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EUROPEAN UNION AND CENTRAL ASIA: NEW HORIZONS FOR ENHANCED COOPERATION

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Abstract. The article examines the role of the European Union as a stable and promising partner for the Central Asian region at the current stage. The new strategy of relations between the European Union and Central Asia, adopted in June 2019, that takes into account global changes in the international arena, as well as the priorities of the countries of the region in their relations with the EU, is a confirmation of this fact. It is expected that the updated EU policy to the Central Asian countries will allow to strengthen existing cooperation and focus on the most productive projects and, most importantly, modify the approaches and aspects of interaction in order to enter a better format of interaction. The relevance of this article is due to the need for a comprehensive study of the main directions and instruments of the European Union's policy towards the region of Central Asia. At the same time, the main task of this work is to determine the possibilities and prospects for the implementation of the EU's new Strategy for Central Asia.

Key words: *European Union, Central Asia, the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, Cooperation, Connectivity, Partnership for Sustainability, Partnership for Prosperity, European Green Deal.*

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ЕУРОПАЛЫҚ ОДАҚ ЖӘНЕ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ: КЕҢЕЙТІЛГЕН ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚТЫҢ ЖАҢА МҮМКІНШІЛІКТЕРІ

Мұрат Лаумулин, Әсима Әубәкір

Андатпа. Мақалада Еуропалық одақтың қазіргі кезеңдегі Орталық Азия аймағы үшін тұрақты және перспективалы серіктес ретіндегі рөлі қарастырылады. Халықаралық аренадағы жаһандық өзгерістерді, сондай-ақ аймақ елдерінің ЕО-мен қатынастарындағы басымдықтарын ескере отырып, 2019 жылғы маусымда қабылданған Еуроодақ пен Орталық Азия арасындағы қатынастардың жаңа стратегиясы осының дәлелі болып табылады. ЕО-ның Орталық Азия елдеріне қатысты жаңартылған саясаты оған қазіргі ынтымақтастықты нығайтуға және неғұрлым өнімді жобаларға назар аударуға, ең бастысы, өзара іс-қимылдың неғұрлым сапалы форматына шығу мақсатында өзара іс-қимылдың тәсілдері мен аспектілерін түрлендіруге мүмкіндік береді деп күтілуде. Бұл жұмыстың өзектілігі Еуропалық Одақтың Орталық Азия елдеріне қатысты саясатының негізгі бағыттары мен құралдарын жан-жақты зерттеу қажеттілігімен байланысты. Сонымен бірге жұмыстың басты міндеті - ЕО-ның Орталық Азияға арналған жаңа стратегиясын іске асыру мүмкіншіліктері мен келешегін анықтау.

Түйін сөздер: *Еуропалық Одақ, Орталық Азия, ЕО-ның Орталық Азия бойынша жаңа стратегиясы, ынтымақтастық, өзара байланыс, тұрақтылық үшін серіктестік, өркендеу үшін серіктестік, еуропалық жасыл курс.*

ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЙ СОЮЗ И ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ: НОВЫЕ ГОРИЗОНТЫ ДЛЯ РАСШИРЕННОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА

Мурат Лаумулин, Асима Аубакир

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается роль Европейского Союза как стабильного и перспективного партнера для Центрально-азиатского региона на нынешнем этапе. Новая стратегия отношений между Евросоюзом и Центральной Азией, принятая в июне 2019 года с учетом глобальных изменений на международной арене, а также приоритетов стран региона в их отношениях с ЕС, является тому подтверждением. Ожидается, что обновленная политика ЕС по отношению к странам Центральной Азии позволит ему укрепить имеющееся сотрудничество и сфокусироваться на наиболее продуктивных проектах и, главное, модифицировать подходы и аспекты взаимодействия в целях выхода на более качественный формат взаимодействия. Актуальность данной работы обусловлена необходимостью комплексного изучения основных направлений и инструментов политики Европейского Союза в отношении стран Центральной Азии. При этом основной задачей в работе является определение возможностей и перспектив реализации новой Стратегии ЕС по Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: *Европейский Союз, Центральная Азия, новая Стратегия ЕС по Центральной Азии, сотрудничество, взаимосвязанность, партнерство во имя устойчивости, партнерство во имя процветания, европейский зеленый курс.*

Introduction

Against the background of the cardinal transformation of the previously existing balance of power observed in the modern system of international relations, the Central Asian region continues to remain in the focus of attention of the world's leading actors, one way or another striving not only to strengthen but also to further advance their positions in Central Asia. One of the largest and strategically important external actors for the Central Asian states is the European Union.

The EU policy in Central Asia, which was mainly based on the corresponding EU strategies in the region, went through several stages of its evolutionary development.

It is noteworthy that at each of these stages the EU faced the need to solve certain tasks related to both the development of priority areas of cooperation and the need to formally “coordinate” its actions in the region with the initiatives of other key players in the system of international relations operating in Central Asia and also the respective integration institutions.

Numerous works of both Kazakhstani and foreign researchers have been devoted to the study of the problems of European strategy in the region. It is well covered in the works of K. Bayzakova, M. Gubaidullina, E. Esenbaeva, J. Ibrashev, D. Kalieva, R. Kalieva, G. Kurganbaeva, M. Laumulin, T. Suleimenov, and G. Rakhmatulina.

A relatively new view of EU cooperation with the Central Asian countries and especially with the Republic of Kazakhstan is given in the works of R. Kurmanguzhin.

Among the works of Russian authors, the works of S. Yun, A. Kazantsev, I. Bolgova, D. Malyshev, I. Novikov should be noted.

The works of Western and Eastern specialists, in particular Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr, deserve a separate mention. K. O'Neill, J. Balsiger, S. D. VanDeveer, H. Milner, S. Golunov, L. F. Blanco, C. C. Cirilig,

G. Mostafa, S. Kay, T. Renard, O. L. Spaiser.

The purpose of this article is to consider the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, adopted in 2019 from the point of view of determining the place and role of the Central Asian countries in the foreign policy of the European Union, taking into account the ongoing global and regional processes.

Research methods

Among various research methods, which were used for this research, in parallel with logical methods, the following should be stressed. The method of content analysis allowed to highlight the key approaches and tools of the European Union in implementing its policy in Central Asia, as well as to conduct an analysis of some current and prospective joint projects. The above-mentioned method made it possible to study the content of individual strategic documents of the European Union concerning the region. The method of systematic and interdisciplinary analysis helped to identify and explore several aspects of the EU's policy in Central Asia, as well as to identify cause and effect links, number of new tendencies of interaction followed by conclusions. This method was also used for comparing the opinions of various researchers and the officials on a given topic.

Among the approaches that made up the methodological basis of this study, the method of expert assessments, statistical analysis, and forecasting should be noted.

Development and implementation of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia «EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership»

On May 15, 2019, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented to the EU Council the Joint Communiqué “European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” [1], which became,

in fact, the new EU Strategy for Central Asia. This Communiqué entered into force on June 17, 2019, after the adoption of the relevant conclusions of the EU Council [2].

This document, which in fact became the third program document of the European Union towards Central Asia (the previous two - from 2002 and 2007), reflects the 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 lacks any specific thematic platforms, which confirms the desire to make the document flexible and leave the possibility of maintaining its relevance for a longer time.

The desire to use the newly opened opportunities in the region was a confirmation of the European side's recognition of the positive dynamics of interaction between the Central Asian countries and the European Union. This is the main idea behind its new policy document.

As a priority goal in the region, the European Union defines the Partnership for Sustainability, which envisages "increasing the ability of the Central Asian states to overcome various internal and external challenges, as well as successfully carry out reforms". The focus remains on issues of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and gender equality.

The European Union expresses its intention to continue cooperation in the field of security, including in the field of border management, migration, combating illegal drug trafficking, extremism and terrorism, disarmament, and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

"Partnership for Prosperity" is defined by the second area of interaction. It includes promoting the modernization of the economies of the region's countries, developing their sustainable interconnection

with each other and neighboring regions, as well as investing in the younger generation, mainly in educational projects.

Thus, the policy pursued by the Europeans in Central Asia was supplemented by the above elements but retained the basic model of interaction. It is important to note that today the European Union strives to take into account the specifics and priorities of each Central Asian country.

New policy innovation is the EU's focus on developing interconnectivity between Europe and Central Asia. In other words, the Europeans expect that regional cooperation will enable the Central Asian countries to better manage interdependence in order to strengthen their positions in the international format.

In addition, through Central Asia, the EU seeks to improve interaction with the countries of Southeast Asia, which correlates with another European strategy - the EU's Europe and Asia Connectivity Asia Strategy [3], published ahead of the Asia-Europe Forum Summit (ASEM) in September 2018.

European Policy Implementation Instruments in the Central Asian region

Separately, it is necessary to focus on the tools for the implementation of the Strategy, in which the key role is assigned to regional and bilateral programs financed within the 7-year budget cycles of the European Union. So, from 2014 to 2020, the budget for cooperation between the EU and Central Asia amounted to about 1.1 billion euros [4].

Most of the funds allocated for the Central Asian countries are intended for the implementation of regional projects involving two or more countries in the region. The rest of the funds are distributed among bilateral projects with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

The strategy is being implemented through the respective regional and bilateral

Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) programs. It should be noted that due to the rather limited financial resources, the European Union strives to implement relatively low-cost projects that have practical benefits, rather than allocate grants for expensive projects, for example, infrastructure development.

In addition, support to the region is provided in the form of loans from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank, which to date have invested about 11 billion euros in the region.

Another support option is the blending of grant aid and borrowed funds. Such an EU investment facility for Central Asia has a universal application and is used to reduce the amount of capital that partner countries must raise to implement a project in Central Asia. It is noteworthy that in the period from 2010 to 2016, in a similar mixed format, the countries of the region received more than 1 billion euros, of which 143 million euros were grant aid (25 projects), and 970 million euros were loans [5].

To provide the European Commission more flexibility in planning its program activities, as well as to renew the right to implement bilateral development programs in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the European Union is currently working on the development of a new instrument of cooperation.

The new program document of the European Union also provides for the creation of new formats of cooperation at different levels. Today, the annual conferences of EU-CA foreign ministers and high-level EU-CA dialogues on political and security issues function effectively.

Along with this, it is planned to establish an informal platform - the "EU - Central Asia Forum" for closer interaction between civil societies, think tanks, and the business community. In July 2021, the First CA-EU Economic Forum is planned in Bishkek, at

which special attention will be paid to the promotion of innovative, energy, and resource-saving projects of a cross-border nature within the framework of a partnership in promoting a green economy [6]. It is assumed that such forums will be held on a rotating basis in the countries of Central Asia.

It must be admitted that the European Union is attentive to the proposals of the Central Asian countries for interaction, which is reflected in its program documents. In particular, the following Central Asian initiatives have found a place in the Strategy: the possibility of implementing trilateral projects in the EU-CA-Afghanistan format, holding working meetings between meetings of Ministerial Conferences and High-Level Dialogues, as well as virtual institutionalization of EU-CA cooperation through the establishment of an appropriate online portal [7].

The meeting of the author with a representative of the Central Asia Department of the European External Action Service (Brussels, March of 2020), who was directly involved in the preparation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia 2019, revealed the following thesis regarding EU's interaction with Central Asia. According to the European diplomat, the EU has no intention to compete with any other actor in the region, including China. The European Union can be just a third party and a "good partner" that is able to offer the Central Asian region an alternative between Russia and China.

Prospects for European Union cooperation and Central Asia through ongoing projects

Joining the Central Asian countries to the "European Green Deal", launched in December 2019 at the initiative of the European Union, could be another important area of cooperation. Under this initiative, the EU is committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

According to European experts, by 2050 a balance will be achieved between the volumes of emissions and absorption of greenhouse gases. At the same time, the natural capital of the EU will be protected and augmented, and economic growth will not depend solely on the use of resources. However, they also note that in order to achieve this goal, Europe needs close cooperation with international partners.

In this regard, the EU recognizes the growing potential of the Central Asian countries and draws attention to the significant challenges they face in working to improve the resilience of their national economies [8].

In January 2020, the European Union launched a new environmental integration project “Green Central Asia”, initiated by Germany [9]. This initiative, as part of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, is designed to support a high-level dialogue on climate change issues in the context of ensuring the security and stability of the countries of the region. During his participation in the inauguration of this initiative in Berlin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Tleuberdi told his colleagues about the state policy in Kazakhstan in the field of green economy development and the activities of the International Center for Green Technologies [10].

According to the Head of European Diplomacy Josep Borrell, the fight against climate change is the highest priority for the EU’s partnership with the countries of Central Asia, since the region has been particularly hard hit by this issue.

The European diplomat notes that the European Union, unlike some other partners of Central Asian countries, can offer a truly regional and cross-border approach for solving problems in Central Asia. Having accumulated rich experience in this area, the EU is ready to share it [11].

In this direction, the European Union is working in the framework of the EU-CA

Platform for Cooperation in the Field of Environment and Water Resources and its Working Group on Environment and Climate Change (WGECC), which are supported by the EU-funded project on cooperation in the field of water resources and environment (WECOOP) [12].

Another important area of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia today is the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The countries of Central Asia did not stand aside from the negative processes in the socio-economic and political spheres caused by the coronavirus pandemic. And here, in the framework of the work carried out by the European Union to assist in this direction, it is necessary to note the assistance program “Central Asia COVID-19 Crisis Response” (CACCR), with a budget of 3 million euros.

The program was launched in July 2020 and is designed for two years. It should be noted that it is carried out within the framework of the “Solidarity Package” with a budget of 124 million euros, prepared by the European Union for the Central Asian region as part of the Team Europe global response to COVID-19.

This project, which is being implemented by the World Health Organization, provides support to mitigate the negative impacts caused by the coronavirus and create conditions for the sustainable development of health systems in the countries of the region by strengthening their capacity to respond to such threats in the future. Thus, according to the information of the Delegation of the European Union in the Republic of Kazakhstan, in order to better prepare for the fight against the pandemic, in addition to providing the necessary medicines and equipment, it is planned to provide assistance to medical institutions and laboratories.

In particular, the CACCR program has several stages. In the first phase, priority needs will be met, taking into account

existing national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans. Then, after the peak of the pandemic has passed, the focus will be on recovery and preparation for a possible next wave. In the final stage, in the long term, a number of activities are planned to create and maintain sustainable and effective health systems [13].

As another example of successful interaction between the EU and the Central Asian countries, it is necessary to note the program for training Afghan female students in higher educational institutions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It is noteworthy that Kazakhstan was the author of this concept in 2017.

The main coordinator of the project is UNDP with the assistance of UN-Women, the European Union is assigned the role of sponsor. Thus, the budget of the program at the start-up stage amounted to about 2 million euros.

This program (lasting 6 years – bachelor’s and master’s degrees), involves the training of at least 40 students from Afghanistan in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. At the same time, most of the students will study in Kazakhstan, taking into account the developed educational infrastructure. The main focus of studying in Kazakhstan will be on such specialties as applied statistics, agriculture, and mining. In Uzbekistan, it will mainly be agriculture.

The first group of 30 Afghan women arrived in Kazakhstan with an educational purpose on this project in October 2019 [14].

Conclusion

In its new program document in relation to Central Asia, the European Union reaffirmed the importance of the comprehensive development of cooperation with the Central Asian countries and the region, in general, reaffirming its intentions to promote its sustainable development and outlining the

priority areas of interaction at the interregional level.

It is expected that the European Union Strategy “EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” will allow Europeans to flexibly adapt their policies within the framework of more specific development programs and other initiatives. At the same time, it should be understood that this framework document sets the EU member states a general tone of cooperation and does not give specific guidelines for promoting their national interests in the region. In this regard, the development of traditional cooperation between countries on a bilateral basis does not lose its relevance.

Taking into account the new relevant approaches and aspects of the Strategy, the effect of its implementation has yet to be assessed. It is obvious that the concentration of many priority areas in one document will set the European Union the task of using more resources than before. However, in connection with the changes taking place in the EU today against the background of the coronavirus pandemic, the weakening of the economy in this regard, migration and other problems, along with the strengthening of the role of Eurosceptic, the question arises whether the potential of the European Union will be sufficient to fully disclose and realize them.

In this article, the author tried to show the features of the new not yet fully formed EU Strategy for Central Asia (interaction instruments are still in the process of defining) and, in general, the prospects for the policy pursued by the European Union in the region through the prism of the key aspects of interaction developed by the European Union.

At the same time, it is obvious that taking into account the current global processes cooperation of the European Union with Central Asia can bring, in addition to practical benefits, political and image dividends. Thus,

effective cooperation with the region and the results achieved can be used as evidence of the effectiveness of European diplomacy for interaction with other regions. And the countries of Central Asia should not miss the opportunity to use such kind of intention, showing active interest and involvement at

the level of both the state and other formats of interaction.

The Central Asian countries are also interested in developing a strategic partnership with the European Union, which would meet new realities and new needs.

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