

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU STRATEGIC PRIORITIES IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The Central Asian region has never been a priority area of EU external policy, although the European Union Global Strategy underlines its support for multilateralism in global strategy. The European Union has been more actively engaged in the region since the launch of the New Great Game in Central Asia between China, Russia and the U.S. Following the “neigh-

bors of neighbors” concept, the EU shapes its relations with post-Soviet Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) on the basis of multilateral strategies and bilateral partnership agreements. The first comprehensive EU strategic document focused on post-Soviet Central Asia, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, was con-

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cluded in 2007. Despite some allegations that the strategy should take into account the individual needs and specificities of each country, it should be emphasized that the strategy intensified mutual relations between Central Asia and the EU, as well as the EU's institutional presence in the region, mainly in terms of political and diplomatic dialog. Due to a dynamic approach, the analysis undertaken in the research study

allowed for the presentation of positive and negative tendencies, changes and reversals in the implementation of the particular components of the previous EU strategy towards Central Asian countries over time.

It should be noted that most objectives outlined in its normative strategy towards Central Asia were achieved to a limited extent, especially in terms of democratization and civil society.

KEYWORDS: *European Union, Central Asia, post-Soviet countries, EU strategy towards Central Asia.*

Introduction

Over the years, the EU has utilized technical and financial instruments to activate its presence in Central Asia and institutionalized mutual cooperation in both multilateral and bilateral formats. Following the vision of “neighbors of neighbors,” the EU establishes its relations with post-Soviet Central Asia on the basis of multilateral strategies and bilateral partnership and cooperation agreements.¹ The first comprehensive EU strategic document focused on post-Soviet Central Asia, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, was concluded in 2007.² Despite some allegations that the strategy should take into account the individual needs and specificities of each country, it should be emphasized that the strategy intensified mutual relations between Central Asia and the EU, as well as the EU institutional presence in the region, mainly in terms of political and diplomatic dialogue.

In 2019, in its Joint Communication on the new strategy *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*,³ the European Commission stated that the EU and Central Asia have reached an “unprecedented level of cooperation” and “opened up new opportunities” for a new partnership.⁴ Kazakhstan’s authorities perceive the new EU strategy as visionary and flexible,⁵ whereas Peter Burian, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, stresses that the EU needs to

¹ See: A. Konopelko, “The European Union Policy Towards the Post-Soviet Countries of Central Asia,” in: *Can Business Challenges in the Changing Economic Landscape?*, ed. by B.M. Huseyin, H. Danis, E. Demir, U. Khan, Springer Publishing, Cham, 2016, pp. 423-435.

² See: “Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the Period 2007-2013,” available at [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/rsp/07_13_en.pdf], 21 June, 2020.

³ See: “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on ‘The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership’,” European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf], 19 June, 2020.

⁴ A. Aubakir, “New EU Strategy for Central Asia: History, Vision, Prospects,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, 2020, pp. 7-14.

⁵ See: “EU and Central Asia: A New Strategy: Special Report,” EURACTIV, available at [<https://en.euractiv.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/special-report/EURACTIV-Special-Report-EU-and-Central-Asia-A-new-strategy.pdf>], 14 June, 2020.

“strengthen the capacity of Central Asian states and societies to overcome internal and external shocks, not as a rival player but as a reliable partner for the region.”⁶

The main research objective of this paper is to analyze and assess the implementation of the EU strategic priorities in post-Soviet Central Asia. The article evaluates the scope and degree of the implementation of the EU strategy in the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in 2008-2018. A dynamic analysis of the implementation of the key objectives outlined in the strategy allowed to fill the research gap by examining trends and changes in the level of the involvement of particular Central Asian republics in the process of institutional cooperation with the EU. Over the selected period of time between 2008 and 2018, certain tendencies and reversals may be observed from a medium- or long-term perspective. A novel research approach proposed in the article is complementary to the existing studies on mutual relations between the EU and Central Asia and on the strategic role of the EU in the region. The empirical measurement of the selected indicators enabled the presentation and analysis of both positive and negative tendencies in implementing the particular components of the EU strategy in Central Asian countries.

Literature Overview

The Central Asian region is perceived as a strategic zone of interests, not only for its huge reserves of natural resources and security importance, but also for its strategic location between Asia and Europe and its status as an important transport corridor in transcontinental routes.⁷ Nevertheless, the Central Asian region has never been a priority area of EU external policy, although the European Union Global Strategy underlines its support for multilateralism.⁸

EU external policy towards the Central Asian region has been shaped by the political and economic influence of other external players in the region and the launch of a “New Great Game.” Over time, the roles of particular players have been dynamic and subject to change.⁹ Undoubtedly, the visibility of Russia and China has increased significantly, whereas the Western partners, the U.S. and the EU, have reduced their active presence. Russia traditionally perceives the Central Asian region as a natural zone of influence and the near abroad.¹⁰ However, in recent years, the Russian Federation’s vision of regional integration have been affected by China’s growing involvement in Central Asia, as well. China, as a major trade partner, key foreign investor and proponent of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road interregional initiatives (BRI), has become a main geopolitical and economic player in the region, which has weakened Russian integration initiatives.¹¹ On

⁶ See: J. Itzek, “‘Central Asia Has Always Been Important for Europe’: The Influence of Political Heavyweights China and Russia in Central Asia Grows. Peter Burian on Europe’s Role in the Region,” available at [<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/international-relations/article/show/central-asia-has-always-been-important-for-europe-3676>], 20 June, 2020.

⁷ See: K. Czerewacz-Filipowicz, A. Konopelko, *Regional Integration Processes in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Economic and Political Factors*, Springer Publishing, Cham, 2017, p. 347.

⁸ See: “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy,” European Union External Action, available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf], 22 June, 2020.

⁹ See: N. Collins, K. Bekenova, “Fueling the New Great Game: Kazakhstan, Energy Policy and the EU,” *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 15, No.1, 2017, pp. 17-18; A. Konopelko, K. Czerewacz-Filipowicz, “The Strategy of the Eurasian Economic Union Extra-Regional Integration,” *WSEAS Transactions on Business and Economics*, Vol. 18, 2021, pp. 67-68.

¹⁰ See: S. Krapohl, A. Vasileva-Dienes, “The Region That Isn’t: China, Russia and the Failure of Regional Integration in Central Asia,” *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 18, 2019, pp. 347-366.

¹¹ See: S. Yilmaz, L. Changmin, “China’s ‘Belt and Road’ Strategy in Eurasia and Euro-Atlanticism,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 2, 2018, pp. 262-271; K. Czerewacz-Filipowicz, A. Konopelko, “Can the EAEU Deliver External Integration to Business?” *European Research Studies Journal*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, 2020, pp. 515-528.

the other hand, such deep engagement of China in Central Asia definitely affects the current architecture of regional integration created by the Russian Federation. The United States perceives the region as a guarantee of security, but also a possible option for regional economic and energy integration.¹²

Most scientific research studies on EU policy in Central Asia emphasize the normative role of the EU and its “normative power”¹³ due to its legal, values-based approach and its status as a bearer of democratic values.¹⁴ Such regulatory regionalism¹⁵ as an element of the EU’s soft power is subject to criticism due to its ineffectiveness, unilateral Eurocentric approach¹⁶ and visible divergences between the interests of Central Asian states and the EU.¹⁷

The EU creates its multilateral policy towards Central Asia by means of strategic documents; however, they cannot be called typical strategies.¹⁸ They formulate key strategic priorities and detailed goals, but in typical strategic documents the objectives are measurable, real, feasible and time-based; thus, their fulfilment within a pre-determined period of time is considered realistic. The EU 2007 strategy is of a general nature without detailed implementation instruments, SWOT analyses and precise deadlines; however, it can be defined as an instrument of EU external policy.

In his evaluation of the 2007 strategy, Neil Melvine noted a small amount of progress in the implementation of the EU strategic objectives, especially in terms of democratization and rule of law issues, while the EU’s increased institutional engagement in Central Asia was stressed.¹⁹ Nevertheless, according to Jos Boonstra, the current EU presence in Central Asian region was insufficient, and cooperation in the energy sector has not developed significantly.²⁰ Similarly, in its report, the European Court of Auditors emphasized that “the regional programs did not achieve a genuine regional dimension; a significant share consisted merely of ‘multi-country’ facilities available to each partner country individually.”²¹

In its 2019 framework document, The EU’s New Central Asia Strategy, the EU Parliamentary Research Service underlined a limited amount of progress in the implementation of the EU 2007 strategic objectives.²² Only three out of 13 areas evaluated in the scorecard by the Research Service noted a good level of progress. The largest improvements were observed in diplomatic relations and political dialog. Such conclusions prove the resistance among authoritarian political leaders resulting from a reluctance to change their constitutional regulations and democratize their political regimes, and from a will to preserve the *status quo*.²³

¹² See: H. Khan, “Russia and Central Asia: The Eurasian Orientation of Development,” *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2019, pp. 21-22.

¹³ See: I. Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2002, pp. 235-258.

¹⁴ See: R. Dragneva, K. Woleczuk, “Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?” *Russia and Eurasia Programme Briefing Paper*, Vol. 1, 2012, p. 9.

¹⁵ See: P. Jones, “Regulatory Regionalism and Education: The European Union in Central Asia,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2010, pp. 59-85.

¹⁶ See: A. Konopelko, “Eurasian Economic Union: A Challenge for EU Policy towards Kazakhstan,” *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2018, pp. 1-17.

¹⁷ See: A.M. Angheliescu, “European Union and Central Asia: Past Directions and Future Perspectives,” *CES Working Papers*, Vol. X, No. 3, 2018, pp. 283-284.

¹⁸ See: N. Kassenova, “The EU Strategy for Central Asia: Imperatives and Opportunities for Change. A View from Kazakhstan,” available at [http://www.fes-centralasia.org/files/assets/publikationen/Nargis%20Kassenova_new.pdf], 26 March, 2020.

¹⁹ See: N. Melvin, “The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy,” *EUCAM Policy Brief*, Vol. 28, 2012, p. 1.

²⁰ See: J. Boonstra, “EU Central Asia Policy: Steady as She Goes,” *Central Asia Policy Brief*, Vol. 4, 2012, pp. 1-5.

²¹ See: “EU Development Assistance to Central Asia,” European Court of Auditors, available at [https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR13_13/QJAB13014ENN.pdf], 18 July, 2020.

²² See: M. Russell, “The EU’s New Central Asia Strategy,” 2019, available at [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/Reg-Data/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)633162_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/Reg-Data/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162_EN.pdf)], 5 July, 2020.

²³ See: K. Shyrokykh, “Policy-Specific Effects of Transgovernmental Cooperation: A Statistical Assessment across the EU’s Post-Soviet Neighbours,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2019, pp.149-168.

The Analysis of the Implementation of the Previous EU Strategy Towards Central Asia. Research and Results

The research was carried out in five selected post-Soviet Central Asian countries covered by The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership adopted on 30 May, 2007.²⁴ The analysis focuses on the period between 2008 and 2018, beginning with the moment of the implementation of the EU strategy.

The study is developed through the empirical analysis, overview and interpretation of official data and documents of the European Union and other international institutions. The research is based on 24 indicators grouped by particular categories indicated in the EU strategy as key priorities. The data were collected from Freedom House, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Transparency International, the International Criminal Court, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the European Commission, World Bank Group, the Heritage Foundation, the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI), British Petroleum (BP), the World Economic Forum, the Institute for Economics and Peace and ACN International.

There are several limitations to this analysis. It is not easy to examine certain EU priorities by means of measurable indicators year-to-year, or even within two-year periods, because they are projected for several years and their results may be visible only from a medium- or long-term perspective. In addition, during the research process the author was faced with the lack of complete data in particular rankings available for certain years or for certain countries. The author is aware that the selected Central Asian countries, despite being situated in the same region and belonging to the post-Soviet legacy, differ from each other by many internal historical, political, cultural and economic conditions. Nevertheless, the selected longer time period allowed for the indication and comparison of certain regularities, tendencies and reversals in the implementation of EU strategy in specific countries.

The EU strategy of 2007 outlined seven key priorities.²⁵ The first priority, namely, "Human rights, the rule of law, good governance and democratization" has been perceived as the most important in terms of its normative approach to Central Asian countries. However, when we look at the scores demonstrated by the selected international institutions and compare them with the implementation of other priorities, the results are not particularly optimistic.

In 2008-2018, no substantial progress was noted in the democratic performance of Central Asian political regimes. According to the Freedom in the World reports²⁶ prepared by the Freedom House on the basis of political rights and civil liberties ratings, Kyrgyzstan has remained a partly free regime, whereas the rest of the republics are non-free regimes. In turn, using its Democracy Indexes based on 60 indicators in five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture, the Economist Intelligence Unit noted an improvement in Kyrgyzstan, which evolved from an authoritarian regime in 2008 to a hybrid regime in 2018.²⁷ Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have demonstrated limited progress in their ranks, but in general four of the Central Asian countries have remained authoritarian regimes.

²⁴ See: "Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the Period 2007-2013," available at [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/rsp/07_13_en.pdf], 21 June, 2020.

²⁵ See: *Ibidem*.

²⁶ See: "Freedom in the World," Freedom House, available at [<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>], 2 April, 2020.

²⁷ See: Economist Intelligence Unit "Democracy Index," available at [<https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>], 2 April, 2020.

The results of the evaluation of political rights and civil liberties presented by Freedom House²⁸ are highly pessimistic, which proves that human rights are not respected in the selected countries. In 2008-2018 the overall trend was negative. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the scores have not changed, remaining at the lowest level, whereas the scores in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have worsened, and Kyrgyzstan's score remained stable—but also at a low level.

In its Nations in Transit reports, Freedom House assesses the state of democracy in the countries of Eurasia by means of selected measures such as national and regional governance, judiciary, corruption in the media and civil society.²⁹ Almost all Central Asian republics represent consolidated authoritarian regimes, which means that their authoritarian presidents prevent political competition and pluralism, and they are responsible for violations of political and civil rights. Neither the legislative, nor executive, nor the judiciary branches or the media are independent. Civil society organizations are highly limited in terms of their participation in the public sphere. A declining trend in all these categories may be discernible. Between 2008 and 2018, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan consistently occupied the lowest ranks in all categories. A slight improvement was noted in 2018 in Uzbekistan within the independent media and civil society categories. The situation in national democratic governance and independent media in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remains stable, but, once again, at a low level. The most visible regression is observed in independent judiciary and civil society areas in all the selected republics.

As demonstrated in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index³⁰ in 2008-2018, almost all Central Asian republics (except for Tajikistan) have made progress in the rankings. However, the results may rather be due to a greater regression of other countries, all the more so because, as recorded in the Freedom House's Nations in Transit reports, these countries (except for Kyrgyzstan) have noted negative tendencies in their "corruption" scores.

One of the key objectives in the framework of the first priority of the EU 2007 strategy was "the adoption of the necessary legal adjustments required to accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)."³¹

The Court investigates the most serious crimes such as war crimes, genocide, crimes of aggression and crimes against humanity. According to the International Criminal Court, only Tajikistan (in 2000) signed and ratified the document, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed—but have never ratified—the Rome Statute. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have not managed to sign the document.³²

When we observe the implementation of the second priority of the EU strategy towards Central Asia, "Investing in the future: 'youth and education'," which covers the development of all stages of education and Internet-based communication networks, the assessment results are more positive than in the case of the first priority.

Over the period of 2008-2018, almost all post-Soviet Central Asian republics improved their scorecards in the Education index, which is one of the components measured by the UNDP in the framework of the Human Development Index.³³ The education component is measured by years of schooling for adults and expected years of schooling for children. Only Tajikistan noted a slight de-

²⁸ See: "Freedom in the World."

²⁹ See: "Nations in Transit," Freedom House, available at [<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>], 3 April, 2020.

³⁰ See: "Corruption Perception Index," Transparency International, available at [<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi#>], 25 April, 2020.

³¹ "Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the Period 2007-2013."

³² See: United Nations Treaty Collection, available at [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVIII-10&chapter=18&clang=_en], 28 April, 2020.

³³ See: "Human Development Index," United Nations Development Program, available at [<http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>], 1 May, 2020.

cline between 2009 and 2017. In 2015, the Central Asian countries were included in the EU Erasmus+ exchange program. As we may observe, the total number of students and staff moving to Europe has increased, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; whereas in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan these figures have been moderately stable, but in Uzbekistan they have declined over the last two years.³⁴

When it comes to Internet communication, the UNDP also investigates the number of Internet users through its Human Development Index.³⁵ According to the reports, the total number of Internet users has increased in all republics that were the subjects of research. The highest growth was noted in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where the percentage of Internet users in the total population has increased from 3% in 2010 to more than 21% in 2018 in Turkmenistan, and from almost 16% in 2010 to more than 52% in 2018 in Uzbekistan. Growth figures in the rest of the countries have doubled or tripled as well.

Under the third priority, “Promotion of economic development, trade and investment,” part of the EU strategy is to support the Central Asian countries in their accession to the World Trade Organization. This goal has been partially implemented. While Kyrgyzstan joined the WTO before 2007, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan joined in 2015 and 2013, respectively. Uzbekistan still has an observer status, while Turkmenistan has not begun the accession process.³⁶

The 2007 strategy also put emphasis on the bilateral dimension of mutual cooperation, therefore aiming “to fully implement the trade and economic provisions of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs).”³⁷

In actual fact, only Kazakhstan has successfully concluded such negotiations, signing a new enhanced PCA with the EU in 2015, whereas Tajikistan has not yet begun negotiations. Some provisions are being negotiated with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan under the proposed new enhanced PCAs, while Turkmenistan is negotiating new provisions with the European Union based on the Interim Trade Agreement.³⁸

As for EU institutional involvement in Central Asia, the opening of EU delegations in Central Asian countries (especially the most recent in Turkmenistan in 2019) and the establishment of the EU Special Representative in Central Asia should be perceived positively.

The World Bank Group, in its Doing Business reports, investigates 12 various areas of activity that affect business in 190 countries.³⁹ The rankings demonstrate the regulations on: starting a business, dealing with construction permits, obtaining electricity, registering property, obtaining credit, protecting minority investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts, resolving insolvency, employing workers, and entering contracts with the government.

The ease of doing business has been explored in four Central Asian countries due to a lack of available data from Turkmenistan. The rankings demonstrate the regular progress of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan between 2008 and 2018, which advanced by 42, 33 and 62 positions, respectively. Following the initial growth, Kyrgyzstan has noted a decline and remained stable. The World Bank Reports emphasize that all the evaluated republics made efforts to implement regulatory reforms to make it easier to start a business, gain access to credit, trade across borders, enforce contracts, pay taxes and export products faster.

³⁴ See: “Erasmus+,” European Commission, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/factsheets_en], 7 May, 2020.

³⁵ See: “Human Development Index,” United Nations Development Program.

³⁶ See: World Trade Organization, available at [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/org6_e.htm], 28 April, 2020.

³⁷ See: “Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the Period 2007-2013.”

³⁸ See: “Central Asia,” European Union External Action, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/regions/central-asia/2068/central-asia_en], 22 May, 2020.

³⁹ See: “Doing Business,” World Bank Group, available at [<https://www.doingbusiness.org>], 28 April, 2020.

Similar research outcomes have been reflected in the Heritage Foundation's reports on the Index of Economic Freedom.⁴⁰ The rankings concentrate on four key categories: the rule of law, the size of government, regulatory efficiency and market openness, in which 12 components are measured. From the point of view of the research, business freedom, investment freedom and financial freedom turned out to be the most relevant components. The business freedom component assesses the impact of regulatory and infrastructure constraints on procedures, time and costs of starting, operating and closing a business. A maximum of 100 points is assigned to the freest business environment. Apart from Turkmenistan, which has remained at a low but stable position of 30 points, and Kyrgyzstan, which recorded a slight decline, the rest of the evaluated countries have noted regular improvements in their business freedom scores. The highest growth, by more than 22 points, was observed in Tajikistan. The investment freedom index measures regulatory restrictions imposed on investment. The results are not as optimistic as in the case of the business freedom index. The worst situation is observed in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where the governments imposed many restrictions on foreign investment and specific sectors. In Tajikistan, the marks have worsened, whereas those of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have slightly improved and remained at an average level.

The regulatory environment of the investment sector was revealed in the dynamics of foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows. According to the World Investment Reports by the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development,⁴¹ the general trend in all Central Asian countries is negative. Following the initial growth in 2009 and 2010, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have noted a decline in their FDI inflows, whereas Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have recorded a regular drop since 2008: in 2018 they reached their lowest levels of FDI inflows. In Tajikistan, the trend in FDI inflows has remained changeable. Following an initial decline, it noted slight improvements, but since 2015 has again recorded a regular fall in foreign investment.

The financial freedom index⁴² evaluates government regulations and influence on financial services and markets and openness to foreign competition. The Heritage Foundation underlines that, in all the selected Central Asian countries, financial institutions and services are subject to significant restrictions, and in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan the financial systems are near-repressive. None of the countries seem to have made progress in 2008-2018. Furthermore, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have recorded a regular decline in their scores.

The biennial Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index assesses the transformation towards democracy and a market economy, as well as the quality of political management, in more than 130 countries.⁴³ The Ranking Status Index measures different variables within three components: democracy, economy and governance. It can be observed that in 2008-2018, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have recorded a regular decline in their rankings, whereas following an initial fall, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have noted improvements in their overall transformation indexes. The deteriorating scores of the Central Asian countries in the component Ranking Economy Status may be discerned. The economy index explores social and economic measures, such as the level of socio-economic development, organization of the market and competition including the banking system, monetary and fiscal stability, private property, the welfare regime, economic performance, and sustainability. All states that were subject to evaluation have noted a negative trend: Kazakhstan has recorded the highest decline, from 32nd to 64th position. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

⁴⁰ See: "Index of Economic Freedom," Heritage Foundation, available at [<https://www.heritage.org/index/download#>], 11 April, 2020.

⁴¹ See: "World Investment Report," UNCTAD, available at [https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/wir2019_en.pdf], 3 April, 2020.

⁴² See: "Index of Economic Freedom."

⁴³ See: "Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index," available at [<https://www.bti-project.org/en/meta/downloads.html>], 22 April, 2020.

have remained outside of the top 100. The authors of the BTI reports demonstrate negative tendencies in the economic status of the Central Asian countries, describing their economic performance as limited (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) or very limited (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).

Another two priorities of EU strategy in Central Asia include the energy and environmental sectors. However, the assessment of the implementation of the selected objectives is hardly measurable from a year-on-year comparative perspective. In particular, most new energy projects have been scheduled from a long-term perspective (e.g. new energy transport corridors, diversified export routes or new investments in energy). The measurable objective “increasing oil and gas exploitation” was evaluated on the basis of the BP Statistical Reviews of World Energy.⁴⁴ The research examines three oil-based Central Asian economies. In the period of 2008-2018, only Kazakhstan noted a visible increase in oil production, from 70 to 91 million tonnes, and liquefied gas production from 15 to 21 million tonnes. Uzbekistan’s oil and natural gas production has regularly declined in the last ten years. Turkmenistan’s energy sector was highly vulnerable to external conditions. Following a visible drop in 2009, the next six years were marked by an increase in Turkmenistan’s oil and natural gas production up to 2016, which was the beginning of another declining trend.

In terms of the environmental sphere, the main EU goals in Central Asia were related to forestry and water management. The EU has implemented numerous effective long-term projects to improve environmental management. In its Human Development Index reports, the UNDP⁴⁵ demonstrates the percentage of forest area in the total land area. In 2010-2018, the overall forest area in Central Asian republics remained stable. In Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, it remained unchanged, whereas in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan it decreased by 0.2%, and in Tajikistan it increased by 0.1%.

The last two priorities relate to “Combating common threats and challenges” and “Building bridges: inter-cultural dialog.” It should be noted that the EU has successfully implemented the Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA) to develop effective legal institutions, procedures and measures facilitating regional and international trade, as well as fight against organized crime, terrorism, corruption, illegal migration, the trade of weapons and drugs, and trafficking in human beings.⁴⁶

The Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum assesses the influence of organized crime on business in 141 countries.⁴⁷ Due to a lack of complete data, only three countries could be analyzed. In Kazakhstan, the overall tendency is positive, with the country rising 38 places in the rankings in 2008-2018. The situation in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, however, has not been quite as stable. Following the periods of ups and downs, Kyrgyzstan eventually fell five positions in the rankings, whereas Tajikistan noted a slight rise by two positions.

The above scores demonstrate similar trends presented in the Global Terrorism Index of the Institute for Economics and Peace,⁴⁸ which reflects the number of terrorist incidents and the number of deaths from terrorism. In 2013-2018 Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan recorded progress in terms of their rankings, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan noted a regular decline. It should be underlined that the neighboring Afghanistan has been perceived by the EU as one of the greatest threats to security in Central Asia, especially in the context of illegal migration, trafficking in human

⁴⁴ See: “BP Statistical Reviews of World Energy,” British Petroleum, available at [<https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-full-report.pdf>], 12 June, 2020.

⁴⁵ See: “Human Development Index.”

⁴⁶ See: “Border Management Programme in Central Asia,” available at [<https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/>], 16 May, 2020.

⁴⁷ See: “Global Competitiveness Reports,” World Economic Forum, available at [<https://www.weforum.org/reports/>], 26 May, 2020.

⁴⁸ See: “Global Terrorism Index,” Institute for Economics and Peace, available at [<http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf>], 18 June, 2020.

beings and the illegal weapons trade. Afghanistan invariably occupies the first place in the Global Terrorism Index as the country most impacted by terrorism.

The Institute for Economics and Peace, in its Global Peace Index,⁴⁹ also investigates the state of peace in 163 countries by measuring the number of domestic and international conflicts, the degree of militarization and the level of societal safety and security. As may be observed, the worst scores among the Central Asian republics and the highest decline in recent times were recorded in Turkmenistan. As a relatively closed regime, Turkmenistan is not a target of terrorist attacks as such, but it is highly unstable and unsafe in terms of the militarization level and societal security. The rest of the evaluated countries were marked by improvements in long-term results. The greatest growth is visible in the scores of Kazakhstan.

In the framework of the priority “Building bridges: inter-cultural dialog,” the European Union put emphasis on the civil society and respect for freedom of religion.

Since 2012, Freedom House has prepared a detailed review of respect for freedoms of expression, assembly, religion and association in its Freedom in the World reports.⁵⁰ In general, a negative trend may be visible in all evaluated countries. Within the subcategories of freedom of assembly and freedom for non-governmental organizations and trade unions, a country is awarded a maximum of 12 points. None of the Central Asian republics has received more than five points, and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have remained at a level of zero or one point. A much worse situation is observed in the subcategory of freedom to practice and express religious faith or non-belief in public and private. Except for Kyrgyzstan, which recorded a slight improvement in 2008-2018, the rest of the countries were awarded either zero or one point out of a maximum of four points, and Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have noted a regular decline to zero points.

The results of the Freedom in the World rankings reflect the restrictive laws on religion and limited rights under these regulations in the evaluated republics, which have also been examined by the independent institution ACN International. In its Religious Freedom Reports⁵¹ the organization stated that the situation in the religious freedom domain in Central Asian countries worsened or remained unchanged, but overall was at a low level between 2008 and 2018.

Conclusion

Due to the general assumptions of the research, the conclusions drawn on the basis thereof almost exclusively concern the evaluation of the implementation of the previous EU 2007 strategy towards Central Asia. The new EU 2019 strategic document has begun to be implemented in 2020; therefore, a thorough analysis of the progress in the implementation of the directions of the new strategy will be possible in several years' time.

Due to a dynamic approach, we may observe certain mechanisms and tendencies in the decisions and steps taken by the selected Central Asian countries over time. The analysis undertaken in the research allowed for the presentation of positive or negative trends in the implementation of the particular components of the EU strategy.

Analyzing the scope of and the advancement in implementing particular strategic objectives, it should be stated that the most pessimistic results were achieved under the first and the seventh com-

⁴⁹ See: “Global Peace Index,” Institute for Economics and Peace, available at [<http://visionofhumanity.org/reports/page/4>], 18 June, 2020.

⁵⁰ See: “Freedom in the World.”

⁵¹ See: “Religious Freedom Reports,” ACN International, available at [<https://religious-freedom-report.org>], 10 July, 2020.

ponents. All the examined rankings, within almost all measured indicators, demonstrate no progress in terms of the democratization process and respect for human rights; therefore, the overall tendency is negative. A slight improvement is visible in Kyrgyzstan, which evolved from an authoritarian to a hybrid, partly free regime. Similarly, in 2008-2018, negative trends have been recorded in judiciary and corruption subcategories. The regular decline in measures pertaining to the civil society and respect for freedom of religion may be perceived as a consequence of restrictions imposed on non-governmental organizations. Much better outcomes have been recorded under the second priority. All the evaluated countries have managed to improve their ratings in the education and Internet subcategories, which may also be affected by direct support and cooperation with international institutions, including the EU. Such a measurable effect has not been fully achieved in the institutional dimension of the third component of the EU strategy. Most of the Central Asian republics have not concluded new partnership and cooperation agreements, but previous steps towards closer integration into the European and global economy should be perceived positively. In general, despite the unfavorable legal and political environment, the results relating to the economic development priority do not seem excessively pessimistic. The differentiated research effects of particular rankings result from various research methods and indicators measured by selected institutions; however, certain regularities and conclusions may be observed. The worst scorecards have been observed in the investment and the financial sectors. The restrictive state regulations have regularly negatively affected both sectors, which revealed negative tendencies in the ratings of particular countries and the declining inflow of foreign direct investments. In turn, when it comes to the assessment of the business environment component, it should be stated that almost all Central Asian countries, except for Turkmenistan which represents a restrictive closed economy, have demonstrated regular progress in their scores pertaining to regulations on starting and doing business. The energy sector is highly vulnerable to natural conditions and external determinants, and numerous irregularities and reversals were observed in 2008-2018. Kazakhstan is the country that benefited most from strengthening energy links, whereas Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan recorded declining tendencies. As for the research on security threats and challenges, the results of the reports are somewhat surprising. Traditionally, the Central Asian region is perceived as politically unstable, being a source of many domestic and international conflicts and a base for organized crime. Such arguments are not groundless, since their nearest neighbors are Afghanistan and Pakistan, the countries which are highly impacted by terrorism. However, following the previous period of domestic instability affected by numerous domestic revolutions, most post-Soviet Central Asian countries, except for Turkmenistan, which has increased its militarization, have recorded improvements in their internal safety and security. In terms of the influence of organized crime and terrorist incidents on business, negative trends have been visible in the ratings of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.