with the EU’s plans to tie the region’s resources and transportation potential together. It says, in particular, that “the economic presence of Russia and of key Asian partners of Central Asian states, concentrated on very targeted sectors and areas, has installed a competitive context in which the EU is not a major player, in spite of its substantial involvement.”

By “very targeted sectors and areas,” the document means the energy sector, while the RF and China are seen as the key rivals in the region’s energy sphere. Russia’s recent self-confidence is based mainly on the high oil and gas prices, which means its status depends on its ability to export its energy fuels to the world market. Very soon, however, inadequate funding of prospecting and extraction will make the extracted amounts insufficient for this purpose.⁵ Central Asian resources may help remedy

⁴ *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy, December 2003*, available at [<http://www.iss-eu.org/solana/solanae.pdf>], 23 March, 2007.

⁵ See: V. Milov, “Russian Energy Policy: Challenges and Implications,” Roundtable discussion meeting, Chatham House, 20 September, 2006, available at [<http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/viewdocument.php?documentid=7916>], 15 April, 2007.

the situation, which explains why in recent years the RF has been actively working in Central Asia and has been concentrating on acquiring the maximum possible oil and gas obligations from the local countries. Russia is also actively opposing all alternative transportation projects designed to deprive it of influence in the Central Asian raw material sphere.

Russia is stubbornly opposing the trans-Caspian gas pipeline through which gas from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan would reach the European markets, something that the EU badly needs. The May 2007 agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan on a gas pipeline along the Caspian shores seems to have buried the trans-Caspian project. There is the opinion, however, that the rumors of its death were premature.⁶ The Central Asian governments will postpone the final decision as long as they can and will use the alternative routes for bargaining. All the pros and cons will be carefully weighed. The outcome is still not quite clear. Russia's position is strong, but its "gas victory" is not final.

Another country with a strong interest in Central Asia's energy fuels is China, which is consistently augmenting its presence in the local energy sectors. An oil pipeline has recently been built between Kazakhstan and Western China (Atasu-Alashankou). There is an agreement between China and Turkmenistan on a gas pipeline that is expected to move considerable volumes of Turkmenian gas to China in the next 30 years, starting in 2009. The Chinese National Oil Company has several oil and gas contracts with Uzbekistan.⁷

China, Russia, and the West are competing for the Central Asian energy resources. It should be pointed out that if Russia succeeds in implementing its alternative, Central Asian oil and gas will finally reach Europe; if China gets the upper hand, Europe and Russia will be left out in the cold. This explains their keen interest in the construction projects in the East.

The European Union is busy adjusting its policy to reality, which can be described as uncompromising rivalry. While in the past the EU preferred not to be viewed as another influence-seeking force and left this role to the United States, Russia, and China, today Brussels is obviously concerned about its inability to compete with the other actors, Russia and China in particular.

For several reasons the EU has been unable to develop an adequate Central Asian strategy: first, it is not an easy task for a supra-national political project to arrive at a united foreign policy; second, there is no clarity about the future of its relations with Russia (until recently the region's key partner); third, and a more recent factor, the absence of clarity in the EU's relations with China.

European politicians and foreign policy experts are becoming increasingly aware that the European Union needs a Chinese strategy: the People's Republic of China is building up its economic weight and political influence while Central Asia serves as a connecting link between Europe and China.

The EU-Russia: Times of Troubles

The relations between the European Union and Russia are far from simple: the Russian Federation has essentially stopped mentioning its "European choice" in its official statements.

In fact, Moscow is hurling scathing criticism at new EU members, the Euro-Atlantic organizations (OSCE and NATO), and the West's double standards. The latest EU-RF summit in Samara stirred

⁶ See: I. Rubanov, "Ne po pravu sily," *Ekspert*, No. 19, 2007.

⁷ See: Xuanli Liao, "Central Asia and China's Energy Security," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2006, pp. 65-67.

up no hopes and was all but short of a flop. Typically enough, shortly before the summit the EU Institute for Security Studies deemed it necessary to discuss the subject of Russia being one of the EU's most difficult partners.⁸

In recent years the RF has gained a lot of confidence and moved away from the West for reasons about which there is no agreement in the expert community: some people blame the West, which abetted Russia's authoritarian trends and was reluctant to integrate it; others insist that the Russian elite itself was not ready to integrate into the West and indulged in the still live imperial sentiments of a former superpower seeking very special treatment.

Dmitry Trenin put this in a nutshell by saying that the Russian Federation is busy creating a "solar system of its own" separated from the Euroatlantic one in which it was no closer and no more important than Pluto.⁹ Since Russia treats the post-Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic states, as part of this system, it feels deprived of its old status, due to the fact that these republics are involved in the European neighborhood policy, that is, moving closer to integration into Europe.

In the process of enlargement, the European Union is doing its best to make it less painful for Russia to avoid the "new dividing lines" in Europe, but it does not hesitate in the face of Moscow's negative responses. Brussels is determined to involve Russia in mutually advantageous cooperation within the "neighborhood" post-Soviet expanse. The Russian Federation Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013, for example, describes "fostering the political and economic stability of the Federation and cooperation in various fields in order to combat 'soft' security threats, ...stepping up cooperation with Russia in the Southern Caucasus and Western NIS"¹⁰ as one of the EU's main interests.

The same paper describes Central Asia as a Russia-dominated region. It also points to the fact that not all of the Russian-Kazakhstani border has been delimited and that border control along the entire stretch is inadequate. As long as the Russian Central Asian border remains porous and open to threats from the south, the EU will never go very far toward easing the visa regime, something on which Moscow insists.¹¹

Russia's EU policy is of a defensive nature. The Survey of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy issued by the RF Foreign Ministry in March 2007 says nothing about Russia's cooperation with the European Union in the CIS countries. Instead, it contains indirect criticism of Brussels, which is trying "to influence the processes within the CIS," "restructure the European periphery according to alien patterns," put "pressure on the states that are not NATO and EU members to change their political vectors up to and including regime changes."¹²

The authors assert that "there are reasons to believe that Moscow's 'European choice' is shared by the societies and political elites of the other CIS countries" and that "personal example is the best method of paving the road to this goal."¹³ One wonders why Moscow does not rejoice at the post-Soviet republics' "European choice" made outside the CIS.

"Indirect" logic is another outstanding feature of strategy, or rather absence of strategy, in Russia-EU relations. According to two prominent British researchers, "both sides lack an overall strategic vision of the relationship and this deficiency is not remedied by their tendency to adopt grand programmatic schemes."¹⁴ When discussing the subject "Russia as the EU's difficult partner," members

⁸ See: EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 23 April, 2007, available at [<http://www.iss-eu.org/activ/content/rep07-04.pdf>], 10 May, 2007.

⁹ See: D. Trenin, "Russia Leaves the West," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006.

¹⁰ *Russian Federation Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013*, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/russia/csp/index.htm], 28 April, 2007.

¹¹ See: *Ibidem*.

¹² MID RF. "Obzor vneshney politiki Rossiiskoy Federatsii," 27 March, 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/3647DA97748A106BC32572AB002AC4DD], 5 April, 2007.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ M. Light, R. Allison, "The Place of Europe in Russian Foreign Policy," *Putin's Russia and the Enlarged Europe*, Chatham House Papers, Blackwell Publishing, London, 2006, p. 16.

of the workgroup likewise concluded that the RF leaders have no clear idea about their country's choice, which negatively affects its relations with Europe.

Having announced its "European choice," Russia refused to go further; those who support its speedy integration with the West have found themselves on the political roadside inside the country; EU membership, either full or associated, has been removed from Russia's agenda. In his article published on the eve of the EU's 50th anniversary, President Putin confirmed this by saying that in the near future his country had no plans to join the European Union or to become associated with it.¹⁵

Prominent Russian political scientist Sergey Karaganov partly blames Europe for the present state of its relations with Russia: "Today the temporarily weakened European Union, in which the 'new Europeans' (which the EU has not yet entirely integrated) play a great role, is dominated by frantic rivalry." In his opinion, the wait-and-see policy is the best one in this situation. After a while, he argues, Russian society will grow tired of "stability," and the possibility of reforms and a new development vector will appear.¹⁶

While Russian politicians and political analysts remain relatively composed, their European colleagues look disappointed and even concerned. They are trying to understand how they should treat this new confident Russia no longer wishing to integrate with the West; how to respond to the West's growing dependence on Russian gas, and how to combine inevitable cooperation with inevitable rivalry. The EU's Central Asian policy will depend on the answers to these questions.

The EU-China: "A Latter-Day Asian Empire at the Gates of the West"

While RF-EU relations and their subject range have become habitual and ramified, there is still no expertise or forecasting regarding China, another Eurasian giant. The EU Institute for Security Studies has undertaken an analysis of Europe's Chinese policies and published the results in the form of a book called *Facing China's Rise: Guidelines for a EU Strategy*.¹⁷

François Godement, one of the contributors, has pointed out that China is obviously moving ahead. This is "an international trade giant with ever-increasing military spending and hyperactive regional diplomacy both in Asia and throughout the developing world," says he, and goes on to point out that another bout of China's hegemony in Asia cannot be excluded and that there will be "a latter-day Asian empire at the gates of the West."¹⁸

The United States has been concerned about the "Chinese factor" for a long time now, while Europe has just begun pondering on how China's rise might affect its position and the global world order. Here are the main baffling questions: How will the relations between America, Europe's traditional and main ally, and progressing China, which will be determined to squeeze the U.S. from Asia, develop in future? How will this geopolitical shift affect the security of Asia, in which Europe has

¹⁵ See: V. Putin, "Polveka evropeyskoy integratsii i Rossia" (the article appeared in several European newspapers), 25 March, 2007, available at [<http://www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/03/120754.shtml>], 27 April, 2007.

¹⁶ S. Karaganov, "Kak Rossii popast v Evropu," *Novaia gazeta*, 6-13 April, 2007.

¹⁷ See: *Facing China's Rise: Guidelines for a EU Strategy*, ed. by M. Zaborowski, in: *Chaillot Paper*, December 2006, No. 94 (EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris).

¹⁸ F. Godement, "Neither Hegemon Nor Soft Power: China's Rise at the Gates of the West," *Facing China's Rise: Guidelines for a EU Strategy*, p. 51.

vast economic interest? What can Europe do in the context of the mounting geopolitical rivalry in Asia, especially between China and Japan?

So far the European countries have been demonstrating caution when dealing with China, designed to make it a “responsible participant” in international relations. Europe is China’s largest trade partner and an investment source; the sides are engaged in a dialog on a variety of issues in the bilateral and multilateral formats (the Asia-Europe Meeting, or ASEM is one of the examples). In 2003, it was announced that the EU and the PRC were strategic partners.

So far this strategy has not received concrete content and was even differently interpreted by the sides: Beijing expected that Brussels would lift the embargo on selling weapons to China, while the EU did not do this, even though such a possibility was discussed. An embargo was introduced in 1998 after the Tiananmen events; its lifting is contingent on the human rights issue in China. Before lifting it, the EU expects Beijing to ratify the U.N. Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and release those who were imprisoned in 1998.¹⁹

As could be expected the U.S. and Japan were dead set against lifting the embargo. Brussels, on the other hand, feels responsible for Asian security and the EU’s role in it. Since China has been purposefully increasing its military budget (over 10 percent during the last 17 years), and since there is a smoldering conflict between continental China and Taiwan, which might develop into a war between China and America, the EU preferred to preserve the embargo to the great disappointment of its new “strategic partner.” The transparency of China’s military spending is another, newly formulated condition under which Brussels would be prepared to lift the embargo. In addition, China cannot rejoice at the newly established EU-U.S. and EU-Japan dialogs on security in Eastern Asia.

The current Asian context is not the Europeans’ only headache—they are very concerned about China’s mounting influence the world over and the way it is affecting politics in the developing countries, especially in Africa. As distinct from the West, China’s financial, technical, and military aid has no strings attached in the form of human rights conditions. This has helped China to draw the leaders of not particularly democratic states rich in natural resources to its side. This policy is known as the “Beijing consensus,” as opposed to the “Washington consensus.”

Central Asia is another arena of rivalry from which China is more or less successfully driving away the West, which is brandishing its values and principles there. At the June 2004 SCO summit, Beijing offered the SCO members soft loans totaling \$900 million.²⁰ The EU is obviously involved in a hard battle over Central Asian resources. On the one hand, it is endangering its position by insisting on the human rights issue, on the other, it cannot drop it lest it loses its identity.

Central Asia in the Eurasian Strategic Triangle (the EU-Russia-China)

The three centers of power are working toward changing the international balance of forces. The RF and China can be described as classical examples of states dissatisfied with their place in the current world order: Russia is seeking the global power status it lost along with the Soviet Union and its former sphere of influence in the post-Soviet expanse. China, after a “century of humilia-

¹⁹ See: A. Berkofsky, “The EU-China Strategic Partnership: Rhetoric versus Reality,” *Facing China’s Rise: Guidelines for a EU Strategy*, p. 105.

²⁰ See: V. Panfilova, “Uzbekistan zarabotal na sammite SCO pochti 4 milliarda dollarov,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 30 June, 2004.

tion,” which lasted from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, wants to restore its traditional hegemony over Asia. Both countries favor multipolarity to trim the current status of the United States as the only superpower.

The European Union belongs to another category of revisionist states: its enlargement is not aimed at prestige or restored status: security is its only aim. It is out to create a “belt of stable and prospering states” on its borders by drawing their political and economic systems closer to the European patterns and standards. The EU looks fairly attractive as a successful political project and economic giant. This is its main weapon.

Russia regards Central Asia as part of the sphere of its vital interests. This is a traditional approach: in the past, the region was consecutively part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. China regards the Central Asian republics as its strategic rear to be kept under control for the sake of security of its western provinces. The European Union regards the region and its republics as “neighbors of neighbors.” It deems it necessary to build up its influence there for the sake of Europe’s security. The three actors are obviously after the region’s rich natural resources.

Early in the 1990s, Zbigniew Brzezinski described Central Asia as a “power vacuum” in which none of the powers could claim hegemony.²¹ Russia, China, and the United States (the latter with ebbs and flows) are trying to fill in the vacuum. The European Union is becoming involved in the game. Since the U.S. is geographically removed from the region its interests there will not necessarily be long-term, they might vary. The Eurasian actors (Russian, China, and the EU) will be drawn into regional rivalry on a grand scale.

The future of the local republics depends on how the relations between the three actors unfold. There are three preliminary alternatives. Under the first of them, Russia will move even further away from the European Union and will draw closer to China to set up an anti-Western front in the multipolar system. China will acquire more weight, which Russia will find hard to balance out. Working together they will be able to minimize Central Asia’s integration with the West, thus causing irreparable damage to the region’s political future.

Under the second alternative, Russia will preserve the status quo and will remain an autonomous force waging its own game and keeping away from the EU and China. Russia will avoid showing preferences in its competition with both rivals. The local countries will use the situation to insist on favorable conditions and, in this way, will undermine their long-term prospects. Day-by-day policy deprived of long-term planning is not the best of options. Russia will do its best to integrate the Central Asian republics—the project, though, does not look promising.

Under the third alternative, Russia will resume its integration with the West; there is any number of politicians and political scientists in the West and in Russia who are looking forward to this. China’s growing might is seen as one of the reasons for Russia’s resumed integration with the West. In one his interviews, René van der Linden, President of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, pointed out with a lot of chagrin that Russia and the EU are moving apart, even though they have many interests in common, China’s growing might be one of the reasons.²²

Roy Allison believes that Russia and the EU should coordinate their Asian policy. In fact, this may become the central link in their relations: “Russia’s uneasiness about the proximity of China as a rising power from a geopolitical point of view could be reduced through deeper structural cooperation with the EU.”²³

Those politicians and political experts in Russia who support the “European choice” for their country agree with the above. They are convinced that the West will also profit from its integration

²¹ See: Z. Brzezinski, *The Great Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 124.

²² See: “Evropeyskiy dom bez truby,” *Novaia gazeta*, 26 January-2 February, 2007.

²³ R. Allison, “Russian Security Engagement with the European Union,” *Putin’s Russia and the Enlarged Europe*, p. 80.

with Russia. Sergey Karaganov, for example, speaks of a super-alliance strategically advantageous for the EU because of Russia's vast territory, armed forces, and resource potential.

If Russia resumes its Western trend, Central Asia's future will be vague: will Moscow move further from the problem region (this already happened in the early 1990s)? It is thought that a visa-free regime between Russia and the EU will call for tighter control on Russia's southern borders.²⁴ Will Russia try, with Europe's help, to bring more order to Central Asia? So far those in Russia who support the European choice for their country prefer to ignore the issue.

Prospects for EU Policy in Central Asia

Judging by the key documents, the EU has decided to build up its influence in Central Asia and join in the rivalry with Russia and China, two other big actors. It has enough resources to do this. First, the European political and economic models and values are tempting. The Central Asian population has already learned to look at Europe as a vehicle of modern civilizational values: the political opposition and the civil sectors appeal to them, while the ruling elite cannot continue ignoring them either. Second, the EU is a strong economic power close enough to the region to profit from this. It is the main source of investments and technical innovations. Third, the EU, together with the United States, is setting up an alternative to Russia's and China's domination in the region. The local political elites are fully aware of this.

The European Union has its weak sides, too: first, a coordinated foreign policy is hard to achieve in a multinational alliance; second, so far its knowledge about the region is inadequate (experts in Central Asia are few and far between in Europe); third, the distance between the EU and Central Asia is comparatively large, which is not a weakness, rather a factor that diminishes Europe's interest in Central Asia (drawing closer will obviously require much effort).

Potential EU membership is the strongest weapon the EU uses to enlarge its spheres of influence. This helped transform the Central and East European states and accelerated reforms in Turkey. In the case of Central Asia, EU membership is not a prospect, but closer involvement in the Neighborhood Program could stimulate the local countries' pro-European orientation. If Central Asia remains outside the transport corridors that start in the Southern Caucasus, Europe's energy security will be impaired.

If Europe abandons Central Asia to Russia and China, the region may develop, in the long term, into a source of threats, since neither Moscow nor Beijing will be able to cope with its problems. Central Asia is a conflict prone area, which means that the EU should be prepared for unfavorable situations and arm itself with preventive measures.

So far I have regarded Central Asia as a single whole and a target of the EU's Central Asian strategy. However, this approach explains only a part of the problem. Successful policy depends on profound knowledge of the specific features of each of the countries.

Despite all sorts of integration projects and alliances, the Central Asian countries are becoming increasingly distinct from each other; they are drifting apart as far as their politics and economy are concerned. Kazakhstan has traveled farther than its Central Asian neighbors along the road of market reforms and has attracted considerable foreign investments. Thanks to the high oil prices, its GDP is higher than the total GDP of all the other Central Asian countries put together. The political systems of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan can all be described as authoritarian with

²⁴ See: M. Light, "Russian Political Engagement with the European Union," *Putin's Russia and the Enlarged Europe*, p. 59.

considerable distinctions. Kazakhstan's relatively liberal authoritarian regime looks better against the background of the highly authoritative system of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and the "barely defrosted" totalitarian system of Turkmenistan. The Tulip Revolution that removed Askar Akaev left Kyrgyzstan in a state of perpetual crisis with no end in sight.

The European Union cannot accept cooperation with authoritarian regimes: this prospect is neither attractive nor acceptable. European politicians are facing and will face all kinds of dilemmas—they will either have to defend human rights and undermine their economic and other interests or ignore human rights violations and impair their reputation. The absolutely correct thesis about the highly effective policy of involvement and low effectiveness of sanctions cannot be applied to each specific situation.

From the geopolitical viewpoint, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are weak states. This explains their enthusiasm over Russia's patronage. Judging by the latest events, Turkmenistan is moving in the same direction. Kazakhstan, the key Russian integration ally and partner, will continue balancing its interests for some time thanks to its greater political weight. While maintaining contact with each of the republics, the EU should concentrate on Kazakhstan as a country ready for all-round cooperation and free in its actions, even though the degree of its readiness and freedom is fairly low.

While pursuing its Central Asian policy, the EU should concentrate on its relations with Russia. Today it prefers to cooperate with Russia across the post-Soviet expanse, but it is becoming increasingly harder to stick to it in the context of the mounting geopolitical rivalry. Russia-EU partnership in Central Asia is the most favorable for the region. If the European countries manage to convince Moscow that cooperation in Central Asia will serve the interests of both sides, the region will have a chance to stabilize the situation and start developing.

The Eurasian expanse is a field on which the EU can operate; it is also a source of threats and possibilities. The EU's future as a geopolitical actor depends on whether the EU will manage to elaborate and implement an effective strategy in relation to the other Eurasian giants—Russia and China—as well as Central Asia.