

## THE TRANSFORMATIONAL ENGAGEMENT OF CENTRAL ASIA WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION: OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the specifics of interaction between the Central Asian countries and the EU, taking into account global changes that have caused a complete restructuring of the previously existing system of international relations. The article pays special attention to the experience of cooperation between the EU and the Central Asian states, with some of which new type agreements have already been signed or are in the process of being prepared, opening up broad opportunities for bilateral cooperation, which has certainly contributed to their political and economic development. The article notes that the EU's diplomatic representation in the region has increased, assistance has been expanded and cooperation mechanisms have been introduced. In this vein, a new stage of political liberalization and diversification of the economy with a focus on industrial and innovative development can be noted in Kazakhstan.

The article concludes that the EU can rightly position cooperation with Central Asia as a model, using developments for other regions and presenting the achieved results as evidence of the effectiveness of European diplomacy. The Central Asian countries, in turn, have significant potential for developing a partnership with the EU in the context of the interests of the entire region, which would meet its new needs and opportunities.

**Keywords:** *global power, Central Asian countries, geopolitical situation, strong partnership, democratization, pluralism, human rights, security agenda.*

### Introduction

This article is devoted to the study of the stages of the evolutionary development of the EU policy and strategy towards the Central Asian region, their impact on Kazakhstan and the Central Asian states, the definition and disclosure of interaction mechanisms, the identification of trends, as well as promising areas of cooperation in the context of the changing balance of power in the global system of international relations, in general, and Central Asia itself, in particular. At each of these stages, the EU faced the

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need to achieve certain goals related to both the development of priority areas of cooperation and issues of a geopolitical nature. The EU policy towards the region is built through the implementation of relevant program documents and strategies that define the range of tasks achieved with the help of relevant mechanisms and tools. The main tools for the practical implementation of strategies are country and regional programs.

The purpose of this study is to examine the main directions and mechanisms of the EU policy towards the Central Asian states: identifying the factors of influence, characteristic features and peculiarities of its formation and evolution. The main direction of the work is the study of the coordinated EU policy towards Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries. Much attention is paid to the formation and practical application of the regional approach by the EU. This phenomenon is considered from the point of view of the mutual influence of the main factors - the implementation of a planned logical policy, intra-European processes, changes in the balance of power within the EU and the reaction to external factors (Rentschler et al. 2025; Yermekbayev, Delovarova and Kaliyeva 2024).

In accordance with the stated goal, it is proposed to solve a number of tasks: 1) to consider the ratio of national and supranational components in the EU foreign policy activities in the areas under consideration; 2) to analyze the main interests and instruments of the EU policy towards Central Asia; 3) to determine the main stages of the formation and development of pan-European policy in the regions under consideration; 4) to identify and study the dynamics of the process of diversification of the EU approaches to Central Asia; 5) the analysis of the modernization of the EU foreign policy in the area under consideration from initially global to differentiated reflects changes in the structure of the EU interests and the evolution of the role of the region under consideration in the system of pan-European priorities; 6) to determine the significance of the EU policy in the specified region for the foreign policy activities of Kazakhstan.

As turbulence and uncertainty in global politics increase, the global balance of power changes and, accordingly, the redistribution of spheres of influence, the importance of Central Asia in global political processes has rapidly increased. In the context of the formation of a polycentric model of the world order, the Central Asian region with its natural potential and strategic position at the crossroads between North and South, West and East determines the foreign policy activity of global and regional players seeking to expand their spheres of influence. In this context, contradictions are intensifying between the United States and China, between the countries of the collective West and Russia in Central Asia, which is a geopolitical phenomenon that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the center of Eurasia. The development of the situation in this strategically important region will largely determine the new alignment of forces on the world stage and the contours of the future world order.

The development of new trends in world politics, the complication of globalization processes, the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the obvious crisis of the world order model that Western countries built after the collapse of the USSR with the center in the U.S. have greatly updated the study of the geopolitical

positions of extra-regional actors in the Central Asian countries. Since the emergence of new independent states, under the pretext of democratic modernization of the countries of the region, the collective West has been trying to assert its leadership in Central Asia, realizing its own geopolitical and geo-economic interests. The crisis of the liberal model has become a catalyst for fierce competition that has unfolded between extra-regional actors in Central Asia. In the context of the formation of a new paradigm of the world political order and changes in the structure of global governance, the importance of the region in world politics has increased, in which the influence of the leading centers of power has increased. The geopolitical projects they promote are aimed at strengthening their positions in Central Asia and creating effective mechanisms for ensuring economic and political interests. The U.S., the EU, China, Türkiye, Iran and Japan are all claiming a special role in determining the development of Central Asia, demonstrating an increased level of political and diplomatic activity in the region.

### **Central Asia at the Crossroads of the EU's External Interests**

Against the backdrop of the fundamental transformation of the previously existing balance of power observed in the modern system of international relations, Central Asia continues to be the focus of attention of leading global actors, who in one way or another strive not only to strengthen, but also to further advance their positions in the region. One of the largest economic and political players in Central Asia is the EU. For more than three decades, the Central Asian countries have been striving to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy aimed at building pragmatic relations with extra-regional actors. At the same time, the foreign policy of these states, which have significant resource potential and a significant geopolitical position, has a strong influence on the development of regional political processes. Over the years of independence, the Central Asian countries have become active participants in world political processes, diversifying their foreign policy ties. In the emerging new world political reality, the Central Asian countries are striving to form a model of relationships with the leading centers of power in world politics, in which they position themselves as equal partners. In this regard, the question becomes especially important: Will the Central Asian countries be able to become full-fledged actors in world politics, EU policy, or will they remain in regional geopolitical processes?

The confrontation between Russia and the EU has exacerbated the existing contradictions and negative trends that have developed over decades in Central Asia. China and Russia are increasingly influencing the regional agenda. Their active policies are causing concern in Western countries, especially in the United States. In such conditions, the conflict potential of the region is increasing, and the likelihood of a clash of geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of the leading states in world politics is growing. Despite the preferences of a number of countries, primarily belonging to the collective West, to implement their foreign policy ambitions in world politics with reliance on hard power, the relevance of soft power in Central Asia is still in demand by such extra-regional countries as Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, and Japan. The mechanisms of soft power used have become one of the effective levers for achieving political and economic influence. Central Asia serves as an example of the use of a

wide range of soft power instruments by various geopolitical actors who achieve their strategic goals through ideological, linguistic, educational, and religious instruments. For Russia, Central Asia is a vital region, especially in terms of stability and security (Bahturidze and Li 2024). However, Russia's geopolitical competitors are interested in creating a belt of unfriendly, often hostile states along the perimeter of Russia's borders. In such a situation, it is extremely important for Russia to prevent destabilization in the region and maintain good-neighborly relations with the former Soviet republics (Krasnopolksy 2022).

Central Asia is a region where global and regional powers intersect. This phenomenon is rare in other parts of the world. Russia, China, the USA, the EU, India, Japan, Iran, and Türkiye are expanding their influence here, which has increased the region's significance. The region has become a vast arena for interaction between great powers and other countries.

This article examines the interaction of Central Asian countries with the EU, the consequences of the EU's involvement in the region, how the geopolitical situation is expected to evolve in the future, and what their interests and potential for cooperation are.

The perspective and necessity of developing relations with the EU for the Central Asian countries are determined by the role and position of this union in European and global politics, economics, and culture. These regions are united by a common interest in regional and international security, economics, social and cultural development, investment activities, large international projects, and attracting advanced technologies and knowledge to the country. For more than 30 years, their cooperation has gone through several stages. Starting from 1991, the EU transitioned to direct contacts with the republics in the areas of technical, financial, and humanitarian cooperation. The main documents that formed the basis of the relations between the EU and the Central Asian countries were the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, which were signed in 1995-1996.

These Agreements established an institutional, political, and administrative framework for the countries of Central Asia and the EU to facilitate all forms of bilateral cooperation. They introduced a political dialogue, created an open trade and investment regime between the parties, and provided for cooperation in a wide range of areas: from transportation to education and from energy to combating illegal activities. In 2007, the EU elevated the level of its regional political approach by adopting the Partnership Strategy for Central Asia. It is important to note that the EU was one of the first major partners of the Central Asian countries to propose, alongside bilateral cooperation, collaboration at the regional level (EEAS 2019a, 2019b).

According to the President of Kazakhstan K.-J. Tokayev, over 30 years, relations between Central Asia and the EU have contributed to strengthening the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Central Asian states, and interregional dialogue has covered priority areas of cooperation<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Official website of the President of the RK. 2022. "Kassym-Jomart Tokayev took part in the Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia and the President of the European Council." October 27, 2022. Accessed March 6, 2025. <https://www.akorda.kz/en/kassym-jomart-tokayev-took-part-in-the-meeting-of-heads-of-state-of-central-asia-and-the-president-of-the-european-council-289842>.

Kazakhstan, continuing its fruitful cooperation with EU countries, was the first among the Central Asian countries to transition to the next level of collaboration. Specifically, negotiations for a new Enhanced agreement between the EU and Kazakhstan began in 2011. This Agreement was signed in 2015. The Agreement on Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the EU aims to further develop our relations (EUR-Lex 2016). This document outlines 29 areas of cooperation, including political dialogue (human rights, democratic development, rule of law, fundamental freedoms), cooperation in trade and industry, transport and logistics, among others (EUR-Lex 2016; European Commission 2025).

The new phase of development of the geopolitical situation in the region and around it was characterized by a gradual change in the roles and levels of influence on Central Asia by major players (Council of the EU 2023). In this context, the need to update the EU strategy is due to important changed geopolitical realities. Firstly, the political ties of the Central Asian countries have changed, as they have become more self-sufficient and economically developed. Secondly, not only Russia and China, but also the United States, Japan, France, India and other countries are increasingly active in the Central Asian countries. Thirdly, the EU foreign policy priorities for Central Asia are being re-evaluated. In this context, a relatively stable Central Asia appears to be a suitable partner for demonstrating the effectiveness of European diplomatic and foreign policy.

In the current geopolitical situation, Central Asia is a new opportunity for a strong partnership for the EU, where the EU promotes a stronger and non-exclusive partnership in many areas. For the EU, democratization of political regimes in Central Asian countries is important, in addition to the traditional EU goals regarding the protection of human rights (European Commission 2025). Mutually beneficial cooperation is the guiding principle of the new EU Central Asian policy, which adheres to a non-exclusive approach to partnership. In other words, the EU political system is open to working together with its regional competitors to achieve its goals. The main priorities of the EU in Central Asia are the promotion of values and norms of behavior of European states in the region, support for democratic and market reforms, the dissemination of European culture, the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime, etc. The most attractive area of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia has been and remains energy, since, unlike the previously discussed periods, the EU directs its efforts more towards the economic and energy spheres, pushing issues of democratization, pluralism of opinions and human rights into the background (Toropygin and Lyubina 2024).

The economic security of the Central Asian states is determined by the state of various economic sectors, among which the food sector plays one of the key roles. The influence of the food sector on the economic security of Central Asia is broader, since, performing an integration function in the economy, integration mechanisms either help to mitigate threats caused by conflicts between elements of the economic system, or, on the contrary, exacerbate destructive processes in the national economy of Central Asia.

Anticipating a crisis in the global semiconductor market due to the ongoing escalation of China-Taiwan tensions, the EU has established a strategic partnership on rare metals with Kazakhstan. In November 2022, during the COP27 (UN Climate Change Conference) summit in Sharm El Sheikh, a Memorandum of Strategic

Partnership was signed between the EU and Kazakhstan in the field of creating a sustainable value chain for raw materials, battery production, and green hydrogen.

The partnership focuses on particularly important raw materials, such as rare and rare earth metals, as well as other industrial products that are important for the green and digital transformation of the economy. The Memorandum also highlights the potential for developing cooperation between the parties in the areas of investment, geological exploration of the subsoil, development of scientific research and modernization of the mining industry.

The EU needs several dozen types of rare metals, such as beryllium, tantalum and niobium. Kazakh companies currently produce most of them. As for the rest, Kazakhstan has deposits, but they are not yet developed, and a relative share has deposits, but their volumes are not yet known. European interest in rare metals extends to other Central Asian countries, which also have significant reserves (Muratova et al. 2023): graphite in Uzbekistan; tellurium, chromium and lithium in Kyrgyzstan; aluminum, manganese, lead and zinc in Tajikistan.

One of the promising areas for strengthening the energy dialogue between Kazakhstan and the EU is the development of cooperation in the field of nuclear energy and the related uranium industry (Nursultanova et al. 2024). This is particularly evidenced by the recent visit of French President E. Macron to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Another significant issue in the relations between Europe and Central Asian countries is security and joint efforts to combat the threats of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and radicalism. European countries themselves possess vast experience in addressing issues such as the fight against terrorism, extremism, separatism, and drug trafficking (Baizakova and Yergeshkyzy 2013; Moisé and Sorbello 2022).

Among the main factors contributing to the preservation and strengthening of the EU's interest in Central Asia, the following stand out: 1) the geostrategic position of the region, located at the crossroads of the geopolitical interests of world powers. A small geographical area already represents a highly concentrated multipolarity or a very dense concentration of a number of powers and major geopolitical players; 2) the high transit potential of Central Asia for trade flows between Europe and Asia; 3) the presence in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, of significant energy and natural resource potential (especially hydrocarbons); 4) the immediate proximity of the Central Asian states to Afghanistan, which increases the risks of the spread of security threats and large-scale transit migration in the region, especially against the backdrop of the crisis that arose in the summer of 2021 in connection with the Taliban's coming to power. In this context, it should be noted that Kazakhstan has demonstrated to the world community a real readiness for international cooperation in various areas, including in the increasingly important area of facilitating border security.

### **Hybrid threats in Central Asia**

The EU offers assistance to Central Asian countries in the fight against hybrid threats, including drug trafficking, which is taking new routes from Afghanistan to European

cities. In the EU Strategy for Central Asia, regional security issues include continued cooperation in combating the growth of drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Hybrid cyber attacks are also mentioned among the main emerging challenges. The EU is ready to share knowledge and information on both cyber security and the identification of hybrid threats. To assist in the fight against drugs and improve border management, the EU has developed two programmes: the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the Counter Drugs Programme in Central Asia (CADAP). BOMCA aims to strengthen security in the region, facilitate legitimate trade and transit, and reduce the illicit movement of goods and people. The CADAP aims to gradually adopt European and international practices in the field of counter-narcotics.

In general, during this period, the European Union tried not to view the Central Asian region through the prism of geopolitics, unlike other external actors Russia, the United States and China. After the repetition of the events in Central Asia in the summer of 2000, connected with the invasion of Islamic militants into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Europe began to watch the developments in the region with genuine concern. The EU became even more concerned about maintaining stability in Russia and Central Asia. In practical terms, some German politicians saw the transformation of the Caucasus-Central Asian region into a kind of belt of stability separating Europe from the unstable regions of the Islamic world.

At the same time, the need to continue implementing existing regional initiatives and cooperation platforms was noted, but with a differentiated approach. In particular, the EU expressed its readiness to abandon the practice of mandatory involvement of all states in the region in participation in a particular initiative and to proceed, first of all, from their interests and needs. It was assumed that such an approach could give greater impetus and effectiveness to EU programs and framework cooperation. In this regard, the European side demonstrated its intention to reassess the balance between regional and bilateral programs in favor of the latter. Another innovation that followed in the preparation of the document was the thesis on the need to strengthen the coordination of the EU's activities in the region. On the one hand, this concerns the EU itself, its structures and member states, whose coordinated actions could improve the effectiveness of the implementation of EU projects, dialogues and platforms, as well as promote their recognition. On the other hand, it was envisaged to expand efforts to promote dialogue with regional and international organizations (OSCE, Council of Europe, UN, etc.), as well as with neighbors of the Central Asian states and other countries operating in the region. It is important to understand that the adoption of these conclusions, as well as the restoration of the position of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, was positioned as a manifestation of the EU's interest in further developing cooperation with the countries of the region.

In June 2017, the EU Council adopted updated conclusions on the Strategy, reaffirming that the core objectives and priority areas of the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia remain relevant. At the same time, the new conclusions placed emphasis on regional development assistance programmes for sustainable growth/employment and security/stability. According to the conclusions, in the context of the implementation of the Strategy, Brussels expressed its readiness to strengthen the dialogue with relevant regional and international organisations, in particular the OSCE,

the Council of Europe, the UN, as well as neighbouring and other states active in the region, in order to ensure synergies between EU policies and initiatives on issues such as security, connectivity, transport, energy and sustainable development, including opportunities linked to the Silk Road initiatives. In addition, the EU Council asked the EU High Representative and the European Commission to submit proposals for the development of a new EU Strategy for Central Asia by mid-2019, which should reflect a modern vision of cooperation between the two regions, taking into account current geopolitical realities, changing needs and new opportunities of the Central Asian states. Although this process was an internal EU assessment of its Central Asian Strategy, this time many other stakeholders were involved, ranging from the Central Asian states themselves to research centers and civil society, for which numerous conferences were held both in Brussels and in the countries of the region (Kurmanov 2024).

Firstly, Central Asia itself has changed. The states of the region have become more self-sufficient and economically developed. Two countries, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, were transferred to the category of middle-income countries according to the World Bank classification, which excluded them from bilateral EU aid programs. The change of power in Uzbekistan has significantly intensified and improved regional cooperation, opening up new opportunities for both the Central Asian countries themselves and non-regional players. Secondly, its immediate neighbors Russia and China have become much more active in the region. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union and the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative forced the EU to seek new formats of interaction within the framework of these projects. Thirdly, the situation in the EU (migration crisis, economic downturn, Brexit process, etc.) and on its borders (conflict in Ukraine, confrontation with Russia, strained relations with the Trump administration) required the EU to reconsider its foreign policy priorities. It is obvious that cooperation with the stable Central Asian region seems to be a sufficiently convincing example to demonstrate the viability of the foreign policy course of European diplomacy. Fourthly, on August 12, 2018, the presidents of the Central Asian states signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, which defines and regulates the rights and obligations of the parties with respect to the Caspian Sea, including its waters, seabed, subsoil, natural resources and airspace. This circumstance opens up additional opportunities for the EU to diversify routes for energy supplies to European markets bypassing Russia.

On 15 May 2019, after two years of work, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented to the Council of the EU a Joint Communication “The European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”, which de facto became the new EU Strategy for Central Asia. This Communication entered into force on 17 June 2019, following the adoption of the relevant conclusions of the EU Council. According to the developers of the Strategy, the mutual relations of the Central Asian states, as well as the level of their cooperation with the EU, have reached a qualitatively new level, especially in recent years. In this regard, the main message of the new EU programmatic document was to use the opportunities arising from this positive dynamics. The Communication reflects a modern vision of the interaction between the two regions, and also takes into account the current geopolitical realities, changing

needs and new opportunities of the countries of the Central Asian region. It should be noted that the core ideas of the previous EU policy document on Central Asia – connectivity, sustainable, inclusive and rules-based initiatives – remain unchanged

### **Transit diplomacy of the Central Asian region**

An important area of intersection of interests of the EU and Central Asia is transport and infrastructure, i.e. transit diplomacy of the Central Asian region. The potential for cooperation in this area is truly significant. Firstly, for Europe, the Central Asian countries are valuable as markets for goods. Secondly, the transit potential of Central Asia is no less important for Europe, since it can potentially connect it with its largest trading partner, China, which is also very active in this area, especially within the framework of the BRI strategy.

The new transcontinental roads are also expected to give a new impetus to cooperation and strengthen ties, as the EU hopes to make greater use of the opportunities offered by the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. This will not only reshape the Eurasian transport framework as a regional economic zone, but also as an alternative and sustainable route between Asia and Europe (Rentschler et al. 2025).

International transport corridors are, on the one hand, a phenomenon of the modern history of international relations. On the other hand, the development and expansion of International transport corridors is due to deep historical reasons associated with the expansion of interstate interaction, foreign trade, which began in the Ancient World. The development of International transport corridors occurs both in the context of globalization and increasing regionalization of international relations. At the present stage of transformation of international relations, further expansion of the network of International transport corridors will be determined not only by the national interests of individual states and the aspirations of individual regions, but also by the general direction of world politics set by the countries - leaders of the international system (Yermekbayev, Delovarova and Kaliyeva 2024).

At the Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity in January 2024<sup>2</sup>, it was announced that the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor project includes the rehabilitation and modernization of the rail and road networks, an increase in rolling stock, expansion of port capacity, improvement of border crossing points, and the creation of multimodal logistics centers and auxiliary hubs in all five Central Asian countries (Vinokurov 2023). For Kazakhstan, which is ready to play the role of a transit and transport bridge between the West and the East, it is important to achieve consistency between the EU strategy, Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol program<sup>3</sup> and China's BRI initiative.

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission. 2024. "Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity." Accessed March 30, 2025. [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/investors-forum-eu-central-asia-transport-connectivity\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/investors-forum-eu-central-asia-transport-connectivity_en).

<sup>3</sup> Official Information Source of the Prime minister of the RK. 2021. "How Nurly Zhol program is changing Kazakhstan: Modern highways and new directions." October 27, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/reviews/how-nurly-zhol-program-is-changing-kazakhstan-modern-highways-and-new-directions>.

## Central Asia in a new geopolitical and geoeconomic influence

An important question remains: to what extent will the EU maintain its geopolitical and geo-economic influence in Kazakhstan and Central Asia in the context of China's growing influence and Russia's attempts to regain control over the region?

While the EU recognizes its own limitations in Central Asia, a more active European policy in the region will lead to significant geopolitical shifts and changes in the relationships between the main regional players such as the US, Russia and China.

The EU is conducting a series of consultations to, on the one hand, convey the priorities of its Strategy, and on the other, align them with the needs of the Central Asian countries themselves. It is important to listen to the opinions of the countries of the region to ensure the effective implementation of this Strategy. As part of the EU's cooperation with the Central Asian countries, an important interaction mechanism has been developed in the form of the EU-Central Asia Summit<sup>4</sup>, which brings together political leaders from the EU and Central Asian countries. Importantly, this format develops the institutionalization of relations between the Central Asian countries and the EU within the framework of existing high-level platforms. In this format, a wide range of issues were discussed, including the expansion of mutual trade and investment mechanisms, which gives a qualitative impetus to the social and economic development of all parties, the creation of favorable conditions for doing business, as well as the creation of a new platform for economic integration between the EU and Central Asia<sup>5</sup>. For the EU, it is important to transform Afghanistan into a safe and peaceful country with the participation of Central Asian countries, discussing issues of mutually beneficial and open water and energy cooperation in Central Asia. In particular, concerning the rational use and protection of water resources, adaptation to climate change, as well as the preservation of the environment and biodiversity in Central Asia. High-level cooperation between the EU and Central Asia demonstrates that the EU acts on two levels: developing bilateral cooperation with each of the Central Asian countries and promoting a multilateral format, which serves as additional confirmation of the renewed European interest in the region. These dialogue platforms represent a potentially additional area of cooperation with the EU, as it has extensive experience in the practice of regulation and collegial decision-making that can benefit the Central Asian region (Dewen 2025; Pepe 2024).

Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries have entered a global era of turbulence, which is characterized by rapidly transforming international economic relations and a changing geopolitical landscape (Sullivan 2025). In particular, the Middle East conflict and the Ukrainian crisis, all these changes are often unpredictable, and therefore leading global players are faced with new challenges. At the current stage, the EU demonstrates a more specific understanding of its own national interests (EEAS 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Official website of the Council of the EU and the European Council. 2025. "International Summit: First EU-Central Asia summit, 4 April 2025." Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/>.

<sup>5</sup> Official website of the Council of the EU and the European Council. 2025. "Joint Declaration following the first European Union-Central Asia summit, 4 April 2025." Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/04/04/joint-declaration-following-the-first-european-union-central-asia-summit/>.

That is, it intends to engage in those areas in the region that are of greatest interest to it: ensuring security, improving the investment climate and developing sustainable economic growth, as well as developing human capital and increasing the level of employment. Other areas of public administration, human rights, education and others will also be modernized, but to the extent necessary for the effective implementation of the main tasks of the EU Global Gateway strategy<sup>6</sup>.

Dynamically transforming geopolitical relationships between the leading players in the global energy market, where Russia and China are actively building up a mutually beneficial partnership aimed at deepening ties in the economic, political and energy spheres. The unstable nature of changing global energy markets and the redistribution of the world economy and international relations leave their mark on the cooperation between Russia and China. But the strategic partnership of the two countries is becoming one of the most important factors in the development of a modern cross-border logistics infrastructure for the transportation of energy resources, which in the future will undoubtedly influence the formation of the future architecture of the global energy market (Carls 2024). One of the most important geopolitical parameters for Russian-Chinese rapprochement is the escalation of global military and political conflicts, and the ongoing fading of the European economy and the steadily gaining strength and demonstrating high potential of the Chinese market are strategically important components in the reorientation of Russian interests not only in the Central Asian, but also in the Asia-Pacific region.

Since the adoption of the EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2019 (Perianes Bermúdez 2023), the region has been influenced by significant external factors, such as Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine since 2022, the transition to power in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2021, as well as China's increasingly assertive foreign policy. Therefore, the EU, reviewing its strategy for Central Asia in the light of the geopolitical situation, on 17 January 2024, the European Parliament in its Resolution<sup>7</sup> called on EU countries to actively engage with the countries of Central Asia and promote a strategic partnership with them. Given the isolation of Russia by Western European countries caused by the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine since 24 February 2022 and the growing influence of China in the region, this Resolution noted the need to strengthen trade routes through Central Asia, bypassing Russia. In this context, EU institutions have actively rethought their projects towards Central Asia, more actively engaging the region as a democratic actor as an alternative to the established autocratic players.

When considering cooperation between the Central Asian countries and the EU, it is important to take into account the factors that may or may already influence the implementation of this EU Strategy, so in my opinion the following recommendations can be made:

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission. 2024. "Global Gateway." Accessed March 30, 2025.

[https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en).

<sup>7</sup> European Parliament. 2024. "European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2024 on the EU strategy on Central Asia (2023/2106(INI))." Accessed March 30, 2025.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0027\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0027_EN.html).

- Cooperation should be developed on the basis of a multi-level and sectoral approach. In particular, the existing cooperation mechanisms in the formats of a working group and dialogues, which diversify relations at different levels between the EU and the Central Asian countries.
- The European experience of combining the efforts of the states of the region to ensure internal security can be used by the Central Asian countries, primarily in the formation of an organizational and legal framework for the operational interaction of law enforcement agencies.
- In order to intensify technological cooperation with European countries, the Central Asian countries could initiate a discussion of cooperation in the use of advanced European technologies in the field of transport communications, energy, environmental protection, healthcare, as well as in the development of small and medium-sized businesses.
- Cooperation in the field of cybersecurity will become an important aspect of interaction in the near future, so it is necessary to further expand cooperation in the field of information technology, cybersecurity and in the training of qualified personnel.
- Cooperation in the field of education has great potential; it is necessary to develop specific educational programs in the specialties that Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries need.
- Scientific cooperation of academic communities, despite significant achievements, is fragmentary; it is necessary to initiate long-term comprehensive research to develop medium-term forecasts.

In environmental matters, it has become necessary for the Central Asian countries to develop and implement programmes that will bring their national environmental legislation into line with the practices of European countries (Akram, Mohazzam and Ali 2024). A significant part of the main environmental problems in Central Asia are related to the distribution, use and protection of the quality of water resources. Environmental issues should be taken into account in the regional dialogue at all levels, including continuing discussions within the framework of the EU's Water Resilience Strategy<sup>8</sup> and the EU's Water Initiative Plus project<sup>9</sup>.

In my opinion, the EU also needs to pay more attention to the social and economic situation of the population in the Central Asian countries, which is generally deteriorating, and try to take into account potential social unrest (Sharipova and Kudebayeva 2023).

This, in turn, requires the EU to move away from a policy of passive reaction to events and move to a policy of proactive action, continuing the following areas of cooperation:

- consultations with EU Council experts in the field of social and economic security;

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<sup>8</sup> European Commission. 2024. "Water resilience strategy." Accessed March 30, 2025. [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/environment/water-resilience-strategy\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/environment/water-resilience-strategy_en).

<sup>9</sup> European Commission. 2025. "The European Union's Water Initiative Plus (EUWI+) project." Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://www.euwipluseast.eu/en/>.

- coordination of the actions of the Central Asian countries with Afghanistan, continuing and expanding joint programmes with the EU, such as BOMCA and CADAP;
- using the BOMCA model in other security areas in Central Asia;
- expanding cooperation in emergency response;
- strengthening cooperation with European countries in the area of human security.

These measures should be strategic in nature and not adapted each time to specific situations, since the implementation of all this largely depends not only on funding from the EU, but also on the readiness of the Central Asian countries to implement it.

Thus, the new stage of the geopolitical situation in and around the region is characterized by a gradual change in the roles and levels of influence of the EU on Central Asia aimed at resilience, which is of strategic importance for the Central Asian countries in terms of security and interconnectedness, as well as energy and resource diversification (EEAS 2025).

The EU, influencing the development of the transport corridor along which oil and gas will be transported to Europe, can act as a kind of arbitrator and guarantor of stability, both in relation to individual countries and the organization as a whole. The EU's regional approach has good potential for effective interaction, so the EU is trying to strengthen cooperation, identifying which programs work effectively and which do not, and why. Despite the low geopolitical influence of the EU in Central Asia, it is important for the countries of the region to view the EU as another alternative player and actively offer new formats of cooperation to their partner in the sphere of economy, foreign policy and security.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

The EU continues to be one of the world's leading players and a benchmark for global stability and development. In this regard, strengthening its geopolitical position and influence on the Central Asian region through the intensification of economic, political and institutional interaction should be viewed in a positive light. As a successful model of regional integration, the EU can offer the Central Asian countries many proven mechanisms for their regional rapprochement. The EU's most important priority is to promote deepening regional cooperation, which fully correlates with the goals and objectives of the Central Asian states in this area. In this context, one cannot fail to note the EU's constant search for a balance between regional and bilateral interaction formats. With its impressive resource potential and unique geographical position for creating transport corridors to European markets, Central Asia remains important for Europe's energy supply. In addition, it is important to understand that the Central Asian states, which are members of the OSCE, are positioned in the EU as an integral part of the European space. This is confirmed by the readiness of the Central Asian countries to cooperate with the EU in bilateral, regional and global formats.

The EU's policy documents regarding the region were not always perfect. However, despite certain shortcomings in the development and implementation of joint projects, European policy towards the Central Asian states can be called consistent and structured. If the EU's first steps largely reflected interest in the region as a source of

energy resources, then in the context of confrontation between the West and Russia since 2022, the EU's desire to interact with the Central Asian countries as equal partners on mutually beneficial terms has been noticeable.

Approaches to EU cooperation with Central Asia are being transformed not only by the European side, but also by the countries of the region, which is confirmed in the national policy documents of the latter. In the course of preparing and implementing EU strategies in the region, each of them adapts the European vector of its foreign policy activities to modern reality. This allowed the European side to develop a practical approach to interaction with the countries of the region, focusing on long-term strategic planning.

In my opinion, it is important to focus on increasing the practical impact of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, which will be greatly facilitated by the unification of efforts of the states in the region. In this sense, it is necessary to hold regular consultations between the parties on the status and prospects of regional programs to coordinate the measures taken and avoid duplication. The development of criteria for assessing the effectiveness of such programs within the framework of the document and their further use would allow identifying and correcting shortcomings already in the process of work.

It is advisable to expand in each Central Asian state think tanks on the issues of cooperation with the EU from among representatives of civil society, research circles and others, that is, independent experts.

The Central Asian states need to demonstrate openness to dialogue with the EU and its partners, actively using, among other things, the capabilities of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. For Kazakhstan, in addition, it is important to focus on the implementation of the Agreement on Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation between Kazakhstan and the EU. The priority areas for cooperation, both bilaterally and regionally, are seen as: development of trade and investment, transport and logistics sector, export of agricultural and other types of products, digitalization, green economy, improvement of the education system, human rights and the rule of law.

Despite the growing importance and active development, International transport corridors have not yet become the object of special scientific understanding. The special importance of land transport communications for the Eurasian continent with the largest latitudinal extent explains the scientific and practical significance of special studies of the Eurasian International transport corridors. The experience of functioning of transport corridors allows us to consider them a special form of international cooperation, producing unique features and characteristics that require conceptualization. Advancement along the path of mastering a new phenomenon of international relations and political order, namely international transport corridors, is impossible without building the logic of research from the genesis, the reasons that determine the emergence of the Trans-Caspian international transport route, to the description of their mature state, that is, in the process of historical development. It is this logic that explains the demand for studying the Trans-Caspian international transport route in the context of political studies.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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