

REGIONAL POLICY

THE EU IN CENTRAL ASIA: UNREALIZED AMBITIONS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The Soviet Union has disappeared from the maps of the world, leaving the EU a chance to participate in the political processes unfolding in Central Asia, even if the vast spaces between them limited Brussels' involvement in regional policies. This explains the European Commission's succinct definition: "a bridge to China, as well as to Afghanistan and the Middle East" and "a source of significant energy imports for the EU."

For the same reason, Central Asia remains outside the European neighborhood policy; in defiance of the Treaty of Lisbon, its members prefer to act independently on the

international arena: their interest in Central Asia and, therefore, their contributions to the common EU policy in the region differ vastly.

Following the signing of partnership and cooperation agreements with the Central Asian states, the EU became one of their important trade partners and key investors. As such, Brussels pays particular attention to democracy, human rights and civil society in all the regional countries and cooperates with them in the security sphere. Destabilization in Afghanistan has forced border security issues into the focus of corresponding programs and initiatives realized by the EU.

Their growing dependence on external sources of energy and an absence of guaranteed supplies stir up concerns in the EU member-states and in Brussels and breed hopes that Central Asia, with its considerable hydrocarbon resources and advantageous geographic location, may play an important role in energy supplies.

So far, EU policy in Central Asia leaves much to be desired, while the results of the projects it had initiated in the region are clearly contradictory. Brussels has achieved

a lot in diplomatic relations with the local states, which allowed it to expand its trade and economic cooperation and develop political coordination. However, its achievements in many other spheres (human rights, counteracting corruption and economic diversification) are not particularly impressive.

The worsening situation in Afghanistan will generate migration flows to the Central Asian countries and the European Union. Another migration crisis cannot be ruled out.

KEYWORDS: *European Union, Central Asia, energy fuels, security, normative power, resilience.*

Introduction

European Union's highly developed economic potential and its generally successful political integration made it one of the main centers of power in the contemporary world. Its role on the international arena and the consequence of its normative powers in its cooperation with the states in the developing regions of the world attracts a lot of attention; Brussels conveys its rules, norms and values through international and bilateral agreements, development programs, cooperation in the spheres of science, culture and humanitarian aid.

The EU members and the European Union as a whole have established relations with all five post-Soviet Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Central Asia was never a foreign policy priority of the European Union in the global hierarchy partly because, for obvious reasons, it never presented a real threat to its security and political stability.

The European Union has recognized the region's strategic importance in the geopolitical context (China's Belt and Road infrastructural project) and border security threatened by instability in Afghanistan.¹ Furthermore, its relations with energy-rich Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan should allow Brussels to diversify the sources of fuel supplies and limit Russia's role on the fuel market.

The EU Global Strategy: Norms and Values

The EU's Central Asian strategy is realized through its agreements with the local states and regulated by corresponding structures in Brussels. There are, however, certain nuances and specific competencies of the member-states and the EU supranational structures.

¹ See: "Central and South Asia: Connectivity and the Need for Stable Afghanistan," EEAS, 21 July, 2021, available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/europe-and-central-asia/102221/central-and-south-asia-connectivity-and-need-stable-afghanistan_en], 21 August, 2021.

According to Art 3 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), trade lies within the competence of EU institutions. Foreign policy was institutionalized within the Single European Act (SEA) of 1986, which set up a coordinating council on European Political Cooperation (EPC). Common foreign and security policies were set forth in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. It was after the Treaty of Lisbon of 2009 that the EU established an External Action Service and appointed a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Formally, the Treaty of Lisbon removed some of the “pillars” of competences of European institutions (introduced with the Treaty of Maastricht on 1 November, 1993), yet continued treating foreign policy and security and defense policy as separate spheres of decision-making at the inter-government level. Unanimity was required on practically all issues, while the inter-governmental institutions preserved their importance; the European Council has the final say on the most debatable and important issues, i.e., sanctions.²

The Treaty of Lisbon did not establish wide supranational powers in foreign and security policy comparable to those in common commercial policy. The chaos, wherein none of the structures has enough controlling rights or power to pursue foreign and defense policy, is brought about by the fairly complicated institutionalized structures, the presence of the European External Action Service, specialized committees of the European Commission and the preserved powers of national ministries and departments.

There are three outstanding foreign policy problems:

- first, member states prefer to carry out their own regional foreign policy on the sly; this casts aside specialized EU structures;
- second, member states cannot agree among themselves, which de facto paralyzes foreign policy: practically all problems (except the very small number of issues that belong to the exclusive competence of Brussels) should be solved by consensus;
- third, the European Council objects to any encroachments on inter-governmental prerogatives.³

The Treaty of Lisbon significantly altered the overall principles and objectives related, in particular, to external action: “The common commercial policy shall be conducted in the context of the principles and objectives of the Union’s external action,” which means, in plain words, that the EU trade competence should be realized with common external aims and treaties, sustainable development, free and fair trade and the promotion of human rights in mind.⁴

In its strategy for the year 2015, “Trade for All: Towards a More Responsible Trade and Investment Policy,” the European Commission, which plays a strategically important role in common commercial policy, generated a formula: trade policy “will not only project our [EU] interests, but also our [EU] values.”⁵ From that time on, the Trade and Investment Strategy will not be limited to trade in goods and services, but will promote “around the world, values like sustainable development, human rights and the rule of law as the foundation of trade between the EU and the Central Asian countries.”⁶

² See: L. Van Middelaar, *Alarums and Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage*, Agenda Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2019.

³ See: M. Westlake, “Afterword: The European Union’s New Foreign Policy—A Glass Half Full?” in: *The European Union’s New Foreign Policy*, ed. by M. Westlake, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020, pp. 253-266.

⁴ M. Cremona, *A Quiet Revolution: The Common Commercial Policy Six Years After the Treaty of Lisbon*, Swedish Institute of European Policy Studies, Stockholm, 2017.

⁵ *European Commission. Trade for All: Towards a More Responsible Trade and Investment Policy*, 2015, available at [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/october/tradoc_153846.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

Having established sustainability as one of the inalienable aims of trade policy and one of specific trade instruments, the European Union shifted the emphasis from inclusion of EU obligations concerning sustainable development to their fulfilment.

The Laeken Declaration on the Future of the European Union of 2001⁷ registered the moving force that turned the EU into a global power that acts like a “force for good in the world.” The Union’s action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles, which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world...⁸

For a long time, the EU was promoting its norms and values in the developing countries of Central Asia as universal as part of the “soft power” concept. As formulated by Joseph Nye, it meant that the state can achieve the desired results through persuasion and attraction, rather than by coercion and the use of military force.⁹

The European Union developed it as a “normative power” idea elaborated by Ian Manners: “a normative power of an ideational nature characterized by common principles.”¹⁰

Unlike soft power, normative power is not opposed to the use of military force, even if Manners disagreed with those who insisted that the development of military power in the EU is the shortest road towards increasing its weight on the international arena: “It is tempting to think that the EU can have-its-cake-and-eat-it-too in militarizing its normative power.” He argued that it will undermine the EU’s “normative power”¹¹ and that reliance on the power of its norms rather than on the traditional forms of political power sets the EU aside from other international political actors.

In 2011, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton defined normative power as follows: “When so many countries wish to be our partners, we have the opportunity to build relationships that can make a difference to their citizens’ lives, and ours.”¹²

Certain critics of the normative power concept support a theory that claims that the EU does not differ from other international actors: it pursues its own national interests in defiance of moral or normative considerations. It is an instrument of “collective hegemony” added to the already available means used to realize the member countries’ national interests.¹³

The absence of a consensus and unanimity in foreign policy issues in the initial years after the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon and of a common strategic culture, and the crisis that has changed the global political process forced the EU to revise its international strategy. Its 2016 version presents a more realistic approach to its role in international affairs: idealism restrained by “principled pragmatism.”¹⁴ In its new foreign policy the EU relies on resilience as the main guiding principle.¹⁵ This term, which is mentioned over 30 times in the Strategy, replaced similarly vague concepts of

⁷ See: European Council. Presidency Conclusions: European Council Meeting in Laeken, 14 and 15 December, 2001. Document no. 300/1/01 REV 1, available at [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/20950/68827.pdf>], 21 August, 2021.

⁸ Treaty on the European Union. Art 21.1.

⁹ See: J.S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York, 2004, p. 5.

¹⁰ I. Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, No. 40 (2), 2002, p. 252.

¹¹ I. Manners, “Normative Power Europe Reconsidered: Beyond the Crossroads,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, No. 13 (2), 2006, p. 194.

¹² C. Ashton, *A World Built on Co-operation, Sovereignty, Democracy and Stability*, Corvinus University, Budapest, 25 February, 2011, available at [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-126_en.htm], 21 August, 2021.

¹³ See: A. Hyde-Price, “‘Normative’ Power Europe: A Realist Critique,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, No. 13 (2), 2006, p. 227.

¹⁴ “Shared Vision. Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union”, European Union, 2016, available at [http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs_review_web.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

¹⁵ See: *Ibidem*.

stability, democratization, human rights and humanitarian security, which inevitably appear in all documents.¹⁶

Resilience was and remains a fairly comprehensive and vague concept, which experts and analysts¹⁷ have tried to clarify, apparently to no avail. No unified approach has been formulated, since in real life resilience refers to a wide range of strategies. According to the EU Strategy, “resilience [is] the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises.”¹⁸

To specify the main provisions of the EU Global Strategy, in 2017, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy issued Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s External Action,¹⁹ united Europe has resolved not only to prevent crises or other shocks, but also to ensure the continued functioning of state institutions during and after crises in a number of regions, including Central Asia.

The 2016 Strategy insists that “a resilient society featuring democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable development lies at the heart of a resilient state,”²⁰ while the Joint Communication specifies that shortcomings in governance, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, gender equality, corruption or the shrinking space for public participation and civil society pose a fundamental challenge to the effectiveness of any society’s development efforts.²¹ An incapable state threatens the vitally important interests of the European Union, its incapability stems from its undemocratic nature and non-observance of human rights: resilience is the only adequate answer to the incapacities of inherently fragile repressive regimes.²²

The EU and the Central Asian Countries: The Beginning

As soon as the Soviet Union disintegrated, the EU and its members demonstrated their readiness to help the Central Asian countries. In 1991, the EU endorsed the TACIS program designed to support those post-Soviet states that undertook European-style reforms.

EU member states (Germany, France, and Great Britain in the first place) established bilateral relations with the Central Asian countries. In 1993, Germany opened embassies in all Central Asian countries and focused on the states with a German diaspora. The biggest such diaspora (nearly 1 million) was located in Kazakhstan; the policy of resettlement of ethnic Germans to Germany has reduced it to 200,000 at most.²³

¹⁶ See: W. Wagner, R. Anholt, “Resilience as the EU Global Strategy’s New Leitmotif: Pragmatic, Problematic or Promising?” *Contemporary Security Policy*, No. 37 (3), 2016, pp. 414-430.

¹⁷ See: P. Bourbeau, *On Resilience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018; *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*, ed. by D. Chandler, J. Coaffee, Routledge, London, 2016; J. Coaffee, “From Counterterrorism to Resilience,” *The European Legacy*, No. 11 (4), 2006, pp. 389-403.

¹⁸ “Shared Vision, Common Action...”

¹⁹ See: *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s External Action*, European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2017.

²⁰ “Shared Vision, Common Action,” p. 24.

²¹ See: *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council*.

²² See: “Shared Vision, Common Action,” p. 25.

²³ See: T. Apendiyev, N. Abdukadyrov, R. Kubeyev, “History of German Diaspora in Kazakhstan in the Context of Migration System,” *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2019, pp. 127-134.

By the late 1990s, all Central Asian countries have signed partnership and cooperation agreements: in 1995, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan led the way; Uzbekistan followed in 1996. In 2004, Tajikistan signed an agreement on trade and cooperation that remained unratified until 2010.

The neutrality of Turkmenistan complicated its relations with the EU; the bilateral trade and cooperation agreement signed in 1998 remains unratified and uncoordinated. The European Parliament does not seek to expand its trade and economic relations with Turkmenistan due to the complicated situation with human rights in the country. Their economic relations are currently regulated by the Interim Trade Agreement.²⁴ Moreover, it was only in 2019 that the EU managed to finally open its office in Ashgabat.

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the Central Asian countries are based on the supremacy of universal values; they are expected to support democracy and the market economy principles.²⁵ In its agreements with the regional states, the EU paid particular attention to different aspects of universal values. The agreement with Uzbekistan, for example, contains a section that obliges the sides to expand their cooperation, aim to establish functioning democratic institutions and ensure efficient protection of human rights and basic freedoms.

TACIS is the main instrument of EU assistance extended in exchange for reforms. It was specified that its efficiency directly depends on market and democratic reforms.²⁶ This means, in particular, that continued assistance depended on the achievements of the preceding period. According to EU bureaucrats, the program was exceptionally successful.²⁷

Russian experts have criticized this program since a considerable part of European money (allocated both by Brussels and on a bilateral basis) was spent on business trips of European experts to the region and on educational programs for Central Asian students in Europe. In short, money was used to create jobs in EU member countries. “The suggestions to use this money for business trips of experts from Russia are rejected by EU as utopian. Meanwhile, the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development as an investor and Chinese companies as economic operators have been cooperating for the last 40 years. Tens of thousands of kilometers of highways in all corners of the world, including Central Asia, have been built.”²⁸ The Central Asian countries have already received €150-200 million under the TACIS program. Tajikistan, with about €400 million, was the main benefactor: it required foreign assistance to recover after the civil war.²⁹

The European Union paid particular attention to cooperation in the energy sphere. In 1993, it initiated TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), a multilateral cooperation program in the energy sphere; Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia were also involved. By 1998, the sides arrived at the Baku Declaration on the revival of the Great Silk Road to connect Europe, the Caucasus and Asia.

²⁴ See: Interim Trade Agreement with Turkmenistan. European Parliament, available at [<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/interim-trade-agreement-with-turkmenista/product-details/20200407DPU25216>], 21 August, 2021.

²⁵ See: Partnership and Co-operation Agreement Establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the One part, and the Republic of Kazakhstan, of the Other part [1999], Art 1.

²⁶ See: Council Regulation (Euratom, EEC), No. 2053/93 of 19 July, 1993 Concerning the Provision of Technical Assistance to Economic Reform and Recovery in the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union and Mongolia.

²⁷ See: A. Frenz, *The European Commission's TACIS programme (1991-2006): A Success Story*, European Commission, 2007, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/regional-cooperation/enpi-east/documents/annual_programmes/tacis_success_story_final_en.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

²⁸ V.F. Priakhin, “Evropeyskiy soiuz i Tsentralnaia Azia: Poiski novoy kontseptsii sotrudnichestva,” *Aktualnye problemy Evropy*, No. 5, 2011, p. 137.

²⁹ See: *Central Asia Strategy Paper for 2002-2006 and TACIS Central Asia Indicative Programme 2002-2004*, European Commission, available at [http://www.ecas.europa.eu/central_asia/rsp/02_06_en.pdf], 21 August, 2021; *TACIS Central Asia Indicative Programme 2005-2006*, European Commission available at [http://ecas.europa.eu/asia/docs/rsp/tacis/05_06.en.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

In the 1990s, Central Asian countries were among the first 30 states to sign and ratify the Energy Charter; they accepted the Energy Charter Protocol on energy efficiency and related environmental aspects. The Energy Charter, an instrument of an “open and non-discriminatory energy market,” came into force in 1998.³⁰

In 1995, the European Commission launched the program of Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE), aiming to integrate the energy markets, achieve sustainable power production and coordinate investment projects. Realized within the European Eastern Partnership Neighborhood Policy, it was applied to the Central Asian states as well.

In 2004, the European Union tried to set up a multilateral political dialog regarding the energy and transportation spheres between the Caspian and Black Sea littoral states and Central Asian countries known as the “Baku Initiative”³¹ to integrate the energy markets of the 12 states involved in the program and the EU market, a logical development of the INOGATE program.

Various programs were the products of the EU’s desire to establish a unified energy market of the EU-Black Sea-Caspian-Central Asian countries in order to decrease the energy vulnerability of the European Union. The idea to create this energy market was formulated by Brussels in 2003 as “the third route of natural gas.”³² The participants of the meeting in Astana in 2006 discussed alternative routes and infrastructure, yet produced no significant results.³³

The EU launched several programs in the security sphere, including the Border Management Program in Central Asia — BOMCA (2003) and the Central Asia Drug Action Program — CADAP (2001). Commenced as working agreements between the European Commission and UNDP with more or less similar aims and intended as instruments of improving transborder cooperation, legal transit trade and fighting drug trafficking, they relied on EU funding of €5-6 million a year.

On the whole, the EU programs and mechanisms brought no significant results; internal political reforms, intended to copy the European patterns, remained unrealized; none of the aims declared in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was achieved. The pinching conditions under which assistance within TACIS was extended brought no positive results: Central Asian countries failed to observe their obligations.

The EU in Central Asia: Initial Strategy

In 2007, the EU adopted its first Central Asian Strategy.³⁴

By that time, the relations between the EU and the Central Asian countries were structured through a set of bilateral agreements and short-term sectoral interaction programs. Two years before,

³⁰ “Energy Charter Treaty Overview,” available at [<http://www.encharter.org/index.php?id=28>], 21 August, 2021.

³¹ *Conclusions of the Ministerial Conference on Energy Co-operation between the EU, the Caspian Littoral States and their Neighbouring Countries*, available at [<http://w1.inogate.org/attachments/article/89/baku.pdf>], 21 August, 2021.

³² European Parliament and the Council (2003) Decision no 1229/2003/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2003 Laying Down a Series of Guidelines for Trans-European Energy Networks and Repealing Decision No 1254/96/EC, available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L._2003.176.01.0011.01.ENG], 21 August, 2021.

³³ See: *Ministerial Declaration on Enhanced Energy Co-operation between the EU, the Littoral States of the Black and Caspian Seas and their Neighbouring Countries*, Astana, 30 November, 2006, available at [http://w1.inogate.org/attachments/article/90/FINAL_Astana_Conclusions_-_Road_Map_30-11-06_eng.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

³⁴ See: *The European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, 10113/07. Council of the EU. Brussels, 2007, available at [<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/pdf>], 21 August, 2021.

in 2005 the European Union had appointed its Special Representative for Central Asia: it clearly planned to deepen its cooperation with the local countries.

As part of the initial Strategy, the EU had initiated dialogs on human rights as the most important element of political cooperation. The first of these dialogs took place in 2007 between the EU and Uzbekistan, followed by similar meetings in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan, likewise, organized such discussions.

The EU hoped to persuade the Central Asian countries to adopt the European human rights standards by the prospects of wider cooperation, yet the results were not particularly impressive. Kazakhstan was the only country that adopted a National Human Rights Action Plan. Elaborated together with the UNDP and coordinated by Great Britain and the Netherlands, the plan did not demonstrate impressive results once implemented: according to the EU Delegation in Kazakhstan, the declared aims were fulfilled by 22.6%.³⁵

The EU revised its financial assistance instruments: according to its new approach to the relations with the Central Asian countries, it extended its financial aid not within TACIS, but within the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which coordinated development assistance programs on a global scale.

The European Union decided to concentrate on the potentially successful cooperation projects. The Strategy suggested “to make a special effort to apply its principled approach in ways that are realistically operational in this difficult political environment.”³⁶ An increase of annual targeted aid during the 2007-2013 budget period to €750 million was planned; a quarter of all subsidies were used to develop efficient administration. Poverty reduction and gradual movement towards social and economic stability were seen as preliminary conditions for the realization of the agenda: development assistance and state administration reforms became interconnected.³⁷

From that time on, the EU paid more attention to the energy issues and export of hydrocarbon resources from the Central Asian countries. Its 2007 strategy defined a direct gas delivery route from Central Asia to Europe as one of the EU national interests.³⁸ In 2008, the mandate of the EU Special Representative was extended to “provide input to the formulation of energy security aspects.”³⁹ The European Union put in significant efforts to achieve its aim—direct gas deliveries from Central Asia.

In an absence of an efficient multilateral interaction format in the energy sphere and due to the strained relations among the Central Asian states,⁴⁰ the EU had no choice but to rely on bilateral Memorandums on Mutual Understanding. Kazakhstan signed this document in 2006, followed by Turkmenistan in 2008 and Uzbekistan in 2011.

In 2011, President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso visited Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to persuade their leaders to deliver gas to Europe along the Southern Gas Corridor, “a stepping stone in increasing European Energy security.”⁴¹ The total cost of the Southern Gas Corridor

³⁵ See: *Kazakhstan has Complied with the Recommendations of the 2009-2012 National Human Rights Action Plan only by 23%*, EU Delegation to Kazakhstan, Astana, 13 March 2013, available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/press_corner/all_news/news/2013/13.03.2013_en.htm], 21 August 2021.

³⁶ *Into Eurasia: Monitoring the EU's Central Asia Strategy*, ed. by M. Emerson, J. Boonstra, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels; Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), Madrid, 2010, p. 9.

³⁷ See: G. Volishin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014, p. 43.

³⁸ See: *The European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, 10113/07, pp. 18-19.

³⁹ *Council Joint Action 2008/107/CFSP of 12 February 2008 Extending the Mandate of the European Union Special Representative for Central Asia*, Art 3 (1).

⁴⁰ See: G.Ch. Akunova, “Strany Tsentralnoy Azii: trudnosti na puti sblizheniia,” *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2020, pp. 300-311, available at [<https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2020-7-3-300-311>].

⁴¹ *Joint Declaration on the Southern Gas Corridor of José Manuel Durão Barroso (President of the European Commission) and Ilham Aliyev (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan)*, The Republic of Azerbaijan, Baku, 13 January 2011, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/energy/infrastructure/strategy/doc/2011_01_13_joint_declaration_southern_corridor.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

was assessed at €40 billion.⁴² The Trans Adriatic Pipeline is expected to cost €4.5 billion; the Nabucco West project, about €8 billion.⁴³

Prior to 2011, Nabucco (later renamed Nabucco West) had been the main pipeline project and enjoyed EU support: “The EU planned to increase its political influence in Azerbaijan and expand its energy cooperation with Turkmenistan to access Turkmenistan’s hydrocarbons. It could not, however, realize the Nabucco project and the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline as its component part. It turned out that hydrocarbon resources were not as vast as expected.”⁴⁴

As soon as realization of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project began, the European Commission announced that it fully supported both projects. Approved by the European Commission in 2016, the project was completed in 2020.

The anticipated effect, however, was not achieved: these economic projects were realized for political and security considerations; the EU wanted to limit Russia’s presence on the European energy market and ignored its economic advantages—lower prices and easily accessible pipeline systems.

The 2007 Strategy paid a lot of attention to security; Central Asia was seen and defined as a source of threats and challenges. The EU Strategic Interests: Security and Stability Section says, in part, that the EU is concerned with security and stability in Central Asia since “strategic, political and economic developments, as well as increasing trans-regional challenges in Central Asia impact EU interests both directly and indirectly.”⁴⁵ The BOMCA and CADAP programs are the EU’s most important initiatives when it comes to opposing terrorism, proliferation of WMD, instability caused by regional conflicts, failed states and illegal migration.⁴⁶

The EU generally failed to realize its impressive and ambitious plans: no comprehensive security concept was formulated for Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁴⁷ On the whole, in the past the greater part of the EU financial aid to Central Asia was separated from Afghanistan. In recent years, however, these two trends have become somewhat intertwined due to the “inclusion of Afghanistan in Central Asian actions,” since Central Asia demonstrates a far greater interest in Afghanistan today. In 2021, it was decided to increase BOMCA and BOMNAF (Border Management in Northern Afghanistan) funding for 2021-2025.⁴⁸

The EU policy of cooperation with Muslim countries of Central Asia, taking into account their geographical location, in particular with respect to Afghanistan, was presented as an achievement of its normative power. It demonstrated the EU’s ability to maintain special relations with the Muslim states, while promoting their values and norms, which demanded geopolitical and geocultural balancing.⁴⁹ At the same time, much of what the EU was doing to cope with problems did not account for regional and national specifics. Instead of coping with the problems of drug cartels and their considerable impact on the local elites, the BOMCA program was spearheaded against corruption in the ranks of the border guards.⁵⁰

⁴² See: Trans Adriatic Pipeline, TAP (2015) Southern Gas Corridor, available at [<http://www.tap-ag.com/the-pipeline/the-big-picture/southern-gas-corridor>], 21 August, 2021.

⁴³ See: “Nabucco Gas Pipeline,” Bankwatch Network, available at [<https://bankwatch.org/project/nabucco-gas-pipeline>], 21 August, 2021.

⁴⁴ S.S. Zhiltsov, “Energeticheskaya politika Turtsii v Kaspiyskom regione,” *Geoekonomika energetiki*, No. 2 (14), 2021, pp. 32-47, available at [DOI: 10.48137/2687-0703_2021_14_2_32].

⁴⁵ *The European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, 10113/07, p. 4.

⁴⁶ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 6.

⁴⁷ S. Peyrouse, J. Boonstra, M. Laruelle, “Security and Development Approaches to Central Asia: The EU Compared to China and Russia,” Working Paper No. 11, *EU-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM)*, 2012, p. 16.

⁴⁸ “Ambassador Opens Inception Webinar for BOMCA 10,” EEAS, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/delegations/turkmenistan_en/100862/Ambassador%20opens%20inception%20webinar%20for%20BOMCA%2010], 21 August, 2021.

⁴⁹ See: E. Kavalski, *World Politics at the Edge of Chaos: Reflections on Complexity and Global Life*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2015, p. 23.

⁵⁰ See: K. Czerniecka, J. Heathershaw, “Security Assistance and Border Management,” in: *The European Union and Central Asia*, ed. by A. Warkotsch, Routledge, London & New York, 2011, pp. 77-101.

Amid the failed “color revolutions” in some of the former Soviet republics and the new integration formats across the CIS territory, European influence on the political processes unfolding across post-Soviet Eurasia, including Central Asia, shrank considerably. At the same time, other actors—regional (Russia) and extra-regional (the U.S., China and Iran)—became much more visible in this part of the former Soviet Union.⁵¹

Very much like the EU Neighborhood Policy, the 2007 Strategy initially intended to foster regional cooperation, could not be implemented in the form of a regional dialogue under the EU aegis: the partners were far more interested in direct cooperation with the European Union.

The EU concept of conditioned cooperation with the Central Asian countries (aid and reform policy) was never clearly outlined; it was not supported by its implementation mechanisms either in its 2007 or later (2015) variants. It specified no circumstances under which the EU would have limited its technical and economic assistance, except for a general statement about disregard of European norms and values. The 2015 variant contains a statement made by the Directorate-General of the Union for External Policy: “The EU should not and cannot compete with Russia and China in the region.” It was stated in so many words that the EU strategy in Central Asia with its limited resources had to face many problems, political backslide, corruption and the local states’ inability to materialize the forecasted gas deliveries. In short, “the EU’s engagement in Central Asia is one of limited to no impact.”⁵²

The EU in Central Asia: New Strategy

The global financial crisis, migration problems and, on the whole, the systemic crisis of the EU forced Brussels to revise its foreign policy priorities, including those in the neighboring areas. In 2019, it adopted a strategy called The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership.⁵³

It was much more positive than the previous one: it indicated the readiness of the EU to support Uzbekistan in its desire to join the WTO, to improve trade and transportation, to facilitate access to the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP) and expand the partnership and cooperation agreements. In 2015, for example, the European Union and Kazakhstan had signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which came into power in 2020: Kazakhstan’s EAEU membership prolonged the ratification process. Similar agreements with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are being negotiated. On the whole, the new Strategy offered new opportunities for cooperation and economic development.⁵⁴

In addition to the EU’s traditional aims in the human rights sphere the Strategy specified sustainable development as a point of fundamental importance. It is balanced with the other EU docu-

⁵¹ See: Yu.I. Nadochey, I.A. Safranchuk, “Evropeyskiy soiuz v Tsentralnoy Azii: granitsy normativnoy sily” (Review of the book by O.A. Spayser *Vliyaniye Evropeyskogo soiuz v Tsentralnoy Azii. Geopoliticheskie vyzovy i otvety*), *Vestnik mezhdunarodnykh organizatsiy*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2018, pp. 280-286, available at [DOI: 10.17323/1996-7845-2018-04-14].

⁵² European Union, Directorate-General for External Policies, *Implementation and Review of the European Union — Central Asia Strategy: Recommendations for EU Action*, 2016, available at [Doi:10.2861/58706].

⁵³ See: *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, European Commission, 15 May, 2019, available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

⁵⁴ See: J. Boonstra, “A New EU Strategy for Central Asia: From Challenges to Opportunities”, *ISPI*, 3 October, 2019, available at [https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/new-eu-strategy-central-asia-challenges-opportunities-24062], 21 August, 2021.

ments of prime importance, EU Global Strategy 2016 among them. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were included in the Connecting Europe and Asia Strategy 2018.⁵⁵ The new document focuses on efficient management instead of political and economic reforms promoted in the 1990s.⁵⁶ It was the EU's response to the Chinese Belt and Road initiative: Brussels was ready to compete with or even oppose Beijing to prevent Central Asia's dependence on China. Very much like in the past, the EU is ready to pour several billion euros into new or realized projects;⁵⁷ China has already invested \$20 billion in Kazakhstan.⁵⁸ Peter Burian, EU Special Representative for Central Asia, criticized China's BRI project: to reveal its economic potential, the region needed more than "big infrastructure projects or trains delivering goods that only run through these countries" and "there is a need to have real, long-term investments that bring benefits to local communities, based on sustainable and long-standing solutions."⁵⁹

"Sustainable connectivity" as a declared objective is ambiguous; it has no clear short-term aims and, therefore, may face the problems that had prevented democratic transfer to Central Asia in the past. At the same time, today the EU is obviously abandoning its previous goals of achieving wide-scale reforms in Central Asia and approving the principles of sustainable development according to European standards, and thus differs from some other Western actors in the region.⁶⁰ However, such an aspiration of the European Union comes up against criticism on the part of many analysts.⁶¹

The EU Strategy for Central Asia replaced its basic aims and principles for transit states with the concept of resilience, which attracted a barrage of criticism.⁶² This trick allowed the EU to shift its responsibility of monitoring the fulfillment of human rights and freedoms in these countries to their civil societies. In fact, the poorly coordinated actions of the national delegations and EU offices (the European Commission and the European External Action Service [EEAS]) in the regional countries create a lot of problems. According to the experts of the Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) center, the countries that have no ties with the regional states, i.e. Spain, are poorly informed about the EU's goals in Central Asia.⁶³ Central Asian actors, likewise, are dissatisfied with the European projects launched to promote their development: "They have grandiose objectives, but only modest means, there is an absence of transparency in the recruitment of European companies to work on EU programs in the region, there are disproportionate salary levels offered to European expatriates, a lack

⁵⁵ See: *Connecting Europe and Asia — Building Blocks for an EU Strategy*, European Commission, 19 September 2018, available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf], 21 August, 2021.

⁵⁶ See: N. Kassenova, "Central Asia and the EU Connectivity Strategy: Rising to the Good Governance Challenge," *PONARS Eurasia*, 9 October, 2019, available at [<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/central-asia-and-the-eu-connectivity-strategy-rising-to-the-good-governance-challenge/>], 21 August, 2021.

⁵⁷ See: E.M. Kuzmina, "'Bolshaia Evrazia': interesy i vozmozhnosti Rossii pri vzaimodeystvii s Kitaem," *Problemy postsovetского prostranstva*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2017, pp. 229-239, available at [<https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2017-4-3-229-239>].

⁵⁸ See: "China Global Investment Tracker," American Enterprise Institute, available at [<https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>], 21 August, 2021.

⁵⁹ P. Burian, "Central Asia has Always Been Important for Europe," *IPS*, 27 August 2019, available at [<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/central-asia-has-always-been-important-for-europe-3676/>], 21 August, 2021.

⁶⁰ See: N.J. Melvin, "The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia," in: *Engaging Central Asia*, ed. by N.J. Melvin, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, 2008, pp. 137-151.

⁶¹ See: *Ibidem*.

⁶² See: J. Boonstra, M. Laruelle, "A New EU-Central Asia Strategy: Deepening Relationships and Generating Long-Lasting Impact," EUCAM, available at [<https://eucentralasia.eu/ru/a-new-eu-central-asia-strategy-deepening-relationships-and-generating-long-lasting-impact-ru/>], 21 August, 2021.

⁶³ See: J. Boonstra, "Seven Pointers for the New EUSR for Central Asia," EUCAM, 22 June, 2021, available at [<https://eucentralasia.eu/seven-pointers-for-the-new-eusr-for-central-asia/>], 21 August, 2021.

of monitoring of allocated funds (which favors to misappropriation), and an overly opaque bureaucracy for NGOs and social activists who wish to benefit from offered opportunities.”⁶⁴

Experts of the Russian Council for Foreign Affairs have pointed at three major changes in Brussels’ new strategy:

- first, security and stability as two main factors;
- second, admission that other international organizations and integration structures have their own roles to play in the comprehensive system of regional relationships;
- third, the non-contradictory nature of expanded partnership agreements between the EU and the regional states with the Eurasian Economic Union.”⁶⁵

Conclusion

The European Union, which is responsible for 30% of the region’s total trade turnover, was and remains the biggest economic partner of the Central Asian countries. Real figures, however, demonstrate that trade is stagnating. Between 2007 and 2019, it increased by 16% (which is much lower than the increase in EU’s trade turnover with the rest of the world—39% for the same period). Its share (less than 1% in the total volume of the EU foreign trade and investments) is negligible.

Pursued in the EU’s strategic interests, its policy in Central Asia is highly pragmatic. On the other hand, unlike the EU, which is guided by the European agenda in all spheres, its separate members are guided by their own interests. The Central Asian states have no strategies related to interaction with the EU either at the national or regional levels. The Central Asian elites currently consider the EU a donor that funds their activities on a scale that is unattainable for their budgets.

There are two main reasons why the EU has not become an influential actor in Central Asia: first, its determination to promote democracy, civil society and human rights were interpreted as destabilizing technologies of color revolutions. In fact, it was only recently that Brussels discontinued its practice of exporting its values to the Central Asian countries.⁶⁶ European experts have registered the unsatisfactory results: “They learned how to build democratic institutions, with a proper façade but little content.”⁶⁷ Second, at no time Central Asia was seen by Brussels as a regional priority, hence the limited economic and military assistance. This means that the EU is no rival for Russia and China in the geopolitical and geo-economic confrontation in the region.

⁶⁴ S. Peyrouse, “A Donor without Influence. The European Union in Central Asia,” in: *Europe’s Eurasian Challenge*, PONARS, Washington, 2017, pp. 61-66.

⁶⁵ N. Mendkovich, “Novaia strategii ES v Tsentralnoy Azii,” *RSMD*, 24 January, 2020, available at [<https://russian-council.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/asian-kaleidoscope/novaya-strategiya-es-v-tsentralnoy-azii/>], 21 August, 2021.

⁶⁶ See: S.S. Zhiltsov, “Borba za Evraziu,” *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2021, pp. 8-19, available at [<https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2021-8-1-8-19>].

⁶⁷ K. Kluczevska, S. Dzhuraev, “The EU and Central Asia: The Nuances of an ‘Aided’ Partnership,” in: *Managing Security Threats along the EU’s Eastern Flanks*, ed. by R. Fawn, Springer Nature, Cham, 2020, p. 238.