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## BEHIND THE NEW EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGY ON CENTRAL ASIA: SOME CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS

The research article would be devoted to the study on the new EU–Central Asia strategy for partnership, which has been presented this year in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Given geopolitical characteristics of region countries and importance of Central Asian region for the world leading countries and economies, authors develop further research ideas on the theoretical, methodological and legal basics of that strategy.

For almost three decades of partnership, Central Asia has become of a great strategic importance to the European Union due to the geographic location of the region between Asia and Europe and mutual common interests in cooperation issues.

The new EU–CA cooperation strategy lies within the general foreign policy of the European Union towards its neighboring countries and regions. The author tries to find and justify changes and challenges of new strategy, comparing to the previous one, and comes to the conclusion on the inevitable importance of the European Union for the future development of Central Asian region.

**Key words:** European Union, Central Asia, new strategy, partnership, aspects.

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### Орталық Азиядағы Еуропалық Одақтың жаңа стратегиясы кейбір тұжырымдамалық аспектілері

Мақалада 2019 жылы Қырғызстан Республикасының Бішкек қаласында ұсынылған Еуропалық Одақ пен Орталық Азия арасындағы жаңа серіктестік стратегиясы қарастырылады. Аймақтағы елдердің геосаяси ерекшеліктерін және жетекші елдер мен әлем экономикасына Орталық Азия аймағының маңыздылығын ескере отырып, автор осы стратегияның теориялық, әдіснамалық және құқықтық негіздерін зерттеуге арналған қосымша пікір ұсынады.

Орталық Азия шамамен үш онжылдық ішінде Еуропа мен Азия арасында географиялық тұрғыда орналасуына байланысты және ынтымақтастықтың түрлі мәселелері бойынша өзара ортақ мүдделерінің бар болуының негізінде Еуропалық Одақ үшін үлкен стратегиялық маңызға ие болды. Мақалада авторлар Еуропалық Одақтың сыртқы саяси стратегиясындағы Орталық Азия аймағының маңыздылығы қарастырылып, орын алған өзгерістердің ғылыми негіздемесін саралаған.

Еуропалық Одақ пен Орталық Азия елдерінің жаңа ынтымақтастық стратегиясы Еуропалық Одақтың көрші елдер мен көрші аймақтарға негізделген сыртқы саясаты болып табылады. Автор жүргізіліп отырған жаңа стратегияны жүргізілген ескі немесе бұрынғы стратегиямен салыстыра отырып, жаңа стратегиядағы өзгерістер мен сын-қатерлерін табуға және дәлелдеуге тырысып, Еуропалық Одақтың Орталық Азия аймағындағы елдердің болашақта дамуына маңызға ие деген қорытындыға келеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** Еуропалық Одақ, Орталық Азия, жаңа стратегия, серіктестік, аспектілер.

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### Некоторые концептуальные аспекты новой стратегии Европейского Союза по Центральной Азии

Статья посвящена исследованию новой стратегии партнёрства между Европейским Союзом и Центральной Азией, которая была представлена в 2019 году в Бишкеке, Кыргызстан. Учитывая геополитические характеристики стран региона и важность самого региона Центральной Азии для ведущих стран и экономик мира, автор развивает некоторые дальнейшие идеи для изучения по теоретическим, методологическим и правовым основам этой стратегии.

За почти три десятилетия партнерства Центральная Азия приобрела большое стратегическое значение для Европейского Союза из-за географического расположения региона между Азией и Европой и взаимных общих интересов по разным вопросам сотрудничества. В статье авторы рассматривают важность региона Центральной Азии во внешнеполитической стратегии Европейского Союза и анализируют научную обоснованность изменений.

Новая стратегия сотрудничества Европейского Союза – Центральной Азии лежит в рамках общей внешней политики Европейского Союза по отношению к соседним странам и регионам. Автор пытается найти и обосновать изменения и вызовы новой стратегии по сравнению с предыдущей и приходит к выводу о важности Европейского Союза для будущего развития Центральноазиатского региона.

**Ключевые слова:** Европейский Союз, Центральная Азия, новая стратегия, партнерство, аспекты.

## Introduction

Since gaining independence, one of the priorities for the newly emerged states of Central Asia, who were interested in pursuing a well-balanced foreign policy, has been the establishment of mutually beneficial cooperation with global geopolitical players, including the European Union (EU) – one of the main centers of the modern international politics and economics.

In turn, the European integration process also initially sought to establish close cooperation with post-Soviet countries in order to both expand political and economic ties and increase its influence on the development of these countries in regional dimension on long-term basis. As a result, nowadays, after almost three decades from the beginning of the establishment of the first contacts, relations between the Central Asian countries and the EU have acquired a complex, multifaceted character in the political, trade, economic, social and cultural fields, and are characterized by a high level of dynamism.

On June 17, 2019, the European Council adopted conclusions on a new European Union (EU) strategy for Central Asia, which will adapt EU policies to new opportunities that have appeared in the region. The Council welcomed the strengthening of EU relations with Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which has taken place since the adoption of the first EU strategy for Central Asia in 2007.

The Council endorses the Joint Communiqué (*Council of the European Union, 2019*) of the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy entitled “The European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for Strengthening Partnerships”, which, together with the Council’s conclusions, now lays out the new political foundation for EU cooperation with Central Asian countries on coming years. The

new strategy aims to ensure sustainability, prosperity and regional cooperation in Central Asia.

## Historical background: EU policy in Central Asia before 2019

The external strategy of the EU is global in nature, in which Asia as a whole has a significant place. This is confirmed by regular meetings of the government representatives of Europe and Asia (Asia-Europe Meetings). At these meetings, the EU is presented as a single organizational structure, which allows for the formation of a common approach on the side of all participating countries. The Central Asian region within the framework of this approach was updated not so long ago. The EU cooperates historically with Central Asian countries at the bilateral and multilateral (regional) levels. The EU began the practice of interacting with Central Asian states almost only in 2001, and then that cooperation was associated with anti-terrorism tasks. The countries of Central Asia got into the EU Security Strategy, adopted in 2003, but only in 2007 the official document “EU and Central Asia: a strategy for a new partnership” appeared, the purpose of which was to indicate the clear interest of the EU in the countries of the region. This strategy was slightly updated in 2015 and 2019. In addition, in 2018, an EU strategy for the entire Asian direction was adopted. However, Central Asia received a clearer role on the foreign policy radar of Europe only after the development of the EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2007. The EU opened its representative offices in Central Asia, launched a number of projects, increased funding and created several formats for bilateral and regional cooperation. As for the second pillar, the EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia was adopted by the Council of Europe on June 21-22, 2007, confirming the growing importance of Central Asia in the field of EU interests in terms of security, stability, management and diver-

sification of energy. The strategy provided the general structure of EU relations with Central Asia and was based on previous achievements in building relations with Central Asian countries, EU assistance programs and other initiatives, undertaken by the European Union. EU priorities for cooperation with the region as a whole include cooperation in the field of human rights, the rule of law, good governance and democracy, education, economic development, trade and investment, energy and transport, environmental policy, common threats and challenges, and intercultural dialogue. All EU strategies are connected with the goal of creating common principles for solving problems in the field of security, energy, transport and the digital network. By now, it has become apparent that the EU has achieved the greatest successes in cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and to some extent, with Uzbekistan.

### Methods

The EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia was adopted by the Council of Europe on June 21-22, 2007, confirming the growing importance of Central Asia in the field of EU interests in terms of security, stability, management and diversification of energy. The strategy provides the general structure of EU relations with Central Asia and is based on previous achievements in building relations with Central Asian countries, EU assistance programs and other initiatives, undertaken by the European Union. EU priorities for cooperation with the region as a whole include cooperation in the field of human rights, the rule of law, good governance and democracy, education, economic development, trade and investment, energy and transport, environmental policy, common threats and challenges, and intercultural dialogue.

### Results and discussion

*EU-CA strategic documents as the legal framework of previous partnership (Regional Center, 2021):*

- European Union and Central Asia: New Partnership Strategy (2007)
- Joint preliminary report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia (2012)
- Conclusions of the Council on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia (2015)

The theoretical foundations could be considered within general theories of international relations – realism and constructivism. Particular attention is also paid to the neo-realistic approach (*Ibrayeva,*

2017), as well as the conceptual ideas of Jean Monet and J. Nye. The writings of the French politician J. Monet reflected the fundamental ideas of the integration of European states, while R. Schumann was the founder of the idea of unification, who believed that borders should not be dividing barriers, but present “lines of contact” that ensure intensive interstate cooperation. Based on J. Nye’s ideas, the main regional policy of the EU’s foreign policy is based on soft power in promoting its values. In studying the idea of realism, it is substantiated that the basis of the EU foreign policy is based on the economic component, that is, it has pragmatic interest. Based on this, the ideas of humanism, it is clear that the EU promotes have topical relevance. In this context, we can consider a new strategy for the cooperation within the common neighborhood policy of the European Union (*ENP, official page*).

*European Union’s new strategy for Central Asia: necessary response to new challenges*

The EU strategy towards Central Asia has been an important area of interest in different academic and scientific circles since the beginning of the 21st century.

On May 2019, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy have issued a joint message outlining the EU’s vision of a new Strategy for Central Asia. The 17-page document, on which diplomats from the EU and from the countries of the Central Asian region have been working for about two years, is called “The European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”. The new Strategy will help identify cooperation programs in the region, as suggested. “Central Asia has always been a key region: because of its history, because of its culture and because of its role in uniting East and West. Today, it is gaining more and more strategic importance against the background of positive internal and regional dynamics, as well as growing global challenges that require strengthening partnerships”, the words of the head of the European diplomacy (at that time) Federica Mogherini underline the place of Central Asia within EU’s regional policy, according to the official communiqué by the European Commission (*Official Press releas, 2019*). The most important tool in strengthening the EU’s interaction with these countries was the annual meetings of representatives of the EU and Central Asian governments, as well as various programs with a humanitarian focus. On July 7-8, 2019 in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), such a regional meeting was held. It was on it, where the new EU strategy for Central Asia was officially presented. The new EU

Central Asia Strategy was endorsed by the Council earlier in June 2019. The earlier version of the strategy from 2007 has been updated to focus on resilience (covering areas such as human rights, border security, environment), prosperity (with a strong accent on connectivity), as well as regional cooperation. It also puts a greater emphasis on Central Asia-Afghanistan relations. The importance of a regional approach and of regional cooperation is also stressed by the EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meetings, the last one (15th) having taken place in July 2019 in Bishkek.

At the same time, an analysis of this document shows that the EU is not so much ready to intensify its activities in the region, as it focuses on the general global and geopolitical changes that need to be taken into account and which must be taken into account in strengthening the partnership. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (at that time) Federica Mogherini [5], who participated in the meeting, mentioned that “the strategy is due to the rapidly developing multilevel and multilateral interaction between different European and Asian states, the growth of regional cooperation”.

The countries of the region do welcome new strategy and point out its importance as for the country and for region itself. “Kazakhstan attaches great importance to the development of a constructive and trusting dialogue in the format of the European Union – Central Asia. Today, the European Union is our reliable partner, contributing to the prosperity and unity of the countries of Central Asia”, said Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Mr. B. Atankulov at a meeting with European Union Special Representative for Central Asia (at that time) Peter Burian, generally expressing almost the same perceptions of CA countries towards new strategy (*Official press release of the MFA RK, 2019*).

*Defining priorities as conceptual focus of new cooperation strategy*

The EU strategy and policy towards the CA region does not include directly the traditional, military-strategic sense. When speaking about the EU’s Central Asian policy, two important points should be noted. First, the European Union, unlike the United States, China and even Russia, is the only geopolitical actor associated with Central Asia that has a full-fledged conceptual document in this regard – the EU Strategy for Central Asia. True, the question of the effectiveness and result of this strategy remains open. Second, the European Union emphatically (on a conceptual and practical level) gives preference to “soft power” over traditional methods of geopoliti-

cal projection of power. However, we can observe, this principle is used not only in relations with the Central Asian countries, but also in the foreign policy activity of the EU as a whole.

The new EU strategy (*European Union, 2021*) aims to create a “more durable, modern and non-exclusive partnership with Central Asian countries” in the interest of developing the region as a sustainable, prosperous and closely interconnected economic and political space. The document focuses on three priorities that are interlinked and complementary. Firstly, the European Union intends to establish a “partnership for the sake of sustainability” of the states of our region. Particular attention in this context will be given to preventing the causes of violent extremism and radicalization, and to combating the financing of terrorism. In addition, Brussels will focus on promoting democracy, protecting human rights and the rule of law, achieving the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement and addressing environmental issues, as well as cooperation on migration issues.

The EU’s second priority is “cooperation for prosperity,” which means promoting business competitiveness, creating a healthy and open investment environment, unlocking scientific potential, and supporting the accession of the remaining countries of the region to the World Trade Organization. Cooperation in this area is supposed to focus mainly on transport, energy and digital communications, as well as on contacts between people. “The EU is extremely interested in developing existing trade corridors between Europe and Asia,” the authors of the strategy note (*European Union, 2021*). The third priority lies within “intensive joint work” to strengthen political dialogue and expand the participation of civil society in decision-making. The EU intends to carry out such work through social networks and other “new communication technologies”. The target audience will include youth, opinion-makers, popular bloggers, prominent civic activists, academics and the media.

## Conclusion

Thus, the new EU strategy for Central Asia is not so much a new idea rather than a deeper and more detailed explanation of the tasks and work of the EU in this region.

Accordingly, the EU cannot afford the systematic advancement and large-scale presence where both Russia and China are already active. In addition, it is obvious that the historical attraction of these countries to Russia and China hinders the promotion of

the EU interests in the region. The Russian and Chinese sides have achieved significant success in Central Asia, in addition, EU should take into account the economic ties of these countries with Russia and China, including the dependence of the GDP of individual Central Asian countries. For this reason, in the new strategy, the EU relies on humanitarian projects – primarily educational programs – as well as security issues, linking its cooperation with Central Asian states to improve the situation in Afghanistan. The EU is aware that competition in the region is not in its favor – it does not have advantages – however, it hopes to use soft power tools. At the same time, the new EU strategy does not take into account the positions of China and Russia, and does not propose joint approaches. Considering analytical review, which provides a critical review of the monograph by the French researcher O.A. Spicer (*Nadtochey Y., 2018*) on European Union policy in Central Asia, researchers draw attention to the methodological tools with which the author analyzes the possibilities of projecting the influence of the EU on a region.

Unlike the European part of the post-Soviet space, where the policy of Europeanization – “instilling” European values and norms into the former socialist countries – provided the EU with certain geopolitical advantages as an actor, in Central Asia Brussels is forced to recognize the limitations of its normative power, being content only with a measured effect on the political life of countries in the Central Asian region.

Analyzing current relations between EU and Central Asia states, we can argue that nowadays both of them are deeply interested in the further development and deepening of both political and trade-economic relations, but not limited. At the same time, it is obvious that previous cooperation agreements between the parties is no longer up to date and requires fundamental changes. We clearly see the understanding of that from EU officials, since the New EU strategy towards Central Asia (2019) became one of the step towards new level of relations and partnership.

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