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# EU'S CENTRAL ASIA STRATEGY: NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR PARTNERSHIP

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**Abstract.** The article dwells on the prospects and opportunities of European Union's new Central Asia Strategy defining trends and projects being implemented as part of 2020-2027 strategy. Furthermore, the article reviews current state of relations between EU and Central Asian countries, the main factors contributing to its strengthening and further development. EU's new Central Asia Strategy is aimed at fostering sustainability of region where EU is one of the key players, including such areas as investment, infrastructure and trade.

**Keywords:** *European Union, Central Asia, Strategy, Partnership, Cooperation, Interests.*

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## ЕУРОПАЛЫҚ ОДАҚТЫҢ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ БОЙЫНША СТРАТЕГИЯСЫ: ӘРІШТЕСТІКТІҢ ЖАҢА МҮМКІНДІКТЕРІ

**Әсел Назарбетова**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақала Еуропалық одақтың Орталық Азия бойынша жаңа стратегиясының келешегі мен мүмкіндіктеріне арналған. Стратегия шеңберінде 2020-2027 жж. жүзеге асырылатын бағыттар мен жобалар белгіленген. Сонымен қатар, ЕО және Орталық Азия елдері қарым-қатынасының қазіргі жағдайы, оның нығаюы мен ары қарайғы дамуына ықпал ететін негізгі факторлар қарастырылған. ЕО Орталық Азия бойынша жаңа стратегиясы аймақтың тұрақтылығына бағытталған, Еуроодақ аймақта сондай-ақ инвестиция, инфрақұрылым, сауда салаларында басты ойыншылардың бірі болып табылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** *Еуропалық одақ, Орталық Азия, стратегия, әріптестік, ынтымақтастық, мүдделер.*

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## СТРАТЕГИЯ ЕВРОСОЮЗА ПО ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: НОВЫЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ ДЛЯ ПАРТНЕРСТВА

**Асель Назарбетова**

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена перспективам и возможностям новой Стратегии Европейского Союза в Центральной Азии. Обозначены направления и проекты, реализуемые в рамках Стратегии на 2020-2027 гг. Кроме того, рассмотрены современное состояние взаимоотношений ЕС и стран Центральной Азии, основные факторы, способствующие ее укреплению и дальнейшему развитию. Новая Стратегия ЕС для Центральной Азии направлена на устойчивость региона, где ЕС является одним из ключевых игроков, в том числе в области инвестиций, инфраструктуры и торговли.

**Ключевые слова:** Европейский Союз, Центральная Азия, стратегия, партнерство, сотрудничество, интересы.

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### Introduction

On June 17, 2019, the European Council adopted a conclusion on a new European Union (EU) strategy on Central Asia adapting EU policies to new opportunities appeared in the region. EU's new Central Asia strategy is reflected in the Joint Communiqué "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" adopted by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy May, 2019. The strategy was presented on July 7, 2019 in Bishkek at the Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Central Asian countries and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini.

The EU strategic objectives in Central Asia are based on the position of the region serving as a link between East Asia and Europe. EU began cooperating with the Central Asian countries after eastward enlargement, and interest in the region was associated with the counter-terrorism operation in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks.

In 2007, the paper "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership" appeared aimed at defining EU's clear interest in the countries of the region. This EU's Strategy on Central Asia indicates security and stability as the key interests of the European Union in Central Asia.

The EU Strategy is remarkable for its focus on only five states of the region - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, leaving aside such concepts as Greater Central Asia and others. The first Strategy focused on the development of political dialogue and strengthening the supremacy of law, education and the environment issues. The aspirations of Brussels in the region were also aimed at ensuring EU energy security.

Based on the implementation results 2007 Strategy is hardly successful, yet it would be wrong to speak of its failure. The strategy is characterized by political and inter-agency consultations and funding for EU projects. We identified several factors that had impeded a more effective partnership between the EU and Central Asia [1].

*Firstly*, the adoption of 2007 Strategy coincided with the period when the region, in fact, ceased to exist as a single geopolitical entity. Thus, focusing on regionalism, Brussels actually failed to find a foothold that would enhance the cooperation effectiveness.

*Secondly*, EU's contradictory image as a participant in the modern international relations system also became an obstacle in building relations between the EU and Central Asia. Central Asia is characterized by a rather dismissive attitude towards EU being a supranational structure not having a so-called hard power.

*Thirdly*, the Central Asian republics' image in the mind of European countries is not the best either. From EU's perspective, Central Asian countries have the same set of vices.

A lot of works by foreign and Central Asian experts were devoted to the implementation of the first European Union Strategy for Central Asia, its features, failures and factors hindering its effectiveness and viability. Among them are the works of J. Bonstra, M. Laruelle, Svante E. Cornell, N. Norling, S. Peyrouse, B. Eshment, V. Mikhailenko, A. Kazantsev, D. Popov, S. Yun, K. Baizakova, M. Gubaidullina, A. Gusarova, R. Kurmanguzhin, M. Laumulin, V. Paramonov, A. Chebotarev and etc.

### Research methods

In the study of the stated topic, general scientific methods of socio-humanitarian cognition were used: structural, institutional, activity, comparative approaches, methods of modeling, conceptualization, discourse analysis, expert assessments, etc. The strategy of the European Union in Central Asia, its effectiveness or failure can be studied, analyzed trends, detect trends, reveal institutional impacts and develop scientific and practical recommendations only by applying complex general scientific means of history, political science, economics, statistics and using specific social dimensions (foresight, prolonged, monitoring).

### Priorities of the new Strategy

Despite the difficulties faced by the first Strategy, EU adopted an updated Strategy on Central Asia providing for an expanded partnership with five CA countries, involving investment in regional cooperation, including "the transition to unified regulation and a more integrated regional market, solving common problems such as environmental degradation and terrorism, as well as stepping up cooperation with CA partners to promote peace in Afghanistan".

The new Strategy is part of Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security

Policy, adopted at the end of 2016, and has been prepared in a close consultative process with CA partners, reflecting their wishes and vision. The 2019 strategy is supported by a budget of 1.2 billion Euros embracing more economic issues. The renewed EU cooperation with Central Asia will focus on three priorities that are interconnected and complement each other [2].

The first priority: "**Partnering for resilience** by strengthening Central Asian states' capacity to overcome internal and external shocks and enhancing their ability to embrace reform". In this context a special focus will be given to guarding against the causes of violent extremism and radicalization, control of the terrorism financing and solving the problem of the retrieval of terrorist fighters. EU expert on security and terrorism in Central Asia residing at Bishkek will deal with these issues. EU also offers to expand partnerships in such fields as control of drug trafficking, cybersecurity and protection against hybrid threats, including possible cooperation as a part of EU program on studying such risks.

In addition, Brussels will focus on the further promotion of democracy, the protection of human rights and the supremacy of law, the achievement of the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement and solving environmental issues, as well as cooperation on migration issues. EU plans to continue promoting mutually acceptable solutions regarding the use of water resources in Central Asia.

EU's second priority is "**Partnering for prosperity** by supporting economic modernization, promoting sustainable connectivity, and investing in youth". Here, EU is determined to support the accession of the remaining CA countries to the WTO, to ensure a competitive private sector, and to cooperate in the exchange of technologies related to renewable energy and energy efficiency.

The new EU's strategy pays great attention to the development of infrastructure designed to establish communications between Europe and Central Asia. Envisaged areas

of cooperation include transport, energy and digital connections, as well as people-to-people contacts. In addition, we can expect an increase in the number of participants in EU research programs, such as Horizon, Erasmus +, Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, etc.

The third priority is “**intensive joint work**” aimed at promoting political dialogue and expanding the participation of civil society in decision-making. Hoping to get through to CA public the benefits of partnership with Brussels, EU is determined to enhance public diplomacy. EU will accomplish the envisaged works via social networks and other “new communication technologies”. The targeted audience includes youth, opinion-makers, popular bloggers, prominent civic activists, academics and the media.

The adopted “EU’s new Central Asia Strategy” will serve as the basis for the development of EU 2020-2027 aid programs. The European Union’s former Special Representative for Central Asia Peter Burian, during his working visit to Kazakhstan in the fall of 2019, announced the launch of three new CA programs with a total budget of 55.6 million Euros. The presentation of the programs aimed at supporting investment, competitiveness and trade in Central Asia was held on November 27-29, 2019 in Nur Sultan. As was stated, special focus will be on supporting women-led enterprises. Three EU Programs will be implemented in the following areas:

- International Trade Center (ITC) program supporting international and intra-regional trade;
- Council of Europe’s program aimed at enhancing the rule of law in CA;
- A new phase of the Central Asia Invest (CAI) program on competitiveness and investments to small and medium-sized businesses, jointly implemented by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and regional business intermediary organizations (BIOs).

In addition, EU resumed the WECOOP project entitled “EU-Central Asia Enhanced

Regional Cooperation on Environment, Climate Change and Water” in October 2019. This is the third phase of the project and it will last three years. The project aims to improve policies on environment, climate change and water resources at the national level in Central Asia through their convergence with EU standards, as well as to promote investments in relevant economy sectors in order to achieve significant reduction of pollution caused by human activities, including CO2 emissions. [3].

Despite the enforcement of EU’s policy in Central Asia in recent years, Brussels’s influence in the region in respect to the trade, economy, energy, and security fields remains limited. Facing with strong competition and working with a low budget compared to other major centers of power, EU is trying to establish itself as a relevant and influential participant in an environment where its leading role is not fully shaped. It is fair to assume that EU consciously takes the position of a second tier player acting as a “consultant”. Empowerment in CA requires a greater amount of resources and investment of the European Union, given the increasing involvement of Central Asian countries in large-scale economic projects and security initiatives of the key regional players - China - “One Belt One Road”, SCO, and Russia - EAEU.

During an interview with the Institute for European Policy Peter Burian said: “our approach to the region is that we want to develop an enhanced, modern and non-mutually exclusive approach to partnership with the region, which does not present our partners with a binary choice between us or someone else. ... At least we want to try to combine the efforts of these actors in supporting the needs and ambitions of the region with its young and growing market and population in need of jobs”[4].






In the opinion of K. Baizakova, the Europeans have long understood that all Central Asian countries have their own specifics. In turn, this circumstance contributed to the active development of bilateral cooperation. She believes that at the present stage, the Central Asian countries understand the need to

develop regionalization in order to solve a large number of problems and issues. A. Gusarova also notes that a great deal of attention is paid in the Strategy for Regionalization of Central Asia, aimed at the development of regional cooperation [5].

### Prospects for EU-CA Partnership

Currently, EU’s cooperation with the Central Asian region is largely bilateral, as stipulated by the EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with each CA country, except for Turkmenistan for which the Interim Trade Agreement is valid.

**Table 1.** Legal framework of CA and EC cooperation

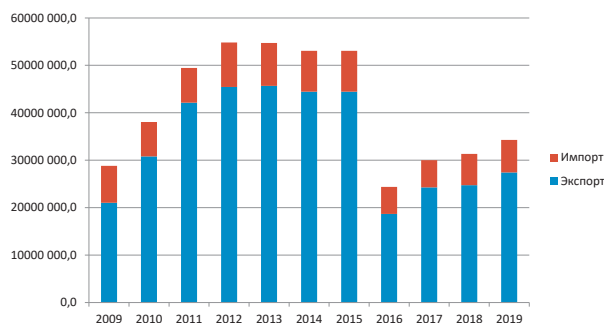
Central Asian Countries	Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA)	Extended partnership and Cooperation Agreements	Other agreements
 Kazakhstan	1995	2015, entered into force since March 1, 2020	
 Kyrgyzstan	1999	Negotiations started in 2017	
 Uzbekistan	1996	Negotiations started on November 23, 2018	
 Tajikistan	2004	-	
 Turkmenistan	-	-	Interim Trade Agreement 1998

At the bilateral level, Kazakhstan remains a key partner of Brussels, including the trade and economic field. EU engagement with the rest of CA states resulted in lowlier outcomes. Although Central Asia is not a key focus of EU’s foreign policy, Brussels seeks to maintain its strategic presence in the region, causing EU to review its strategy.

The EU’s tool to promote the regional economic diversity (except for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) is the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) providing for reduced export tariffs on a wide range of goods. One may note the decision of the European Commission on a new cooperation tool providing wider

and more flexible options for the EU Strategy implementation. For some time Kazakhstan did not receive bilateral EU grant for development, being a middle-income country, now the new Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) affords such an opportunity.

Despite EU is the second largest trading partner of the Central Asian countries (second to China), accounting for about 1/3 of CA’s foreign trade, EU-CA turnover remains low: \$ 28.8 million in 2009 and \$34,2 million in 2019. At the same time, trade with Central Asia is only about 1% of the external trade of the European Union. Yet a significant breakthrough in EU-CA trade cooperation (except for Kazakhstan) has not occurred.



**Chart 1.** Foreign trade of Kazakhstan with the EU countries (Source: State Revenue Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan)

The main EU imports from Central Asia still comprise energy sources - oil, gas, as well as metals and cotton fiber. Central Asia mainly imports from EU vehicles, transport equipment, and other manufactured goods. At the same time, the main factor hindering the development of EU-CA trade relations is the logistics.

The main trade and investment partner of the EU in Central Asia remains Kazakhstan, which accounts for 83.2% (according to the European Commission) of the EU's bilateral trade with Central Asian countries and more than half of all direct investments in Kazakhstan [6]. In 2020, the foreign trade turnover of Kazakhstan with the EU countries amounted to almost 24.86 billion US dollars (exports - 18.34 billion

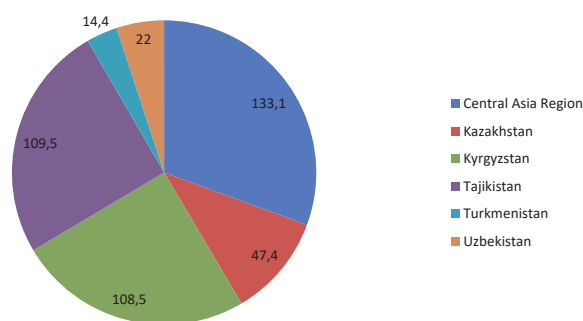
US dollars, imports - 6.52 billion US dollars). Trade turnover in 7 months of 2021 amounted to USD 16.5 billion (exports - USD 13.1 billion, imports - USD 3.4 billion). The increase in comparison with the same period in 2020 was more than 14% [7]. At the end of 2020, the volume of gross foreign direct investment from the EU countries to Kazakhstan amounted to more than 8.8 billion US dollars, or 51% of the total volume of attracted gross foreign direct investment. For the 1st quarter of 2021, about 2 billion US dollars (50.7%) were attracted from the EU countries [8].

According to statistics from the European Commission, at the end of 2020, Uzbekistan accounted for 11% of the EU's bilateral trade with CA countries. According to the official data of Uzbekistan, in 2020 foreign trade turnover with the EU countries amounted to US \$ 3.98 billion (exports - US \$ 418 million, imports - US \$ 3.56 billion) [9]. According to the data of the European Commission at the end of 2020, the share of all EU bilateral trade with CA countries is quite insignificant. The share of Tajikistan accounted for just over 1%, Kyrgyzstan - 1.4%, Turkmenistan - 3.4% [10].

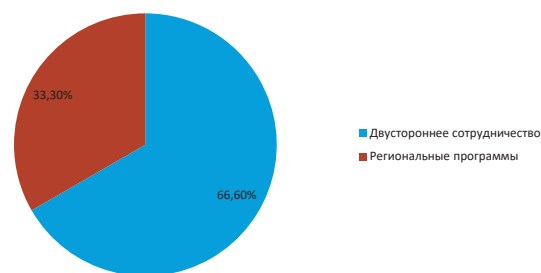
It is worth mentioning that Brussels maintained an economic dialogue with Central Asian states by providing support via development promoting programs. The European Union remains a leading donor in the Central Asian region. If during 2007-2012 EU provided to CA 435 million euros for promoting the development, and the total funding for the period 2007-2013 was 750 million euros, then for the period 2014-2020 the amount reached 1 billion euros (an increase of 56% ) At the same time, EU's funding focuses mainly on bilateral cooperation. Some European experts believe that EU will enhance support for regional cooperation in Central Asia in the nearest future, coupled with the context of an improving dialogue between Uzbekistan and CA countries.

According to experts, one of the prerequisites for the successful implementation of the Strategy is the EU's ability to perform unique functions

that other partners cannot offer: to promote the development of effective mechanisms for regional cooperation with subsequent integration. As a globally recognized successful model for regional integration, the EU can share its experiences. The emerging regional cooperation structures in Central Asia can take note of the many legal, institutional, economic and other instruments tested by the Union over the decades [11].



**Chart 2.** Promotion of Central Asia development, 2007-2012 (in million euros)  
Source: European Court of Auditors



**Chart 3.** Promotion of Central Asia development 2014-2020. Source: European Court of Auditors, Voice on Central Asia

Considering the results of the 2007 Strategy implementation, new strategic document is expected to focus on specific goals and interests, which are closely linked to action programs, enabling the involvement and participation of all parties to the EU-CA dialogue in their implementation. At the same time, no fundamental changes in the EU's approach to cooperation with CA countries or in the priority areas of EU-CA cooperation are expected in the med-term.

However, there were some factors causing EU

to review its presence in CA region. One of these was the restart of regional cooperation between Central Asian republics. CA countries have finally started “speaking” to each other and tried to define formats of regional cooperation; such event cannot but draw attention to the processes taking place. Moreover, this contributes to shaping the cooperation mechanisms based on EU’s beloved regionalism [1].

In addition, the Afghanistan factor is a determining one in EU-CA cooperation. CA countries are extremely interested in resolving and stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. In turn, Brussels supports humanitarian and infrastructure projects implemented by CA countries to aid Afghanistan.

As Russian researcher I. Prokhorenko notes: «For the long term, the European Union is aimed at an economic, political and cultural presence in the region, aiming to achieve, albeit not quickly, but consistently, the readiness of Central Asian societies to accept in a positive way the principles and values of the EU, above all in such promising areas for the European Union as entrepreneurship and support for small and medium-sized businesses, the use of water resources, environmental protection, education, science, culture, border control and counting on the appropriate economic return» [12].

According to Kazakh experts, the new EU Strategy will allow Europeans to flexibly adapt their policies within the framework of more specific development programs and other initiatives. At the same time, they believe that this framework document should be understood as giving the EU member states a general tone of cooperation and not giving specific instructions 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 [13].

## Conclusion

In fact, EU’s 2019 Strategy on CA is an updated version of the 2007 document containing same main areas of cooperation, and the outlined values are more optimistic.

As for the implementation of Strategy against new political background forming in EU after the elections to the European Parliament and Brexit, no tangible changes are expected here. Despite the intensifying of Euroscepticism in this institution, foreign policy issues related to regional security and development are unlikely to change.

The prevalence of pragmatism over value motives in making political decisions may become a new trend; however, many provisions of the new EU’s Strategy on Central Asia are quite pragmatic, since they are aimed at the stability of CA where the EU is one of the key players, including EU’s role in the investments, infrastructure and trade.

Thus, the new EU’s Central Asia strategy is not so much new ideas as a deeper and more detailed explanation of the tasks and activities of EU in CA region, a new attempt to take part in the recent political processes in Central Asia. Participants in the implementation of the EU’s Central Asia strategy will continue traditional cooperation in the spheres of security, reinforcing democratic institutions, the supremacy of law, human rights protection, etc. At the same time, we can assume that areas relevant in light of the changes taking place in the region will get a special emphasis.

It should be noted that the pandemic has already made its own adjustments to the EU Strategy in Central Asia, including its expenditure side. In 2020, the European Union launched the comprehensive COVID-19 in Central Asia: Crisis Response (CACCR) package with a budget of 3 million euros (1.4 billion tenge), aimed at meeting the needs of Central Asian countries, where the main focus paid to Kazakhstan [14].

This suggests that the 2019 Strategy must be flexible and mobile in order to respond to the current situation both within the EU itself and in the CA region in order to achieve the goals and objectives outlined in the document "EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for Strengthening Partnership".



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