DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

The European Union's Foreign Policy in Central Asia and its perceptions

by

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Szeged, 2026.

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List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BOMCA	Border Management Programme in Central Asia
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CADAP	Central Asia Drug Action Programme
CAQDAS	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EC	European Community
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
EPCA	Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
EU	European Union
EUCAM	EU-Central Asia Monitoring
GSP	Generalised Scheme of Preferences
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
INOGATE	Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
SECCA	Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States

TEC	Treaty establishing the European Community
TEMPUS	Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TNC	Transnational Corporation
TRACECA	Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USA	United States of America
WECOOP	European Union – Central Asia Water, Environment and Climate Change Cooperation
WTO	World Trade Organization

PART I: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Central Asia matters to Europe" and "Europe matters to Central Asia"[1]

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, began her speech at the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum with these words. These words underline the deepening relationship between the EU and Central Asia and the growing geopolitical importance of the region to the EU. The Central Asian region, which geographically includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and strategically situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia. The region's role on the international stage began to change considerably after the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the bipolar international system. These changes have transformed the world's geopolitical landscape and created a new dynamic geopolitical space in Central Asia. During the first years of independence, Central Asia was mainly regarded as a *terra incognita* in international politics and attracted only limited interest from regional and global powers. This perception shifted with time as the region's strategic importance became more evident, and Central Asia slowly moved to the centre of Eurasian geopolitics.

In the early years of Central Asia's independence, the EU was largely absent in the region compared to other actors, mainly due to its geographical distance and limited knowledge of the area. The EU has gradually realized the strategic importance of Central Asia, and this shift became more visible after the events of September 11, 2001, when Afghanistan, a border-sharing country with three Central Asian countries, emerged as a focal point for global security concerns. Consequently, Central Asian countries gained increasing importance in maintaining security and stability in the Eurasian continent, and their role in the region has grown as a result. Moreover, following the EU expansion in 2004, Central Asia became geographically closer to the EU, as the EU found itself positioned as the *neighbour of the neighbours*. Another important turning point was the Russian and Ukrainian gas conflict in 2006, which increased the importance of Central Asia for the EU. The conflict has led the EU to look for alternative energy sources in Central Asia to reduce its dependence on Russian energy. These changes have served as a *wake-up call* to the EU's engagement with Central Asia.

[1] European Commission, *Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum*, Brussels, 5 November 2021, accessed December 1, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_21_5803.

One of the most significant turning points in the EU's engagement with Central Asia was adopting the EU's first Central Asian strategy in 2007[2], which formalized the EU's foreign policy approach towards the region. In this period, cooperation between the EU and Central Asia focused primarily on areas that avoided "sensitive issues."[3] The EU's strategy later, after 12 years of the adoption of its first strategy, updated in 2019[4], which is a long gap in modern international relations with a rapidly changing global environment. The 2019 strategy builds upon the 2007 strategy framework and strengthens its profile by defining more specific interests and priorities. As mentioned in the 2019 strategy, the region's geostrategic location, rich energy resources, and critical role in maintaining stability and security across Eurasia have made it increasingly attractive to the EU.[5]

Central Asia has gradually turned from a peripheral point of geopolitics into the center of interest for the world's major powers. Central Asia's strategic location, vast energy resources, potential as a transit hub, and closeness to unstable regions such as Afghanistan have turned it into a "centre of political gravity."[6] From a geopolitical point of view, the EU has never been a dominant external actor in Central Asia, and its influence lags behind traditional powers such as Russia, China, and the United States. Previous studies have reported that the EU has missed several opportunities in the region and is now facing stronger competitors.[7] In comparison to other global players, the EU is often seen as a "donor without influence,"[8]

[2] Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, Brussels, 31 May 2007, accessed December 1, 2024, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/pdf.

[3] Sanavbarbonu Vokhidova, "Сотрудничество Европейского Союза как инструмент взаимопонимания с Центральноазиатскими государствами." ("The European Union's Cooperation as a Tool for Mutual Understanding with Central Asian States"), *Endless Light in Science* 5 (2022): 229.

[4] European Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, JOIN(2019) 9 final, Brussels, 15 May 2019, accessed December 1, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf.

[5] European Commission, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, 15 May 2019.

[6] Leili Rustamova and Bakhri Khurshedovich Bakhriyev, "Особенности публичной дипломатии Европейского союза в Центральной Азии." ("Features of the European Union's Public Diplomacy in Central Asia"), *Zhurnal politicheskoi filosofii i sotsiologii politiki 'Politia. Analiz. Khronika. Prognoz.* 3 (98) (2020): 166, https://doi.org/10.30570/2078-5089-2020-98-3-165-180.

[7] Sebastiano Mori, "The New Great Game: An Opportunity for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," *European Institute for Asian Studies*, Briefing Paper, June 2016, 19.

[8] Sébastien Peyrouse, "A Donor Without Influence: The European Union in Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 478 (2017): 1.

a "peripheral actor,"[9] and a "hesitant vicar,"[10] highlighting its often secondary role in the region.

The recent changes in global and regional geopolitics, such as the starting Russian and Ukraine war, the Taliban's retaking power in Afghanistan,[11] the COVID-19 epidemic and the developments in Central Asia, have led the EU to reconsider its policies towards the region. As a result, the EU has started to play a more active role in recognizing the growing strategic importance of Central Asia. This change is particularly evident in the ongoing discussions within the EU institutions to update the EU's regional strategy[12] and adopted a roadmap to develop the relationship.[13] The latest adopted European Parliament resolution based on a report on the EU strategy on Central Asia mentions that the Ukraine war gives the EU a "window of opportunity" to develop its connections with Central Asian countries, and the Parliament suggests updating the EU's strategy towards Central Asia considering the latest developments.[14] At the same time, Central Asian countries see the EU as an important partner for trade, investment, and development, especially as they manage their multi-vector foreign policies to balance ties with various global powers. As the EU seeks to play a more active role in the region, its success will depend, in part, on how Central Asian nations perceive its policies. As Zhanibek Arynov suggests, "[w]hat the EU does and promotes in the region needs to be recognized and accepted as legitimate by Central Asians."[15] Arguably, in order to design a better strategy toward Central Asia, the EU needs to know more about this region and the region's perceptions of the EU's policies.

There is a lack of a commonly accepted definition of the perception in academic literature on International Relations studies. In the Cambridge dictionary, perception is described as "a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem."[16] In the

[9] Andrea Schmitz, "The Central Asia Strategy: An Exercise in EU Foreign Policy," in *The European Union and Central Asia*, ed. Alexander Warkotsch (Routledge, 2011), 18.
[10] Sébastien Peyrouse, Jos Boonstra, and Marlène Laruelle, "Security and Development Approaches to Central Asia: The EU Compared to China and Russia," *EUCAM Working Paper* 11, no. 1 (2012): 14, https://eucentralasia.eu/security-and-development-in-central-asia-the-eu-compared-to-china-and-russia/.
[11] The Taliban is included in the list of terrorist organizations in the EU and all Central Asian countries.
[12] European Parliament, *Resolution on the EU Strategy on Central Asia (2023/2106(INI))*, adopted January 17, 2024, accessed December 1, 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0027_EN.html.
[13] Council of the European Union, *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia*, 14587/23, COEST 575 (Luxembourg, 23 October 2023), accessed November 30, 2024, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14587-2023-INIT/en/pdf.
[14] European Parliament, *Resolution on the EU Strategy on Central Asia*, January 17, 2024.
[15] Zhanibek Arynov, "Changing Perceptions of the European Union in Central Asia," *L'Europe en formation* 1 (2018): 62.
[16] Cambridge English Dictionary, "Perception," accessed December 2, 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/perception.

same way, the Britannica dictionary defines perception as "the way you think about or understand someone or something."[17] This thesis borrows the definition from Houman Sadri and Madelyn Flammia's work. It defines perception as "the process by which individuals develop impressions of the characteristics and positions of other nations and their foreign policies."[18]

In the field of International Relations, studies on the perceptions of other actors date back to the mid-20th century. At that time, the focus was primarily on the image of the Soviet Union in the United States and the United States in the Soviet Union, which led to the formation of image theory. Scholars have widely applied this theory to study the perceptions of these two main actors of the bipolar system of international relations during the 20th century. According to Kenneth E. Boulding, a pioneer in image theory research, as humans, we act based on how we see and interpret the world, not necessarily on how it actually is. These perceptions shape the images we form of specific countries, organizations, or the world as a whole.[19]

Scholars are increasingly interested in studying the EU's perceptions by other international relations actors. One of the reasons for this growing interest of scholars in studying the EU's image outside its borders is that the EU lacks many traditional advantages that states have, such as a clear sense of national interest and control over military power.[20] For a better understanding and assessment of interstate relationships, it is essential to consider the actors' perceptions, which shape their behaviour and interactions with each other, as these perceptions determine the degree of success of such relationships.[21] As Hans Morgenthau notes, "what others think about us is as important as what we actually are."[22] States often implement foreign policies and develop national strategies based on their perceptions, even when those perceptions do not align with reality. Similarly, Simon Anholt mentions that the

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[17] The Britannica Dictionary, "Perception," accessed December 2, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/perception.

[18] Houman Sadri and Madelyn Flammia, "Democracy, Political Perceptions, and New Media," *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 30, https://www.iiisci.org/journal/pdv/sci/pdfs/HB354MJ14.pdf.

[19] Kenneth E. Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 2 (1959): 120, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275900300204.

[20] Kenneth Chan, "Images, Visibility and the Prospects of Soft Power of the EU in Asia: The Case of China," *Asia Europe Journal* 8 (2010): 134, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-010-0259-6.

[21] Rajendra Kumar Jain and Shreya Pandey, "The Public Attitudes and Images of the European Union in India," *India Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2012): 331, citing Kripa Sridharan, "Regional Perceptions of India," in *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy*, ed. F. Grare and A. Matto (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

[22] Hans J. Morgenthau, "Vietnam: Shadow and Substance," *New York Review*, September 16, 1965, accessed December 2, 2024, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1965/09/16/vietnam-shadow-and-substance/?srsltid=AfmBOoruJYXdXu6-HC5pBw6BRPNgHnpn-N-Qx9mQZKXaOqMpGQMNgri3.

image of a country determines how the world sees and treats it.[23] This thesis builds on the idea that perceptions are important, as "people act towards objects, including actors, based on the meanings these objects hold for them."[24]

However, despite the research conducted, more studies are needed to improve our understanding of how the EU is viewed worldwide. There is a gap in research regarding how the EU is perceived across all regions. The Central Asian region, with only a handful of studies on this topic, remains a less explored area.[25] This thesis analyzes EU and Central Asia relations and the EU's perceptions in Central Asia, arguing that the level of relationships determines the EU's perceptions in the region. The perception of the EU in Central Asia can be examined from various perspectives held by different actors in society, such as the views of elites and experts, public opinion, and the mass media. The mass media is often called the fourth branch of power, and the news media is a powerful force in constructing images. It should be noted that mass media plays a crucial role in shaping how the EU is perceived in Central Asia by gathering, framing, and sharing information that influences the EU's image in the region. This thesis examines how the EU is portrayed in the mass media of selected Central Asian countries and how officials and experts view the EU and its policy towards the region. The analysis of the official perspectives is based on official documents, which help to understand the views of the elites. The experts' views are analyzed through interviews conducted by the author with experts from the selected countries to explore their perception of the EU in Central Asia.

1.1. The significance and aims of the research

Central Asia is becoming a geopolitically significant region on the global stage because of its strategic location and rich natural resources. The region is also growing in importance for the EU due to its position between Europe and Asia, its rising role in regional security, its vast energy resources and expanding market opportunities. As the EU works to strengthen its position in the region and update its strategy toward Central Asia, how effectively it can use the current opportunity will depend on how well it considers the region's needs and perceptions. The EU and Central Asia relations studies have received considerable critical attention from researchers from both regions, and a considerable amount of literature has

[23] Simon Anholt, *Brand New Justice: How Branding Places and Products Can Help the Developing World*, revised ed. (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 105, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780080457758.
[24] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 396.
[25] For more detailed information, please refer to Chapter 3.

been published. These studies explore the different areas of the relationship. Until recently, researchers have not paid much attention to how the EU is seen in the region. There is a growing interest among scholars in exploring the EU's external perception, and the following several reasons for the importance of studying the EU's external image can be counted based on the findings from the literature review.

First and foremost, this thesis supports Sonia Lucarelli's point and argues that the external perception of the EU is a crucial factor in determining whether its policies succeed or face barriers in the region.[26] Similarly, the same argument is presented in another article where Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti argued that the perceptions held by other countries regarding the EU are likely to significantly impact its effectiveness and success as an actor in the international arena.[27] As it's argued by researchers studying the EU's external perception studies, this thesis also argues that the impact and success of the EU's policies in Central Asia depend, to some extent, on how Central Asian countries evaluate these policies.

Secondly, studying the EU's external perception will help examine whether other actors also view the EU in the same way it perceives itself. The external images of the EU are a vital part of the EU's process of self-identification as a political entity and of shaping its roles in international politics. The literature shows that at the international level, the self-perception of the EU and its perception by other actors often contradict each other, and for this reason, the EU does not meet its potential.

I became interested in studying the EU's perceptions in Central Asia after reading Zhanibek Arynov's work, one of the pioneers of EU's perception studies in Central Asia. He specifically looked at the EU's perception in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and Arynov's work has become a cornerstone for studying the EU's perception in Central Asia more deeply.

There are four primary aims of this thesis. The first purpose of the thesis is to explore the relationship between the EU and Central Asia by conducting an extensive literature review, analyzing the legal bases of relationships, examining the foreign policy concepts of Central Asian countries, reviewing speeches and interviews of officials, and collecting data from publicly available sources provided by relevant authorities in both the EU and Central Asia.

[26] Sonia Lucarelli, "Perceptions of the EU in International Institutions," in *Routledge Handbook on the European Union and International Institutions*, ed. Knud Erik Jørgensen and Katie Verlin Laatikainen (London: Routledge, 2012), 430.
[27] Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti, "Introduction: The EU in the Eyes of the Others—Why Bother?," in *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor*, ed. Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

In particular, this aim involves identifying and analysing the main elements of the EU's foreign policy towards Central Asia, such as its priorities, instruments and areas of cooperation. The second and most important purpose of this thesis is to analyze the perception of the EU in Central Asia through mass media coverage from June 2019 to December 2023, as well as through official views based on document analysis and experts' opinions gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted by the author. The third aim of this research is to apply a more innovative approach to studying the EU's perception by using computer-assisted data analysis software to analyze the collected data from the selected mass media. Using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) helps systematically analyze the articles collected from the media and improves its efficiency. The final aim of this thesis is to contribute to the academic literature on EU–Central Asia relations and, to some extent, to the broader field of external perceptions of the EU studies. By addressing gaps in current research, this thesis aims to provide valuable insights for both academics and policymakers.

1.2. Originality and contribution to knowledge

The selected topic is relatively new in the field of EU–Central Asia relations studies, and currently, only a few works explore how the EU is perceived in specific Central Asian countries. This thesis aims to address this gap by focusing on EU–Central Asia relations and the perception of the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, as well as the official perspectives and expert views from these respective countries.

One may ask, what distinguishes this thesis from other research already conducted. Firstly, in terms of case studies, to understand the perception of the EU in Central Asia, this thesis selects two countries, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, which have not yet been studied comparatively. In particular, Tajikistan's perceptions of the EU remain relatively underexplored. Secondly, methodologically, this thesis applies both qualitative and quantitative methods. To conduct the content analysis of the collected news articles, official documents, and transcripts of the expert interviews, this study uses ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, which is expected to enhance the reliability and depth of the research findings. Thirdly, a broad range of media outlets from both countries has been included for data collection, covering both state-run and independent sources. This helps provide a fuller picture of how the EU is viewed in the region. Fourthly, in terms of time frame selection, this thesis offers insights into the effect of recent developments, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the Taliban's takeover of the government in Afghanistan, the

COVID-19 pandemic, and internal developments in the EU and Central Asia, on EU perceptions in Central Asia.

Through this research, the thesis hopes to contribute to analyzing EU and Central Asia relations, as well as the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The reasons why Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were selected as case studies for this research will be explained in the following subsection.

1.3. Case study selection

This thesis for studying EU and Central Asia relations covers all Central Asian countries. However, two countries, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, were selected as case studies to explore the EU's perception in Central Asia. These two countries were chosen because they have different levels of relationship with the EU. One of the main arguments of this thesis is that the level of engagement between the EU and Central Asian countries influences and determines their perception of the EU. The reasons for selecting Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as the case studies for this research can be justified as follows. Firstly, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan differ significantly in their foreign policy approaches toward the EU. Kazakhstan is often seen as the stable, prosperous Central Asian country with an open foreign policy.[28] Kazakhstan has shown an interest in developing relations with the EU by implementing its state program "Path to Europe," which aims to strengthen ties with the EU. On the other hand, Tajikistan focuses on balancing relations with global and regional actors, and strengthening its relationship with its neighbours and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states is a priority direction. Secondly, the selected countries' economic relationships with the EU show important differences in their engagement level. According to the latest report by the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU is Kazakhstan's largest trade partner, representing 40% of its external trade, and is also its leading foreign investor, accounting for 48% of total foreign direct investment flows.[29] Since 2014, Kazakhstan has no longer been eligible for bilateral assistance from the EU.[30] On the other hand, EU and Tajikistan relations are heavily based on bilateral assistance, with financial aid and technical cooperation as central components. From Rustami Suhrob's point of view, the

[28] Artem Patalakh, "Kazakhstan's EU Policies: A Critical Review of Underlying Motives and Enabling Factors," *Asian Journal of German and European Studies* 3, no. 1 (2018): 8, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40856-018-0026-9.
[29] Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan, *The European Union and Kazakhstan*, October 19, 2023, accessed December 5, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kazakhstan/european-union-and-kazakhstan_en?s=222.
[30] Ibid.

EU's economic influence in Tajikistan is relatively weak compared to other regional actors,[31] and Tajikistan is the smallest trade partner of the EU in Central Asia.[32] Thirdly, looking at the legal agreements governing the relationship between the EU and these two selected countries also highlights differences in their level of engagement. The EU signed the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kazakhstan in 2015, which came into force in 2020.[33] This replaced the earlier signed Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) from 1995, which came into force in 1999.[34] This is the first such agreement signed by the EU with a partner in Central Asia. On the other hand, relations between the EU and Tajikistan continue to be regulated under the PCA, which was signed in 2004 and ratified in 2010 by the EU.[35] Although discussions to upgrade the PCA to an EPCA began in 2023,[36] as practice shows, such processes of discussion, signing, and ratifying legal documents can take a long time in EU practice. Finally, one important reason for choosing these two countries is that it minimizes potential language barriers. The Russian language is an official language in Kazakhstan, holding the same status as the Kazakh language, and almost all official publications and mass media articles are equally available in both languages. The author's ability to read and understand Tajik and Russian has made it possible to access and analyze a wide range of primary and secondary sources in their original languages. The differences in the level of relationship between the EU and Kazakhstan and Tajikistan offer a valuable opportunity to compare how the EU is perceived in Central Asia. The choice of these most different cases allows this thesis to explore various perspectives on the EU's role in the region.

1.4. Research questions

Based on the above discussion, and to achieve the aims of this thesis, the research is guided by the following main research question: What are the main elements of the EU's foreign

[31] Suhrob Rustami, "Взаимоотношения Европейского Союза и Таджикистана в 1991-2007 годах." (*Relations between the European Union and Tajikistan in 1991-2007*), *Uchenye Zapiski Khujand State University named after Academician B. Gafurov. Series on Humanities and Social Sciences* 2 (2019): 73.
[32] Delegation of the European Union to Tajikistan, *The European Union and Tajikistan*, published November 20, 2024, accessed December 5, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/tajikistan/european-union-and-tajikistan_en?s=228.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Zhenis Kembayev, "Partnership between the European Union and the Republic of Kazakhstan: Problems and Perspectives," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 21, no. 2 (2016): 186, https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2016013.
[35] Delegation of the European Union to Tajikistan, *The European Union and Tajikistan*, published November 20, 2024, accessed December 5, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/tajikistan/european-union-and-tajikistan_en?s=228.
[36] ibid

policy towards Central Asia, and how do Central Asian countries perceive the EU and its policies towards the region? The thesis is organised around three interrelated research questions that aim to explore both the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia and its perceptions in Central Asian countries.

The first research question aims to examine the EU's approach towards Central Asia, specifically: (*Question 1*): Which areas of cooperation does the EU prioritize in its cooperation with Central Asian countries? To address this question, the study divides the EU–Central Asia relationship into several phases, and in this way analyses how the EU's policy focus and areas of engagement have changed over time. A content analysis of regional EU-adopted strategies towards Central Asia and bilateral agreements signed between the EU and individual Central Asian states is conducted to identify and evaluate the EU's stated priorities. Answering this research question helps to better understand the EU's foreign policy agenda in the region and provides the necessary background for analysing how these efforts are seen locally by Central Asian countries. Since the EU represents itself as a normative power, this research question naturally leads to an important sub-question: Do these areas of cooperation underpin the concept of EU normative power? This sub-question is important because it helps to understand more clearly whether the EU's official priorities in Central Asia truly reflect its normative power. By examining this in detail, the study can better explain the EU's policy approach towards Central Asian countries. Later, the findings from this sub-question can be compared with how the EU is perceived in Central Asian countries, and this allows for a deeper analysis of the relationship between the EU's self-presentation and local perceptions.

The second part of this research is analysing the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The second research question is about the perception of the EU in the region from a mass media perspective (*Question 2*): How is the EU portrayed in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan? This part of the research employs content analysis of selected mass media to analyse how the EU is framed in the media of the selected countries. The media coverage encompasses various areas of the relationship, with a focus on the level of engagement in different areas between the EU and the selected countries. This leads to the sub-questions of: What are the dominant themes in the news articles collected from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's mass media? To ensure a balanced perspective, both state-funded and independent media sources from each country are included. This allows the study to answer the other important sub-questions: What are the differences in showing the EU between state-funded and independent media? And also, by comparing two countries with

different levels of EU engagement, the analysis explores the other sub-question of: What are the main differences in media framing of the EU between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan? Additionally, this part also considers the following sub-question: Does the EU appear as a normative actor in the Kazakh and Tajik mass media? This sub-question focuses on whether the media in these two countries portray the EU as a promoter of normative values, or mainly as a political or economic actor without a strong value-based agenda.

Finally, the third research question is about officials' and experts' views from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan on the EU and its relations with Central Asia (*Question 3*): How do Central Asian officials and experts view the EU and its relationship with Central Asian countries? This part of the research is based on official document analysis and semi-structured interviews conducted with experts. An additional following sub-question is included to better understand the normative side of experts' and officials' views about the EU and its policy in Central Asia: Does the EU appear as a normative power for the Central Asian officials and experts? Together, these research questions aim to assess the extent to which the EU's self-image corresponds with how it is perceived in Central Asia.

1.5. Structure of the thesis

To make the structure of the thesis clearer and more organized, the whole thesis is divided into four parts, and each of the four parts is divided into chapters that present the findings of the research. The first part is the introduction part, which consists of four chapters; the second part is the EU–Central Asia relations part, which consists of one chapter; the third part presents the results of the analysis on the EU's perceptions in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, which consists of two chapters; and lastly, the final part is the conclusion and recommendation part, which consists of one last chapter presenting the research findings and conclusion. In short, the structure of this thesis is the following:

1.5.1. Part I

The first part of the thesis is the introductory part, which consists of four chapters including this introductory chapter, and chapters on the theoretical framework, literature review, and methodology of the research. The main aim of this part is to analyse the importance of this research topic, the existing literature, the theoretical bases for understanding the research topic, and the methodology of the data collection and data analysis used in this thesis during the research process.

The second chapter presents the main theoretical foundation of the thesis. It starts by discussing the importance of perception in international relations, especially through the lens of social constructivism. The second part of the chapter discusses the EU's self-perception through the concept of Normative Power Europe. This concept, developed by Ian Manners, argues that the EU is a different kind of international actor that does not focus on military strength but tries to spread its values such as democracy, human rights, peace, and the rule of law. In this chapter, Ian Manners's list of core and minor norms promoted by the EU is also discussed. Then, the chapter explains how the EU spreads these norms using norm diffusion mechanisms. The chapter highlights that the success of the EU's norm promotion depends not only on what the EU does but also on how other actors accept or reject these norms. As mentioned in the chapter, scholars argue that what is considered "normal" in the EU may not be accepted as normal in other regions, like Central Asia. This is why understanding the external perception of the EU is very important. Even though the EU sees itself as a normative power, its real influence depends on whether other countries agree with this image. This chapter concludes that to fully understand the EU's foreign policy and its role in international politics, we must study how the EU sees itself and how others see it.

Chapter three provides a comprehensive look at the existing literature on this research area. This chapter aims to systematically review current research on these topics and identify gaps in the existing literature. The first part of this chapter focuses on earlier conducted research on EU and Central Asia relations, and the second part focuses on studies on the EU's perception around the world, including research related to the EU's perception in Central Asia. This chapter concludes with a summary of the gaps identified in the existing research.

The fourth chapter, which is the last chapter of the first part, covers the research methodology of the research. In the first part of the chapter, the data collection methods are explained in detail, including the process of gathering data from the selected mass media and the steps taken to select and interview experts. These details are provided to ensure the transparency and trustworthiness of the data used in the research. The second part of the chapter covers the process of data analysis, which in the case of this research, uses a content analysis method where the content of the collected data is analyzed. Lastly, the methodological limitations of this research are presented.

1.5.2. Part II

This part is one of the core parts of this thesis, which is the EU–Central Asia relations part, and this part consists of one chapter. The aim of chapter five is to analyse the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia and to answer the research question regarding which areas of

cooperation the EU is prioritizing in its cooperation with Central Asian countries. The main objective here is to understand how the EU is representing itself in Central Asia. For analysing the relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries in a more detailed and better way, the EU–Central Asia relationship is divided into four stages, and in the first part of this chapter, the four stages of the relationship are covered. Following this, in the second part of the chapter, the EU's strategies for Central Asia and the bilateral, legally binding agreements signed between the EU and Central Asian countries are analyzed in detail in order to identify which areas of cooperation are more visible in these documents and which areas the EU has prioritised in cooperation with Central Asian countries. Next, the most developed areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries are presented in detail in the last part of this chapter. The findings from this chapter later help in a comparison of the policies the EU is implementing in Central Asia with the EU's perceptions in the selected countries, based on the official perspective, media portrayals, and expert views in the following chapters.

1.5.3. Part III

This part of the thesis is the core part of the research, which presents the results of analysing the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan through the analysis of the mass media. It also includes the analysis of official and expert views based on data collected from the official websites of the selected countries and interviews conducted with experts from these countries. This part consists of two chapters, chapters six and seven, which analyse the perceptions of the EU and present the author's findings.

Chapter six presents the results of the analysis of the perceptions of the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, based on the findings of the content analysis made with the support of ATLAS.ti. The main aim of this chapter is to answer the question of how the EU is portrayed in Kazakhstani and Tajikistani mass media. In the first part of the chapter, the attention intensity of selected media from both countries towards the EU is analyzed in the selected period of time. The attention intensity is analyzed comparatively in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and also comparatively analyzed in the state-funded and privately funded media of both countries. Following this, the image of the EU in the news articles collected for analysis is presented based on the coding in ATLAS.ti, where news articles are coded as positive, neutral, and negative based on the tone of the coverage to understand the image of the EU in the media of both countries. Lastly, the thematic dimensions of the news articles covering EU-related news are presented to understand which areas of cooperation in the

mass media of both countries are visible when covering the relationship with the EU. Finally, a short conclusion is presented.

Chapter seven presents the official perspectives and expert views towards the EU and its relations with Central Asian countries. This chapter answers the research question of how Central Asian officials and experts view the EU and its relationship with Central Asian countries. In the first subpart of this chapter, the official perspectives of Kazakhstani and Tajikistani officials are analyzed based on the official statements, documents, speeches, and interviews given to the media to understand the views towards the EU and its policy in the region. The data for this were collected from the official websites of the different government agencies. In the second part, the views of experts towards the EU and its policy in Central Asia are analyzed based on the author's interviews conducted with experts from both selected countries to understand their perspectives. Lastly, the short conclusion of the chapter is presented.

1.5.4. Part IV

The last part of this thesis is the conclusion and recommendations part, which consists of the final chapter of the research. Chapter eight presents the conclusions of the research findings and provides recommendations to the stakeholders, and areas for further research are identified.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

As Stephen Walt suggests, the world is still waiting for a theory that can fully capture and address the debates that emerged after the Cold War.[37] Similarly, the exact words can be used in the field of EU perception studies. There is growing attention to the EU's perception studies field among scholars who examine different case studies from various corners of the world. Matúš Mišík claims that it is challenging to categorize studies on the perception of the EU abroad based on applied theories because "they usually utilise only basic analytical concepts, or do not use any particular theoretical framework at all."[38] Sonia Lucarelli also supports this point and mentions that "the issue has not been theorised in such a way that a relation between different factors could be identified."[39]

Every International Relations theory has its strengths and weaknesses. None of them can fully explain the EU's perception abroad or, in the case of this research, its foreign policy and perceptions in Central Asia. However, they can help clarify the situation to some extent. Some previous studies on the EU's perceptions abroad have applied theories, most notably social constructivism, or have borrowed theoretical approaches from other areas of research, such as communication studies and cultural studies, and have applied role theory and image theory. Naturally, the application of these theories largely depends on the perspective and angle from which the topic is analyzed.

While there is not yet a specifically developed theory for studying perceptions of the EU, social constructivism can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia and how it is perceived in this region. Other traditional schools of International Relations have also discussed perceptions, but they have not focused on this aspect as much as social constructivism does. Overall, this thesis applies social constructivism[40] to better understand the topic, and it also refers to the Normative Power Europe discussions to understand the EU's self-perception better.

The first part of this chapter discusses the importance of perception studies, social constructivism theory, and the social constructivist perspective on the EU's foreign policy in

[37] Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (Spring 1998): 29, https://doi.org/10.2307/1149275.
[38] Matúš Mišík, "How Can Perception Help Us to Understand the Dynamic Between EU Member States? The State of the Art," *Asia Europe Journal* 11 (2013): 448, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-013-0364-4.
[39] Sonia Lucarelli, "Seen from the Outside: The State of the Art on the External Image of the EU," *Journal of European Integration* 36, no. 1 (2013): 12, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2012.761981.
[40] In this thesis, the terms constructivism and social constructivism are used interchangeably.

Central Asia and its perceptions. The second part focuses on the EU's normative power and examines which norms the EU is promoting and how.

2.1. Importance of perception in international relations: Social constructivism

In the past, International Relations theories mainly focused on analyzing cooperation between individual countries, as countries were the only actors in global politics. However, in addition to analyzing relationships between individual countries, the focus is shifting to the relationships between unions, organizations, and individual countries and how they perceive each other. The perceptions of international actors by one another have become particularly relevant in recent years, considering the ever-changing world.

Looking back at the history of perception studies shows that it began emerging in International Relations around the 1950s, with researchers mostly focusing on the image of the Soviet Union in the USA and vice versa. Nonetheless, the prominence of perception in EU studies grew only in the past two decades. As the EU's position in world politics improved, attention to studies on the EU's perception around the world increased, making studying how other actors perceive the EU a relatively new area of research.[41]

After the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations, some states began redefining their policies to adapt to the new conditions, and building a country's image has become one of the key tasks for all actors in international relations. According to Ingrid Martin and Sevgin Erogly, a country's image is a "total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country."[42]

The perception of countries on the international stage is highly relevant in today's international relations, and a country's image determines its position in international politics. Furthermore, two main reasons for the growing interest of researchers in studying the perceptions of international relations actors in other countries can be identified. Firstly, actors in international relations start to recognize the importance of others' perceptions in determining the success of their policies in relation to that actor. As Robert Jervis states, a state's image can be the main factor determining how easily it can achieve its goals, and the desired image is often more useful than a significant increase in military and economic

[41] Matúš Mišík, "How Can Perception Help Us to Understand the Dynamic Between EU Member States? The State of the Art," *Asia Europe Journal* 11 (2013): 448, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-013-0364-4.
[42] Ingrid M. Martin and Sevgin Eroglu, "Measuring a Multi-Dimensional Construct: Country Image," *Journal of Business Research* 28, no. 3 (1993): 193, https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(93)90047-S.

power.[43] Laura-Theresa Krüger and Edmund Ratka rightly pointed out that understanding the perception of others not only helps to clarify the EU's "distinctiveness" as an international actor but also provides a better understanding of the EU itself.[44] Moreover, by citing Michito Tsuruoka's work, they continue their argument, "EU's own self-identification and external perceptions of the EU are two sides of the same coin: any discussions on the nature and characteristics of the EU as an international actor would not be complete without taking into account both aspects."[45] Steve Marsh and Hans Mackenstein argue that the EU's international perception is more important than that of state actors, as the EU lacks many of the traditional advantages of statehood.[46] Considering this, actors in international relations need to understand how other international actors perceive them before forming positions on specific issues or taking concrete actions in foreign policy.

Secondly, the growing interest in studying the perception of others is due to the development of theoretical frameworks that do not focus solely on the importance of material and military forces. From different perspectives, these theories analyze the importance of *others*' perceptions in international relations. As highlighted above, every theory looks at this topic from different angles, and none of them covers the entire process of cooperation of EU and Central Asian countries and its perceptions at once. Among International Relations theories, social constructivism is among the few that highlight the importance of perceptions in international relations. This thesis applies social constructivism to understand the topic better, and the next subpart offers detailed information on this perspective.

2.1.1. Definition of social constructivism

For decades, International Relations have been dominated by two main theories: realism and liberalism. However, the end of the Cold War involved a series of events that existing theories could not fully explain, and it led to the rise of new ideas in International Relations studies, such as constructivism. In 1992, Alexander Wendt published his famous article, *Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics,* where he questioned neorealist and neoliberal theories, arguing that their view of anarchy couldn't

[43] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 410.
[44] Laura-Theresa Krüger and Edmund Ratka, "The Perception of European Policies in Tunisia after the Arab Spring," *Europe en formation* 1, no. 371 (2014): 14, https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.371.0009.
[45] Michito Tsuruoka, "How External Perceptions of the European Union Are Shaped: Endogenous and Exogenous Sources" (paper presented at the GARNET Conference "The EU in International Affairs," Brussels, April 24–26, 2008), 5, quoted in Krüger and Ratka, "The Perception of European Policies," 14.
[46] Steve Marsh and Hans Mackenstein, *The International Relations of the EU*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 247, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315837291.

fully explain how international relations work.[47] Moreover, social constructivism is a relatively new approach in International Relations theories, emerging in the late 1980s as a theoretical framework for describing the behaviour of actors in the international community. Specifically, social constructivism focuses on the connection between state interests and identities, highlighting the role of social processes in shaping international relations. According to constructivism, international systems are created, maintained, and changed only through interactions between actors.

According to Robert Jackson and Georg Sorensen, the main focus of social constructivism is on how people's awareness and consciousness shape world affairs. They argue that the international system is built on shared ideas, not just material forces. Therefore, if people's thoughts and ideas about international relations change, the system itself will change as well, "because the system consists of thoughts and ideas."[48] Notably, constructivism in International Relations was first introduced by American scholar Nicholas Onuf. He first used it in his 1989 book *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*.[49] According to Nicholas Onuf, the central principle of constructivism is that people and societies construct or constitute each other.[50] Constructivism argues that "the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature."[51] In the simplest terms, constructivists believe that ideas and beliefs, rather than just material factors like power or resources, shape how people and countries behave.

Emanuel Adler describes constructivism as "the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world."[52] Similarly, John Gerard Ruggie notes constructivism is "about human consciousness and its role in international life."[53]

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[47] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764.
[48] Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209.
[49] Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).
[50] Nicholas Onuf, "Constructivism: A User's Manual," in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, ed. Vendulka Kusálková, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (London: Routledge, 2015; first published 1998), 59.
[51] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.
[52] Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 322, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066197003003003.
[53] John Gerard Ruggie, "What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 856, https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550770.

Furthermore, Maja Zehfuss highlights that constructivists focus on the meaning behind behaviour rather than just explaining actions and the importance of inter-subjectivity in understanding these meanings.[54]

Based on Alexander Wendt's arguments, world politics is *socially constructed*, which is the key claim of constructivism about international relations.[55] Alexander Wendt identified two distinguishing features of constructivism compared to traditional theories. First, the fundamental structures of global politics are social rather than purely material, challenging materialist perspectives. Second, these social structures shape the identities and interests of actors, not just their behaviour and opposing rationalist views.[56] Moreover, Ted Hopf explains that constructivism does not entirely deny the existence of the material world, but it suggests that how the material world affects us depends on how we interpret it. These interpretations are influenced by our values and our understanding of knowledge.[57] This view offers a unique perspective on world politics from a constructivism perspective.

According to Stephen M. Walt, International Relations theories aim to explain events, their causes, and their outcomes in international politics based on their perspectives.[58] Unlike other International Relations theories, which focus primarily on military and economic powers, social constructivism emphasizes that perceptions of the external world determine states' behaviour. Alexander Wendt explains that the way states behave depends on their identities and interests, which are shaped by their interactions with each other. These interactions define how states see themselves and others, influencing how they act globally.[59] He further noted that international relations actors act towards others based on the meanings of the actions of others. He continued, stating that these meanings arise through interaction, and identities and interests are formed through action.[60] According to the social constructivism point of view, different actors in international relations can perceive the same situation differently depending on how they perceive others.[61] For example, conducting tests

[54] Maja Zehfuss, "Constructivisms in International Relations: Wendt, Onuf, and Kratochwil," in *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation*, ed. Karin M. Fierke and Knud Erik Jorgensen (New York: Routledge, 2015; first published 2001), 68–69, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315705446.
[55] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.
[56] Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 71–72, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539217.
[57] Ted Hopf, "The promise of constructivism in international relations theory," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998), https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.1.171.
[58] Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (Spring 1998): 29, https://doi.org/10.2307/1149275.
[59] Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It."
[60] Wendt, "Constructing International Politics."
[61] Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It," 391.

of new weapons in North Korea means a security threat to South Korea, while it may not be perceived as a threat by Russia. This demonstrates that friends and enemies perceive actions differently because the meanings assigned to these actions vary.

Constructivists argue that the structure of the international system consists of shared ideas, which influence states' interests and actions. As a result, identity is not fixed and is shaped through interactions within the international community. States' perception of themselves and other international actors is shaped through interaction on the global stage. Consequently, identity defines interests, and as identity changes, so do national interests. Interests and identities continuously affect one another. Moreover, identity and interests are interdependent because identity without interests lacks motivation, and interests without identity are meaningless.[62]

In international relations, it is not only important how a state perceives the outside world and shapes its identity but also how other states perceive and define it. According to social constructivism, perceptions of the different actors in international relations are closely related to the identity of the self.[63] It may be argued here that an international relations actor's own identity serves as a basis for perceptions of other actors, and states' actions are shaped by how they perceive one another. Constructivism highlights the importance of how states perceive and construct the world around them, rather than simply accepting the material world as it is.

In summary, constructivists focus on how ideas and norms shape the international structure, which in turn influences the identities, interests, and foreign policy practices of states. According to constructivism, international relations are *socially constructed*, and actors of international relations construct their relations based on their identities. Constructivism emphasizes that world politics constantly changes, and interactions among actors create structures. From a constructivist perspective, state behaviour is influenced not only by the distribution of material power but also by ideas, identities, and norms. In simple terms, constructivism suggests that actions, interactions, and perceptions shape reality. The key concepts in constructivist theory are identity and interest, which are socially constructed and will be discussed in detail in the following subsections.

[62] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.
[63] Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It."

2.1.2. Identity

Identity is important because it shapes the behavior of individuals or groups. The concept of identity has become an increasingly important topic of scholarly discussion among constructivists. Alexander Wendt argues that identity is a key concept in constructivist theory, as a state's interests are shaped by its identity.[64] The concept of identity in International Relations comes from social psychology, mainly the social identity theory. The social identity theory suggests that social groups define themselves based on certain ideas. These ideas can be expressed directly through speech or indirectly via symbols, codes, or signs. According to social identity theory, these ideas aim to create a sense of shared identity that sets the group apart from others. As mentioned by Ted Hopf, identities serve the following important functions in society, "they tell you and others *who you are*, and they tell you *who others are*."[65] Constructivists argue about the importance of an actor's identity in international relations, as it shapes a state's foreign policy preferences, interests, and behavior. Wendt described identity as a "relatively stable, role-specific understanding and expectations about self."[66] From a constructivist viewpoint, identity has two key characteristics. Firstly, it is shaped by social and political actions. Secondly, it provides a basis for future actions.[67] According to constructivism, states' identities are influenced by historical, cultural, political, and social contexts of domestic and international affairs.[68]

Constructivists acknowledge that identity shapes state interests and strategies in three main ways. Firstly, a state's identity, including its national values, defines its goals and what it aims to achieve. In other words, identity can determine a state's interests. Secondly, the beliefs within a state's identity influence how it understands situations and decides on actions to fulfil its interests. Finally, a state's identity includes norms and practices that guide which strategies are acceptable or preferable.[69]

According to constructivist logic, identity refers to the "mutually constructed and evolving images of *self* and *other*."[70] Identity plays an important role in defining the relationships

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[64] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.
[65] Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 175.
[66] Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It," 397.
[67] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (Feb. 2000): 8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3108478, cited in Anna Skolimowska, *Perceptions of the European Union's Identity in International Relations*, ed. Anna Skolimowska (Routledge, 2019), 4.
[68] Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 176.
[69] Glenn Chafetz, Michael Spinas, and Benjamin Frankel, eds., *The Origins of National Interests* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999), 107-108.
[70] Ronald Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," in *The Culture of National Security*, ed. Peter Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 59, cited in Luciana Alexandra Ghica, "Beyond Regional Integration? Social Constructivism, Regional

between different actors and usually creates a distinction between *self* and *other*. The *self* is understood about its position compared to others, as Rumelili pointed out: "identities are always constituted in relation to difference because a thing can only be known by what it is not."[71] The concept of the *other* is important because the *self* "cannot know either itself or the world because meaning is created in discourse, where consciousnesses meet."[72] In other words, identities exist because of their difference from *others*.[73] The *other* plays a significant role in forming self-perceptions and identity. Therefore, Franke Wilmer pointed out "identity is constituted by referring the bounded self to something else, something with which the self is either identified (as the same) or from which it is different."[74]

According to constructivism, identity is developed, supported, and changed through interactions among international actors, making it socially constructed.[75] From a constructivist perspective, state identity is understood as a relatively stable social construct, however, it is also subject to a possible change in the long term, as it reflects not only one's own behaviour but also the behaviour of others through socialization.[76] Through socialization, actors learn about their identity and *others*. Social learning refers to how actors form their identities through interactions. In dealing with other actors, they define their own roles and propose roles for others.[77] Social learning helps actors better understand their identities in relation to *others*. The perceptions of *others* also influence an actor's identity. Through interacting, actors can strengthen their own identity, create a shared identity, or reinforce conflicting identities. Alexander Wendt outlined the factor of an actor's significance when examining social learning's impact on identity formation. An actor's significance depends on how *other* actors perceive them. The more significant an actor is, the easier it is for them to have their suggested roles accepted and their norms shared by

Cohesiveness and the Regionalism Puzzle," *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* 13, no. 4 (2013): 735.

[71] Bahar Rumelili, "Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU's Mode of Differentiation," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 29, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210504005819.

[72] Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 13.

[73] Franke Wilmer, *The Social Construction of Man, the State, and War: Identity, Conflict, and Violence in Former Yugoslavia* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 66.

[74] Wilmer, *The Social Construction of Man, the State, and War*, 67.

[75] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 70.

[76] Chafetz, Spinas, and Frankel, *The Origins of National Interests*.

[77] Birgül Demirtaş-Coşkun, "Systemic Changes and State Identity: Turkish and German Responses," *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 1 (2008): 33, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26328781.

others.[78] In contrast, for less significant actors, it is harder to influence others' roles and norms.[79]

According to Ted Hopf, identities are essential in both international politics and domestic society to maintain a certain level of predictability and order.[80] Moreover, a state's identity shapes its preferences and actions on the global stage. A state perceives others based on the identity it assigns to them while also shaping its own identity through daily social interactions. However, the meaning of an identity is ultimately determined by the inter-subjective structure, not solely by the state that produces it.[81]

Alexander Wendt explained that identities define *who or what actors are*, while interests refer to *what actors want*, representing their motivations and helping explain their behaviour.[82] Moreover, values lead to identity, and identities determine interests, which in turn influence policymakers' decisions. In summary, interests are based on identities, meaning an actor cannot know what it wants until it understands who it is.[83] Furthermore, identity forms via interactions with other international actors. As a result, identities should be understood as a set of meanings that an actor assigns to itself while considering the actions of *others*.[84] Accordingly, a state's understanding of itself is closely linked to its perception of *other* international actors. In conclusion, identities shape the relationships between states in global politics, and a state's image is closely connected to its identity.

2.1.3. Interest

As discussed above, a state's identity shapes its actions, and its priorities depend on what it sees as important based on its identity. According to Ted Hopf, interests come from identity, which means that an actor's identity in international relations determines its interests, and changes in a state's identity can lead to changes in its interests.[85] From a constructivist perspective, identity comes first and sets the foundation for a state's interests, and both jointly

[78] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 328-329.
[79] Natalia Zaslavskaya, "EU-Russia relations: a theoretical interpretation of Russia's perception of the European Union," *Studia Politologiczne* no. 56 (2020): 202-203.
[80] Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 174.
[81] Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 175.
[82] Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (June 1994): 385-386, https://doi.org/10.2307/2944711.
[83] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 231.
[84] Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," 386.
[85] Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 16.

determine the state's actions. As Alexander Wendt highlights, actors' actions in international relations depend on their interests. He pointed out that “without interests identities have no motivational force, without identities interests have no direction”.[86] Therefore, changes in identity mean changes in actors' interests in international relations.[87]

Additionally, as acknowledged above, according to social constructivism, the structure of international relations is not only made up of material powers but is also based on social relationships. These social relations are built on shared knowledge, mutual understanding, common opinions, expectations, and interactions. States develop interests in one another when they are familiar with each other and share knowledge. From Alexander Wendt's perspective, the structures of international relations are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than only material forces. He specifically pointed out that the identities and interests of actors in international relations are constructed by these shared ideas rather than being given by nature.[88]

In contrast to earlier theories, constructivism argues that interests, especially national interests, are key to understanding international relations. John Gerard Ruggie emphasized a similar point, noting that for foreign policy, the identity and interests of actors are essential.[89] Identities and interests help actors decide what is happening and what role they should play. Like identity, interest is also a social construction that can change depending on the situation. These interests guide the actions of actors, helping to determine whether their actions are justifiable or not, both domestically and internationally.

To summarize, if the actors of international relations share a collective consciousness, they also have an identity which defines the meaning of their interests. As constructivism argues, without interests, identity lacks motivational power, and without identity, interests lack meaning and direction. Interests show what an actor wants, while identity explains how to achieve it. As mentioned earlier, a state's actions are shaped by its identity, and its priorities depend on what it sees as important. In cases where states face similar situations, they can act differently because their identities shape how they understand the situations.

[86] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 231.
[87] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 231.
[88] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 1.
[89] John Gerard Ruggie, “What Makes the World Hang Together?”.

2.1.4. Social constructivist perspective on the EU's Foreign Policy in Central Asia and its perceptions

The reason for applying social constructivism to this topic is that according to this theory, the EU's role in international relations is shaped not only by how it defines and presents its own identity and role but also by how other actors in international relations recognize and acknowledge this role. In other words, from a social constructivist point of view, both self-perception and *others*' perceptions are important to understanding the EU's policy, its global identity, and its positions in world politics.

According to constructivism the EU is a socially and politically constructed actor. This means that the interests of the EU and its member states are deeply influenced by their shared identity, norms, and values. The constructivist explanation of the EU's identity in the international arena gained popularity in the 1990s, particularly after the Treaty of Maastricht came into force.[90] Furthermore, the Treaty of Lisbon played a significant role in shaping the EU's self-image and providing it with a stable political identity.

As discussed earlier, identity is based on the historical past of actors. The EU's identity creation began with the Robert Schuman Declaration, the first formal statement of European unity. The EU is a distinct actor compared to other actors in international relations. Alexander Wendt's concept of collective identity formation is particularly relevant here, where member states begin to see each other as an extension of *self* rather than as *other*.[91] The EU's identity significantly impacts its relationships with the rest of the world. From a constructivist perspective, both the EU's history and ideals and how *others* perceive the EU play key roles in shaping its identity. Ian Manners and Richard Whitman emphasize that the EU's identity is represented by how it portrays itself and how these portrayals are reflected in the minds of others, and the "history and principles" of the EU also play an important role in shaping its international identity.[92]

The most prominent idea tied to the EU's identity is the concept of normative power. This is because the EU presents itself as a normative power aiming to lead by example in promoting liberal and democratic values. The concept of normative power was developed by Ian Manners, highlighting the EU's normative role in the global environment. Manners

[90] Anna Skolimowska, "In Search of Academic Tools to Evaluate the European Union's Identity on the Global Stage," in *Perceptions of the European Union's Identity in International Relations*, ed. Anna Skolimowska (Routledge, 2019), 61.
[91] Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State."
[92] Ian Manners and Richard Whitman, "The 'Difference Engine': Constructing and Representing the International Identity of the European Union," *Journal of European Public Policy* 10, no. 3 (2003): 383, https://doi.org/10.1080/1350176032000085360.

highlights a key characteristic of normative power: the ability to shape conceptions of the *normal* in international relations.[93]

From a constructivist perspective, identity serves as a base for the foundation of interests. In the EU case, the EU's interests are based on its normative power identity. Socialisation, in the case of the EU, refers to the process by which the EU spreads its values and model to other countries by encouraging them to adopt its ideas and norms through partnerships and cooperation with other international actors. The following section of this chapter will analyze the EU's normative power in detail and explore questions such as: What norms does it promote? How does it promote norms? These questions are especially relevant to understanding the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia and exploring how the identity of the EU is perceived by *others*.

From a constructivist's point of view, *the other* is a significant factor in forming self-perceptions and national identity. Therefore, focusing on perceptions helps us understand the global significance of the EU and how *others* interpret its actions. Natalia Chaban et al. point out that to truly understand the EU, we need an external perspective to interpret its meaning.[94] Similarly, scholars in the field of EU studies argue that the way outsiders perceive the EU is a crucial part of its international identity and role. For instance, Serena Kelly and Smith Nicholas Ross argue that studying the EU's perceptions can be a valuable resource for systematically assessing the EU and offering insights into the effectiveness of its international actions from the perspective of outsiders.[95] In this context, knowing the EU's self-perception is important before analysing selected countries' perceptions of the EU. The following section will analyze the EU's self-perception in detail.

2.2. EU's self-perception: Normative power Europe

The EU is a unique type of actor in global politics. This is not just because of the unique characteristics of the EU's integration project but also because of the way it conducts relationships with other countries. In understanding the scope and forms of the EU's influence in international relations, it is necessary to consider its structural and functional characteristics. The EU is a union of states that have voluntarily transferred part of their

[93] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 253.
[94] Natalia Chaban, Martin Holland, and Peter Ryan, *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: New Cases, New Findings*, vol. 2 (World Scientific, 2009), 2.
[95] Serena Kelly and Nicholas Ross Smith, "The EU's Reaction to the Arab Spring: External Media Portrayals in China, India and Russia," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 18, no. 2 (2013): 220, https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2013014.

sovereignty to the EU at the supranational level. There is an extensive debate among scholars from Europe and around the world concerning understanding what kind of role the EU plays in international politics. What brings all scholars together is the finding that the EU is a *different* international actor. Periodically, from the early years of the integration of EU countries, scholars have developed numerous concepts that reflect the characteristics and the position of the EU as an actor in global politics. Each of these following concepts discusses the specific nature and role of the EU, such as "civilian power,"[96] "normative power,"[97] "quiet superpower,"[98] "soft power,"[99] "trade power,"[100] and "responsible power,"[101] among others.

The civilian, soft, and normative powers get much more attention from researchers in EU studies and have substantially contributed to the field. In the 1970s, French scholar François Duchêne was among the first to conceptualize the distinctiveness of the EU (then the European Community). Specifically, he characterized the EC as a unique kind of actor in the international system and described it as a "civilian power," which means it has strong economic power but only limited military force.[102] He argued that Western Europe, as one of the world's major economic centers, had the potential to become "the exemplar of a new stage in civilization" by using civilian means to influence other actors in the international system.[103] Supporters of the Civilian Power Europe idea argue that, since the EU is the biggest economic bloc in the world and also one of the largest donors of development assistance globally, it possesses significant economic power in the international system.[104] The EU has the ability to cooperate with other international actors, both state and non-state, through different kinds of agreements, such as cooperation and partnership agreements, trade agreements, market access offers, and providing development or humanitarian aid. At the same time, the EU can also use these tools, like aid packages, trade agreements, and access

[96] François Duchêne, "The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence," in *A Nation Writ Large: Foreign-Policy Problems before the European Community*, ed. M. Kohnstamm and W. Hager (Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), 1-21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-01826-0.
[97] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–258, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353.
[98] Andrew Moravcsik, "The Quiet Superpower," *Newsweek - International Edition*, June 17, 2002, https://swh.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/quiet.pdf.
[99] Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).
[100] Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "The European Union as a Trade Power," in *International Relations and the European Union*, ed. Christopher Hill, Michael Smith, and Sophie Vanhoonacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 155–180.
[101] Hartmut Mayer and Henri Vogt, eds., *A Responsible Europe? Ethical Foundations of EU External Affairs* (Springer, 2006).
[102] Duchêne, "The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence," 19.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

to its market, as a kind of leverage or soft pressure when it has political or economic disagreements with other actors on the global stage. As Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaïdis argue, the EU is able to influence the preferences and interests of others by "manipulating market access."[105] Accordingly, François Duchêne defined civilian power by two main pillars. Firstly, it means being "long on economic power and relatively short on armed force."[106] In line with this, he argued that the EC's strength lies in its ability to influence other international actors through non-military means such as trade, diplomacy, and development cooperation. Secondly, civilian power represents "a force for the international diffusion of civilian and democratic standards."[107] Moreover, François Duchêne emphasized that the EC should promote social values of equality, justice, and tolerance that belong to its inner characteristics. Without promoting these values both internally and externally, Duchêne warned, the EC could become "more or less the victim of power politics run by powers stronger and more cohesive than itself."[108]

Later, Hanns Maull expanded on Duchêne's idea by offering a broader definition of civilian power in the post-Cold War context. He proposed that being a civilian power means: "a) the acceptance of the necessity of cooperation with others in the pursuit of international objectives; b) the concentration on non military, primarily economic, means to secure national goals, with military power left as a residual instrument serving essentially to safeguard other means of international interaction; c) a willingness to develop supranational structures to address critical issues of international management."[109] In general, civilian power is commonly understood as a form of influence that relies on non-military tools such as trade, diplomacy, and development cooperation. Scholars have vigorously challenged the civilian power theory since the beginning of the 2000s, and among them is Ian Manners, the prominent one who proposed his theory of normative power. The other theory, which is also widely debated, is soft power, which roughly originated at the same time as the normative power theory. Joseph Nye defined soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments."[110] The soft power theory was initially used to

[105] Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "The European Union as a Conflicted Trade Power," *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 6 (2006): 907, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760600838623.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Duchêne, "The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence," 20.
[108] Cited in Yonca Özer, "The European Union as a Civilian Power: The Case of the EU's Trade Policy," *Marmara Journal of European Studies* 20, no. 2 (2012): 72.
[109] Hanns W. Maull, "Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 5 (Winter 1990): 92.
[110] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2004): 256, https://doi.org/10.2307/20202345.

describe the United States' foreign policy nature, and according to Ian Manners and Thomas Diez's point of view, this theory is not entirely suitable for understanding the EU's relations with other countries.[111] Ian Manners, in his famous article *Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?*, argues that the EU should be viewed as a normative power, which means it has the ability to shape international norms and values rather than relying solely on military or economic power.[112] This perspective emphasizes the EU's unique identity and its role in redefining what is considered "normal" in international relations. When comparing the differences between the theories of normative power and soft power, the following main points distinguish them, as put by Kristian Nielsen, soft power "*is* something *you have*, *not* something *you are*," and on the other hand, normative power is "what that actor *is*, is very much a function of what they *say and do*."[113]

To better understand the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia, this thesis focuses on the concept of normative power proposed by Ian Manners and discusses it in this subpart. The concept has been widely debated for over two decades and remains relevant in EU foreign policy studies. It must be admitted that the concept does not fully explain EU and Central Asian relations and the EU's perceptions in the region, however, among the available theoretical frameworks, it is one of the most effective for understanding the EU's policy in the region.

The EU, compared to other actors in international relations, is known as a different kind of power, widely known as a normative power that promotes its values in relations with third countries. Ian Manners argues that the developments in international politics during the 1990s reshaped how the EU's power is understood, and these developments shifted the focus from military and civilian power to its unique role as a normative power in international affairs.[114] Manners pointed out that the EU is a different normative power actor in global politics because it's "constructed on a normative basis" and "acts in a normative way."[115] According to Ian Manners, EU normative power is grounded in three factors: the unique historical experience, the hybrid nature of its political system, and its political and legal nature.[116] As a result, these factors allow EU member states to unite under key principles and

[111] Thomas Diez and Ian Manners, "Reflecting on Normative Power Europe," in *Power in World Politics*, ed. Felix Berenskoetter and M. J. Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 179.
[112] Manners, "Normative Power Europe."
[113] Kristian L. Nielsen, "EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectations Gap," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 9, no. 5 (2013): 728, https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v9i5.479.
[114] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 236.
[115] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 252.
[116] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 240.

values within the EU. The EU's values are based on respect for human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, good governance, and minorities' rights. Moreover, these shared values shape the relations of the EU with other countries worldwide, where the EU promotes peace, security, sustainable development, solidarity, and human rights, including minority rights.

The Manners' concept of Normative Power Europe was the first to define the EU's distinctive foreign policy role based on its efforts to promote norms. In this context, normative power is defined as the ability to shape conceptions of the "normal" in international relations.[117] Furthermore, in a detailed way, Ian Manners defined normative power as follows: "the ability to shape or change what passes for normal in international relations, and which will undoubtedly have utilitarian, social, moral, and narrative dimensions to it, just as it will undoubtedly be disputed."[118]

The normative power Europe, defined by Ian Manner, has not remained without criticism from other researchers. For example, Ramon Pacheco Pardo does not support the concept of normative power toward the EU. Instead, Pardo argues that the EU is a "normal" power and needs to use the same instruments in its foreign policy, including military power, to achieve its goals, similar to other actors in international politics.[119] In this view, maximizing security by influencing other actors is a priority for the normal power. Pardo argues that the EU "must pursue the goal of maximizing security by influencing the behaviour of other actors and employ military and non-military means to achieve this goal."[120] Despite the criticisms and the ongoing debate surrounding the concept of the EU's normative power, Thomas Diez mentions that "whether one loathes or loves it,"[121] the theory of normative power remains the most comprehensive theory for understanding the EU's internal and foreign policies. The main components of normative power are norms.

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[117] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 253.
[118] Ian Manners, *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?* (Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 2000), 33, https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/38395695/Ian_Manners_Normative_Power_Europe_A_Contradiction_in_Terms_COPRI_38_2000.pdf.
[119] Ramon Pacheco Pardo, "Normal Power Europe: Non-proliferation and the Normalization of EU's Foreign Policy," *Journal of European Integration* 34, no. 1 (2012): 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2011.566334.
[120] Pacheco Pardo, "Normal Power Europe," 7.
[121] Thomas Diez, "Normative Power as Hegemony," *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 2 (2013): 194, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836713485.

2.2.1. Norms

According to Ian Manners, the EU shapes its relations with other international actors based on the fundamental principles and values that led to its foundation. In addition, the normative basis of the EU has been developed over the years through treaties, policies, and declarations. Manners argues that the norms that the EU promotes are not an invention of the EU, but these norms are accepted by the UN and universally applicable.[122] Manners contends that the most important factor shaping the EU's international role "is not what it does or what it says" but "what it is."[123] Manners continues his argument by mentioning that the EU doesn't just promote these principles to other countries worldwide, but it also claims legitimacy as a normative power by "living by example."[124]

Ian Manners identified five core norms and four minor norms that the EU promotes, which are part of the *acquis communautaire* and *acquis politique* of the EU.[125] As shown in Table 1, these are the norms identified by Manners that the EU promotes and references to the official EU documents that form the basis for these norms.

[122] Ian Manners, "The Normative Ethics of the European Union," *International Affairs* (2008): 46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25144714.
[123] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 252.
[124] Manners, "The Normative Ethics of the European Union," 56.
[125] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 242.

Table 1: EU's norms as described by Manners.

Norm Type	Norms	References to the official EU Documents
Core norms	Peace	Robert Schuman Declaration[126] (1950), Preambles to the European Coal and Steel Treaty (1951)[127], Preambles to the Treaty establishing the European Community (TEC)[128] and article 297 (1957).
	Liberty	Preambles of the TEC and article 6 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) (1992)[129]
	Democracy	Preamble and founding principles of the TEU, and articles of 177 of the TEC, Copenhagen Criteria (1993).
	Rule of Law	Preamble and founding principles of the TEU, and articles of 177 of the TEC, Copenhagen Criteria (1993).
	Human Rights and fundamental freedoms	Preamble and founding principles of the TEU, and articles of 177 of the TEC, Copenhagen Criteria (1993)
Minor Norms	Social Solidarity	Preambles of the TEC and TEU, Article 2 of TEU and Article 2 TEC.
	Anti-Discrimination	Article 12 of the TEC, Protection of minorities in the Copenhagen criteria.
	Sustainable Development	Article 2 of the TEU, Article 2 of the TEC, Article 6 of the TEC.
	Good Governance	Copenhagen criteria, Romano Prodi's inaugural speech (2000), EU election assistance and observation papers (COM (2000) 191 final), White Paper on European governance (COM (2001) 428 final).

Source: Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 242–243.

Furthermore, in addition to Manners's mention of the official EU documents, the Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union has once again confirmed the importance of normative values in the EU's foreign policy. In particular article 21 of the treaty states that "[t]he Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and

[126] European Union, "Schuman Declaration," adopted May 9, 1950, accessed December 13, 2024, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en.
[127] European Union, *Treaty Establishing the European Coal and Steel Community*, adopted April 18, 1951, accessed December 13, 2024, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A11951K%2FTXT.
[128] European Union, *Treaty Establishing the European Community (Consolidated Version)*, Rome Treaty, adopted March 25, 1957, accessed December 13, 2024, https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/eu/1957/en/40087.
[129] European Union, *Treaty on European Union*, adopted February 7, 1992, accessed December 13, 2024, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A11992M%2FTXT.

indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law."[130]

Following the norm, the second component of normative power is the diffusion mechanism. This refers to the process the EU uses to spread its norms through various mechanisms in cooperation with other actors in global politics.

2.2.2. Norm diffusion mechanisms

Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse define diffusion as "a process through which ideas, normative standards, or … policies and institutions spread across time and space."[131] In the case of the EU, norm diffusion is seen as the process of spreading the fundamental EU values around the world. Manners argues that the EU's normative power is acting in a normative way, and there is an "absence of physical force" in promoting its norms worldwide, distinguishing its normative power from other actors.[132] Furthermore, Manners distinguishes the six mechanisms of diffusion of the norms through which the EU is promoting its normative power, which in table 2 EU's norm promotion mechanisms and descriptions are shown.[133]

[130] European Union, *Treaty on European Union (Consolidated Version 2016)*, Official Journal C 202, June 7, 2016, accessed December 13, 2024, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016M/TXT.
[131] Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, "From Europeanization to Diffusion," in *Domestic Politics and Norm Diffusion in International Relations: Ideas Do Not Float Freely*, ed. Thomas Risse (Routledge, 2012), 293.
[132] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe Reconsidered: Beyond the Crossroads," *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (March 2006): 184, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760500451600.
[133] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 244-245.

Table 2: EU's Norm diffusion mechanisms.

Diffusion mechanism	Description
Contagion	This involves unintentionally spreading ideas from the EU to other political actors. The EU often leads by example, highlighting its regional integration efforts, which can encourage similar initiatives in other regions. Manners gives the example of Mercosur, which took inspiration from the EU for its integration.
Informational diffusion	This happens through strategic communications, including new policy initiatives and declaratory communications from EU leadership.
Procedural diffusion	This factor involves establishing formal relationships between the EU and third parties, such as inter-regional cooperation agreements, membership in international organizations or enlargement of the EU. Examples include EU enlargement negotiations.
Transference	Norm diffusion happens through the exchange of goods, trade, aid, or technical assistance. The EU may export its norms and standards through financial benefits or sanctions, as seen in programs like PHARE and TACIS.
Overt diffusion	This occurs through the physical presence of the EU in third states and international organizations, such as through EU delegations and embassies of member states. This direct engagement helps to promote EU norms on the ground.
Cultural filter	The cultural context of the recipient states influences the impact of international norms. This cultural filter can lead to learning, adapting or rejecting norms based on local social and political identities.

Source: Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 244–245.

In addition to Manners' points, Henrik Larsen argues that the EU is most widely seen as a normative model in its regional integration process. Its integration process and structure have attracted significant attention from around the world.[134] However, it is unclear if other countries will follow the EU's model and its policy recommendations. Many countries focus on their own unique situations and argue that Europe's context is different, and what is considered normal in Europe may not be normal in other parts of the world.

The EU aims to promote its norms to other countries and position itself as a norm promoter while the countries serve as the recipients of the EU's normative power. The outcome of the EU's norm promotion is not fully dependent on the EU itself, and it is partly dependent on the norm-receiving actor, whether norms are adopted, rejected, or adapted to the local

[134] Henrik Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power and the Research on External Perceptions: The Missing Link," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 4 (2014): 896–910, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12109.

context.[135] There is a majority-supported idea among the EU's foreign policy studies field, which mentions that the EU needs to move beyond self-perception and focus more on the perspectives of its partners in shaping its foreign bilateral and multilateral relationships. The EU promotes norms in cooperation with other actors in global politics, and therefore, the success of the EU's foreign policy mostly depends on its achievement in this area.

It must be accepted that what is considered *normal* in the EU may not be recognized as the same *normal* outside the EU's borders. Considering this, the normative power of the EU requires external validation from the other countries with which the EU is promoting its norms in cooperation. The external source of legitimacy of the EU's norm promotion lies in the views and opinions of the partner countries. This has become a reason for the intensive focus of scholarly studies on the EU's perception around the world, to find out how the other actors of international relations view the EU's policies.

The outsiders' view holds more significance than the EU's self-perception of its role in international politics. The position of the EU remains less impactful without recognising and validating its role by other countries. Larsen argues that studying the external perception of the EU worldwide makes an important contribution to the "debate about whether the EU can be considered a normative power."[136] Therefore, to understand and analyze normative power, one must examine to what extent other international relations actors see the EU as a normative power actor. A few studies are available on how the EU is perceived by the receivers of the EU's norms outside of its borders, and this is discussed in detail in the literature review section of this thesis. Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti noted that the EU's ability to act as a normative power partly depends on how others perceive it.[137] In detail, chapter five analyzes the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia. However, in this subsection, it is important to highlight a few points on the EU's norm promotion in Central Asia.

Analysing how the EU is perceived in Central Asian countries also helps to understand to what extent the EU is viewed as a normative power in selected mass media, official perspectives, and experts' views from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In the 2007 EU strategy to Central Asia and its updated version in 2019, the EU is committed to promoting its norms within Central Asian countries through bilateral and multilateral channels. The 2007 strategy

[135] Zhanibek Arynov, "'Nobody Goes to Another Monastery with Their Own Charter': The EU's Promotion of 'European Values' as Perceived in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 6 (2022): 1032, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2032604.
[136] Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power," 897.
[137] Lucarelli and Fioramonti, "Introduction: The EU in the Eyes of the Others," 2.

highlighted key areas for cooperation and prioritized normative values. These included human rights, the rule of law, good governance, democratization, youth and education, and intercultural dialogue. Additionally, the strategy strongly focused on economic development, trade and investment, energy, transport links, and addressing common threats and challenges in areas of cooperation. These areas of cooperation were further developed and broadened in the 2019 strategy. The updated strategy built on the earlier priorities, organizing them into three interconnected areas: partnering for resilience, partnering for prosperity, and enhancing collaboration. Bilaterally, the EU promotes its values through signed PCA and EPCA agreements with Central Asian countries, which are discussed in detail in chapter five, outlining the EU's priorities in the region according to the legal bases regulating these relationships.[138] Georgiy Voloshin, back in 2014, found that the EU's normative power in Central Asia was "ineffective since the application of its rules and norms has been scarce and episodic, if not absent altogether."[139] A small part of this thesis will examine whether there have been any changes over the approximately ten years since Georgiy Voloshin's conclusion. From the words of Manners, it may be concluded that the theory of normative power of Europe can "contribute to a better understanding of what principles the EU promotes, how the EU acts, and what impact the EU has"[140] in Central Asia.

Despite the important contribution of the Normative Power Europe approach to explaining the European Union's international role, this concept has not remained without critique in academic debates. While supporters of normative power emphasize the EU's capacity to shape global norms, values, and standards through attraction and persuasion, critics argue that such a view is not sufficient to fully capture the complexity of the EU's external relations. They underline that the EU's influence outside its borders is also strongly connected to more material and interest-based factors. In particular, economic interests, access to the EU market, trade relations, investment flows, and development assistance often play an equally, and sometimes even more, important role in shaping the EU's relations with third countries. One of the most important alternative approaches in this regard is Chad Damro's concept of Market Power Europe. Chad Damro argues that the EU's global influence should not be understood only through norms and values, but also through its economic weight, regulatory power, and the attractiveness of its internal market. He defines

[138] More details are discussed in the following article: Nosirkhon Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia: A Comprehensive Analysis of Legal Frameworks of the Relationship," *De iurisprudentia et iure publico: Journal of Legal and Political Sciences* XV, no. 3 (2024): 17-25.
[139] Georgiy Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia: Promoting Values and Defending Interests* (Springer, 2014), 70, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443946.
[140] Manners, "The Normative Ethics of the European Union," 46.

Market Power Europe as the "externalization of economic and social market-related policies and regulatory measures".[141] In this sense, the EU is able to influence external actors not only through persuasion, but also through market mechanisms. Third countries often adapt to EU rules and standards in order to maintain or improve their access to the European market. This influence operates through different channels such as trade agreements, investment opportunities, development cooperation, financial assistance, and the spread of regulatory frameworks that become *de facto* international standards. However, the emergence of the market power concept does not necessarily reject or replace the normative dimension of EU foreign policy. Instead, it complements it by suggesting that the EU's external influence is multi-dimensional. In other words, the EU can act both as a normative actor and as an economic power at the same time. While the EU often presents itself in official discourse as a promoter of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and other normative principles, external actors may interpret its role in a different way based on their own experiences of interaction with the EU. This means that perceptions of the EU are not shaped only by abstract norms, but also by concrete and visible forms of cooperation. In many cases, what partner countries observe in practice, such as funding programs, infrastructure projects, trade relations, and technical assistance, may have a stronger impact on how the EU is perceived than its declared normative objectives. This point is particularly relevant for the present research. As already discussed above, the normative power framework places strong emphasis on external recognition. The effectiveness of the EU as a normative power does not depend only on its self-perception or declared intentions, but also on whether external actors actually recognize and accept this identity. In this regard, the findings of this dissertation contribute to the broader discussion on the EU's international identity by focusing on how it is perceived in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. While official EU documents and strategic communication consistently present the Union as a normative actor, the perceptions found in media coverage, expert interviews, and public discourse in the two case countries may not fully reflect this self-image. Instead, the EU is frequently associated with more practical and tangible forms of engagement, such as economic cooperation, development aid, technical assistance, investment, trade, and financial support. Therefore, although this dissertation primarily builds on the Normative Power Europe framework, it also recognizes that external perceptions may reveal dimensions of the EU's role that go beyond a purely normative interpretation. In cases where the EU is mainly perceived as a donor, economic partner, investor, or provider of development assistance rather than a

[141] Chad Damro, "Market Power Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy* 19, no. 5 (2012): 696, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2011.646779.

promoter of norms and values, the analytical lens offered by Market Power Europe becomes a useful complementary tool. Importantly, this does not necessarily challenge the EU's normative ambitions or its self-proclaimed identity. Instead, it highlights a potential gap between the EU's projected image and the way it is understood by external actors. This gap itself becomes analytically significant, as it helps to better explain how the EU's influence is constructed, interpreted, and sometimes redefined in different regional and political contexts.

Chapter 3: Literature review

The relationship between the EU and Central Asia and the external perception of the EU in various parts of the world have attracted considerable scholarly attention over the past years. This chapter aims to systematically review current research on these topics and identify gaps in the existing literature. The first half of this chapter focuses on research on EU and Central Asia relations, and the second half focuses on research on external perceptions of the EU. This chapter concludes with a summary of the gaps identified in the existing research.

3.1. Studies on EU policies, perceptions, and geopolitical position in Central Asia

Following a comprehensive review of the literature on EU-Central Asia relations, the studies were further divided into four following sub-groups to facilitate a more structured analysis:

1. Studies focused exclusively on EU and Central Asia relations.
2. Academic studies analyzing the EU's geopolitical presence in Central Asia compared to Russia, China, and the US.
3. The studies focus on the cooperation between EU member states and Central Asian countries, as well as on the foreign policy priorities of the Central Asian states vis-à-vis the EU.
4. Studies exploring the perceptions of the EU within Central Asian countries.

3.1.1. Studies on EU-Central Asia Relations

The literature on EU–Central Asia relations focus on the historical development of the relationship, areas of cooperation, and the legal frameworks governing EU–Central Asia collaboration. Before the 2000s, limited literature covered the EU's policy in Central Asia. However, the scholarly interest began to expand as the EU "witnessed a positive development since 2002"[142] in its relations with Central Asian countries. This interest intensified further following adopting the EU's Strategy in 2007 and significantly increased the academic focus on EU and Central Asia relations (Figure 1). In this context, Zhanibek Arynov rightly pointed out that "the more Brussels engaged with the region, the more

[142] Ioan-David Onel, "Assessing European Union's Actorness in the Extended Neighbourhood: The Case of Central Asia," *EURINT* 1 (2020): 286.

scholarly debate developed."[143] Before adopting this Strategy, Ahto Lobjakas described the level of the EU's relations with Central Asia as "based on the lowest common denominator."[144]

Quite noticeable scholarly attention has been paid to analyzing the EU's strategy towards the *neighbours of the EU's neighbours*, adopted in 2007 and 2019. Scholars have examined the strategies both separately and comparatively.[145] The 2007 Strategy enhanced the relations of the EU with the Central Asian countries and helped to "increase the EU's visibility in the region."[146] Vasa László critically analyzed the EU's adopted Strategy in 2019 and addressed how weak the EU's image is in the region and why the EU can't achieve its goals in the region. According to him, the "Central Asian region is one of the most relevant areas for the EU,"[147] yet he argues that, in this important area, the EU lacks a clear and realistic strategy to meet the needs of both regions. He believes that, in the geopolitical games of Central Asia, the EU is losing to the major and middle powers in the region and remains out of the game.[148] On the other hand, Larisa Kolesnikova studied the EU strategy relatively and stated that the 2019 strategy demonstrates a clearer understanding of the EU's view of the region, its potential, complexity and the importance of future cooperation compared to the 2007 strategy.[149] Despite these updates to the EU strategy, the authors reiterated Vasa's point of view, arguing that the EU has relatively limited roles in Central Asia and that China, Russia and the United States maintain a dominant influence.[150] In the same vein, Antonio Alonso Marcos evaluated the Strategy adopted in 2019, describing the main goals outlined in the document and analyzing its effectiveness one year after its adoption to determine "if

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[143] Zhanibek Arynov, *Decaying Beauty? Image(s) of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan* (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2019), 2.
[144] Ahto Lobjakas, "EU-Central Asia Partnership Unlikely to Be More Than a Marriage of Convenience," *Radio Free Europe*, 2008, accessed November 23, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/EU_Central_Asia_Partnership_Unlikely_To_Be_More_Than_Marriage_Of_Convenience/1201262.html.
[145] Emilian Kavalski and Young Chul Cho, "The European Union in Central Eurasia: Still Searching for Strategy," *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-017-0484-3; Nargis Kassenova, "The New EU Strategy Towards Central Asia: A View from the Region," *CEPS Policy Briefs* 1–12 (2008), https://www.ceeol.com/search/viewpdf?id=7093; Nicklas Norling, "EU's Central Asia Policy: The Adoption of a New Strategy Paper 2007–2013," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 3 (45) (2007); Emilbek Dzhuraev and Nargiza Muratalieva, *The EU Strategy on Central Asia: To the Successful Implementation of the New Strategy*, FES Analysis, March 2020.
[146] Nargis Kassenova, *The EU Strategy for Central Asia: Imperatives and Opportunities for Change. A View from Kazakhstan* (Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015), 1.
[147] László Vasa, "The European Union Strategy on Central Asia: Out of Game?," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2020): 120.
[148] Vasa, "The European Union Strategy on Central Asia," 129.
[149] Larisa Kolesnikova, "Новая стратегия Европейского Союза в Центральной Азии и её влияние на евроазиатскую интеграцию" ("The New EU Strategy in Central Asia and Its Impact on Eurasian Integration"), *Постсоветские исследования* (*Post-Soviet Studies*) 3, no. 2 (2020): 142.
[150] Kolesnikova, "Новая стратегия Европейского Союза" ("The New EU Strategy in Central Asia"), 137.

it is useful or not."[151] Building on this, Murad Shamilov and Karlis Bukovskis, after analyzing the EU's 2019 Strategy, concluded that it "is not so much a new idea but rather a deeper and more detailed explanation of the tasks and work of the EU" in Central Asia.[152] Furthermore, Neil Winn and Stefan Gänzle examined the evolution of the EU's foreign policy towards Central Asia with the 2019 Strategy compared to the 2007 Strategy, arguing that the new policy reflects a shift from democracy promotion to "principled pragmatism and resilience."[153] The words of Catherine Putz and Murat Laumulin can summarize the literature analyzing the EU's strategies in Central Asia. Catherine Putz, who analyzed the new strategy, stated that it is "the old EU Central Asia strategy in a fresh PDF."[154] At the same time, Murat Laumulin explored whether the EU's strategy for Central Asia is suited to the challenges of the twenty-first century, concluding that "it is incomplete."[155]

The promotion of human rights, the rule of law and good governance has attracted considerable attention from academics both from the EU and the Central Asian region. Many of these discussions focused on factors that have influenced the success or failure of the EU in promoting values-based standards in Central Asia, most of whom concluded that the EU was seen as a weak actor in these efforts.[156] Despite the EU's efforts to "present itself as a normative actor in the world,"[157] recent literature frequently highlights its limitations in Central Asia. For instance, Georgiy Voloshin argues that the "EU's normative power in Central Asia has proved so far ineffective," with the "application of its rules and norms has

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[151] Antonio Alonso Marcos, "The New EU Strategy for Central Asia One Year Later: Fears and Wishes," *Вестник КазНУ. Серия международные отношения и международное право* (*Vestnik KazNU. Series on International Relations and International Law*) 93, no. 1 (2021): 49.

[152] Murad Shamilov and Karlis Bukovskis, "Behind the New European Union Strategy on Central Asia: Some Conceptual Aspects," *Вестник КазНУ. Серия международные отношения и международное право* (*Vestnik KazNU. Series on International Relations and International Law*) 95, no. 3 (2021): 53, https://doi.org/10.26577/IRILJ.2021.v95.i3.04.

[153] Neil Winn and Stefan Gänzle, "Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy Vis-à-Vis Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience," *Geopolitics* 28, no. 3 (2022): 1343, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2042260.

[154] Catherine Putz, "The European Union's (Not So) New Central Asia Strategy," *The Diplomat*, May 16, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/the-european-unions-not-so-new-central-asia-strategy/, accessed November 23, 2024.

[155] Murat Laumulin, "The EU's Incomplete Strategy for Central Asia," *Carnegie Europe*, December 3, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2019/12/the-eus-incomplete-strategy-for-central-asia?lang=en, accessed November 23, 2024.

[156] Vera Axyonova, "The EU-Central Asia Human Rights Dialogues: Making a Difference?" *EUCAM - Policy Brief* 16 (2011): 1–4; Katharina Hoffmann, "The EU in Central Asia: Successful Good Governance Promotion?" *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2010): 87–103; Fabienne Bossuyt and Paul Kubicek, "Advancing Democracy on Difficult Terrain: EU Democracy Promotion in Central Asia," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 16, no. 5 (2011); Vera Axyonova, *The European Union's Democratization Policy for Central Asia: Failed in Success or Succeeded in Failure?* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2014).

[157] Gordon Crawford, "EU Human Rights and Democracy Promotion in Central Asia: From Lofty Principles to Lowly Self-Interests," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 9, no. 2 (2008): 173, https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850801999669.

been scarce and episodic" and, in some areas, even "absent altogether."[158] Similarly, Emilian Kavalski observes that the EU's norm-promotion efforts have led to only a few positive changes in democracy, human rights, good governance, and the rule of law in Central Asia.[159] According to Işık Kuşçu, the EU has followed a "carefully balanced policy" in promoting norms in the region.[160] Furthering this idea, Igor Osavoluk and Kateryna Savchenko conclude that the EU's "economic interests prevail over its stated aim of promoting human rights in its relations with Central Asia."[161]

More broadly, research on the EU and Central Asian relationship from a multidisciplinary point of view is increasingly focusing on EU policies in various areas of cooperation, including economic and trade relations,[162] energy,[163] security,[164] climate change and environment,[165] education,[166] and health.[167]

Sébastien Peyrouse suggests that while the EU holds less political influence in the region overall, it has a comparatively more substantial economic presence in Kazakhstan than either China or the United States.[168] Building on this perspective, Artem Patalakh argues that "friendship with the EU" serves as a "mean of economic modernization" for Central Asian countries.[169] Moreover, Mukesh Shankar Bharti examines the growing trade and economic

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[158] Georgiy Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia: Promoting Values and Defending Interests* (Springer, 2014), 70, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443946.

[159] Emilian Kavalski, *Central Asia and the Rise of Normative Powers: Contextualizing the Security Governance of the European Union, China, and India* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012), 98.

[160] Işık Kuşçu Bonnenfant, "Normative Power Europe in Central Asia: The Case of Kazakhstan," *USAK Yearbook of Politics and International Relations* 6 (2013): 113, https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=319363.

[161] Igor Savchenko, Andrii Osavoliuk, and Kateryna Savchenko, "EU Human Rights Promotion in Central Asia: Between the Dragon and the Bear," *Martens Centre Policy Brief* (2020): 1.

[162] Richard Pomfret, "The European Union and Central Asia: Economic Development and Trade," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 14, no. 2 (2022), https://doi.org/10.30722/anzjes.vol14.iss2.15833.

[163] Renata Mantel, "EU-Central Asia Relations in the Energy Sector with a Special Focus on Kazakhstan," *Europe en formation* 1 (2015).

[164] Olga Alinda Spaiser, "The EU as a Security Actor in Central Asia: Minor but Not Marginal," *L'Europe en formation* no. 375 (Spring 2015)

[165] Vyacheslav Pobedinsky, Viktor Shestak, and Roza Yerezhepkyzy, "Improving Environmental Legislation in Central Asia: Current Trends and Features of Cooperation with the European Union," *European Energy and Environmental Law Review* 29, no. 2 (2020).

[166] Peter Jones, *The EU-Central Asia Education Initiative* (February 8, 2010), EUCAM Working Paper No. 09, available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1604444; Sébastien Peyrouse, *Reconsidering EU Education Assistance to Central Asia*, EUCAM Policy Brief No. 37 (June 2019), available at https://www.ceeol.com/search/gray-literature-detail?id=831120.

[167] Neil Collins, Kristina Bekenova, and Ainur Kagarmanova, "Negotiated Health Diplomacy: A Case Study of the EU and Central Asia," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 13, no. 4 (2018).

[168] Sébastien Peyrouse, ed., *How Does Central Asia View the EU?*, EUCAM Working Paper No. 18, June 2014, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/180819/EUCAM-WP18-How-does-Central-Asia-view-the-EU.pdf.

[169] Artem Patalakh, "Kazakhstan's EU Policies: A Critical Review of Underlying Motives and Enabling Factors," *Asian Journal of German and European Studies* 3, article 4 (2018): 1, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40856-018-0026-9.

ties between the EU and Central Asia. Based on Mukesh's findings, since 2007, despite competition from China, Russia and the United States, the EU has strengthened its position in Central Asia mainly in trade and investment. In accordance with Mukesh's findings, the geopolitical significance of Central Asia and the region's energy resources, particularly oil and gas, are central to shaping the relationship between the EU and Central Asia. Mukesh suggests that strengthening cooperation is critical to achieving long-term stability and mutual benefits, especially considering Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine.[170] Furthermore, Mariya Muratova et al. explore the shifting dynamics in EU and Central Asia relations, focusing on Kazakhstan's role in the region's economic and energy transition. They argue that the war in Ukraine has further reinforced the EU's interest in Kazakhstan and that new opportunities for cooperation in alternative energy routes are emerging. These include initiatives such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and the Global Gateway programme. Their research shows that these developments provide Kazakhstan with a diversified energy source while supporting the EU's ambitious target of reducing its reliance on Russia and China, leading to a more independent and connected Central Asia.[171]

However, the majority of researchers studying energy relations between the EU and Central Asian countries agree that, despite substantial financial support, the EU has been unable to establish an energy route that does not cross Russia.[172] In their paper, Zhansaule Zharmanova et al. explain the EU's energy strategy for Central Asia and argue that improving energy cooperation requires strengthening local legislation, setting up joint research and education programmes with European partners, and encouraging the exchange of practical skills and knowledge on energy security.[173] Moreover, Sanya Nurdavletova and Zhansaule Zharmakhanova explore the role of European TNCs operating in Central Asia, concluding that the presence of European Transnational Corporations (TNC) in the region "weakens Russia's position in matters of influence on foreign energy policy."[174] Kazakhstan, which is the largest and one of the wealthiest countries in Central Asia in terms of energy and mineral resources, plays a central role in EU energy relations. The majority of studies are focused on

[170] Mukesh Shankar Bharti, "The European Union's Economic Development Strategy and Cooperation with the Countries of Central Asia," *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 36, no. 1 (2023): 240.
[171] Mariya Muratova, Houman Sadri, Zhanar Medeubayeva, and Ainur Issayeva, "The EU and Kazakhstan in the Latest Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Conditions: New Dimensions of Partnership," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* (2023): 9, https://doi.org/10.1177/18793665231215799.
[172] Neil Melvin, "The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia," *CEPS Policy Briefs* No. 128 (March 2007): 1-6.
[173] Zhansaule Zharmakhanova et al., "Energy Policy of the EU in Central Asia," *Polityka Energetyczna – Energy Policy Journal* 27, no. 1 (2024): 139-156, https://doi.org/10.33223/epj/178250.
[174] Sanya M. Nurdavletova and Zhansaule I. Zharmakhanova, "Analysis of the Activities of European Oil and Gas TNCs in Central Asia," *Society and Security Insights* 3, no. 4 (2020): 37, https://doi.org/10.14258/ssi(2020)4-02.

Kazakhstan's strategic position and its potential for EU cooperation. For instance, Renata Mantel analyzes the development and potential of energy cooperation between the EU and Central Asia with a particular focus on Kazakhstan as a major Caspian oil exporter. The article argues that, especially when viewed from a geopolitical point of view, the EU and Kazakhstan share complementary interests that support mutually beneficial energy cooperation.[175]

In the literature on EU and Central Asia relations, security and stability are frequently mentioned as central priorities. The strategic location of the region, and particularly the proximity to Afghanistan, underscore the importance of security cooperation. The EU positions itself as a "security actor" in Central Asia, cooperating with Central Asian states "on the basis of joint security interests."[176] Daria Kudryashova suggests that for the EU, a secure and stable Central Asia is essential for "diversifying energy suppliers, developing green energy projects, and accessing low-cost transit services."[177]

In the literature on EU and Central Asia relations, cooperation in the education sphere is often discussed as an important, although not always mentioned as a prioritized area. In Gulnara Chokusheva's paper, the contributions of the Tempus programme at the various levels of education are examined, highlighting the innovative achievements realized through projects in higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan.[178] Similarly, Elena Shukusheva examines the impact of EU initiatives such as Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, and Erasmus+ on the reform of the region's higher education system. In particular, the study emphasizes how these programs have contributed to integrating global higher education systems and strengthened cooperation between EU and Central Asian universities.[179] In his analysis of Tajikistan's educational cooperation with the EU, Rustam Soliev concluded that Tajik universities should engage more actively with European counterparts on a bilateral basis to secure fixed quotas for Tajik citizens to study in the European countries. In addition, he emphasizes that the EU should more actively support Tajikistan's participation in the

[175] Mantel, "EU-Central Asia Relations in the Energy Sector".
[176] Jos Boonstra, "The EU Strategy for Central Asia Says 'Security'. Does This Include Security Sector Reform?" *EUCAM - Policy Brief*, no. 10 (November 2009): 1.
[177] Daria A. Kudryashova, "Политика ЕС по стабилизации Средней Азии" ("EU Policy for the Stabilization of Central Asia"), *Middle & Post-Soviet East*, no. 3 (2023): 134, https://doi.org/10.31249/j.2949-2408.2023.03.08.
[178] Gulnara Ryskulovna Chokusheva, "Эффективность и вклад программы Темпус в реформирование сектора высшего образования в Кыргызстане 1995–2014 гг." ("Effectiveness and Contribution of the Tempus Program to the Reform of Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan 1995–2014"), *European Journal of Economics and Management Sciences* 4 (2016): 47-54.
[179] Elena Viktorovna Shukusheva, "Опыт сотрудничества Европейского союза и стран Центральной Азии в сфере образования" ("Experience of Cooperation Between the European Union and Central Asian Countries in the Field of Education"), *Vestnik Bryansk State University* 2 (48) (2021): 139-149.

Erasmus+ program and advocate for the allocation of appropriate quotas for Tajik students in European universities.[180] In this context, the literature on education and academic exchange in relations between the EU and Central Asia emphasizes how these initiatives strengthen connections, promote mutual understanding and strengthen educational links. The researchers' findings show that the developing relationships in the education sphere and academic exchanges contribute to a broader diplomatic and economic relationship and promote long-term cooperation and regional stability.[181]

Researchers also paid particular attention to the legal framework governing EU and Central Asian relations, in particular the role of the PCA and EPCA in shaping these relations. These studies study the evolution of these agreements over time, with particular emphasis on their impact on the relations between the EU and Kazakhstan.[182]

In addition to researchers studying relations between the EU and Central Asia, there are also research institutions in Central Asia and Europe that focus on relations between the EU and the region. One such institution is the Department of European and American Studies at the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, which is one of the few institutions dedicated to studying the EU and its relations with Kazakhstan and Central Asia. The main areas of the Institute's research include analyzing the strategic aspects of foreign policy, examining socio-political processes in contemporary Kazakhstan, and studying economic policy.[183] The Institute publishes academic articles and policy briefs on EU-Central Asia relations. In Tajikistan, the Department of Europe Studies of the Institute of studying the problems of Asian and European countries of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan focuses on researching the internal and foreign policies of the EU, particularly its

[180] Rustam Abdullayevich Soliev, "Сотрудничество между Республикой Таджикистан и Европейским союзом в образовательной сфере" ("Cooperation Between the Republic of Tajikistan and the European Union in the Educational Sector"), *Ученые записки Худжандского государственного университета им. академика Б. Гафурова. Гуманитарные науки* 2 (55) (2018): 65.

[181] Soliev, "Сотрудничество между Республикой Таджикистан и Европейским союзом в образовательной сфере," ("Cooperation Between the Republic of Tajikistan and the European Union in the Educational Sector"), (2018): 66.

[182] Mukasheva, Z. E., and D. K. Akhmedyanova. "Evolution of the Bilateral Partnership Between the European Union and Kazakhstan: Results from the Content Analysis of the PCA and EPCA." *Вестник КазНУ. Серия международные отношения и международное право* 102, no. 2 (2023): 4–12. https://doi.org/10.26577/IRILJ.2023.v102.i2.01; Khaydarali Yunusov, "The European Union's New Central Asia Strategy: Time for Historical Overview Reflection and Agenda Setting for the Future," *Bölgesel Araştırmalar Dergisi* 2, no. 2 (2018): 103-128; Nosirkhon Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia: A Comprehensive Analysis of Legal Frameworks of the Relationship," *De iurisprudentia et iure publico: Journal of Legal and Political Sciences* XV, no. 3 (2024): 17-25.

[183] Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, https://kisi.kz/en/general-information/ (accessed November 24, 2024).

relations with Central Asian countries. At present, the Institute is conducting a project to analyze the cooperation between Tajikistan and the EU during the period of 2019 to 2023.[184]

Compared to other Central Asian countries, EU studies in Kazakhstan have a stronger foundation due to the country's more developed relationship with the EU and its member states. In contrast, EU studies are a relatively new phenomenon in Tajikistani academic circles. As Suhrob Rustami rightly pointed out, "there are not enough comprehensive and systematic scientific works on this topic" at present.[185]

In Europe, the Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM), developed in 2008 by FRIDE in Spain, was established as a project to monitor the realization of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, which was adopted in 2007. Since 2016, EUCAM has been linked to the Groningen-based Center for European Security Studies. The four main objectives of EUCAM are: (a) examine the EU's policies toward Central Asia, (b) deepen understanding of EU engagement with the region through its publications, (c) raise awareness of the importance of the EU–Central Asia relationship, and (d) expand the network of researchers and institutions.[186]

The academic debate continues to focus on understanding the extent to which the EU's policy in Central Asia has been successful, with most researchers concluding that EU policy in the region "remains inefficient."[187] In his work, Sébastien Peyrouse concluded that the EU in Central Asia is a "donor without influence."[188] He argues that the EU can strengthen its position in the region by building on its prestige, which is valued in Central Asia for its culture, education, experience and quality of life.[189] However, only a few studies argue that the EU's interaction and cooperation with Central Asian partners is "mutually beneficial."[190]

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[184] National Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, Institute of Studying the Problems of Asian and European Countries, https://osiyoavrupo.tj/en (accessed November 24, 2024).
[185] Sukhrob Rustami, "Взаимоотношения Европейского Союза и Таджикистана в 1991–2007 годах" ("Relations Between the European Union and Tajikistan in 1991–2007"), *Ученые записки Худжандского государственного университета им. академика Б. Гафурова. Серия гуманитарно-общественных наук* 2 (2019): 69.
[186] Europe-Central Asia Monitoring, "About Us," https://eucentralasia.eu/about/ (accessed November 24, 2024).
[187] Bakyt Ospanova, Houman A. Sadri, Raushan Yelmurzayeva, and Dana Akhmedyanova, "Mass Media Perception of the European Union in Kazakhstan," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 16, no. 4 (2016): 79.
[188] Sébastien Peyrouse, "A Donor Without Influence: The European Union in Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 478 (2017): 1.
[189] Peyrouse, "A Donor Without Influence," 5.
[190] Alica Kizekova, *The European Union in Central Asia: Balancing Competing Actors and Opportunities for the V4 Countries* (Policy Brief, Think Visegrad V4 Think-Tank Platform, 2019), 3.

3.1.2. Research on the EU's Geopolitical Influence in Central Asia in Comparison with Russia, China, and the US

The geographic location and resources of Central Asia make it a center of cooperation and competition among major world powers, including the EU, Russia, China, and the United States. The researchers have conducted extensive research on cooperation and competition among the major powers in the region. This subsection reviews the main studies on the EU's role in Central Asia, focusing on comparisons with other major powers. For instance, Assima Aubakir examines the foreign policies of the EU, Russia, the United States, and China in Central Asia. According to Assima Aubakir's conclusions, Russia, the USA and the EU focus on addressing fundamental challenges, but China's approach is pragmatic and attractive to Central Asian states, offering practical and immediate solutions suitable for the short and medium term.[191] In addition, Fabienne Bossuyt and Irina Bolgova examine the potential for cooperation in connectivity between the EU, China and Russia in Central Asia. They highlight common interests and challenges arising from geopolitical competition and differences in development approaches. Bossuyt and Bolgova suggest that cooperation between the EU and Russia in the region remains unlikely in the short term due to existing tensions. In contrast, China and Russia have formalized their cooperation through frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while the EU and China are progressing toward co-financing infrastructure projects.[192] Fabienne Bossuyt also underlines that the EU and Russia "share an interest in a stable, prosperous, and secure Central Asia," despite geopolitical tensions.[193] Andre Gerrits and Hugo Klijn analyze Brussels and Moscow's policy in Central Asia and highlight Russia's strong influence, rooted in its historical and political ties to Central Asian governments. Their findings underline the limited influence of the EU in the region, regardless of a recent revision of EU policies that shifts the focus to practical cooperation in the areas of governance, human rights, and development. Considering the region's geopolitical dynamics, the authors conclude that the EU will continue to face challenges in substantially impacting the region.[194] Shairbek Juraev examines the roles of the EU and

[191] Assima Aubakir, "Global Actors in Central Asia: Great Game or Great Gain?," *Public Administration and Civil Service* 3 (2020): 75, https://doi.org/10.52123/1994-2370-2020-74-3-67-75.
[192] Fabienne Bossuyt and Irina Bolgova, "Connecting Eurasia: Is Cooperation Between Russia, China, and the EU in Central Asia Possible?" in *Regional Integration and Future Cooperation Initiatives in the Eurasian Economic Union*, ed. Maria Lagutina (IGI Global, 2019), 243, https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-1950-9.ch013.
[193] Fabienne Bossuyt, "The Perks of an Unlikely Couple: Why Cooperation Between the EU and Russia in Central Asia is Worth Considering," *UNU-CRIS Policy Brief* 1 (2020): 1.
[194] Andre WM Gerrits and Hugo Klijn, "Central Asia Under Brussels' and Moscow's Eyes: Prospects and Realities," *Security and Human Rights* 32, no. 1-4 (2022).

Russia in Central Asia, highlighting their differing interests, with Russia prioritizing political loyalty and influence due to its long-standing historical ties to the region.[195] The EU, as a *newcomer in the region*, is more focused on providing development aid and promoting values such as human rights and democracy. According to Shairbek Juraev, while both the EU and Russia share concerns about issues like extremism and drug trafficking, neither has succeeded in becoming a dominant power in Central Asia.[196] Emilian Kavalski, in this context, examines the foreign policies of the EU, India, and China in Central Asia, highlighting their differing normative approaches and the tensions these create. Kavalski notes that the conflicting values of regional powers lead to rivalry rather than cooperation, giving Central Asian states the opportunity to adopt a "pick-and-choose" strategy in their interactions with these powers.[197]

3.1.3. Studies on EU Member States' Relations with Central Asia and the Policies of Central Asian Countries Toward the EU

In addition to studies on the EU's policy in Central Asia, independent studies have also been conducted to understand EU member states' policies in the region. These studies focus mainly on the countries with the most advanced relations with Central Asia, whether as a region or with specific Central Asian countries. For example, Fabienne Bossuyt examined how two EU member states, Latvia and Romania, achieved their foreign policy objectives in Central Asia through the EU rather than independently. The study found that Romania attempted to bring its national interests to the EU's broader agenda, whereas Latvia relied primarily on the EU to achieve its regional objectives.[198] Similarly, Bakhytgul Kassenova et al. use a SWOT analysis to investigate Germany's policy in Central Asia, aiming to provide a comprehensive exploration of Germany's regional strategies within the broader European context. This study is significant, given Germany's prominent role in shaping the EU's policies, which is essential for the success of the Union's overall engagement in the region.[199] Moreover, Assiya Dikanbayeva and Meiram Sarybayev analyze France's use of

[195] Shairbek Juraev, "Comparing the EU and Russia Engagements in Central Asia," *L'Europe en formation* 4 (2014): 78.
[196] Juraev, "Comparing the EU and Russia Engagements in Central Asia," 78.
[197] Emilian Kavalski, "Partnership or Rivalry Between the EU, China and India in Central Asia: The Normative Power of Regional Actors with Global Aspirations," *European Law Journal* 13, no. 6 (2007): 856, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00393.x.
[198] Fabienne Bossuyt, "Between National and European Foreign Policy: The Role of Latvia and Romania in the EU's Policy Towards Central Asia," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 3 (2017): 441, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2017.1361897.
[199] Bakhytgul B. Kassenova et al., "European Context of Regional German Policy in Central Asia," *Journal of Comparative Politics* 13, no. 2 (2020): 43–64.

soft power in Central Asia, emphasizing the importance of French education, cultural promotion, and academic exchange as key elements of France's influence in the region.[200]

While a large number of academic publications on EU and Central Asian relations focus on broader regional dynamics or the interaction of the EU with individual Central Asian countries, fewer studies examine the policies of certain Central Asian countries towards the EU.[201] For example, Kuralay Baizakova and Gulnaz Yergeshkyzy discuss Kazakhstan's foreign policy, in particular Kazakhstan's cooperation with the EU in the energy and security sectors.[202] In the same vein, Kurmanguzhin, one of the few scholars exploring the EU and Central Asia relations from a Central Asian perspective, examines the position of the EU in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. He discussed Kazakhstan's "Path to Europe" programme, which aimed to strengthen relations with the EU.[203] Rustem Kurmanguzhin also reflect on Kazakhstan's contributions during the development of the EU strategy adopted in 2007.[204] In Kyrgyzstan, Muratbek Azymbakiev examined the country's foreign policy toward the EU in 2004, with a focus on the legal aspects of the early stages of their cooperation.[205] Alieva explored the EU's role in Tajikistan's foreign policy, particularly in providing development aid to the country's economy.[206] Meanwhile, Saidakhon Solikhodzhaeva analyzed the historical context of Tajikistan's relationship with the EU, with an emphasis on the role of official visits in strengthening bilateral ties.[207] Marifat Halimova focused on the scientific collaboration between Tajikistan and the EU, assessing

[200] Assiya M. Dikanbayeva and Meiram S. Sarybayev, "Soft Power Tools in Central Asia: Towards a Closer Relationship with France," *French Politics* 22, no. 1 (2024): 64–81, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-023-00235-y.

[201] Luca Anceschi, "The Tyranny of Pragmatism: EU–Kazakhstani Relations," *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 1 (2014): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2013.864101.

[202] Kuralay Baizakova and Gulnaz Yergeshkyzy, "Kazakhstan and the European Union: Cooperation in Regional Security," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 81 (2013): 558–561, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.06.476.

[203] Rustem S. Kurmanguzhin, "Cooperation of the Republic of Kazakhstan with the European Union—Confirmation of Multi-Vector Kazakh Foreign Policy," *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali* 83, no. 2 (2016): 219–223, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44427760; Rustem S. Kurmanguzhin, "Казахстан и ЕС: от стратегии сотрудничества к новому соглашению о продвинутом партнерстве" ("Kazakhstan and the EU: From Cooperation Strategy to a New Enhanced Partnership Agreement"), *Sravnitel'naya Politika* 1 (22) (2016): 106–115.

[204] Rustem S. Kurmanguzhin, "Казахстанские предложения по сотрудничеству с Евросоюзом" ("Kazakhstani Proposals for Cooperation with the European Union"), *Vestnik MGIMO Universiteta* 1 (40) (2015): 80–88.

[205] Muratbek Azymbakiev, "Kyrgyzstan-European Union: Facets of Cooperation," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 3 (27) (2004): 167–171.

[206] R. Alieva, "Совершенствование и развитие внешних связей Республики Таджикистан с Европейским Союзом" (Improvement and Development of External Relations of the Republic of Tajikistan with the European Union), *Uchenye Zapiski Khudjandskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta imeni Akademika B. Gafurova. Gumanitarnye Nauki* 2 (22) (2010): 95–106.

[207] Saidakhon Anvarkhodzhaevna Solikhodzhaeva, "О сотрудничестве Таджикистана с Европейским Союзом" (On the Cooperation of Tajikistan with the European Union), *Uchenye Zapiski Khudjandskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta imeni Akademika B. Gafurova. Gumanitarnye Nauki* 2 (39) (2014): 162–171.

achievements and future prospects in this area.[208] Rustami Suhrob published two articles analyzing Tajikistan and EU relations: the first examined the years from 1991 to 2007,[209] while the second covered the period from 2007 to 2019,[210] following the adoption of the EU Strategy. He concluded that the relationship entered a stage of "intensification of cooperation"[211] in the later period. Rustam Soliev analyzed Tajikistan's cooperation with the EU in the fields of education[212] and security.[213] Finally, Khalmuratov discussed Uzbekistan's multiple areas of relationship with the EU and argued that the development of relations with the EU "will help attract significant investments, technology, and create new jobs" in Uzbekistan.[214]

3.1.4. Studies on EU perceptions in Central Asia

It is worth pointing out that extensive research on the relations of the EU with Central Asia across various domains has been conducted. However, the perception of the EU within the region remains comparatively underexplored. More recently, scholars from Central Asia and beyond have begun to focus more on this topic. Given the limited research in this area, this section provides a comprehensive overview of existing research on the perception of the EU in Central Asia and analyzes the scope and depth of the current literature. Sébastien Peyrouse's study from 2014, based on interviews with Central Asian elites, revealed that the EU was "barely visible" in the region. It is "unknown to the population" compared with other actors, and its ambitions are often perceived as "greater than its actual leverage."[215]

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[208] Khalimova, Marifat Mukhammadovna. "Некоторые вопросы сотрудничества Республики Таджикистан и Евросоюза в области науки в период независимости" (Some Issues of Cooperation Between the Republic of Tajikistan and the European Union in the Field of Science During the Independence Period). *Vestnik Tadzhikskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta Prava, Biznesa i Politiki. Seriya Obshchestvennykh Nauk* 5 (2014): 152–160.

[209] Rustami, "Взаимоотношения Европейского Союза и Таджикистана" ("Relations Between the European Union and Tajikistan"), (2019).

[210] Sukhrob Rustami, "Взаимоотношения Европейского союза и Таджикистана в 2007-2019 годах" ("Relations Between the European Union and Tajikistan in 2007-2019"), *Vestnik Tadzhikskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta prava, biznesa i politiki. Seriya obshchestvennykh nauk* 1 (82) (2020): 185-196.

[211] Rustami, "Взаимоотношения Европейского союза и Таджикистана в 2007-2019 годах" ("Relations Between the European Union and Tajikistan in 2007-2019") (2020): 194.

[212] Soliev, "Сотрудничество между Республикой Таджикистан и Европейским союзом в образовательной сфере," ("Cooperation Between the Republic of Tajikistan and the European Union in the Educational Sector"), (2018).

[213] Rustam Abdulloevich Soliev, "Сотрудничество между Республикой Таджикистан и Европейским Союзом в сфере безопасности" ("Cooperation Between the Republic of Tajikistan and the European Union in the Field of Security"), *Uchenye Zapiski Khudzhandskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta im. akademika B. Gafurova. Gumanitarnye Nauki* 4 (53) (2017): 74–80.

[214] S. E. Khalmuratov, "Развитие многофункциональных отношений Республики Узбекистан с Европейским союзом" ("Development of Multifunctional Relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan with the European Union"), *Ekonomika i Sotsium* 5-1 (96) (2022): 730.

[215] Peyrouse, *How Does Central Asia View the EU?*, 12.

A leading researcher in this field, Zhanibek Arynov, has conducted in-depth studies on how the EU is perceived in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In his article *Opportunity and Threat Perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*, Zhanibek Arynov explores the complex and shifting views of intermediate elites toward the EU. He explains that these perceptions are "highly complex and issue specific," meaning that the EU is seen either as an opportunity or as a threat, depending on the situation and the specific topics at hand. According to the author, in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the EU is generally viewed as a neutral and cooperative partner, when compared to more dominant powers such as China, Russia, and the United States. In Kazakhstan, the intermediate elites view the EU primarily as an economic partner. In contrast, in Kyrgyzstan, the EU is not perceived as a major economic player but rather as a key donor, offering essential development aid and financial support in areas where resources are limited. In addition, in both countries, the EU is valued as a model for "European standards," representing high quality in areas such as economic development, political institutions, and social welfare. However, despite these positive perceptions, Zhanibek Arynov highlights that concerns about the EU's normative agenda persist among the intermediate elites of both countries. While some intermediate elites have high value for European democracy in its focus on transparency and the rule of law, others express concern about its potential to undermine societal cohesion. In addition, the EU's promotion of "non-traditional" values, such as the rights of sexual minorities, is frequently seen by intermediate elites as a challenge to local cultural and moral norms.[216]

In another important contribution, Zhanibek Arynov's article *Nobody Goes to Another Monastery with Their Own Charter: The EU's Promotion of "European Values" as Perceived in Central Asia* examines how Kazakhstan's intermediate elites perceive two categories of European values: political values and cultural values. He categorizes these perceptions into three groups: "opponents," "moderate supporters," and "ardent supporters." While each group holds distinct opinions about the EU's normative agenda, the first group, the "opponents," are generally critical of the EU's values, both in terms of political and cultural aspects. They believe that European values such as democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms do not align with Kazakhstan's political system or traditional values. Opponents argue that the European model of democracy could disrupt the country's stability, believing that Kazakhstan needs to have its own unique model of democracy. Opponents

[216] Zhanibek Arynov, "Opportunity and Threat Perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 734–751, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1917516.

also express concerns about European cultural values, especially regarding the recognition of same-sex marriages and the rights of sexual minorities. They see these issues as a threat to Kazakhstan's traditional family structures and moral values. The second group, "moderate supporters," takes a more nuanced stance. They appreciate European political values, particularly democracy and human rights, but remain critical of European cultural values. For moderate supporters, the European model of democracy is regarded as admirable, especially in terms of human rights, the rule of law, and the importance of free elections. They believe these values are universal and applicable to Kazakhstan, though some aspects may need to be adapted to local realities. However, moderate supporters are uncomfortable with the cultural values promoted by the EU, particularly those related to sexual rights and changes in family structures. Like opponents, they are concerned that these values could undermine Kazakhstan's traditional social norms. Despite this, they generally support European political values and believe they can contribute to positive change in Kazakhstan's political system. Finally, there are the "ardent supporters," who fully accept both European political and cultural values. This group views European democracy as a universal model that should be adopted globally. They are less concerned about the cultural differences which the first two groups of intermediate elites find problematic and are more willing to adopt both the political and cultural aspects of European values. The present study highlights the diversity of perspectives within Kazakhstan's intermediate elites regarding the EU's values. While political values like democracy and human rights receive support from some intermediate elites, cultural values remain a point of contention.[217]

Zhanibek Arynov also shifts the focus to the perceptions of a younger generation in his study *Hardly Visible, Highly Admired? Youth Perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan*. Through focus groups with university students in two major cities of Kazakhstan, Arynov finds that Kazakhstani youth generally view the EU positively, particularly for its economic success, integration, and progressive values. However, he argues that the main challenge the EU faces is not negative perceptions, but a *visibility problem*. While young people are familiar with symbols like the Euro and the Schengen visa, their understanding of the EU is superficial, based more on stereotypes than on a deeper knowledge of its policies and impact in Kazakhstan. The study highlights the essential need for the EU to address its visibility problem and improve its communication strategies in the region. Given the growing importance of young people in shaping public opinion and political paths, improving the

[217] Zhanibek Arynov, "'Nobody Goes to Another Monastery with Their Own Charter': The EU's Promotion of 'European Values' as Perceived in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 6 (2022): 1028–1050, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2032604.

visibility of the EU, ensuring a deeper understanding of its policies, and effectively expressing its messages should be the first priority of Brussels in Central Asia. As Zhanibek Arynov concludes, the EU must take steps to maintain Kazakhstan's present positive image among young people, especially in the face of changes in geopolitical dynamics that may otherwise threaten its influence in the region.[218]

In addition to Zhanibek Arynov's work, Bakyt Ospanova, Houman Sadri and Raushan Yelmurzayeva's article *Mass Media Perception of the European Union in Kazakhstan* examines how the EU is portrayed in Kazakhstan through an analysis of content from four major official and opponent national newspapers: *Yegemen Kazakhstan, Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, Zhas Alash, and Vremya.* The findings suggest that the media in Kazakhstan generally portrays the EU positively, often emphasizing its beneficial role in both Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region. The adoption of the EU's strategy for Central Asia in 2007 significantly enhanced the EU's visibility and recognition within Kazakhstan's media. The media content was categorized into two main types: news reports and periodical articles. These were then further divided into positive, neutral, and negative categories based on the tone and connotation of the message. Additionally, the analysis looked at the nature of the EU's activities, grouping them into three areas: economic, political, and EU-Kazakhstan/Central Asia cooperation. The study found that official state newspapers tend to cover the EU more extensively than opposition outlets, and they generally present a more neutral or positive portrayal of the EU. Over time, the EU has become an increasingly important focus of Kazakhstan's mass media, reflecting the growing relationship between Kazakhstan and the EU, as well as the EU's broader global influence. Overall, the analysis suggests that Kazakhstan's media plays a key role in shaping a generally positive image of the EU among the Kazakh public.[219] The article was later revised and enhanced with a theoretical framework before being republished.[220]

3.1.5. Official sources

In addition to the scholarly articles published in different areas related to this research, this study also widely uses official documents, statements, and other official sources, especially those published during the time period selected for analysis. For this research, official data

[218] Zhanibek Arynov, "Hardly Visible, Highly Admired? Youth Perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2022): 42–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/18793665211058187.
[219] Ospanova et al., "Mass Media Perception."
[220] Bakyt Ospanova, Houman A. Sadri, and Raushan Yelmurzayeva, "Assessing EU Perception in Kazakhstan's Mass Media," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 72–82, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2016.08.002.

are particularly useful, because they show the formal position of the EU institutions and the countries of Central Asia. They also illustrate what these institutions plan to do and which areas they consider important. When studying relations between the EU and Central Asia, documents from institutions such as the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the European External Action Service, and the European Parliament are very important. These institutions prepare strategies, joint communications, council conclusions, agreements, and summit declarations. All these texts discuss what the EU aims to achieve in Central Asia and indicate the direction of future cooperation. In this section, the thesis briefly highlights the main official sources used in this research. However, the list is not exhaustive, and more detailed discussion of each source appears in the following chapters.

Firstly, the most important document used in this research is the EU Strategy on Central Asia, adopted in 2019. The 2007 Strategy of the EU is also widely used in the thesis to understand the areas of relations which the EU prioritized before 2019. The 2019 Strategy was prepared by the European Commission together with the European External Action Service in the form of a Joint Communication titled "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership". Afterwards, it was officially approved in the form of Council Conclusions by the Council of the European Union in June 2019. This document serves as the main framework for EU policy in Central Asia today. The Strategy defines three main priorities for the EU in the region: resilience, prosperity, and regional cooperation.

Secondly, this thesis uses documents from EU–Central Asia ministerial meetings and summits. After 2019, many high-level meetings were held both in Brussels and in the capitals of Central Asian countries, and as a result, they adopted joint statements and declarations. For instance, the Joint roadmap for deepening ties between the EU and Central Asia adopted in 2023 outlines concrete cooperation in areas such as transport, digitalisation, trade, education, and security. The Joint Declaration of the First EU–Central Asia Summit in 2025 is also highly significant, since it emphasizes strategic partnership and stronger political dialogue. These documents show how the 2019 Strategy is implemented in practice and are used in analyzing different areas of cooperation.

Thirdly, this research uses bilateral legal agreements signed between the EU and Central Asian countries. These include the EPCAs and PCAs with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. These agreements define cooperation areas such as trade, investment, political dialogue, education, environment, and migration as priority fields of interaction. In the following chapters, their contents are analyzed to better understand the

areas that both sides prioritized. These agreements are essential for understanding how EU relations differ among Central Asian countries.

Fourthly, this thesis analyzes EU programmes implemented in Central Asia. These programmes include the BOMCA, the CADAP, the EU Rule of Law Programme for Central Asia, and educational cooperation programmes such as Erasmus+. The official data from the websites of these programmes are used to analyze the relationship between the parties in different areas. After 2021, the EU also began using the Global Gateway Initiative for infrastructure and connectivity projects in Central Asia, and all related documents were analyzed in this research.

Fifthly, the thesis uses documents adopted by the European Parliament, including resolutions and reports that discuss EU policy towards Central Asia and evaluate the progress of the 2019 Strategy. Sixthly, this research uses EU programming documents, such as the Multiannual Indicative Programme for Central Asian countries for the period 2021–2027. This document explains which areas of cooperation receive most EU funding.

Finally, official statistics are used to provide background information. Data from Eurostat, the World Bank, and national statistical agencies help illustrate trade levels, development aid, education indicators, and economic cooperation. These data help explain why certain policy areas are more important in the EU's relations with Central Asia.

3.2. Studies on the external perceptions of the EU

Henrik Larsen outlines two critical debates in European foreign policy research: the EU as a normative power introduced by Ian Manners in 2002[221] and the EU's external perceptions.[222] The concept of normative power has been extensively discussed in academic literature, particularly regarding the role of the EU as a distinct actor in promoting global norms and values. However, research on external perceptions of the EU has recently gained attention in European foreign policy studies, highlighting the importance of moving beyond the traditionally dominant European-centric views of the EU's role in global affairs.[223] Most EU external perception studies focus on questions such as EU partners' views of its role in

[221] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–258, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353.
[222] Henrik Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power and the Research on External Perceptions: The Missing Link," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 4 (2014): 896–910, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12109.
[223] Sonia Lucarelli, "Seen from the Outside: The State of the Art on the External Image of the EU," *Journal of European Integration* 36, no. 1 (2014): 11, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2012.761981.

global politics and how these external perceptions compare to EU's self-representation.[224] Existing research focuses on various aspects of the EU's image, including its global role,[225] involvement in peace and security,[226] influence through normative power,[227] and contributions to social, development, and environmental issues.[228] In this regard, Henrik Larsen suggests that studies on the EU's external perception provide valuable insights into the ongoing debate about whether the EU can be considered a normative power.[229] Moreover, other countries' perceptions of the EU play a vital role in determining the effectiveness of EU foreign policy and its influence on the international level.[230]

This subchapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses systematic research projects conducted by research institutes and scholars worldwide on the EU's external perception. The second part presents studies on specific countries conducted by individual researchers or published edited volumes by groups of researchers.

3.2.1. Systematic Research Projects on the EU's External Perception

When examining studies on the EU's external perceptions, the work of the following research projects in EU foreign policy is notable. These projects have made significant contributions to the field and have received considerable attention from scholars in EU studies.[231] Three major schools, each with distinct projects, have systematically studied external perceptions of the EU. Early research in this area was pioneered by the National Centre for Research on Europe at the University of Canterbury, under the leadership of Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland. Since 2002, the Center has undertaken a significant research initiative to identify, measure, and compare perceptions of the EU in Asia-Pacific countries.[232] These studies focus on key questions, including the dominant images of the EU

[224] Ospanova et al., "Assessing EU Perception."
[225] Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti, eds., *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor* (London: Routledge, 2010).
[226] Natalia Chaban, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, "The EU's Peace and Security Narrative: Views from EU Strategic Partners in Asia," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 55, no. 6 (2017): 1273-1289, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12569.
[227] Sharon Pardo, *Normative Power Europe Meets Israel: Perceptions and Realities* (Lexington Books, 2015).
[228] Natalia Chaban, Ole Elgström, Serena Kelly, and Lai Suet Yi, "Images of the EU beyond its Borders: Issue-Specific and Regional Perceptions of European Union Power and Leadership," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 51, no. 3 (2013): 433-451, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12004.
[229] Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power," 897.
[230] Lucarelli and Fioramonti, *External Perceptions of the European Union*.
[231] Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power."
[232] Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland, "Introduction: Research Rationale, Theoretical Underpinnings and Methodological Considerations," in *The European Union and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

in the Asia-Pacific region and the influence of these perceptions on policymaking.[233] Their work employs methods such as semi-structured interviews, surveys, and media content analysis to explore perceptions of the EU across economic, political, and cultural dimensions. This comprehensive effort has resulted in numerous publications that provide valuable insights into how the EU is perceived in the Asia-Pacific region.

The monograph *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public, and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Thailand*, edited by Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban, explores how the EU is perceived in six Asian countries: Thailand, Korea, Hong Kong, China, Singapore, and Japan.[234] The research was conducted in three phases: analyzing how the EU is portrayed in the media, surveying public opinion, and interviewing political, economic, and media elites.[235]

Since 2004, the EU has become China's largest trading partner, and China is now the EU's second-largest partner after the United States. In their chapter, Dai Bingran and Zhang Shuangquan explain that the "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the EU and China goes beyond just trade.[236] The way the EU is presented varies between media types. In newspapers, the EU is primarily framed as an economic power, while on television, it is often seen as a political power. Around 23% of the news stories about the EU focus on its role in trade, with another 18% covering its involvement in business, industry, and finance. Social and environmental issues related to the EU get much less attention in both forms of media, with slightly more coverage on television.[237] The study also reveals how the Chinese public and elites view the EU. Most of the public considers the EU to be China's second most important partner, after the US.[238] Among the elites, while they see the EU as a powerful global player, they do not view it as a leader in global politics.[239]

In Hong Kong, Kenneth Ka-Lok Chan and Cher Lai Suet-yi found that the EU is mostly viewed through an economic lens. This perception is consistent across the media, the public,

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[233] Chaban and Holland, *The European Union and the Asia-Pacific*, 5.
[234] Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban, eds., *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Thailand* (Warsaw: Asia-Europe Foundation, 2007), https://asef.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/EU-through-eyes-Asia_Vol01.pdf.
[235] Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban, "Introduction: The EU through the Eyes of Asia," in *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban (Warsaw, 2007), 25.
[236] Bingran Dai and Shuangquan Zhang, "EU Perceptions in China," in *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban (Warsaw, 2007), 43–67.
[237] Dai and Zhang, "EU Perceptions in China," 50.
[238] Dai and Zhang, "EU Perceptions in China," 66.
[239] Dai and Zhang, "EU Perceptions in China," 67.

and elites, with more similarities than differences in how the EU is seen by each group. A common view is that the EU is an economic "giant," although there are doubts about its political influence on the global stage. In Hong Kong's news media, the EU was most often framed as an economic actor (52% of the total news items), followed by its portrayal as a political actor (26%). A smaller portion (15%) of news items highlighted the EU's role in social affairs, and only 7% framed the EU as an environmental actor.[240] The public generally believes that the Sino-EU relationship will have the greatest impact on their future, with the EU's role as a trade partner coming second. When thinking of the European Union, the terms "euro" and "trade" were most commonly associated with the EU among the public.[241] Interestingly, both the public and elites frequently linked the "euro" to the EU. Overall, the EU was viewed as an economic powerhouse in Hong Kong, recognized as important, but its political influence was seen as limited.[242]

The perception of the EU in the other countries selected for this book shows similar patterns to those seen in Hong Kong and China. For instance, in Japan, Toshiro Tanaka, Eijiro Fukui, and Jessica Bain found that while the EU is recognized as an important economic and political partner, it receives less attention compared to the United States and China. Within Japanese society, the EU is viewed as a "good" partner, with perceptions that are largely positive or neutral.[243]

In Korea, Sunghoon Park and Yeo Jung Seo's research highlights that trade, and economic issues dominate media coverage of the EU. The EU is considered a key market and investment partner, and there is significant interest in free trade agreement negotiations between the two sides.[244] In Singapore, the media provide balanced coverage of EU-related political and economic news. However, despite the EU's growing importance as a trading partner for Singapore, there appears to be a gap between this increasing significance and the level of coverage in the local news media. As a result, the EU is not considered a top priority in Singapore, ranking sixth in importance after China, the United States, Association of

[240] Kenneth Ka-Lok Chan and Cher Lai Suet-yi, "The EU in the Eyes of Hong Kong," in *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban (Warsaw, 2007), 80.
[241] Chan and Suet-yi, "The EU in the Eyes of Hong Kong," 103.
[242] Chan and Suet-yi, "The EU in the Eyes of Hong Kong," 103.
[243] Toshiro Tanaka, Eijiro Fukui, and Jessica Bain, "Cast in America's Shadow: Perceptions of the EU in Japan," in *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban (Warsaw: Asia-Europe Foundation, 2007), 144.
[244] Sunghoon Park and Yeo Jung Seo, "Impaired Vision? The EU in the Eyes of Korea," in *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban (Warsaw: Asia-Europe Foundation, 2007), 165.

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and India. This gap is also reflected in both public and elite perceptions, where the EU is seen as important economically, but not as a dominant.[245]

In Thailand, the EU is portrayed as a growing economic and political power. Thai media emphasize the EU's role in international trade and highlight the strength of the euro compared to the US dollar.[246] Overall, the study shows that the EU is widely acknowledged in Asia as a leading economic power. However, its political influence is often underestimated, and the perceptions vary across the different countries and regions studied. The authors come to conclusion and suggest that "EU needs to rethink how it is being perceived by its constituency and to make a greater effort to explain its actions."[247]

The 2019 edited volume by Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland, *Shaping the EU Global Strategy: Partners and Perceptions*, examines how the changing global power dynamics of the 21st century impact the EU's influence. It focuses on the challenges faced by the EU, including internal crises such as migration, the Eurozone crisis, and Brexit, which have affected its global reputation. These crises and shifts in global power have created new challenges in how the EU is perceived. The volume discusses how these crises were viewed, interpreted, and received by the media, decision-makers, and general publics in the EU's ten strategic partner countries. The ten following strategic partners of EU's perception analyzed USA, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Mexico and other five BRICS countries Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa's perception analyzed in this volume. The research is supported by two main sources of data. One is the analysis of media content collected between April and June 2015, while the other consists of public opinion surveys completed by September 2015. The findings of this volume revealed that there is no "gold standard" in how the EU is portrayed in the media or perceived by the public, even when people react to the same EU events at the same time or when the same event is covered by media in different countries. This variation occurs because "every location tells a unique story of the EU,

[245] Barnard Turner and Ma Shaohua, "Seeing the EU in Singapore: Media, Public and Elite Representations," in *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban (Warsaw: Asia-Europe Foundation, 2007), 193.
[246] Apirat Petchsiri, Trip Kirtiputra, and Rachanirom Raveepaopong, "Thailand: The EU Eclipsed?" in *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban (Warsaw: Asia-Europe Foundation, 2007), 222.
[247] Holland et al., "Introduction: The EU through the Eyes of Asia," 24.

shaped by local priorities, self-visions, and cultural filters, as well as by the EU's actions and global contexts."[248]

The Center is currently conducting an analysis on Asia's expectations of the EU through the EXPECT project, focusing on EU perceptions in China, Indonesia, Japan, and Korea. The EXPECT project is a collaborative network led by the National Centre for Research on Europe, involving eight partners from universities and research institutes across four selected countries. The project aims to analyze the expectations of these countries toward the EU post-2019, with a particular focus on how changing international dynamics, leadership transitions, and disruptions like Brexit influence perceptions of the EU in Asia. The research addresses several key questions: How is the implementation of the European Union Global Strategy perceived externally? Is it effective? How do events such as Brexit, the Trump administration, and Russia's actions alter expectations? Can the EU successfully present its new leadership to third countries? To answer these questions, the authors analyze media coverage from the selected countries, social media posts from EU delegations in the region, and conduct in-depth interviews with elites.[249] In addition to these extensive projects, members of these research groups have also published articles and working papers.[250]

Another major contribution came from the GARNET project, coordinated by Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti, which broadened the research scope to include various global regions. GARNET, a *Network of Excellence on Global Governance, Regionalisation, and Regulation: The Role of the EU*, was funded by the European Commission's 6th Framework Programme. It brought together 42 leading research centers and universities and was coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation at the University of Warwick.[251] A comprehensive survey on *The External Image of the European*

[248] Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland, "Introduction: Partners and Perceptions," in *Shaping the EU Global Strategy: Partners and Perceptions*, ed. Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 21.
[249] National Centre for Research on Europe, *Asia's Expectations of the EU (EXPECT)*, https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/research/about-uc-research/research-groups-and-centres/national-centre-for-research-on-europe/ncre-research/expect (accessed November 25, 2024).
[250] Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland, "The EU in the Eyes of Asia: Motivation and Methodology," *Asia Europe Journal* 8 (2010): 127–131, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-010-0256-9; Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland, eds., *Communicating Europe in Times of Crisis: External Perceptions of the European Union* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Martin Holland and Natalia Chaban, "The EU as an Agent for Democracy: Images of the EU in the Pacific Media 'Mirror'", *Journal of European Integration* 33, no. 3 (2011): 285–302, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2011.558898; Natalia Chaban, "Perceptions, Expectations, Motivations: Evolution of Canadian Views on the EU," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 11, no. 3 (2019): https://doi.org/10.30722/anzjes.vol11.iss3.15107.
[251] Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation, *GARNET*, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/csgr/garnet/overview/ (accessed November 25, 2024).

Union project was conducted within the GARNET network, with its working papers released in two phases over different years.

The research aimed to achieve four main objectives. First, it sought to assess the existing understanding of how the EU is perceived outside its borders. It then aimed to expand on this knowledge by analyzing various sources, including newspapers, websites, official documents, and opinion polls. In addition, the research examined whether these perceptions vary across different regions, countries, and groups within countries. Finally, it focused on identifying the gap between the EU's self-perception and the way it is viewed by others.[252] The research report of the first phase, published in 2007, selected the following countries: Canada, Brazil, Australia, China, India, Japan, Egypt, and South Africa. The project conducted surveys to understand public opinion, elite views, and media coverage, while also analyzing the perspectives of Civil society organizations (CSOs) to assess the EU's image in these countries. The first phase of the project found that knowledge of the EU is limited, especially among certain groups, such as civil society and the general public in the countries included in the study. Additionally, the research revealed a noticeable gap between how the EU presents itself and how it is perceived externally, particularly in the Global South. In general, the EU is viewed as a strategic opportunity for partner countries, a major economic power, and a supporter of multilateralism. It is also seen as a model of regional integration and a potential counterbalance to US dominance. The study found little evidence that the EU is widely regarded as a "normative power" promoting democracy and human rights.[253] The findings from the studied countries reveal both similarities and differences in how the EU is perceived, and the authors observed the following patterns across the countries.

In Australia, the general public has significant knowledge of the EU, generally viewing it positively as an economic power. However, the political elites' perceptions are shaped by strong bilateral ties with individual EU member states, such as Britain.[254] While the EU is positively associated with unity and human rights policies, it has a negative image among political elites due to trade barriers. Civil society organizations pay limited attention to the EU, primarily seeing it as a leading environmental actor. While CSOs acknowledge the EU's role in promoting human rights, they highlight the need for greater coherence in its policies. The media, often reflecting political elites' views, portrays the EU as largely invisible, with

[252] Sonia Lucarelli, ed., *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07 (2007), 7.
[253] Lucarelli, *Research Report*, 7.
[254] The country was an EU member during the study period.

the US dominating coverage. When the EU is mentioned, it is seen as more of a political power than an economic one.[255]

In Brazil, public awareness of the EU is growing, with appreciation varying by education level. Political elites view the EU as both a strategic opportunity and a key economic partner. CSOs regard the EU as a significant player in global politics, particularly for promoting environmental sustainability and its role as a neoliberal actor. The media portrays the EU primarily as Brazil's trade partner.[256] In Canada, public opinion is largely positive, viewing the EU as an important counterbalance to the US. Political elites appreciate the EU's environmental and social policies, while CSOs, similar to those in Brazil, see it as a promoter of environmental sustainability. However, the EU receives little attention in Canadian mass media, which focuses mostly on its foreign policy around the world.[257]

In China, public opinion is predominantly positive, viewing the EU as a strategic opportunity, a development-friendly partner, and a supporter of multilateralism. Among political elites, the EU is valued for its soft security role but criticized for its human rights policies. Media coverage of the EU is limited, focusing on its political and economic dimensions. Information on CSOs' views is not available.[258] In Egypt, public opinion sees the EU as an important partner with high expectations for its role. Political elites view the EU as an economic power and a counterbalance to the US, but they criticize the EU's human rights and democracy conditionality. CSOs recognize the EU's potential as a promoter of human rights and democracy. Media perspectives align closely with those of political elites, portraying the EU as a counterbalance to the US while highlighting mutual misunderstandings between the EU and Egypt. There is also criticism of the EU's human rights and democracy initiatives.[259]

In India, public knowledge of the EU is limited, with the authors describing it as a *poorly known actor*. Political elites view the EU as a strategic opportunity and supporter of multipolarism. CSOs appreciate the EU's environmental sustainability efforts. Media

[255] Katrina Stats, "Report on Australia," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 38.
[256] Arlo Poletti, "Report on Brazil," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 101,
[257] Osvaldo Croci and Livianna Tossutti, "Report on Canada," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 113.
[258] Roberto Peruzzi, Arlo Poletti, and Shuangquan Zhang, "Report on China," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 175.
[259] Soha Bayoumi, "Report on Egypt," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 192.

coverage in India portrays the EU as both an economic and political power, though it is often described as a "little known actor and unclear entity."[260] In Japan, public opinion towards the EU is mixed and ambivalent. Political elites view the EU as a model for environmental protection, though some regard it mainly as an economic actor. The business community holds a relatively positive view of the EU, while CSOs see it as an *invisible partner*. Media coverage highlights the EU's economic influence, with its political relevance rising during critical times.[261] In South Africa, public opinion views the EU as a lesser-known and somewhat ineffective actor. Political elites recognize the EU as a model for regional integration and a strategic opportunity. Among CSOs, the EU is seen as a social model. However, like in India, the EU is portrayed in South African media as a "little known actor."[262]

The report of the second phase of the project, *The External Image of the European Union*, was published in 2009. This phase analyzed perceptions of the EU from selected countries, including Israel, Iran, Mexico, Palestine, Russia, Lebanon, the United States, and Venezuela. In addition to these countries, the authors examined views of the EU from international and regional actors such as the African Union, Al Jazeera, national representations in Brussels, the UN General Assembly, and the World Bank. The authors used the same methodology as in the previous phase of the study. Additionally, they incorporated documentary sources and interviews to analyze the perspectives of these international and regional actors. The findings were largely consistent with the results of earlier studies, showing similarities and differences across the analyzed countries and organizations. The authors concluded that there is a "significant 'gap' between how the EU perceives itself and how it is perceived by citizens, governmental elites, civil society groups, and the media in other countries outside Europe."[263] In addition to these reports, Lorenzo Fioramonti and Sonia Lucarelli analyzed EU perceptions in many different countries around the world.[264]

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[260] Lorenzo Fioramonti, "Report on India," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 219.
[261] Marco Kauffmann and Natalia Chaban, "Report on Japan," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 250.
[262] Lorenzo Fioramonti and Sonia Lucarelli, "The EU Viewed by the Others: Drawing Some Conclusions," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase One)*, GARNET Working Paper No. 17/07, ed. Sonia Lucarelli (2007), 329.
[263] Lorenzo Fioramonti and Sonia Lucarelli, "Conclusions and Policy Recommendations," in *Research Report: The External Image of the European Union (Phase Two)*, GARNET Working Paper, ed. Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti (2009), 540.
[264] Lorenzo Fioramonti and Sonia Lucarelli, "Have You Heard of the EU? An Analysis of Global Images of the European Union," *GARNET Policy Brief* 7 (2008); Lorenzo Fioramonti and Sonia Lucarelli, "How Do the Others See Us? European Political Identity and the External Image of the EU," in *The Search for a European Identity*, ed. Furio Cerutti and Sonia Lucarelli (London: Routledge, 2008), 207-224.

The third major contribution to the study of EU perceptions outside the EU is the project conducted by Ole Elgström, *Leader or Foot-Dragger? Perceptions of the European Union in Multilateral International Negotiations*. This project focuses on how the EU is perceived in multilateral negotiations and international diplomacy. Ole Elgström's research examines the EU's role and performance across different negotiation contexts, specifically in three multilateral settings: the United Nations Forum on Forestry, the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, and the World Trade Organization. His findings provide valuable insights into the EU's role as both a diplomatic and institutional actor, shedding light on its influence in global decision-making processes. One key finding from Elgström's research is that "external actors clearly picture the Union as an extremely important actor in the three negotiations" discussed in this project.[265] This observation emphasizes the EU's significant role in international diplomacy, and playing a central role in multilateral negotiations, even when it lacks exclusive competence in certain areas. Additionally, Ole Elgström highlights that external actors perceive the EU as a great power, comparable to the United States, particularly in terms of economic power. He notes that the EU is seen as powerful "due to its share of world trade, the importance of its currency and its sheer size and wealth."[266]

In addition to the three independent research projects conducted separately, the European Commission requested the study, *Analysis of the Perception of the EU and its Policies Abroad,* to gain a better understanding of how the EU and its policies are perceived in key strategic partner countries. The study, carried out in 2015, focused on ten countries: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, and the USA. It was conducted by the Public Policy Management Institute, the National Research Centre for Europe, and NFG-Asian Perception of the EU.[267] In 2021, a new study was launched to assess how perceptions of the EU and its policies had evolved over the past five years. The purpose was to update the 2015 analysis by looking at any changes in how the EU is viewed in the same ten countries, while also adding three new countries: Colombia, Indonesia, and Nigeria. The study aimed to provide recommendations on how to improve the EU's image, positioning it as progressive, responsible, and flexible in adapting to the changing global context. The study employed several research methods, including a literature review for each

[265] Ole Elgström, *Leader or Foot-Dragger? Perceptions of the European Union in International Multilateral Negotiations*, Report No. 1, March 2006 (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies), 35.
[266] Elgström, *Leader or Foot-Dragger*, 36.
[267] Egidijus Barcevičius et al., *Analysis of the Perception of the EU and EU's Policies Abroad: Final Report* (Brussels: PPMI, NCRE, NFG Research Group, 2015), https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/stories/analysis-perception-eu-and-eus-policies-abroad_en.

country, media analysis to explore how the EU and Europe are represented, social media analysis to examine trends in communication and public reception, a public opinion survey, high-level interviews with EU Delegation representatives, and focus groups with youth.[268]

3.2.2. Country-Specific Studies on the EU's External Perception

In addition to the transnational projects discussed above, several country-specific studies have contributed to the field by highlighting distinct national perceptions while also revealing common themes across regions. One such study is an edited volume by Rajendra K. Jain, which explores the perception of the EU in India. This volume starts by examining the historical perspective, beginning with India's view of the European Coal and Steel Community, and continues to analyze the perception of the EU through to modern times. The study aims to answer two key questions: How has India's image of the European Union changed over the decades? What have been the major narratives about the EU in India? The findings suggest that the Indian press does not make a significant effort to educate its readership about various facets of the EU, and as a result, the EU continues to be seen as a strange and distant entity.[269] In 2010, Rajendra K. Jain and Shreya Pandey further analyzed the EU through the lens of Indian media. Their study was based on content analysis of three prominent Indian newspapers, which were monitored daily for six months, from July 1 to December 31, 2009. Additionally, interviews were conducted with political, business, media, and civil society elites. The findings revealed that the EU suffers from weak visibility and a low profile in India. The EU is clearly under-reported, with coverage being both sparse and often event driven. Due to the intense competition for media space, the Union is usually given the lowest or last priority. As a result, the EU is "simply not 'sexy' enough to evoke passion and interest in the Indian print media."[270] In a later article, Rajendra K. Jain discussed the EU's perception in India from the early years of Indian independence. He concluded that most stakeholders in India believe the EU lacks geopolitical coherence and has not yet demonstrated the ability to act as a credible power on the world stage.[271] James Ling and

[268] Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, *Update of the 2015 Perception Study*, available at https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/key-documents_en?f%5B0%5D=document_title%3Aupdate, (accessed November 25, 2024).
[269] Shreya Pandey, "The Visibility and Perceptions of the EU in the Indian Print Media, 2009–2010," in *Changing Indian Images of the European Union: Perception and Misperception*, ed. Rajendra K. Jain (2019): 79-92.
[270] Rajendra K. Jain and Shreya Pandey, "The European Union in the Eyes of India," *Asia Europe Journal* 8 (2010): 207, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-010-0258-7.
[271] Rajendra K. Jain, "Indian Perceptions of the European Union," *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 51, no. 1 (2015): 80, https://doi.org/10.7366/020909611201504.

Idesbald Goddeeris investigated whether the disinterest in the EU is representative of general Indian views or simply a reflection of Prime Minister Modi's preferences. Through media evaluation, their study addressed this question using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more complete picture of Indian perspectives. They found that the EU was described predominantly as an "economic actor" in 38 percent of articles, making it the most common framing. The second most frequently applied frame was that of a "social actor," which accounted for 25 percent of the total.[272]

China has also been a key focus in research on how the EU is perceived globally. According to Dechun Zhang, who systematically analyzes previous studies on the EU's perception in China, Chinese official media generally frame the EU as an economic and political partner. The relationship is often described as a "love-hate trade story". Dechun Zhang's findings indicate that the annual volume of EU-related coverage in Chinese media is relatively low, suggesting the EU holds secondary importance in China's foreign policy. Moreover, Chinese media portray the EU positively, reflecting stable relations. According to the author, negative aspects, when mentioned, are aligned with government narratives and often serve propagandistic purposes, illustrating a strategic framing of EU-related topics.[273] Zhang Biao and Qian Li analyze how Chinese scholars perceive the EU during the Brexit period, providing a detailed examination of 222 academic journal articles published between 23 June 2016 and 31 December 2021. Their study systematically explores how Brexit has influenced these perceptions, identifying both continuity and notable shifts compared to earlier findings. Specifically, their findings highlight three key aspects of how Chinese scholars perceive the EU, with notable shifts emerging in each area. First, regarding the EU polity, Chinese scholars express growing pessimism about the prospects for European integration, questioning its long-term viability while acknowledging its importance for the EU's internal stability and external influence. Second, in terms of the EU's global actorness, they describe the Union as a weakened yet aspirational player on the international stage. The EU is also characterized as an economic giant with increasing protectionist tendencies, aiming to strengthen its political, environmental, and maritime roles. Finally, regarding the EU's relationship with China, scholars highlight its fluctuating nature, driven by American influence and rising competition, signaling growing complexity and potential conflict

[272] James Ling and Idesbald Goddeeris, "Modi's India and the European Union: A Perceptions Study," in *India and Europe in a Changing World: Context, Confrontation, Cooperation*, ed. Rajendra K. Jain (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 161, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-1114-1_5.
[273] Dechun Zhang, "EU-China Relations: Through the Narrative of China's Media," *Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan (Journal of Government & Politics)* 12, no. 2 (2022): 164

between the two sides.[274] Zhang Caiyi, Daniel Kübler, and Lisheng Dong explore the impact of social media use on Chinese public perceptions of the EU, an area that has been largely overlooked in previous research. The study is based on data from an online survey conducted in late 2020, with 3,009 respondents from six Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xi'an, Chengdu, and Nanning. These cities were selected to represent different geographical regions and stages of development, providing a diverse and representative sample of Chinese opinions. The researchers hypothesized that the use of different social media platforms would have varying effects on perceptions of the EU and China-EU relations. The findings confirm this hypothesis, showing that TikTok use is linked to more positive perceptions of the EU, but it has a negative effect on views of China-EU relations. Weibo use, on the other hand, is not significantly related to perceptions of the EU, but it does negatively influence assessments of the China-EU relationship. WeChat use showed no significant impact on either perception.[275] Lu Gan's study focuses on the EU's image in Chinese print media during 2002–2011, analyzing data from two newspapers: People's Daily and Nanfang Daily. People's Daily, a Republican media outlet aligned with the Chinese Communist Party, represents national perspectives. On the other hand, Nanfang Daily, a regional media outlet based in Guangdong Province, reflects regional interests. The research employs visibility, content, and valence as analytical dimensions. Visibility reflects how much the EU is covered, content shows the topics discussed such as events or themes like politics and economics, and valence indicates whether the portrayal is positive, negative, or neutral. The findings reveal that the EU is perceived as both a political partner at the national level and an economic partner at the regional level, reflecting the distinct priorities of China's national and regional governance.[276]

Japanese perceptions of the EU have also garnered significant attention from scholars in Japan. In this context, Ryo Oshiba explores Japanese views of the EU, focusing on whether it is seen as a global power and how the Eurozone financial crisis has affected these perceptions. The study uses survey data and an analysis of Japanese newspapers to gather insights, with the findings contributing to existing academic discussions. According to the findings of the study, the October 2012 survey results reveal that the Japanese public

[274] Zhang Biao and Qian Li, "China's Perception of the European Union During Brexit: The Case of Chinese Scholars," *Comparative European Politics* 21, no. 5 (2023): 632, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-023-00356-2.
[275] Zhang Caiyi, Daniel Kübler, and Lisheng Dong, "Chinese Perceptions of the EU: The Impact of Social Media Use," *Global Public Policy and Governance* 3, no. 2 (2023): 192, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-023-00069-y.
[276] Gan Lu, "The EU in Chinese Print Media: Mapping the Image," *NFG Working Paper Series* 7 (2013): 12, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-22906.

generally sees the EU as a global power rather than just a regional one. Specifically, Japanese elites and university students recognize the EU's strength in economics. However, business elites are concerned that the EU's influence is declining due to the financial crisis. Moreover, the study also shows that while Japanese newspapers continue to cover the EU, their focus has shifted from its regulatory power to the financial crisis. As a result, the EU's ability to set regional standards has been questioned because of the crisis.[277]

The researchers have also analyzed the perception of the EU in various countries worldwide,[278] employing a range of methods such as content analysis, focus group discussions, interviews, and opinion surveys, or combinations of these approaches. The EU is perceived differently across regions, with varying levels of awareness and diverse opinions in each area. While global awareness of the EU has generally increased, it remains relatively low in many regions. Studies consistently show that the EU's image is multidimensional, with its role as an economic power often dominating perceptions. This is reflected in its reputation as a trade giant, a large market, and a significant source of foreign investment.[279]

These contributions, along with the discussed projects above, have established a robust framework for analyzing the EU's external image, highlighting its importance in shaping foreign policy and global relations. However, the EU's perception as a normative power is somewhat limited in visibility. According to Natalia Chaban et al.'s research, the normative dimension is characterized as "completely absent" in interviews from the Pacific region, while it is described as "somewhat visible" in Africa and Southeast Asia.[280] Surprisingly, the image of the EU as an actor in development is not as prominent as expected and is rarely cited in the literature. However, the EU is recognized as an important aid provider in countries that are somewhat dependent on EU assistance.[281] Overall, the extensive literature review reveals a general finding: the EU is widely viewed as an international actor across

[277] Ryo Oshiba, "A Japanese View of the EU," *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs* 2 (2012): 126.
[278] Igor Gretskiy, Evgeny Treshchenkov, and Konstantin Golubev, "Russia's Perceptions and Misperceptions of the EU Eastern Partnership," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3-4 (2014): 375-383, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.10.006; Andrew Foxall, "From Evropa to Gayropa: A Critical Geopolitics of the European Union as Seen from Russia," *Geopolitics* 24, no. 1 (2019): 174-193, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1417848; Gizem Arıkan, "Attitudes Towards the European Union in Turkey: The Role of Perceived Threats and Benefits," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2012): 81-103; Yannis A. Stivachtis, "American Perceptions of the European Union and Its Role in World Affairs," *Review of European Studies* 4 (2012): 64-76, https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v4n3p64.
[279] Sonia Lucarelli, "The European Union in the Eyes of Others: Towards Filling a Gap in the Literature," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 12, no. 3 (2007): 249-270, https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2007025; Chaban et al., "Images of the EU beyond its Borders."
[280] Chaban et al., "Images of the EU beyond its Borders," 444.
[281] Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power".

various issue areas. Yet, it is not perceived as a great power in all fields, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of its global image.

3.3. Gap in Literature

In recent years, research on relationships between EU and Central Asia has increased significantly, reflecting the growing engagement between the two regions. Early studies, particularly in the 1990s, were limited and often offered a general analysis of EU political and economic relations with the post-Soviet States as a whole. As a result, with the evolution of the EU's role in Central Asia, academic interest has increased, and various studies have been conducted on different aspects of this relationship. The analysis of 251 scholarly articles, policy briefs, and books collected from academic databases and examined using ATLAS.ti reveals several key areas of focus in the literature on EU and Central Asia relations. These include, in general, political ties, economic cooperation, energy partnerships, trade, security, and education. Furthermore, a significant part of the research has focused on the EU's strategies adopted in 2007 and 2019 toward Central Asia. These strategies have been the subject of extensive analysis by scholars from both regions. Additionally, there is a strong comparison between the EU policy and other major global powers policy in region in many studies.

However, despite this extensive body of research, one area remains noticeably underexplored: how Central Asian countries perceive the EU's policies and presence. Many studies focus on the EU's strategies and actions, but few delve into how these are understood or interpreted within the region. While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have received some attention, the EU's perception in other Central Asian countries remains largely unexamined, leaving significant gaps. These gaps are crucial to address, as understanding perceptions provides a deeper understanding of the influence and effectiveness of the EU in the region.

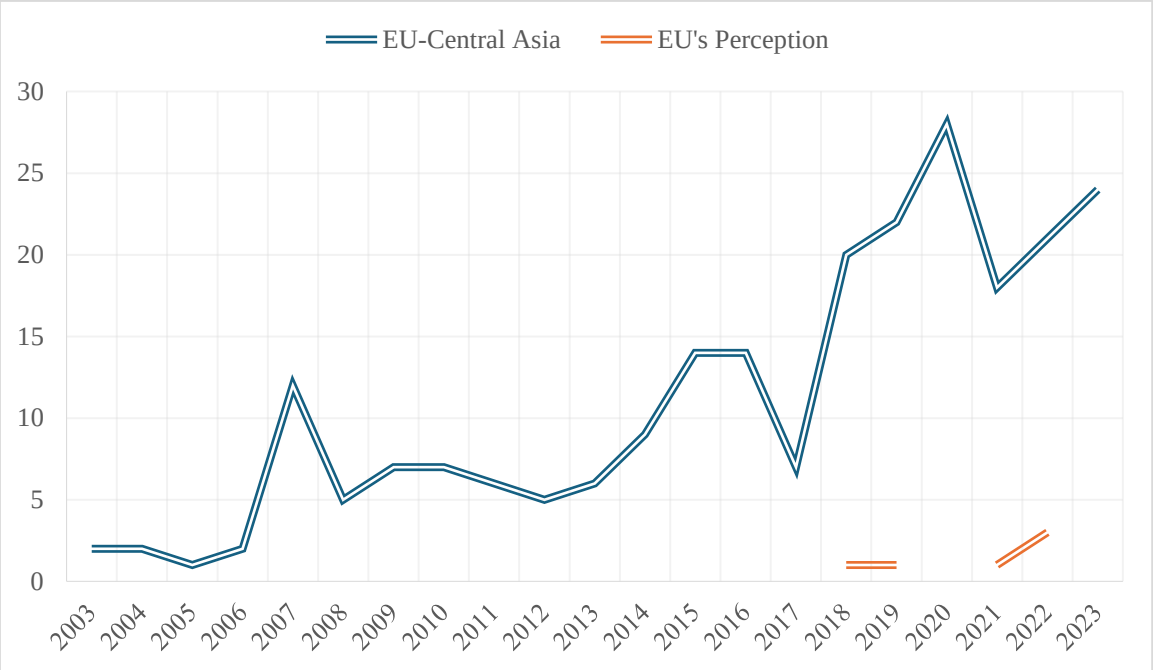
Given the limited number of researchers exploring the EU's perception in Central Asia, insights from previous studies, particularly those of Zhanibek Arynov, have been valuable in shaping this study. Building on these contributions, this PhD thesis addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining the perception of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, with a special focus on media narratives, official perspectives, and expert views. The comparison of the two countries helps to understand the different perspectives of Central Asia. It builds on existing literature, analyzes EU policies and perceptions, and offers new insights into the under-explored aspects of EU and Central Asian relations.

To systematically evaluate these gaps, the collected articles were classified into two main groups in ATLAS.ti:

1. studies that analyze the various dimensions of the relationship between the EU and Central Asia, studies on the EU's policy in relation to other major actors in the region, studies on EU Member States' policies towards Central Asia and the policies of Central Asian States towards the EU, all of which were included in the ATLAS.ti project's "EU-Central Asia" document group.
2. studies that specifically investigate the perception of the EU in Central Asia are included in the document group "EU's perception".

Figure 1 emphasizes the gap between the comprehensive research on "EU-Central Asia" categorized academic sources and the limited exploration of the area of "EU's perception," based on the ATLAS.ti report. This visualization highlights the need for further research into the perception of the EU in the region as such perspectives are still lacking in academic discussions.

Figure 1: Mapping research gaps in the study of EU perceptions in Central Asia



Source: author's collection.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology

4.1. Overview

Paul Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod define research as a "systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information (data) in order to increase our understanding of a phenomenon about which we are interested or concerned."[282] In a similar vein, David E. McNabb, in his book *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, mentions that "[r]esearch means gathering, processing, and interpreting data, then intelligently and cogently communicating the results in a report that describes what was discovered from the research."[283] In simple terms, research can be described as a process of systematically collecting data to answer research questions.[284] On the other hand, research methodology refers to the approach the researcher takes to gather and analyze the data.[285] Based on the provided definitions above, it may be concluded that research is a planned activity by the researcher aimed at establishing new facts and finding new information about a particular phenomenon. David E. McNabb highlights that researchers focus on the issues they think are important and approach their research in the way they believe is best for gaining knowledge.[286] In the same vein, Earl Babbie and Johan Mouton argue that the "selection of methods, and their application, are always dependent on the aims and objectives of the study, the nature of the phenomenon being investigated and the underlying theory or expectations of the investigator."[287] To address the research questions, this thesis employs content analysis methods and incorporates elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. In detail, content analysis is discussed in the subchapter below. It should be noted that the quantitative approach is limited to counting the number of news articles, the number of topics discussed in news articles, official documents, and expert interviews, the number of codes applied in the process of content analysis, and analyzing the attention intensity in selected mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Additionally, the results presented from ATLAS.ti also incorporate quantitative elements of research methodology. As John W. Creswell *et al.* point out, a mixed-method form of research "is more than simply

[282] Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2010), 2.
[283] David E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2015), 11.
[284] McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science*, 13.
[285] McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science*, 13.
[286] McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science*, 4.
[287] Earl Babbie and Johan Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research* (Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2001), 49.

collecting both quantitative and qualitative data; it indicates that data will be integrated, related, or mixed at some stage of the research process."[288] They continue their arguments by mentioning that "[w]hen used in combination, both quantitative and qualitative data yield a more complete analysis, and they complement each other."[289] It needs to be highlighted that the use of mixed methods in social science is "becoming more common to explicitly combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, taking advantage of the strengths that each has to offer in combination."[290] As Bruce Berg defined in qualitative research, researchers, in answering the research questions, "refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things," and by using the quantitative research method, researchers "refers to counts and measures of things."[291]

This thesis uses multiple data sources, including the collection of official documents, speeches, and statements of officials of Central Asian countries to understand official perspectives towards the EU and its relations and positions in Central Asian countries' foreign policies. Additionally, it analyses news articles related to the topic from eight selected mass media outlets in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, as well as ten interviews with experts to understand portrayals of the EU in the media and expert views about the EU's policy in the region. These primary data sources are triangulated with secondary sources such as available literature, reports, and legally binding documents. The thesis's aim, by combining these diverse data sources, is to "guarantee that a research study's data, analysis, and findings are as thorough and precise as possible."[292] In academic literature, there is no accepted consensus among scholars on how to measure perceptions. In this thesis, official perspectives are measured by analysing official documents to identify key themes and narratives about the EU. This includes assessing how frequently the EU is mentioned, the context in which it appears, and the policy areas that officials primarily emphasize in their relations with the EU. To answer the research questions, this thesis examines the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's mass media in four broad categories: the image of the EU (positive, neutral, or negative), the dominant topics of discussion (political, economic, cultural, etc.), and the attention intensity in selected media outlets of both

[288] John W. Creswell, Michael D. Fetters, and Nataliya V. Ivankova, "Designing a Mixed Methods Study in Primary Care," *The Annals of Family Medicine* 2, no. 1 (2004): 7.
[289] Creswell, Fetters, and Ivankova, "Designing a Mixed Methods Study," 7.
[290] Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, *How to Research*, 185.
[291] Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 4th ed. (A Pearson Education Company, 2001), 3.
[292] Marvic Sciberras and Alexiei Dingli, *Research Analysis—Triangulation Approach*, in *Investigating AI Readiness in the Maltese Public Administration*, Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems, vol. 568 (Cham: Springer, 2023), 31, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19900-4_9.

countries (number of publications). For the case of expert interviews, the more dominant themes in interviewees' responses about the relations of the EU and Central Asia, and how they view these relationships, are analyzed.

In addition to conducting a content analysis of the aforementioned data to understand the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia, the content analysis of legally binding agreements, such as the PCA and EPCA signed between the EU and Central Asian countries, is also carried out. Furthermore, the content of the EU's Strategy adopted towards Central Asia in 2007 and 2019 is analyzed. More specifically, regarding legally binding agreements and the EU's strategies towards Central Asia, the most frequently occurring words are monitored through ATLAS.ti's word frequency counting functions. The findings from this analysis are shown in the tables of chapter six, which illustrate the frequency of those terms appearing most often in these documents.

The present chapter is structured into six primary sections. The first section discusses data collection, followed by the mass media section, which discusses in detail the process of media selection and the news article selection criteria. The third section analyzes the process of expert interviews, followed by the content analysis section. The fifth section discusses the trustworthiness of the research findings, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of possible limitations and shortcomings. This research answers the research questions using primary and secondary data sources, and the following subsection will discuss the data collection process.

4.2. Data collection

In social science, researchers use various data collection strategies based on their approach to answering research questions. Social science research typically relies on two main categories of data sources: primary and secondary. Researchers collect data to analyze and answer research questions and produce "original research results."[293] Uma Nath Baral defines primary and secondary data sources in straightforward terms: primary data is collected directly by researchers to answer their research questions. In contrast, secondary data consists of studies conducted by others to answer their respective research questions,

[293] Uma Nath Baral, "'Research Data' in Social Science Methods," Journal of Political Science 17 (2017): 84.

which researchers then use.[294] This definition applies to the data collected for this research, which employs both primary and secondary data sources.

This research uses primary data to provide firsthand testimony and better understand the research topic. A wide range of primary data sources was used for this study, including:

i. The author collected news articles for content analysis from eight selected mass media outlets in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.
ii. Expert interviews conducted by the author with Central Asian experts.
iii. EU-adopted strategies toward Central Asia and bilateral cooperation agreements between the EU and Central Asian countries.
iv. Founding treaties of the EU, fundamental EU documents, and foreign policy conceptions of Central Asian countries.
v. Official publications and reports from EU institutions such as the European Council, the Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament, as well as Central Asian governments, including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Central Asian countries.
vi. Official publications, speeches, interviews, and statements by officials of EU institutions and Central Asian countries.
vii. Statistical data from official statistical institutions of the EU and Central Asian countries.

This research categorises news articles collected from selected mass media outlets as primary data sources. Most primary data sources (categories iii-vii) were collected from the official websites of EU institutions and the official websites of Central Asian governments. These sources were publicly available and used for analysis. The user-friendly interfaces of the websites of EU institutions and related governmental bodies of Central Asian countries selected for this research facilitated easy access to publicly available sources on EU-Central Asia relations.

One advantage of secondary data sources is that they can offer "fresh insights into data, and ready-made data sets or archives do provide extremely valuable and cost-efficient resources for researchers,"[295] and such sources help researchers "to save time, money and energy."[296]

[294] Baral, "'Research Data,'" 90.
[295] Loraine Blaxter, Christina Hughes, and Malcolm Tight, *How to Research*, 4th ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education, 2010), 188.
[296] Baral, "'Research Data,'" 91.

This thesis relies on secondary data sources to support empirical findings from earlier conducted research. Secondary data sources used in this research are broadly categorized into two types:

i. Academic publications, including but not limited to articles, chapters, conference papers, and books on topics such as EU foreign policy, Central Asian politics, the region's geopolitical position in global affairs, and EU-Central Asia relations across different sectors.
ii. Reports and briefings from think tanks, NGOs, and research institutes.

This thesis focuses on three key elements when studying perceptions of the EU: the perspectives of officials, the media's portrayal of the EU, and the views of experts regarding EU-Central Asia relations. To understand officials' perspectives, data were gathered from the official websites of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The process of selecting media outlets and conducting interviews is explained in detail in the following sections. First, the following section will explain why the media were selected for analysis, how the eight mass media outlets were chosen, and the criteria applied to select four outlets from two selected countries.

4.3. Mass media

This research also focuses on perceptions of the EU as portrayed in the mass media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. According to the literature review, perception studies typically involve three key elements in studying perceptions of any actor in international relations: (i) media analysis, (ii) public opinion surveys, and (iii) expert interviews.[297] The decision to concentrate on mass media comes from the view that content analysis of media serves as the central component of these three elements, and it is widely acknowledged in the literature that the media plays an important role in shaping political ideas and influencing public understanding of any specific object. Mass media plays a leading role in shaping worldviews, and as a result, people perceive reality according to the interpretation provided by the media

[297] James Ling and Idesbald Goddeeris, "Modi's India and the European Union: A Perception Study," *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 51, no. 4 (2015): 156, https://doi.org/10.7366/020909614201507, Paul Bacon and Emi Kato, "Potential Still Untapped: Japanese Perceptions of the European Union as an Economic and Normative Power," *Baltic Journal of European Studies* 3, no. 3 (15) (2013): 61, https://doi.org/10.2478/bjes-2013-0021.

image and build their actions and behaviour based on the image received from the media.[298] Based on these arguments, this part discusses the importance of media for studying perception.

The mass media generally performs the following functions, but not limited to it, the media informs, entertains, forms opinions, and enlightens. The media plays an important role in gathering, sharing, and spreading news and information in international affairs. The media provide commentary on current events, reflect public opinion, monitor societal issues, highlight important topics, and shape how the audience evaluates them. Given their ability to influence public perception, media coverage of international news and analysis directly shapes society's understanding, views, and attitudes toward a particular country. As Alpo Rusi argues, this is more applicable in the modern period of technological development. Most people shape their perceptions of international relations based on second-hand contact. In this case, the media acts as a creator of the image of other actors in international relations. This means that people have a limited opportunity to directly engage with image objects, and "mass media of their societies usually prove to be their channels of contacts with image-objects."[299] Similarly, Sreberny-Mohammadi argues that mass media are the primary international image creators today.[300] From this perspective, the way the media shows global events plays an important role in shaping public opinion, and the media's representation of the world can significantly influence how people view and understand international affairs.

This is highly relevant in the case of this research, as citizens of Central Asian countries are on the list of visa-restricted countries for entering the EU, and the process of obtaining the visa is somewhat complicated for citizens of this region. Based on the data, there is a high rate of Schengen visa application rejections for citizens of Central Asian countries, particularly for Tajik citizens, with around 40% of applications being rejected in 2024.[301] It should be noted that negotiations are ongoing between the government of Kazakhstan and the EU to facilitate the visa process for Kazakhstani citizens. These points show that the

[298] Alexander Alexandrovich Gavrilov, "Медиареальность как тип виртуальной реальности" ["Media Reality as a Type of Virtual Reality"], *Издательство «Грамота»*, no. 11-1 (2013): 46, http://www.gramota.net/materials/3/2013/11-1/7.htm (accessed January 17, 2025).

[299] Alpo Rusi, "Image Research and Image Politics in International Relations—Transformation of Power Politics in the Television Age," *Cooperation and Conflict* 23, no. 1 (1988): 32–33, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45083650.

[300] Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., *Foreign News in the Media: International Reporting in 29 Countries* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1985), 54, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000065257.

[301] European Commission, *Short-Stay Visas Issued by Schengen Countries*, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/visa-policy/short-stay-visas-issued-schengen-countries_en, accessed May 25, 2025.

media is the only source for most citizens of Central Asian countries to gain knowledge about the EU, and in general, it is a "principal source of information on foreign events and central to informing public opinion on international affairs."[302] In the same vein, Walter Lippmann, in his book *Public Opinion*, describes the media as a powerful tool that shapes people's views on events beyond their daily experiences. He argues that most people's opinions on matters they do not directly experience are primarily shaped by the information they receive from the media.[303] In this sense, the media is one of the most significant means of forming and transmitting public opinion.

The mass media plays an important role in shaping how people view the world around them, and it "strongly influence the public consciousness, society and the individual."[304] It acts as a primary source of information and a platform for sharing news. Most of what we know about current events comes from the media. By choosing specific language when describing *self* in relation to *others*, the media can influence social discourses on particular issues, either positively or negatively. Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge also emphasize the media's significant role in shaping international actors' public image. They argue that while the image of a country is not shaped by the media alone, the constant presence and influence of news outlets make them key players in forming international perceptions, as "the regularity, ubiquity and perseverence of news media will in any case make them first-rate competitors for the number-one position as international image-former."[305] Stephen D. Reese and Jane Ballinger mention that journalists and media outlets decide what topics to cover and how much attention each topic gets,[306] and because of this, the amount and type of information the public receives is mostly determined by the media.[307] Recently, the question of media influence has expanded to include the idea that media not only informs the audience about an issue but also shapes *how* they think about it. In other words, the way something is presented can significantly influence how people perceive and understand the topic.

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[302] Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland, *The EU through the Eyes of the Asia-Pacific: Public Perceptions and Media Representations*, NCRE Research Series No. 4, https://aei.pitt.edu/10939/1/appp_book.pdf, 63.
[303] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Routledge, 1992), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315127736.
[304] S. H. Barlybaeva, "Transformation of mass media in the modern Kazakhstan," *Herald of Journalism/Habaršy Žurnalistika Seriâsy* 69, no. 3 (2023): 70, https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ.2023.v69.i3.06.
[305] Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, "The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers," *Journal of Peace Research* 2, no. 1 (1965): 64, https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336500200104.
[306] Stephen D. Reese and Jane Ballinger, "The Roots of a Sociology of News: Remembering Mr. Gates and Social Control in the Newsroom," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2001): 645, https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900107800402.
[307] Keith R. Stamm, Fiona Clark, and Paula Reynolds Eblacas, "Mass Communication and Public Understanding of Environmental Problems: The Case of Global Warming," *Public Understanding of Science* 9, no. 3 (2000): 220, https://doi.org/10.1088/0963-6625/9/3/302.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw highlight the importance of mass media, mentioning that the "media not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it."[308]

Lu Gan argues that mass media play three critical roles in constructing an actor's image. Firstly, they serve as a tool for environmental surveillance, acting like our eyes, ears, hands, and skin by collecting information from all around us. Marshall McLuhan and Lewis Lapham mention the same point that media extend our senses, allowing us to observe the world around us.[309] This role is crucial for governments, elites, and the public to form a shared image of reality and make informed decisions.[310] Secondly, mass media function as a central hub for information exchange, directly connecting various sectors of society and distributing images from various actors, influencing how these groups perceive one another. Finally, the media function as a dynamic system, amplifying the images they create. Media outlets set the public agenda and influence perceptions through careful selection, analysis, and information control.[311]

On the other hand, Olga Kovach highlights that mass media employ several key methods to shape a country's image, which is influenced by the orientation of the media. These methods include: (i) selecting events to report—mass media editors carefully choose which events to cover and from which angle to present them. The way information is shared with the audience is strategically planned to influence how it is perceived by the audience of the media; (ii) selective presentation of information—mass media outlets often emphasize certain aspects of a story to present it in a more favourable light according to the editorial selection. In this method, the skilful use of language, visuals, and expert commentary plays a crucial role in shaping public perception; and (iii) strategic use of numbers and terminology—numbers are particularly powerful tools, as they can guide audiences toward specific conclusions.[312]

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[308] Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 2 (1993): 65.
[309] Marshall McLuhan and Lewis H. Lapham, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York, 1964), 1, cited in Lu Gan, "The EU in Chinese Print Media: Mapping the Image," *NFG Working Paper Series*, no. 07 (October 2013), NFG Research Group "Asian Perceptions of the EU," Freie Universität Berlin, 8–9.
[310] Herbert I. Schiller, "Genesis of the Free Flow of Information Principles: The Imposition of Communications Domination," *Instant Research on Peace and Violence* 5, no. 2 (1975): 78, cited in Lu Gan, "The EU in Chinese Print Media: Mapping the Image," *NFG Working Paper Series*, no. 07 (October 2013), 8–9.
[311] Lu Gan, *The EU in Chinese Print Media: Mapping the Image*, NFG Working Paper Series, no. 07 (October 2013), NFG Research Group "Asian Perceptions of the EU," Freie Universität Berlin, 8–9.
[312] Olga Alexandrovna Kovach, "Принципы конструирования медиаобраза государства" ["Principles of Constructing a Media Image of the State"], *Медиасреда* 1 (2019): 59, https://doi.org/10.24411/2070-0717-2019-10110.

In their 2006 study, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro examine the relationship between media and public opinion, arguing that media strongly impacts how the public understands political and social issues.[313] This influence is exerted not only through the information presented but also through how it is framed. Mass media decide which stories to include or exclude, thereby shaping public opinion by setting the agenda and framing the issues deemed important.[314] The mass media's agenda-setting and framing functions help to explain how mass media influences public opinion and policy. Through its agenda-setting role, the media can shape public opinion by deciding which topics to focus on to gain more attention. As highlighted by David Weaver, the more an issue or figure is covered in mass media, the more important it appears to the public.[315] The framing role of mass media refers to how media shapes the way people understand an issue by emphasizing some aspects and downplaying others.[316] This means that by giving specific issues more attention, the media can shape what people consider to be key concerns.

It may conclude this part with the words of Susan Jacobson *et.al.*, mass media plays a crucial role in shaping how the public understands, perceives, and reacts to various issues.[317] The mass media has become a primary source of information on international affairs for policymakers and the general public. This part of the study argues that in Central Asian countries, the news media has a stronger influence on public perceptions of the EU. Considering this, the media was selected to analyze perceptions of the EU in the region. In the following section, I will discuss the process and criteria for mass media selection from both countries selected for this research.

4.3.1. Media Selection Criteria

For the content analysis, I selected eight mass media outlets, four from Kazakhstan and four from Tajikistan, to analyze EU perceptions. The criteria for selecting media for data

[313] Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Media Bias and Reputation," *Journal of Political Economy* 114, no. 2 (April 2006): 280-316, https://doi.org/10.1086/499414.
[314] Gentzkow and Shapiro, "Media Bias and Reputation," 284.
[315] David H. Weaver, "Media Agenda-Setting and Public Opinion: Is There a Link?" in *Communication Yearbook 8*, ed. Robert Bostrom (1st ed.; New York: Routledge, 1984), 682, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203856222.
[316] Maxwell McCombs and Salma I. Ghanem, "The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing," in *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*, ed. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant (1st ed.; New York: Routledge, 2001), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410605689.
[317] Susan K. Jacobson, Cynthia Langin, J. Stuart Carlton, and Lynda Lee Kaid, "Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of the Florida Panther," *Conservation Biology* 26, no. 1 (2011): 172, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1523-1739.2011.01750.x.

collection were as follows: (i) they had to cover both internal and international politics; (ii) they needed to publish original articles based on their own sources of information rather than merely reproducing reports from other sources; (iii) they had to be among the most cited and widely read in the selected countries; and (iv) they had to provide access to their electronic archives, in the case of online media.

The ownership and funding of media can significantly influence the content they produce. Therefore, these factors were considered when selecting mass media to ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis of how the EU is portrayed in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. An equal amount of (i) government-funded mass media and (ii) privately owned—self-funded mass media were selected from both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The globally experienced shift toward digital media consumption is becoming increasingly apparent in Central Asia. Traditional media outlets like newspapers, magazines, television, and radio are becoming less prominent, while the growing young population in the region primarily relies on online platforms and social networks for information.[318] The circulation numbers of newspapers have declined in recent years,[319] but still the newspapers continue to lead the news agenda and set the tone for other media outlets. In Central Asia, newspapers remain an important source of information for the general public, particularly among older audiences and the country's elites. Considering that these two types of media have different readership groups, this thesis aimed to include both—newspapers and online media—to cover a broader range of sources and provide a more comprehensive view of the EU. The selected newspapers for analysis also offer online versions of their news on their websites, some providing brief excerpts, while others offer complete editions of the newspaper in electronic form, available after subscription.

The data for content analysis were collected from mass media in both Russian and Tajik language versions. In Kazakhstan, the selected media included Russian-language newspapers and online news outlets. In Tajikistan, both Tajik and Russian language versions were used for analysis, depending on the language in which the media predominantly publish content, particularly in the online versions of the selected outlets. It should be noted that in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the official languages are Kazakh and Tajik, respectively. Additionally, Russian is widely used across all Central Asian countries. Legally, the position

[318] Othmara Glas, "Media," in *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation*, ed. Jakob Lempp and Sebastian Mayer (Springer Nature, 2024), 185.
[319] Peter J. Anderson and Tony Weymouth, *Insulting the Public? The British Press and the European Union* (First published 1999 by Addison Wesley Longman Limited; published 2014 by Routledge), 31.

of the Russian language is supported by constitutional provisions in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, with some differences in its status between the two countries. In Kazakhstan, Article 7, Section 1 of the Constitution states that Kazakh is the state language and Section 2 of the same article grants Russian official status alongside Kazakh. It further states, "in governmental organizations and local selfgoverning bodies along with Kazakh language the Russian language shall be used."[320] In Tajikistan, Article 2, Section 1, of the Constitution recognizes Tajik as the official state language, while Section 2 of the same article acknowledges Russian as a language of intercultural communication.[321]

Based on the criteria outlined above, the selected media were chosen to provide a balanced and comprehensive analysis of how the EU is portrayed in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

4.3.2. Selected Mass Media from Kazakhstan

According to the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 5,855 mass media organizations operate in the country, including print publications, TV channels, radio stations, and internet resources.[322] Table 3 presents the ranking of print and online media based on their consumption in Kazakh society and information about their ownership. Based on the earlier defined criteria, two newspapers were selected: *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Vremya*. Both rank among the top five most-read newspapers in Kazakhstan. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* is state-funded, while *Vremya* is independently funded. *Inform.kz* and *Zakon.kz* were selected from online media to provide a balanced perspective, representing both state-funded and independently funded viewpoints, respectively. The following subchapters will provide a more detailed discussion of the selected media outlets from Kazakhstan.

[320] Конституция Республики Казахстан [Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan]. Accessed February 11, 2025. https://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitution.
[321] Конститутсияи Ҷумҳурии Тоҷикистон [Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan]. Accessed February 11, 2025. https://mfa.tj/tg/main/tojikiston/konstitutsiya.
[322] "Kazinform" International News Agency, "5,855 Mass Media Organizations Work in Kazakhstan," June 28, 2024, accessed February 11, 2025, https://en.inform.kz/news/5855-mass-media-organizations-work-in-kazakhstan-069902/.

Table 3: List of top Kazakhstani print and online media outlets with ownership information, ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Print Media		Online Media	
	Name	**Owner**	**Name**	**Owner**
1	Karavan	Kazakhstan Today Agency LLP	Nur.kz	Internet Portal Nur LLP
2	Egemen Kazakhstan	Government of Kazakhstan	**Zakon.kz**	**Yurinfo Company LLP**
3	**Kazakhstanskaya Pravda**	**Government of Kazakhstan**	Tengrinews.kz	Alash Media Group
4	Ekspress-K	Eurasian Insurance Company JSC	**Inform.kz**	**Government of Kazakhstan**
5	**Vremya**	**Vremya Publishing House LLP**	Informburo.kz	Verny Capital JSC

Source: Emily Dumont, Jonathan Solis, and Lincoln Zaleski, *Kazakhstan: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, 2023), 5-6.

4.3.2.1. Kazakhstanskaya Pravda

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda is one of Kazakhstan's most influential and widely read daily newspapers. The newspaper was selected for this research due to its position as the leading state-funded newspaper and its role as the official publication of the Government of Kazakhstan. The newspaper extensively covers government activities, including updates from the parliament and local authorities. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda is* a key platform for shaping public perceptions and is a widely read governmental newspaper that presents the government's perspectives on significant domestic and international issues. The newspaper is widely distributed across all regions of Kazakhstan, with a circulation exceeding 100,000 copies.[323] The newspaper offers coverage of various topics, including politics, economics, society, technology, culture, sports, and international affairs. In addition to news coverage, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* publishes official government documents such as laws, presidential decrees and calls for tenders, which grant them legal force upon publication. The newspaper publishes in Russian and maintains a website in Russian and English version. Its counterpart, *Egemen Kazakhstan*, provides the same content in the Kazakh language. For this research, the online version of *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* was particularly useful during the initial data collection phase.[324] Additional data was gathered in the summer of 2024

[323] Ospanova et al., "Assessing EU Perception," 74.
[324] The website of Kazakhstanskaya Pravda is: https://kazpravda.kz/.

during fieldwork in Almaty. The printed versions of the newspaper, spanning the selected timeframe, were accessed at the National Library of Kazakhstan.

4.3.2.2. Vremya

Unlike the state-backed *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Vremya* is a privately owned newspaper with minimal influence from official narratives. It is published four times a week, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, and is printed in Russian. Similar to *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Vremya* covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economics, society, sports, culture, and world news. Data from the printed versions of *Vremya* was collected during fieldwork at the National Library of Kazakhstan. The newspaper also maintains a website that publishes select content in Russian,[325] which was used as an additional source for data collection.

4.3.2.3. Kazinform

Kazinform holds the status of an international information agency. It serves as a "source of information about the politics, economy, education, healthcare, sports, culture and other key areas of life in Kazakhstan and its society."[326] As a state-owned news agency, *Kazinform* is the official source of information regarding the activities of the President's Executive Office, Parliament, Government, and regional authorities. The agency primarily publishes news in Kazakh and Russian while also offering content in English, Chinese, and Uzbek on its website. This research collected data from the Russian version of the website.[327] According to Brand Analytics, *Kazinform* ranked second overall and first among state-funded media in terms of the number of social media mentions, being quoted 122,875 times.[328] This figure reflects its widespread popularity in Kazakhstan. The top position in this ranking was held by *Zakon.kz*, which was also selected for this thesis. The following subsection provides a brief discussion of this media outlet.

[325] The website of Vremya is: https://time.kz/.
[326] Kazinform International News Agency. "About Kazinform." Accessed February 11, 2025. https://en.inform.kz/about/.
[327] The website of Kazinform is: https://www.inform.kz/.
[328] Vasiliy Chyorny, "Топ-30 СМИ Казахстана по цитируемости в социальных медиа, февраль 2021." [Top-30 Media of Kazakhstan by Citations in Social Media, February 2021], *Brand Analytics*, https://brandanalytics.ru/blog/top-30-media-kazakhstan/.

4.3.2.4. Zakon.kz

Zakon.kz is one of the largest news agencies in Kazakhstan, attracting a daily audience of over 150,000 visitors to its website.[329] According to Brand Analytics, it ranked first among the top 30 media outlets in Kazakhstan for the number of social media mentions, being quoted 150,187 times in February 2021.[330] Like *Vremya*, *Zakon.kz* is privately owned and covers various topics, including politics, economics, sports, and international events. The agency publishes its content in Kazakh and Russian. For this thesis, data was collected from the Russian version of the website.[331] *Zakon.kz* was selected as the most prominent privately owned online news agency due to its extensive coverage and accessibility to archives of articles published within the timeframe chosen for data collection.

4.3.3. Selected Mass Media from Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, 376 newspapers are registered, including 112 state-owned and 264 privately owned outlets. The country also has 245 magazines, of which 114 are state-owned, and 131 are privately owned, along with 10 news agencies—one state-owned and nine privately owned.[332] When selecting media outlets from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, efforts were made to ensure comparability across key criteria. The aim was to maintain balance by selecting similar types of media from both countries, allowing for a consistent basis of analysis. Table 4 presents the top print and online media outlets in Tajikistan, ranked by consumption and categorized by ownership. *Jumhuriyat* and *Asia-Plus* were chosen for analysis from the print media. From online media, *Khovar* and *Avesta* were selected as data sources. The following subsections offer a brief discussion of the selected media outlets from Tajikistan.

[329] Forbes Kazakhstan, "zakon.kz," https://forbes.kz/ranking/object/727. Accessed February 11, 2025.
[330] Chyorny, "Top-30 Media of Kazakhstan by Citations in Social Media, February 2021."
[331] The website of Zakon.kz is: https://www.zakon.kz/.
[332] Zerkalo, "Исследователи определили медиапредпочтения населения РТ" [Researchers Identified the Media Preferences of the Population of RT], https://zerkalo.tj/news/120-issledovateli-opredelili-mediapredpochteniya-naseleniya-rt.html. accessed February 11, 2025.

Table 4: Top Tajikistan print and online media outlets with ownership information, ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Print Media		Online Media	
	Name	**Owner**	**Name**	**Owner**
1	Oila	Oila Media Holding	News.tj[333]	Asia-Plus Media Group
2	**Jumhuriyat**	**Government of Tajikistan**	**Khovar.tj**	**Government of Tajikistan**
3	**Asia-Plus**	**Asia-Plus Media Group**	**Avesta.tj**	**Muhammad-Bilal LLC**
4	Sadoi Mardum	Government of Tajikistan	Faraj.tj	NGO Public Association Center for Journalistic Research in Tajikistan
5	Minbari khalq	Government of Tajikistan	Pressa.tj	Oila Media Holding

Source: Emily Dumont, Jonathan Solis, and Lincoln Zaleski, *Tajikistan: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, 2023), 6-7.

4.3.3.1. Jumhuriyat

According to the 2022 ranking conducted by the Center for Sociological Research, "Zerkalo," *Jumhuriyat* is the most widely read newspaper in Tajikistan.[334] It has maintained its leading position and remains the country's widely circulated, state-funded official newspaper. The newspaper is published five times a week and covers both domestic and international affairs. As the official journal, *Jumhuriyat* is a key source of information on the activities of the president, government, parliament, and other state bodies. It also publishes official government documents, including laws, presidential decrees, and tenders. The newspaper is printed in the Tajik language and covers various topics such as politics, economics, culture, social life, security, and sports. In addition to its print version, *Jumhuriyat* regularly posts news articles on its official website.[335] For this research, data were collected from both the print and online versions of the newspaper.

4.3.3.2. Asia-Plus

Asia-Plus is a privately owned media group in Tajikistan comprising three independent companies operating under a single brand: a news agency, a newspaper, and a radio station.[336] For this research, both the *Asia-Plus* newspaper and the news agency's website were analyzed.[337] The newspaper *Asia-Plus* holds the highest circulation among independent

[333] Currently, its website is: https://asiaplustj.info/
[334] Zerkalo, "Исследователи определили медиапредпочтения населения РТ" [Researchers Identified the Media Preferences of the Population of RT].
[335] The website of Jumhuriyat is: https://jumhuriyat.tj/.
[336] Asia-Plus, *"О нас"* [About Us], accessed February 11, 2025, https://asiaplustj.info/ru/info/about.
[337] The website of Asia-Plus is: https://asiaplustj.info/ru

socio-political publications in Tajikistan and maintains a strong position in the country's media landscape. It is published in Russian, and the website offers Tajik, Russian, and English content. The publication covers a wide range of national and international topics, including politics, economics, technology, culture, incidents, and sports.

4.3.3.3. Khovar

Khovar is the national information agency of Tajikistan, fully funded by the government and established during the Soviet period. It remains the only state-funded news agency in the country, providing official reports on the activities of government bodies. The agency publishes content in Tajik, Russian, English, Arabic, and Farsi. *Khovar* covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, society, incidents, technology, culture, sports, and world news. For the purposes of this research, data were collected specifically from the Tajik-language version of the agency's website.[338]

4.3.3.4. Avesta

I selected *Avesta* from a group of privately funded news agencies for this research. The agency established in 2004, and it's aims to inform the public and expert community about key events in Tajikistan and neighbouring countries across fields such as politics, security, economy, society, and culture. Unlike *Khovar*, *Avesta* publishes news solely in Russian.[339] Its independent ownership and focus on diverse topics make it an important source for understanding alternative perspectives in Tajik media. Following the selection of media outlets, the following section discusses the timeframe chosen for gathering news published during the selected period from mass media outlets in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

4.3.4. Timeframe for Selected Media Publications

The articles selected for data analysis were published between June 2019 and December 2023. This timeframe was chosen for several reasons. First, June 2019 marks the beginning of the period because the EU adopted a new strategy towards Central Asia, which has been widely recognized in academic literature as a "milestone in the gradual development of relations between the EU and the region."[340] Second, during this period, the EU and Central

[338] The website of Khovar is: https://khovar.tj/
[339] The website of Avesta is: https://avesta.tj/
[340] Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *A Steady Hand: The EU 2019 Strategy and Policy Toward Central Asia* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, November 2019), 5.

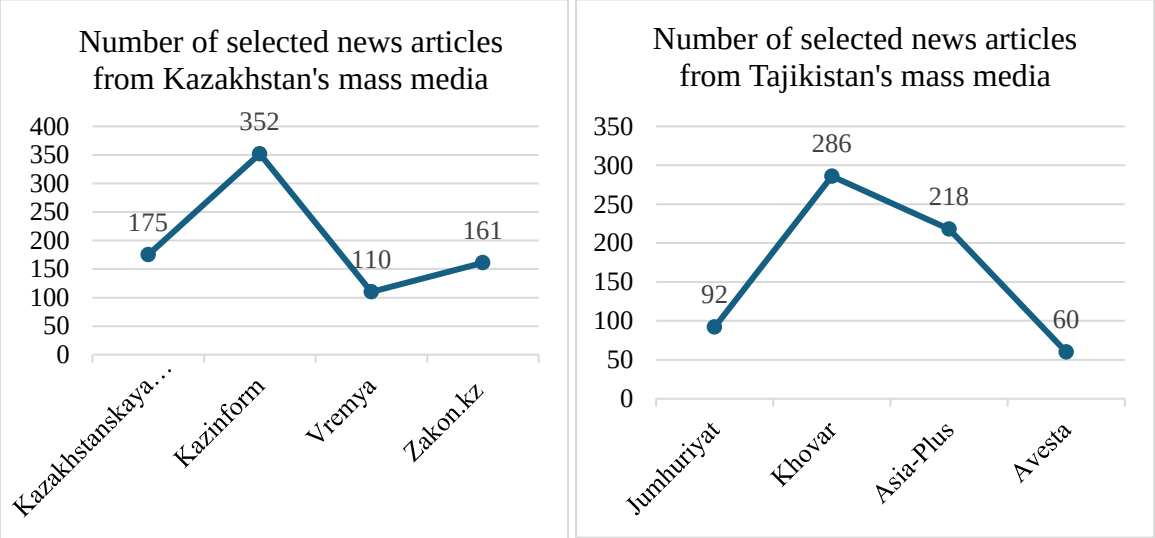
Asian countries further strengthened the legal framework for their relations. The EPCA between the EU and Kazakhstan came into effect in March 2020, and the EU and Tajikistan began negotiations to upgrade their PCA to an EPCA. Third, several significant events occurred during this period that influenced the EU's approach to the region. Notably, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 reshaped the geopolitical landscape in Central Asia and impacted the EU's policy towards the region. Fourth, the war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, prompted the EU to review its policies and position in Central Asia. Lastly, the period concludes in December 2023, marking the end of data collection for the news articles from the online versions of the media selected for this study. This selected time period is long enough to cover the key developments that have significantly influenced EU–Central Asia relations in recent years. In general, this thesis aims to analyze the EU's foreign policy and perceptions following the adoption of the new strategy in 2019 and to explore how shifts in the region's and the world's geopolitics have shaped the EU's portrayal in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The following section will discuss the methodology for data collection from the selected media outlets in both countries.

4.3.5. Search terms and data filtering

News articles for this study were selected based on the presence of specific keywords in the case of online media. To identify relevant articles, I searched for terms such as "European Union," "European Commission," "European Parliament," "European Court of Justice," "European Central Bank," "Council of the European Union," "Schengen," "Eurozone," and "Euro." These terms, along with their Russian and Tajik translations and respective acronyms, were used to collect data from online media and newspaper websites. For the newspaper selection, all issues of the chosen newspapers within the selected timeframe were manually analyzed to identify articles relevant to the research topics. Additionally, the online catalogues of the National Libraries of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were consulted to collect data from printed newspapers. This analysis covered all sections of the newspapers and online media to ensure a comprehensive and accurate representation of the content. Due to the broad scope of the search terms, many results were not directly relevant to the research topic. Therefore, only articles that included at least one paragraph focusing on the search terms as the main subject of the discussion were included. I carefully reviewed each article before saving it to the data collection folder. During the data collection process, it became evident that approximately a quarter of the articles were irrelevant to the research topic. These articles, which mentioned the search terms only briefly or in passing, were excluded from the dataset. After reviewing and organizing all the material collected from newspapers

and online media, I compiled a total of 1,454 relevant articles for further analysis. From these, 798 articles were sourced from Kazakhstani media, while 656 articles came from Tajikistani media, covering the period from June 2019 to December 2023. The intensity of attention given by each selected media outlet is analyzed in Chapter 6, with Figure 2 illustrating the number of articles collected from each selected media.

Figure 2: Number of collected news articles from the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan



Source: Author's collection.

The complete list of news article titles collected and analyzed from all selected sources, including access links for articles retrieved from online media and issue numbers for those obtained from print newspapers, is provided in the online database, which is accessible through the link in the footnote on this page.[341] Due to the lengthy nature of the appendix and character limitations for this thesis, I decided to keep the complete list of collected and analyzed articles in a separate appendix. If any of the news articles are directly cited in the thesis, they are mentioned in the bibliography section. The provided link will remain active until the final defence of this thesis, afterwards, it will be available only upon request.

The next step after data collection is analyzing the collected data. After selecting the news articles for analysis, all articles were saved as PDF documents, totalling 1,454 PDF documents saved for further analysis. I used ATLAS.ti to organize, code, and visualize the data. The following subchapter presents the expert interviews conducted as part of the data collection process for this thesis.

[341] https://drive.google.com/file/d/16DvN-toI5xaKeiYEVdMs3KOswhvhvI_1/view?usp=sharing

4.4. Semi-Structured Expert Interviews

Howard Lune and Bruce Berg, in a basic form, defined an interview as "a conversation with a purpose,"[342] where the interviewer is trying to understand the world from the point of view of the person being interviewed.[343] Valerie Sheppard defined an interview as a data collection method that "involves two or more people exchanging information through a series of questions and answers."[344] Zoltán Dörnyei, citing Kvale, argues that a qualitative interview "is a one-to-one 'professional conversation' that has a structure and a purpose 'to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena'."[345] Interviews provide valuable insights into people's perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and understandings of a particular phenomenon. In this thesis, qualitative interviewing was applied to gather primary data in addition to collecting news articles from selected mass media. Leo Van Audenhove and Karen Donders defined the expert interview as the "interview with a person holding 'expert knowledge',"[346] about the topic of the research. Similarly, according to Lewis Dexter, an expert is someone who has specialized knowledge or has direct experience with the political or social process under study.[347] An expert might be "academics, practitioners, political elite, managers, or any other individuals with specialized experience or knowledge."[348] For the purpose of this research, an expert is defined as an academics and reseachers who has specialized knowledge about the EU-Central Asia relations. Additionally, Von Soest highlights that one of the advantages of conducting expert interviews is that it "may serve as a method of affirmation, meaning the confirmation or disproving of prior research results."[349] In addition to understanding the

[342] Howard Lune and Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 9th ed. (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2017), 65.
[343] Allison L. Hurst, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Helpful Guide for Undergraduates and Graduate Students in the Social Sciences* (Oregon State University, 2023), 138.
[344] Valerie Sheppard, *Research Methods for the Social Sciences: An Introduction* (2020), 239, https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/jibcresearchmethods/.
[345] Zoltán Dörnyei, *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methodologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 134, citing Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 5-6.
[346] Leo Van Audenhove and Karen Donders, "Talking to People III: Expert Interviews and Elite Interviews," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Methods for Media Policy Research*, ed. Hilde Van den Bulck, Manuel Puppis, Karen Donders, and Leo Van Audenhove (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 179, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16065-4.
[347] Lewis Anthony Dexter, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2006 [1970]), cited in Christian von Soest, "Why Do We Speak to Experts? Reviving the Strength of the Expert Interview Method," *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 1 (2023): 278, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722001116.
[348] Cherie Maestas, "Expert Surveys as a Measurement Tool: Challenges and New Frontiers," in *The Oxford Handbook of Polling and Survey Methods*, ed. Lonna Rae Atkeson and R. Michael Alvarez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 585.
[349] Von Soest, "Why Do We Speak to Experts?" 279.

experts' perceptions of EU–Central Asia relations, findings from the interviews can help validate the findings from other sources of data used in this research.

In selecting participants for the interview, I followed the guidance of Eleanor Knott *et al*. on sampling techniques and participant recruitment to ensure that this research was informed by rich, insightful data from a carefully chosen group of experts.[350] I invited interviewees based on their expertise in the EU's role in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Considering this, I tried to conduct interviews with early-career and established researchers, as well as independent and affiliated researchers, in order to have broader perspectives. While the sample was small, it was diverse enough to provide a well-rounded understanding of expert views on the EU's presence and influence in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Thus, this expert selection process was central to the study's design, as I needed to ensure that the experts I interviewed were well-versed in EU policies and perceptions within Central Asia.

The first step in participant selection was defining who should be included in the study, and for my research, this meant selecting individuals with relevant knowledge of EU-Central Asia relations. In particular, I focused on experts from the field of academia, as these individuals had the necessary experience to offer informed insights into the EU's presence in the region. Next, I needed to establish inclusion criteria for selecting my interviewees, and Eleanor Knott *et al*. explain that "researchers should be clear about what characteristics would make an individual a candidate for inclusion in the study."[351] In this study, inclusion criteria consisted of factors such as professional background, expertise in EU relations, and published work or research conducted on EU-related topics in Central Asia.

Once the criteria were set, I began the process of contacting experts. Eleanor Knott *et al*. recommend *purposive sampling*, where participants are selected based on their ability to provide in-depth insights relevant to the research topic.[352] This approach was ideal for my study, as I needed to interview experts who could provide detailed perspectives on EU perceptions in the two countries. Moreover, in addition to purposive sampling, I used *snowball sampling*, which involves asking "participants to introduce the researcher to others

[350] Knott *et al.*, "Interviews in the Social Sciences," 2.
[351] Eleanor Knott *et al.*, "Interviews in the Social Sciences," *Nature Reviews Methods Primers* 2 (2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6.
[352] Knott *et al.*, "Interviews in the Social Sciences," 2.

who meet the study's inclusion criteria."[353] This approach helped me expand my group of experts by using the networks of the initial researchers invited for the interview.

Importantly, my participant selection did not aim to achieve statistical representativeness but rather to gather deep, qualitative insights from individuals with specialized knowledge. As Eleanor Knott *et al*. point out, "the aim is not breadth, via representativeness, but depth via rich insights about a set of participants."[354] This focus on depth was critical for my research, as I needed nuanced perspectives on the EU's role in Central Asia rather than generalizable trends. The interviews were conducted in person, online, and in written form, depending on the availability of the interviewees. These interviews took place between the spring and summer of 2024 and were conducted after completing the literature review and preliminary content analysis of the collected news data to ensure a comprehensive background knowledge of the research before conducting interviews.

The interview process can be divided into three important steps in the case of this research: preparation for the interview, conducting the interview, and transcription and analysis of the interviews. In detail, the following subsections discuss the interview process step by step.

4.4.1. Preparation Phase

As Andrea Fontana and James Frey state, "asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem,"[355] and it requires a lot of research and energy to prepare a list of preliminary interview questions, select interviewees, and coordinate with candidates for the interview, including setting a convenient time and format. In this process, developing an initial set of interview questions requires thought and planning about "what to ask and how" from the interviewee.[356]

A key part of the interview is the preparation phase and creating an interview protocol. First, in this phase, I prepared interview questions based on the literature review and the preliminary results of the conducted content analysis of mass media. As Howard Lune and Bruce Berg recommend using a basic checklist or a list of prepared questions to ensure that

[353] Knott *et al.*, "Interviews in the Social Sciences," 2.
[354] Knott *et al.*, "Interviews in the Social Sciences," 2.
[355] Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, "The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Involvement," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 679.
[356] Rosanne E. Roberts, "Qualitative Interview Questions: Guidance for Novice Researchers," *The Qualitative Report* 25, no. 9 (2020): 3189.

all relevant areas of research are covered during the interview process.[357] Then, secondly, an interview guide was prepared, which included information about the research project, the process of conducting the interview, and the privacy and ethical policies applied for data collection (Appendix B).

The list of experts was prepared, and I contacted them via email with detailed information about the project. The list of interviewed experts is available in Appendix A. After receiving their preliminary responses, practical factors such as the timing and format of the interview were discussed with the interviewees. Flexibility was given to the researchers to select the time that worked best for them, and interviewees could choose from the following formats: in-person, online, or written form. The aim was to ensure that the location and time were convenient for the participants in the research project. The interviewees had the opportunity to select how they would like to be cited in the work.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with ten experts from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. One of the advantages of semi-structured interviews is that the researcher starts with a set of planned questions that are open-ended and flexible. These characteristics of semi-structured interviews give the researcher an opportunity to adapt and ask follow-up questions based on the interviewee's responses. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the subject and can lead to discoveries that might not arise through more structured methods.[358] The open-ended questions for this research allow respondents to elaborate on their answers in detail when necessary, "without being constrained by a fixed set of possible responses."[359] The general questions for the interview are listed in Appendix B.

4.4.2. Conducting the Interview

The interviews were conducted in person, online, or in written form through email exchange. In the case of conducting an online interview, the choice of platform was given to the interviewee, allowing them to select the platform they were most comfortable using. Generally, online interviews were conducted through Zoom or WhatsApp. In the case of a written interview, the form in Appendix B was sent to the interviewees. Since the format is

[357] Lune and Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 68.
[358] Jörg Hecker and Neringa Kalpokas, "Analyzing Interviews," ATLAS.ti, accessed February 12, 2025, https://atlasti.com/guides/interview-analysis-guide/analyzing-interviews.
[359] Zoe Bray, "Ethnographic Approaches," in *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 310.

semi-structured, if follow-up questions arose after reading the written comments, the expert was contacted with additional questions or for further elaboration on certain parts of their comments. The interview questions were generally prepared to understand how experts view and evaluate EU-Central Asian relations. The interviews were conducted in both English and Tajik, and those conducted in Tajik were later translated into English for further analysis. Each in-person and online interview lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour, depending on the follow-up questions asked during the interview. The experts had 30 days for written interviews to return their comments to the questions.

Steven Talmy stresses the importance of allowing interviewees to share final thoughts or ask questions at the end of the interview.[360] In the online and in-person formats, this was the last question. In the written format of the interview, the last part of the form allowed the interviewee to write their final thoughts to ensure that all points they wanted to mention but didn't get a chance to during the interview process were covered, as well as any questions or concerns they may have had about the interview or the project in general. In the process of the interview, all "interviewees have the right not to answer individual questions."[361] This right of the interviewee was mentioned at the beginning of the in-person and online interviews and in the interview questionnaire form for written interviews (Section 1 of Appendix B).

For online interviews, before starting, I asked the interviewee if they permitted the interview recording for later transcription. Recording the interview "permits the interviewer to concentrate on the process of listening, interpreting and re-focusing the interview,"[362] and allows the researcher to focus more on asking follow-up questions rather than taking notes.[363] The interviews were recorded for further transcription and analysis if permission was granted. However, in-person interviews were not recorded. Instead, brief notes were taken during the interview, and a more detailed transcript was written afterwards. The transcription of interviews follows in these subsections, which is key in the interview process and time-consuming, as it requires the researcher to focus on every detail of the interviews.

[360] Steven Talmy, "Qualitative Interviews in Applied Linguistics: From Research Instrument to Social Practice," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 30 (2010): 143, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190510000085.
[361] David E. Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004), 235.
[362] David E. Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004), 227.
[363] Knott *et al.*, "Interviews in the Social Sciences," 4.

4.4.3. Transcription of Interviews

From Elizabeth Halcomb and Patricia Davidson's perspective, transcription is "reproducing spoken words, such as those from an audiotaped interview, into written text."[364] Transcription is a challenging part of the interview process. From Helen Eftekhari's point of view, it's a "time consuming laborious task with an estimated 3–10 h to transcribe 1 h of raw data."[365] Rohaiza Zakaria *et al*. mention the role of transcription as a bridge between raw data and meaningful analysis, which makes it easier to review and interpret what interviewees have shared.[366]

This thesis adopted a hybrid approach to transcribing the interviews, using a mix of manual and software transcription. First, the interviews were transcribed by ATLAS.ti and then manually. The aim of using this hybrid approach was to ensure the efficiency and accuracy of the transcribed data. After the ATLAS.ti transcription, I manually transcribed the recordings by listening to the interviews in order to correct any technical errors and compared the transcribed data with the recorded data to ensure the transcriptions were accurate. It's important to note that these two steps of transcription were applied only for interviews conducted in English. For interviews in other languages, transcription was done manually, as using ATLAS.ti was not very helpful for transcription in Tajik, and it was not among the supported transcription languages of ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti's memo and comment functions are beneficial during transcription, as researchers can correct and write any comments or highlight any part which they think will be helpful in the data analysis process. When there's something in the tone of a participant's voice, such as highlighting certain words or parts of speech, the researcher can mention it in the comment section of the transcribed text.

The next step after preparing the transcription of interviews is analyzing the data gathered from the expert interviews and finding out their views on EU-Central Asian relations. The ten conducted interviews underwent content analysis, which helps identify dominant narratives about the EU's relations with Central Asian states and identify how experts see and perceive the relationships. This stage involves carefully reviewing the transcripts of interviews and coding them to discover the dominant themes in the texts. The following

[364] Elizabeth J. Halcomb and Patricia M. Davidson, "Is Verbatim Transcription of Interview Data Always Necessary?" *Applied Nursing Research* 19, no. 1 (2006): 38, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2005.06.001.
[365] Eftekhari, "Transcribing in the Digital Age," 555-556.
[366] Rohaiza Zakaria, Aede Hatib Musta'amal, Nor Fadilah Mohd Amin, and Halmi Mashindra Saleh, "Transcribing with ATLAS.ti," in *ATLAS.ti User Conference 2015 – Qualitative Data Analysis and Beyond*, Universitätsverlag der TU Berlin, 2015, 1, https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-5157.

subsection will discuss the content analysis and its coding process through ATLAS.ti in further detail.

4.5. Content Analysis

This research employed qualitative and quantitative content analysis to analyze the EU's policy and its perceptions in Central Asia. It involved analyzing official documents, including foreign policy conceptions, speeches, and interviews of officials published earlier, to assess the views of Central Asian governments toward the EU's policy in the region. The study also conducted content analysis of selected articles from the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to understand portrayals of the EU in these countries. Additionally, the research applied content analysis to analyze the views of experts on EU-Central Asia relations.

A number of definitions of content analysis are presented in academic literature. According to Frank Cole, content analysis is a method of analyzing written, verbal, and visual communication messages.[367] In detail, Klaus Krippendorff defined content analysis as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use."[368] Paul Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod broadly define content analysis as a "detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes."[369] Devi Prasad highlights that content analysis helps study "the content with reference to the meanings, contexts, and intentions contained in messages."[370] Content analysis classifies textual material, reducing it to more relevant, manageable bits of data, and enables valid inferences from texts.[371] Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngäs emphasize that content analysis aims "to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, and the outcome of the analysis is concepts or categories describing the phenomenon."[372] From Robert Philip Weber's words, one may summarize that content analysis is a "research method that uses a set of procedures

[367] Frank L. Cole, "Content Analysis: Process and Application," *Clinical Nurse Specialist* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 53, https://doi.org/10.1097/00002800-198800210-00025.
[368] Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2019), 24.
[369] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 275.
[370] Devi Prasad Bammidi, "Content Analysis: A Method of Social Science Research," in *Research Methods for Social Work*, ed. D.K. Lal Das (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008), 173, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1748.1448.
[371] Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 29.
[372] Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngäs, "The Qualitative Content Analysis Process," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (2008): 108, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x.

to make valid inferences from text."[373] The primary purpose of using content analysis in the case of this thesis is "to identify and unpack the play of dominant ideologies within mainstream texts."[374]

As Hesse Biber argues, content analysis as a research method crosses both quantitative and qualitative approaches,[375] which, in the case of this research, is also applicable, as it takes advantage of both methods. Quantitative content analysis refers to the numbers and statistical description of the text data. According to Uma Nath Baral's point of view, in content analysis, the quantitative approach refers to the "type of approach where the data have the numerical values, as data are laden with numbers, figures and percentage scale of measurement."[376] This method is helpful for measuring the frequency of specific themes and patterns in the data, helping researchers identify the most prominent topics in the collected data, and in the case of this research, these advantages of the quantitative method are applied.

Qualitative content analysis is context-specific and treats context as central to interpreting and analyzing the material. Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon argue that it is "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data."[377] Qualitative content analysis methods help uncover different viewpoints of various people or groups about a specific issue. In detail, Philipp Mayring defines qualitative content analysis as "an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification."[378] Content analysis aims to reduce a large amount of text into smaller categories. In content analysis, codes are the basic units of analysis that capture important aspects of the data, which are relevant to the research questions. The codes serve as the basis for identifying themes, which are broader patterns rooted in a central idea.[379] The following subsection discusses the coding process.

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[373] Weber, *Basic Content Analysis*, 9.
[374] Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *The Practice of Qualitative Research: Engaging Students in the Research Process*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017), 324.
[375] Hesse-Biber, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 325.
[376] Uma Nath Baral, "'Research Data' in Social Science Methods," *Journal of Political Science* 17 (2017): 93.
[377] Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (November 2005): 1278, https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687.
[378] Philipp Mayring, "Qualitative Content Analysis," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1, no. 2 (June 2000): 2, https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089/2386.
[379] Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, "Thematic Analysis," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 3 (2017): 297, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613.

4.5.1. Coding Process

Johnny Saldaña defined a code as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of languagebased or visual data."[380] In the case of this research, the coding of the data plays two important roles, (i) it serves as a tool for organizing and categorizing data, and (ii) it transforms raw data into meaningful analytical insights. The coding process of content analysis of this thesis's data involves reading through the text and picking out a section of the text, whether it's only a phrase, a sentence, a phrase, a longer passage, or the whole part of the text, and giving it a label that captures its meaning.

According to Mai Skjøtt Linneberg and Steffen Korsgaard, the coding of the data is a transformative process that reshapes the initial text into a new form of output.[381] As a result, the applied codes reveal underlying meanings that were not immediately apparent in the original text. Most widely, researchers use two types of coding: inductive and deductive coding. According to Saldaña, researchers start coding with a preliminary prepared list of codes when applying the deductive coding method. In contrast, in the case of using the inductive method of coding, researchers generate codes as they progress in the data analysis process.[382] Inductive coding is useful when the researcher aims to discover new patterns from the text in the process of finding answers to research questions and not limiting themselves to only testing hypotheses. In an inductive approach, codes are developed directly from the data, allowing researchers to stay flexible and adapt as new insights emerge. For the case of this research, the inductive coding approach was adopted because no pre-existing codebook was available, and the researcher explored the data without limiting it to specific codes, applying codes *directly* from the data.

In practical terms, content analysis is "time consuming and labour-intensive,"[383] compared to other methodologies. The extensive data can often overwhelm human coders when manually coding, and Seth Lewis et al. suggest, "traditional forms of manual content analysis were not designed to handle huge datasets of media texts … on the other hand, algorithmic analyses of content remain limited in their capacity to understand latent meanings or the

[380] Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016), 4.
[381] Mai Skjøtt Linneberg and Steffen Korsgaard, "Coding Qualitative Data: A Synthesis Guiding the Novice," *Qualitative Research Journal* 19, no. 3 (2019): 6, https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012.
[382] Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016), 75.
[383] Virginia Wilson, "Research Methods: Content Analysis," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 6, no. 4 (2011): 178.

subtleties of human language."[384] Considering these factors, previous research suggests that combining computer-assisted content analysis with traditional manual coding enhances both the reliability and validity of content analysis, and arguing that "blending computational and manual methods throughout the content analysis process may yield more fruitful results."[385] In analyzing a large data set, especially collected news articles from media, this thesis uses computer-assisted software in the content analysis process to provide a broad picture of the research.

Weber suggests that there is no single right way to conduct content analysis, and it depends on the researchers and research questions, as the questions guide the way of conducting a content analysis.[386] James Drisko and Tina Maschi also support Weber's point but emphasize that researchers need to ensure that "content analysis must be systematic, methodologically based, and transparently reported."[387] In the following section, I will discuss why this thesis uses a computer-assisted program and why specifically ATLAS.ti was selected.

4.5.2. Computer-Assisted Content Analysis

There are many ways to code data in the content analysis process. Traditionally, manual coding can be more effective for smaller datasets, but traditional content analysis may not be helpful when a researcher works with larger data sets. Using software can speed up the research process and improve the research's transparency, validity, and reliability. Researchers have been using computer-assisted software to analyze data for almost forty years. The use of technology in content analysis, such as computer-assisted coding of documents, is now common practice in social science research.[388] Today, qualitative coding is much easier using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Qualitative researchers have been using computer-assisted software, such as MAXQDA, ATLAS.ti, and NVivo. These software programs have developed extensively in recent years, expanding their use beyond data analysis. The softwares also help with tasks like project management, literature reviews, data collection, and writing reports.[389] Such software helps speed up a

[384] Seth C. Lewis, Rodrigo Zamith, and Alfred Hermida, "Content Analysis in an Era of Big Data: A Hybrid Approach to Computational and Manual Methods," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 1 (2013): 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.76170.
[385] Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida, "Content Analysis in an Era of Big Data," 1.
[386] Weber, *Basic Content Analysis*, 13.
[387]James W. Drisko and Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.
[388] Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, and DeWaard, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, 278.
[389] Andrew John Hutchison, Lynne Halley Johnston, and Jeff David Breckon, "Using QSR-NVivo to Facilitate the Development of a Grounded Theory Project: An Account of a Worked Example," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 13, no. 4 (October 2010): 285, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570902996301.

researcher's tasks, especially when combining qualitative and quantitative data. Using software makes the analysis process more manageable, especially when dealing with large amounts of data. The software keeps all included data in one place, helps organize it, assists in finding specific pieces of information much faster through simple search functions, and aids in visualizing findings from the data.[390] In general, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software offers many tools to help with different parts of research from the early stages until presenting the findings, including collecting and managing data, searching and querying, coding, making notes, visualizing data, and collaborating with other researchers when working in group projects.

Marilyn Domas White and Emily E. Marsh believe that using computer software for content analysis makes the process much faster, especially when there are many documents to analyze. The authors identified several important roles of computer software in content analysis: (i) it acts like a research assistant, helping to organize data, simplify code creation, take notes, group similar items, and make editing and coding easier; (ii) it manages and extracts data by matching text with special dictionaries; (iii) it works as a data collection tool by keeping both the original and coded data in the same place, only one click away from the researcher, and (iv) it helps with quantitative analysis by counting frequencies and calculating percentages.[391]

According to Daniel Riffe et al., technology can make content analysis more efficient and reliable as long as it doesn't harm the accuracy of the data.[392] Researchers' opinions on using software in content analysis remain divided. The majority support its use, while a minority remain sceptical. Before adopting such software, it's important to consider both perspectives and make an informed decision accordingly. Supporters of using software in the process of content analysis point out several advantages, including: (i) first and foremost, software helps manage data faster and more efficiently;[393] (ii) second, software helps analyze large amounts of data, which is impossible to do manually,[394] and simplifies complex tasks for

[390] Hesse-Biber, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 339.
[391] Marilyn Domas White and Emily E. Marsh, "Content Analysis: A Flexible Methodology," *Library Trends* 55, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 40, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2006.0053.
[392] Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy, Brendan R. Watson, and Jennette Lovejoy, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2024), 70.
[393] Joy D. Bringer, Lynne Halley Johnston, and Celia H. Brackenridge, "Using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software to Develop a Grounded Theory Project," *Field Methods* 18, no. 3 (August 2006): 248, https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X06287602.
[394] Michael Bergin, "NVivo 8 and Consistency in Data Analysis: Reflecting on the Use of a Qualitative Data Analysis Program," *Nurse Researcher* 18, no. 3 (2011): 6.

researchers;[395] (iii) third, software can increase the accuracy of research methods,[396] enhance transparency in the research process,[397] and make the process and findings more reliable.[398] The software's search and visualization functions also allow researchers to see data in new ways that manual content analysis methods cannot provide.[399] Earlier research conducted in various fields shows that researchers widely use data analysis software to manage and analyze data and visually represent their findings.

However, it is also important to consider the criticisms of using software, as some critical perspectives highlight several disadvantages of data analysis software: (i) first, the cost of some software can be very high, and a lot of time and effort is needed to learn how to use software properly,[400] (ii) second, another concern is that researchers might rely too much on the tools, leading to unrealistic expectations about the results of the analysis,[401] (iii) some researchers also argue that using software for coding might reduce the need for deep reading and reflection.[402] Some of the mentioned disadvantages are valid, such as the software license cost and the time required to learn new software. However, it is worthwhile to learn, as analyzing large datasets manually would be very difficult. Some of the mentioned disadvantages of the software can be addressed by using a hybrid approach to content analysis, which makes the findings more reliable. Considering the advantages and disadvantages discussed in the literature, I tried to reduce the software's limitations in this research. In the case of this research, a hybrid approach was applied. The data was collected, uploaded to the software, and then manually coded by reading and analyzing all of the data within the software. The software was used to organize the coding process and visualize the findings.

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[395] Walter Schönfelder, "CAQDAS and Qualitative Syllogism Logic—NVivo 8 and MAXQDA 10 Compared," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011): 24, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1514.

[396] Lyn Richards, "Qualitative Computing—a Methods Revolution?," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 5, no. 3 (2002): 275, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570210146302.

[397] Mary Ryan, "Making Visible the Coding Process: Using Qualitative Data Software in a Post-Structural Study," *Issues in Educational Research* 19, no. 2 (2009): 145.

[398] Nicholas Jenkins, Karen Monaghan, and Michael Smith, "Did They Really Say That? An Agential Realist Approach to Using Computer Assisted Transcription Software in Qualitative Data Analysis," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 26, no. 1 (2023): 107, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1965037.

[399] Carolyn J. Siccama and Stacy Penna, "Enhancing Validity of a Qualitative Dissertation Research Study by Using NVivo," *Qualitative Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (2008): 92, https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0802091.

[400] Herbert H. Thompson, James A. Whittaker, and Florence E. Mottay, "Software Security Vulnerability Testing in Hostile Environments," in *Proceedings of the 2002 ACM Symposium on Applied Computing* (2002): 263, https://doi.org/10.1145/508791.508844.

[401] Katie MacMillan and Thomas Koenig, "The Wow Factor: Preconceptions and Expectations for Data Analysis Software in Qualitative Research," *Social Science Computer Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 179, https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439303262625.

[402] Kaefer, Roper, and Sinha, "A Software-Assisted Qualitative Content Analysis," 16.

Currently, a wide range of software is available for conducting content analysis, and it is important for researchers to carefully evaluate each software option to understand what it brings to the research and to be aware of any limitations it may present. Considering all the factors in this research and the available software options, ATLAS.ti was selected for content analysis. In addition to its content analysis support, as discussed above, ATLAS.ti is suitable for literature reviews and interview transcription. One of the main reasons for selecting ATLAS.ti for content analysis is that it helps make the coding process more manageable by automatically recording the codes. Another benefit of this software is that it can access coded text and keep it connected to the original source, making it easy to check the analysis against the original data. Additionally, coding frequencies can be quickly seen, which helps in the quantitative data analysis. Jörg Hecker and Neringa Kalpokas highlight that by using ATLAS.ti, researchers can speed up their analysis and obtain more accurate and detailed results.[403] Unlike manual coding in content analysis, ATLAS.ti enhances the efficiency and organization of the coding process, making it more structured and manageable. It allows researchers to build networks that show how different codes and themes are connected, making it more straightforward to interpret complex relationships within the data.

What I found particularly useful was how ATLAS.ti helped me stay organized and navigate through large amounts of data without feeling overwhelmed. It's important to highlight that the software is just a tool and does not replace the researcher's ability to think critically and interpret the data. Even when using software for content analysis, the researcher defines its role in the research process and remains responsible for gathering data, coding it, and interpreting the findings. In ATLAS.ti, the researcher remains at the heart of data analysis, defining and coding specific parts of the text based on research questions or theoretical frameworks.

In the research process, having access to technical support is very important. One of the reasons for choosing ATLAS.ti over other available software was its 24/7 customer support service, where customer service professionals assist with any issues that arise. I contacted them a few times during my research and immediately received feedback. Overall, ATLAS.ti was instrumental in organizing data, coding, and visualizing findings, tasks that manual content analysis might not achieve with the same level of efficiency and effectiveness.

[403] Jörg Hecker and Neringa Kalpokas, "Coding Interviews," ATLAS.ti, accessed February 13, 2025, https://atlasti.com/guides/interview-analysis-guide/coding-interviews.

4.6. Research Ethics and Reflexivity

Ethical considerations and researcher reflexivity were important throughout all stages of this PhD dissertation. As Siti Roshaidai Mohd Arifin highlights, in qualitative research the ethical dimension is especially important because the research process is long and complex, and researchers must ensure that their work is conducted in a responsible and ethical way.[404] For this reason, this study paid close attention to ethical principles during data collection, analysis, and also when presenting the findings.[405]

As discussed in the subpart on semi-structured expert interviews, the research followed the main principles of social science ethics, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality of expert interview participants. Participation in expert interviews was fully voluntary. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview process, and how the data would be used. They were also clearly told that they could skip any question or stop the interview at any time without giving any explanation. In addition, interviewees were given a choice regarding how they would be identified in this PhD dissertation. Some experts agreed to be mentioned by name and institutional affiliation, while others preferred to remain anonymous. Their preferences were fully respected throughout the research process. As mentioned in the above subpart, for online interviews, permission to record the conversation was requested in advance. The recordings were used only for transcription and analysis and were stored securely together with other research materials.

In terms of other data sources used for this research, the collection of mass media articles and official documents did not involve human participants, as all materials were publicly available. However, all sources were still handled according to academic standards, and they were properly cited and acknowledged in the bibliography and footnotes.

According to Earl Babbie and Allen Rubin, ethical responsibility is important not only in data collection but also in analysis and in the publication of findings.[406] In the case of this

[404] Siti Roshaidai Mohd Arifin, "Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Study," *International Journal of Care Scholars* 1, no. 2 (2018): 30, https://doi.org/10.31436/ijcs.v1i2.82

[405] During the preparation of this dissertation, I used artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT (GPT-4o), Claude (Claude 3.5 Sonnet), and Google Gemini (Gemini 1.5 Pro), solely for language editing purposes, such as improving grammar and clarity. I carefully reviewed all modifications and take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and conclusions of this work.

[406] Allen Rubin and Earl R. Babbie, *Essential Research Methods for Social Work*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning, 2009), 40.

dissertation, ethical principles were also followed during the data analysis and presentation of findings.

Reflexivity was also an important part of this research. In qualitative studies, it is important for researchers to reflect on how their own background, experiences, and position may influence the research process. As Roni Berger notes, researchers are not completely detached observers but are always connected to the social and political contexts they study.[407] From this point, it can be concluded that reflecting on the researcher's position is important for improving transparency and credibility.

In this study, the researcher comes from Central Asia and works on research topics related to this region. This background provided some advantages during the research process. For example, familiarity with the political, cultural, and historical context of Central Asia helped in understanding regional developments more deeply. It also made it easier to access and interpret local sources in Russian and Tajik, and to communicate with experts, including understanding details that may not be obvious to researchers without regional knowledge.

At the same time, the researcher also recognizes that being close to the research context may create a risk of bias or subjective interpretation. As Roni Berger also suggests, personal experience, regional background, and prior knowledge can influence how data is selected, coded, and interpreted.[408] For this reason, conscious efforts were made to reduce such influence and to maintain analytical distance as much as possible.

Several steps were taken throughout the research process to limit the impact of personal assumptions on the findings. First, clear and transparent criteria were used for selecting media outlets, interview participants, and official documents. Second, data were collected from different sources, including official documents, media articles, and expert interviews, which allowed for triangulation of findings. Third, the coding process was carried out in a systematic way and repeated in three rounds to ensure consistency and reduce the risk of missing contradictory evidence. Finally, preliminary results were presented at academic conferences and discussed with scholars, experts, and the dissertation supervisor, which helped to challenge interpretations and improve the overall analysis through external

[407] Roni Berger, "Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Research* 13, no. 1 (2013): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475.
[408] Ibid.

feedback. The following subpart discusses in detail the steps that this research followed in order to guarantee the trustworthiness of the research's findings.

4.7. Determining Trustworthiness

In the process of conducting this research, I followed several steps to establish its trustworthiness and guarantee that the findings are reliable and valid. During the first steps of the research, four news media outlets, two from each country of the study, were selected for preliminary analysis. Following data collection covering June 2019 to June 2023, content analysis of 196 news articles was conducted manually. After completing the manual content analysis, the findings were published as an article, and valuable comments and suggestions for improvement were received during the publication process. In the next step, data were collected from the same mass media outlets, and content analysis was conducted with the help of ATLAS.ti software. The results of this step's findings were presented at an international conference, and after the presentation, valuable feedback was received from experts in the field to improve the research. Then, I compared the results of the manual content analysis with those obtained from computer-assisted analysis, which confirmed the consistency of findings across both methods. The findings from both steps published and throughout the publication process, whether for journal articles or conference papers, the feedback from anonymous reviewers significantly improved this thesis methodology and research results. Additionally, presenting different parts of the thesis at various conferences and publishing multiple parts of its preliminary findings allowed me to discuss it with my supervisor, other scholars and experts in the field and receive feedback on its improvement. These exchanges further enhanced the understanding of the research topic and contributed to refining the findings. Furthermore, to better understand how to use ATLAS.ti in content analysis, I joined multiple webinars organized by the software company at different stages of this research process. These sessions provided essential insights into effectively using ATLAS.ti and helped me improve the overall research process.

It should be noted that using software tools like ATLAS.ti doesn't automatically guarantee the reliability of research findings. However, the ATLAS.ti offers features that can make the research process more transparent and organized. In the case of ATLAS.ti, the ability to track every action taken within the software enables the researcher to review and document the process at any research stage. Moreover, the software allows the export of coded quotations, which helps write a data analysis part of the research. Also, the software supports

the visualization of the study's findings. In this study, data coding was performed in three rounds using ATLAS.ti to analyze relevant data and avoid overlooking significant details thoroughly. The issue of transparency is often questioned when using software for content analysis since the processes involved are not always visible to readers, and this limitation has been widely recognized in research.[409] Florian Kaefer *et al*. point out that software-based qualitative research often lacks a "detailed account of data collection procedures, steps involved in the analysis process, and how those lead to specific results and conclusions,"[410] They suggest that "making the research process transparent can enhance its trustworthiness and perceived quality."[411] Julius Kikooma similarly advises that to ensure transparency in research using computer-assisted data analysis tools, "screen captures can be used as a way to maximize transparency when communicating research findings and can also be a way to demonstrate consistent use of software, thus allowing others to accurately evaluate the research."[412] Due to space limits that this thesis needs to follow, this methodology chapter does not include a detailed description of every step in the data analysis process. However, to ensure transparency of the research, a separate supporting file has been prepared, which presents the details of the data analysis process using ATLAS.ti. This file provides a more comprehensive overview of how the news articles collected from the selected mass media were analyzed. It can be accessed through the link provided in the footnote, and the same accessibility policy applies to this material as to the previous link.[413]

The researcher acknowledges that one of the primary challenges in ensuring the validity of the research process is a "researcher bias."[414] Coming from Central Asia and researching this topic could influence the research findings. As Paula Roberts *et al*. discuss, researcher bias can affect the selective approach in data collection and "interpretation based on personal perspectives."[415] Considering this research bias, I followed various steps to minimize its influence on the findings of this study. The media selection process and interview procedures

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[409] Julius F. Kikooma, "Using Qualitative Data Analysis Software in a Social Constructionist Study of Entrepreneurship," *Qualitative Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (2010): 45, http://dx.doi.org/10.3316/QRJ1001040.
[410] Florian Kaefer, Juliet Roper, and Paresha Sinha, "A Software-Assisted Qualitative Content Analysis of News Articles: Example and Reflections," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 16, no. 2 (2015): 14, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-16.2.2123.
[411] Kaefer, Roper, and Sinha, "A Software-Assisted Qualitative Content Analysis," 15.
[412] Kikooma, "Using Qualitative Data Analysis Software," 48.
[413] https://docs.google.com/document/d/12skuEqpmZHo8zUSydO-I_JZaX6x6Qwxx/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=102785025736340923613&rtpof=true&sd=true
Note: This supporting file is currently in the process of being completed and may not be available at the time of your initial review. It will be finalised step by step during the preliminary debate of this thesis.
[414] Paula Roberts, Helena Priest, and Michael Traynor, "Reliability and Validity in Research," *Nursing Standard* 20, no. 44 (2006): 44.
[415] Roberts, Priest, and Traynor, "Reliability and Validity," 44.

were carefully designed to guarantee the objectivity of the findings. A clear set of criteria was followed when selecting media outlets, assuring a balanced representation of viewpoints. Similarly, interviewees were selected carefully, maintaining fairness and avoiding personal bias. The researcher adopted a triangulation approach to reduce the impact of researcher bias further and gathered multiple perspectives on the topic by combining content analysis of official documents and speeches, mass media content analysis and expert interviews. The author believes this approach strengthened the findings' validity and minimized the influence of personal bias.

4.8. Methodological Limitations

It is important to acknowledge some methodological limitations in this research. Firstly, while this thesis focuses on the cases of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and the thesis is not claiming that the findings can be fully applied to all Central Asian countries. Instead, the aim is to keep the conversation open, and encourage contributions from other researchers in the field. A similar methodology can be applied in the case of other Central Asian countries. Secondly, the content analysis in this thesis only covers articles from eight selected mass media outlets in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, chosen by the specific criteria mentioned above. The thesis is limited to these eight mass media outlets, and covering other mass media was beyond its scope. Thirdly, this thesis does not claim to provide a complete perception of the EU in the selected Central Asian countries. It covers only the official perspectives from official documents, mass media portrayals, and experts' perceptions of EU-Central Asian relations. The other approaches remain outside the scope of this study and are open for further research. Fourthly, in the case of mass media publication selection, the reader should bear in mind that the study analyzes the perceptions of the EU in mass media publications between June 2019 and December 2023. Perceptions can change quickly, and the data collected from mass media only represents the EU's perceptions in the selected timeframe. Lastly, the methodology used in this study presents some inherent limitations. Since the author is responsible for analyzing and coding the data, it should be highlighted that there is a risk of bias due to personal interpretations, as discussed above. James Drisko and Tina Maschi argue that it is common for multiple researchers to be involved in qualitative content analysis to ensure inter-coder reliability.[416] This thesis is an independent work by the author, so this suggestion is not applicable in this case. Instead, as discussed in the above subchapter,

[416] James W. Drisko and Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 76.

I followed strict guidelines to minimize this, and three rounds of coding were applied in the data coding process. All efforts were made to keep the coding process transparent by clearly describing it in the following chapters and including additional details in the supporting file.

PART II: EU–CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

Chapter 5. The European Union's Foreign Policy in Central Asia

5.1. Overview

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was "back once more in the thick of the news, and looks like staying there for a long time to come."[417] This prediction was made by Peter Hopkirk back in 1992, and Central Asia continues to hold its position as a geopolitically important region. Currently, significant attention is being paid by both global and regional powers to this region. During the Soviet era, the Central Asian countries were mainly unknown to the outside world. The signing of the Belovezha Accords on December 8, 1991, by the President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, the President of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, and the Chairman of the Parliament of Belarus, Stanislav Shushkevich, who was *de jure* head of state in Belarus at that time, was a formal agreement recognizing each other's independence and marked the first step in creating CIS to replace the Soviet Union.[418] Later, on December 26, 1991, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. The Central Asian countries, following the Baltic states, began declaring their independence from the Soviet Union. The first country in the region to declare independence was Kyrgyzstan, which did so on August 31, 1991. It was followed by Uzbekistan, which announced its independence on September 1, 1991, and then Tajikistan, where the Supreme Council adopted the independence declaration and announced the country's independence on September 9, 1991. Later, Turkmenistan declared its independence on September 27, 1991, and finally, Kazakhstan became the last Central Asian country to proclaim independence on December 16, 1991.

Central Asian countries despite sharing significant historical, cultural, and religious commonalities, unlike the EU, is "not home to a regional integrationist project with a well-developed institutional structure."[419] There are different views on which countries can be included as Central Asian countries. It's important to highlight here that there is a widely

[417] Cited in Neil Collins and Kristina Bekenova, "Fuelling the New Great Game: Kazakhstan, Energy Policy and the EU," *Asia Europe Journal* 15 (2017): 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-016-0451-4.
[418] Сергей Миронович Юн (Sergey Mironovich Yun), *Политика Европейского Союза в Центральной Азии: от «открытия» региона к «стратегии нового партнерства» (1992–2008 гг.)* (*The European Union's Policy in Central Asia: From the "Discovery" of the Region to the "New Partnership Strategy" (1992–2008)*), (Томск: Томский государственный университет, 2009), 175.
[419] Daniel Kimmage, "Security Challenges in Central Asia: Implications for the EU's Engagement Strategy," in *Engaging Central Asia: The European Union's New Strategy in the Heart of Eurasia*, ed. Neil J. Melvin (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2008), 12.

accepted definition of which countries belong to Central Asia, and scholars, along with international and regional organizations, currently group together Central Asia as a region consisting of five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.[420]

Central Asian countries are attracting the attention of actors in international relations due to their geopolitical position, trade potential, natural resources, and security. Moreover, Central Asian countries are located at the "geographical heart of Asia and has been historically central to the exchange between Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East."[421] As a result, major actors in international relations have intersecting interests in Central Asia, and each global and regional actor is developing unique strategies for building relationships with the region's countries. In Central Asia, there is a growing activity from countries in close geographical proximity, such as Russia, which shares a border with Kazakhstan, and China, which shares a border with three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Even after more than thirty years since the Soviet Union's collapse, Central Asian countries remain, to some extent, politically and economically tied to Russia. This connection is mainly due to the continued use of the Russian language in Central Asian countries, the influence of Russian media, and the significant movements of people and goods between Russia and Central Asian countries, which in turn keeps Russia as a dominant external actor in the region.[422] On the other hand, China's influence in Central Asia is mainly exercised through its aid, debt, trade, and the implementation of development projects in the region.[423] Meanwhile, the USA is also one of the region's significant actors and substantially impacts the region's development. Additionally, other actors, such as Türkiye, Iran, and India, are no less important in the geopolitics of Central Asia, and they are actively engaging with the region and implementing their own strategies.

Meanwhile, the EU is a *latecomer* compared to other currently active actors in the region. The EU has gradually recognized the importance of Central Asia, and its engagement with Central Asian countries has undergone significant evolution over the thirty-year period of

[420] Selbi Hanova, "The Interplay of Narratives on Regionness, Regionhood and Regionality: European Union and Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 699, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2117134.
[421] Stefan B. Kirmse, "Spatial Conceptions of Central Asia: A Historical Overview," in *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation*, ed. Jakob Lempp and Sebastian Mayer (Springer Nature, 2024), 19.
[422] Juraev, "Comparing the EU and Russia Engagements in Central Asia," 78.
[423] Fabienne Bossuyt, "The EU's and China's Development Assistance towards Central Asia: Low versus Contested Impact," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no. 5–6 (2018): 615, https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1581635.

cooperation. Various factors, including security concerns, energy diversification, economic and trade interests, the promotion of democratic values, and geopolitical factors, have influenced the EU's development of relations. The EU first established diplomatic ties with Central Asian countries in the early 1990s and opened its first regional mission in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan at that time. Moreover, Central Asian countries became important from Brussels' perspective after the EU's eastward expansion in 2004, as Central Asia became a *neighbor of the neighbors*.[424] Additionally, the region's strategic location attracted the EU's and other actors' attention. Moreover, the beginning of the war in Afghanistan and North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 positioned Central Asian countries as a transit hub for some EU countries that were also NATO members. Subsequently, the EU's increasing interest in energy made Central Asia more visible in the EU's foreign policy. In examining the EU's growing interest in the region, several key factors should be highlighted, including but not limited to: first, the geostrategic location of Central Asia; second, the region's role as a trade corridor between Europe and Asia; third, its rich energy and natural resources, which attract the EU's interest in energy diversification; and fourth, the proximity of Central Asian countries to Afghanistan, which makes the region more important in the eyes of Brussels.[425]

In terms of regional cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, in 2007, the EU adopted its strategy towards Central Asian countries to deepen its engagement with the region. The strategy was launched during Germany's EU presidency and, as argued in academic sources, primarily reflected Germany's interest in Central Asia.[426] However, the strategy was widely criticized for treating the region as a single, uniform entity while failing to consider the unique characteristics of each Central Asian country and not considering the region's needs in its preparation. As a result, the strategy was not very effective. In response to this, the EU Council began working on a new strategy in 2017, which was officially adopted in June 2019.[427] As former EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Peter Burian, put it, this time, the EU took a different approach in preparing the strategy by actively involving the Central Asian countries in the process.[428] The goal was to understand better the region's priorities, challenges, and expectations regarding the EU's role in the region. Considering

[424] Kamen Velichkov, "EU Policy in Central Asia: An Externally Constructed Regionalism," *Politeja* no. 4(73) (2021): 29, https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.18.2021.73.02.
[425] Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia," 18.
[426] Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia*, 49.
[427] General Secretariat of the Council, *Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia* (2017): 6, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf (accessed September 29, 2024).
[428] Susann Heinecke, "EU–Central Asia relations: New opportunities for a stronger partnership? Interview with Peter Burian," *EUCACIS in Brief* 9 (2019): 7.

the latest geopolitical developments in the region and the world, since the beginning of 2024, there has been discussion within EU institutions about preparing and adopting a new strategy towards Central Asia and developing its relations to a new level. The EU's cooperation with Central Asian countries at the bilateral level is guided by legal agreements signed with these countries, including the EPCA between the EU and Kazakhstan and the PCAs signed with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which regulate the bilateral relations between the EU and these countries. In contrast, in the case of Turkmenistan, relations are governed by an Agreement on trade and trade-related matters.

Looking at it from the perspective of Central Asian countries, after gaining independence, Central Asian countries began shaping their foreign policies independently and implementing a multi-vector approach, seeking to balance their relationships with various actors in international relations. During the Soviet period, Moscow oversaw the implementation of foreign policy for all fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics. In recent years, developing relations with the EU has been a key priority for most Central Asian countries. The region's countries aim to strengthen trade relations with EU countries and attract foreign investment from the EU and its member states. The EU market remains important for Central Asian countries due to its large population, high-income levels, regulatory framework, and competitive trade opportunities.[429]

The primary aim of this chapter is to analyze the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia and to answer the first research question: which areas of cooperation the EU is prioritizing in its cooperation with Central Asian countries. To achieve this, after this introduction, the first part of this chapter analyzes the brief historical background of the EU's relationship with Central Asian countries. Following this, the EU's strategies for Central Asia and the legally binding agreements signed between the EU and Central Asian countries are analyzed in detail in order to identify which areas of cooperation are more visible in these documents. Next, the most developed areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries are presented in detail in the last part of this chapter. The findings of this chapter allow for a comparison of the policies the EU is implementing in Central Asia with the EU's perceptions in the selected countries, based on the official perspective, media portrayals, and expert views in the following chapters. Finally, a brief conclusion of the chapter is presented.

[429] Nosirkhon Qodirov, "The EU's Engagement with Central Asia: Assessing Achievements and Prospects for Cooperation," *Eurasian World Journal*, no. 13 (October 2023): 75, https://avimbulten.org/public/images/uploads/files/Nosirkhon%20Qodirov(7).pdf.

5.2. The Stages of Cooperation and the Evolution of EU Policies towards Central Asia

The relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries began immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Over time, the EU's involvement in Central Asia has developed.[430] The EU's policy has been shaped by factors such as (i) the region's geostrategic importance, (ii) Central Asia's role as a transit hub for trade between Europe and Asia, (iii) the region's vast energy and natural resource reserves, (iv) efforts to promote human rights and democracy, and (v) the region's closeness to the unstable Afghanistan.[431] Looking back at the history of the relationship, it is evident that in the early years of cooperation, Central Asia was not on the radar of the foreign policy of EU institutions and member states. It is widely accepted by researchers that the EU maintained limited connections with Central Asian countries in the 1990s. As Emilian Kavalski points out, in the first years of cooperation, there was a lack of a clear EU strategy for the region and uncertainty about how the EU should structure its vision for Central Asia.[432] However, in the early 2000s, the EU became more active in Central Asia. This was influenced by two main factors, (i) the growing geopolitical importance of Central Asia and (ii) the EU's increasing role in international politics. Until the adoption of the EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2007, the political presence of the EU was hardly visible in the region.[433] The earlier research analyzing the evolution of cooperation highlights that the EU has repeatedly adjusted its strategies and policies toward the region. Khaydarali Yunusov argues that the EU's relationship with Central Asian countries has never been straightforward.[434] In the early years, the EU lacked information about the region and faced challenges due to internal changes in Central Asian countries.

To better understand EU-Central Asia cooperation and simplify the analysis, the development of this cooperation can be divided into four stages based on the level of engagement and the agreements signed. The first stage, for the purpose of this research, called the *introductory and policy formation stage*, started in the late months of 1991 and lasted until the 9/11 attacks in 2001. During this time, the EU began shaping its policy toward Central Asia. However, the EU was preoccupied with internal issues and did not pay much

[430] Qodirov, "The EU's Engagement with Central Asia," 76-77.
[431] Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia," 18.
[432] Emilian Kavalski, "Whom to Follow? Central Asia between the EU and China," *China Report* 43, no. 1 (2007): 45, https://doi.org/10.1177/000944550604300103.
[433] Anna Matveeva, "EU Policy towards Central Asia," in *EU Stakes in Central Asia*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2006, 83, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06976.8.
[434] Kh. Yunusov, "The European Union and Central Asia: Historical Overview, Current Situation and Prospects," *International Relations and Foreign Policy Issues* 2018, no. 3 (2018): 60.

attention to Central Asia during this period.[435] Instead, the EU directed its focus toward countries and regions with membership potential, such as the Baltic states, which similar to the Central Asian countries, had been part of the Soviet Union. Later on, after the 2004 enlargement, the EU began paying much more attention to Central Asia and other regions without membership prospects. During the 1990s, Central Asia held relatively low significance for EU from a geopolitical point of view. As Emilian Kavalski highlights, the EU's engagement in Central Asia was "patchy at best" during the first years of cooperation.[436] He continues by mentioning that in the early years of cooperation, the EU viewed Central Asia from the perspective of its geographical distance. As a result, the EU's policies and presence in the region were largely reactive.[437] Similarly, Enayatollah Yazdani argues that between 1991 and the mid-1990s, Central Asia held marginal importance for the EU.[438] However, by the mid-1990s, the EU began to recognize the region's energy potential and developed an energy-focused policy toward Central Asia. The turning point came after September 11, 2001, when the region's location and proximity to Afghanistan became a key factor in the EU's growing interest.[439] As a result, the war on terror prompted the EU to revise its approach to the region. At this point, the second stage of cooperation began, which can be characterized as the *wake-up call stage*, which started in 2001 and continued until 2007. According to Enayatollah Yazdani, the war on terror changed the EU's policy direction toward Central Asia.[440] This stage served as a wake-up call for the EU to revise its policy toward the region. However, there was still a clear lack of EU engagement in its relations with Central Asian countries. During this period, both sides recognized the importance of developing stronger relations. Central Asia became more significant to the EU due to its geopolitical positioning, energy resources, and security concerns, particularly given the instability in neighbouring Afghanistan. Thereafter, the EU started considering the region as geopolitically important and started discussions on adopting a strategy to enhance its relationship with Central Asia. The adoption of this strategy marked the beginning of a new phase of cooperation. The third stage, described in this thesis as the *partnership and growing relationship stage*, began with the EU's adoption of its first Central Asia strategy in

[435] Ризоев Бурхон Мирзоевич (Burkhon Mirzoevich Rizoiev), "Стратегия Европейского Союза для Центральной Азии" ("The European Union's Strategy for Central Asia"), *Вестник Таджикского государственного университета права, бизнеса и политики* (Bulletin of the Tajik State University of Law, Business and Politics) 2013, 195–201, 196.
[436] Kavalski, "Whom to Follow?" 45.
[437] Ibid.
[438] Enayatollah Yazdani, "The European Union and Central Asia," *International Studies* 45, no. 3 (2008): 248, https://doi.org/10.1177/002088170904500304.
[439] International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: What Role for the European Union?* Crisis Group Asia Report N°113 (April 10, 2006): 10.
[440] Yazdani, "The European Union and Central Asia," 248.

2007 and lasted until the adoption of the 2019 Strategy. This period was characterized by the EU acknowledging the region's importance and taking a more proactive approach to strengthening ties with Central Asian countries. The EU also focused on increasing its visibility, and one of its key achievements during this time was the opening of an EU representation office in every Central Asian country. Later on, the EU updated its strategy to reflect changes in world politics, which marked the beginning of the fourth stage of the relationship, the *intensification of cooperation stage*. In June 2019, the EU revised its strategy toward Central Asia to deepen cooperation further, marking the start of the ongoing phase.[441] These four stages of the EU-Central Asia relationship will be explored in detail in the next sections to better understand the evolution of cooperation and to address the research question.

5.2.1. Introductory and Policy Formation Stage (1991-2001)

In the early years of cooperation, the EU focused mainly on humanitarian aid, development assistance, and supporting political and economic reforms in the newly independent Central Asian countries. However, during this period, the EU did not have a well-structured and coordinated strategy for the region. At the beginning of this stage, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Agreement on Trade and Commercial and Economic Cooperation[442] between the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the Soviet Union, signed in 1989, was accepted as a temporary agreement that remained in force to regulate relationships with the newly independent countries.[443] Gradually, this was replaced by the PCAs, which were bilaterally signed between almost all the newly independent post-Soviet countries and the EU.

The first stage of the relationship began when Central Asian countries gained independence and the European Economic Community (EEC) recognized their sovereignty. An extraordinary meeting of the EEC's foreign ministers was held in Brussels on December 16, 1991, where the principles for recognizing new states in Eastern Europe and the former

[441] Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia," 18.
[442] "Agreement between the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Trade and Commercial and Economic Cooperation," *Official Journal of the European Communities*, 15 March 1990, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/1990/116(1)/oj/eng.
[443] Berdi Berdiyev, "The EU and Former Soviet Central Asia: An Analysis of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreements," *Yearbook of European Law* 22, no. 1 (2003): 463, https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/22.1.463.

Soviet Union were defined.[444] As a result, the EEC recognized the independence of the newly independent countries, including all the Central Asian countries. This date can be considered the starting point for the relationship between the newly independent Central Asian countries and the EEC, the predecessor of the EU.[445] The EU opened its first representation in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in 1994. Later, the EU gradually opened representative offices in other Central Asian countries. At the same time, the Central Asian countries gradually opened their missions in Brussels and embassies in EU member states. In December 1993, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to open its representation in Brussels.[446]

During the first half of this stage, the EU maintained weak ties with Central Asian countries. It is widely accepted among scholars in the field of EU foreign policy that in the 1990s, the Central Asian countries were barely visible on the EU's foreign policy radar. Emilian Kavalski and Young Chul Cho explain that, at first, the EU viewed the region as part of Russia's sphere of influence and preferred not to become too involved.[447] In the 1990s, there was no clear EU policy toward Central Asia, and the links between EU institutions and Central Asian states were still in their early stages.

In the first half of the first stage of cooperation, Central Asian countries were not considered an independent direction in the foreign policy of the EEC/EU. Enayatollah Yazdani argues that in the early 1990s, the EU did not consider Central Asia a region of strategic importance. Instead, the EU viewed the region as peripheral and had no clear strategic vision guiding its approach to the region.[448] During this stage, the EU was primarily focused on its internal challenges, and little attention was given to the Central Asian countries. However, as time progressed, the EU began to shift its approach. In the second half of this stage, the EU recognized the geopolitical importance of the region and the need to support its economic development. As Sergey Yun highlights, the second half of the first stage marked the period during which the EU began to form its policy toward Central Asia, with a clearer outline

[444] European Economic Community, *Declaration on the Guidelines on the Recognition of New States in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union*, December 16, 1991, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/135135/files/S_23293-EN.pdf.
[445] Alieva, "Improvement and Development of the Republic of Tajikistan's External Relations with the European Union," 98.
[446]Tadeusz Wallas, Radosław Fiedler, and Beata Przybylska-Maszner, "European Union-Central Asia Cooperation in Transition: Characteristics, Determinants, Implications," in *European Union and Central Asia: Cooperation in Transition*, edited by Tadeusz Wallas, Radosław Fiedler, and Beata Przybylska-Maszner (2018), 6.
[447] Kavalski and Cho, "The European Union in Central Eurasia," 54.
[448] Yazdani, "The European Union and Central Asia," 248.

emerging by 1996.[449] The EU's policy in this period was primarily focused on strengthening the independence of the newly independent Central Asian countries and establishing closer bilateral relationships with them. During this time, the EU provided Central Asian countries with technical assistance for economic reform, state-building processes, and supported democratization efforts.[450] In total, the EU provided 944.4 million euros in assistance to the newly independent republics, at this stage.[451]

The European Commission's communication, *The EU's Relations with the Newly Independent States of Central Asia*, which was adopted in 1995, is one of the first documents outlining the EU's vision for its relations with Central Asia. It highlights the EU's interests in the region, "the EU has important interests in Central Asia. These are geopolitical and economic. The development of the energy sector is particularly important to the Union."[452] One of the EU's aims during this period was the "maintenance of stability in the region,"[453] which was seen as crucial for the smooth transition of Central Asian countries.

In this period, a key goal of the EU's involvement in Central Asia was to support stability and economic growth in the region. The EU provided financial and technical assistance to promote democratic reforms, human rights, good governance, and the rule of law. Additionally, it encouraged economic and trade cooperation to strengthen regional integration, diversify economies, and improve connectivity both within Central Asia and between the region and Europe. At this stage, the EU's policy toward Central Asia was aimed at "stabilizing the post-Soviet field, helping in urgent economic issues, and fostering democracy, pluralism and market connections."[454] Alieva argues that the EU's goals at the beginning of the cooperation were, firstly, to support the former Soviet republics of Central Asia on their path to independence; secondly, to develop the EU's ties with Central Asian countries, particularly in the energy and economic sectors; thirdly, to support the democratic reforms of these countries; and finally, to assist in reducing potential conflicts within the region.[455]

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[449] Yun, *The European Union's Policy in Central Asia*, 71.
[450] Ertan Efegil, "Analysis of the EU's Central Asia Policy: From a Project-Oriented Approach to a New Strategic Partnership," *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations* 38 (2007): 116.
[451] Yazdani, "The European Union and Central Asia," 242.
[452] European Commission, *The EU's Relations with the Newly Independent States of Central Asia*, June 9, 1995, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_95_586
[453] European Commission, *The EU's Relations with the Newly Independent States of Central Asia*.
[454] Madina Zhunissova, "The European Union's Soft Power Dynamics in Kazakhstan," *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies* 6, no. 11 (December 2023): 94, https://doi.org/10.56679/balkar.1398137.
[455] Alieva, "Improvement and Development of the Republic of Tajikistan's External Relations with the European Union," 98.

One of the practical mechanisms for cooperation was the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program, which was introduced in early 1990s under a Council Regulation. TACIS aimed "to promote the transition to a market economy and to reinforce democracy and the rule of law in the partner States."[456] The program provided technical support for state-building efforts, assisted in economic reforms, and encouraged foreign direct investment across the Commonwealth of Independent States. This initiative also provided support to all five Central Asian republics.[457] In the case of the Central Asian countries, this was managed by the Delegation of the EU in Kazakhstan. TACIS was originally designed as an assistance program for the entire CIS, but it was not applied uniformly across all member nations. The level of economic and technical support varied according to the EU's strategic interests: Russia, as the largest CIS country, received the highest amount of aid, followed by Eastern European states preparing for EU membership, while the Central Asian countries received comparatively less attention. For instance, between 1991 and 2002, Russia received 2.3 billion euros through this programme, while Central Asian countries, in total, received 366 million euros, which is six times less than Russia.[458] This is particularly significant, as compared to Russia, the Central Asian countries needed financial support to transition to a market economy and democratization process. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most Central Asian countries started building state regulations from scratch. In general, during the program's operation from 1991 to 2006, the EU allocated a total of 537.8 million euros to Central Asia, distributing 166.2 million euros to Kazakhstan, 94.9 million euros to Kyrgyzstan, 51.0 million euros to Tajikistan, 57.5 million euros to Turkmenistan, and 168.2 million euros to Uzbekistan.[459]

The TACIS program operated until the end of 2006 and the closure of TACIS was influenced by several factors, with a key reason being the shifting geopolitical landscape and the achievement of the predetermined goals of the program to some extent. A detailed analysis of how this programme achieved its goals requires further research, but it can generally be concluded that, over its fifteen-year duration, substantial progress was made in economic and political reforms across much of the region.

[456] Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 99/2000 of 29 December 1999 concerning the provision of assistance to the partner States in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2000/99/oj/eng.
[457] Qodirov, "The EU's Engagement with Central Asia," 76.
[458] Karolina Kluczewska and Shairbek Dzhuraev, "The EU and Central Asia: The Nuances of an 'Aided' Partnership," in *Managing Security Threats along the EU's Eastern Flanks*, ed. Rick Fawn (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 227, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26937-1_10.
[459] Andrzej Raszkowski, "Program TACIS w państwach postsowieckich (TACIS Program in Post-Soviet Countries)," *Ekonomia* 16 (2011): 436–445.

During this period, active negotiations between the EU and several Central Asian countries began to prepare the legal base documents for regulating relationships. In the mid-1990s, the EU signed a PCA with some Central Asian countries and established a framework for collaboration in areas such as political dialogue, trade, investment, and development cooperation. In 1992, the EU Council of Ministers adopted a directive to initiate negotiations for a PCA with three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.[460] A PCA is a legally binding treaty between the EU and a non-EU country, aimed at encouraging democratic and economic development in the partner state, and this type of agreement serves as a broad framework for cooperation and structured dialogue across multiple sectors. The PCA with Kazakhstan was signed on January 23, 1995, after several rounds of negotiations, and came into effect in 1999, establishing political dialogue and a mechanism for consultations on mutually significant issues, including global concerns.[461] The Kyrgyz Republic's PCA with the EU was signed in Brussels on February 9, 1995, and took effect on June 1, 1999.[462] Diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and the EU were established on November 16, 1994, and the two sides signed a PCA on June 21, 1996, which officially came into force in 1999.[463] On May 24, 1998, the EU finalized a PCA with Turkmenistan, however, its ratification was postponed by the European Parliament due to concerns over the country's human rights situation.[464] As a result, the primary legal framework governing EU-Turkmenistan relations remains the Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters, which came into effect in August 2010.[465] Meanwhile, the civil war in Tajikistan delayed the negotiation and signing process of the PCA. However, after the signing of the peace agreement and the restoration of stability and security in the country, Tajikistan was able to sign the PCA agreement with the EU. The EU and Tajikistan signed the PCA on November 11, 2004, which officially took effect on January 1, 2010.[466] In general, PCAs address a broad spectrum of areas, including trade, economic relations, investment, human rights, democracy, energy, environmental protection, transport, tourism, financial cooperation, and cross-border services. These agreements have played a key role

[460] Yazdani, "The European Union and Central Asia," 249.
[461] Kembayev, "Partnership between the European Union and the Republic of Kazakhstan," 187.
[462] EEAS, "EU-Kyrgyz Republic Relations," 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-kyrgyz-republic-relations_en (accessed May 10, 2024).
[463] EEAS, "EU-Uzbekistan Relations," 2018, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/11047_en (accessed May 10, 2024).
[464] EEAS, "EU-Turkmenistan Relations," 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-turkmenistan-relations_en (accessed May 6, 2024).
[465] Wallas, Fiedler, and Przybylska-Maszner, "European Union-Central Asia Cooperation in Transition," 6.
[466] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, "Bilateral Relations of Tajikistan with the European Union," 2024, https://mfa.tj/en/main/view/160/bilateral-relations-of-tajikistan-with-the-european-union.

in shaping EU partnerships with Central Asian states, laying the groundwork for political dialogue, trade, investment, and development assistance.[467]

This period was characterized by the implementation of several joint projects in connectivity, energy, and economic development. During this time, one of the EU's main goals in Central Asia was to develop energy cooperation and facilitate the transportation of oil and gas from the region's energy-rich resource countries to the EU. As part of this effort, the EU launched INOGATE in 1996 under the TACIS program.[468] This initiative's goal was to strengthen energy cooperation with 11 countries, including the five Central Asian states, as well as other nations around the Black and Caspian Seas. The primary purpose was to guarantee a stable and long-term supply of oil and gas from former Soviet Union countries to the EU. Specifically, the program focused on upgrading existing pipeline infrastructure and identifying new routes for energy transportation. The EU spent over 150 million euros on more than 70 INOGATE projects from 1996 until the program ended in 2016.[469]

Another key initiative in the field of transportation is Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), a project with a total length of 10,800 km that aims to establish a transport corridor linking Europe to Central Asian countries via the Black Sea and the Caucasus.[470] The EU launched the TRACECA program in May 1993 to improve regional connectivity and trade. The legal foundation for the project was established with the signing of the Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for the Development of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Corridor on September 8, 1998, in Baku.[471] To support its implementation, a permanent TRACECA secretariat was established in Baku in 2001.[472] The program's main goal is to "strengthen economic relations, trade and transport links between the EU and the programme's participating countries."[473]

Strelkov believes that the EU's limited attention to Central Asia during this period is also related to its lack of knowledge about the region and expert assessments regarding Central

[467] Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia," 19–20.
[468] Pavel Petrovich Timofeev, "Политика Франции на постсоветском пространстве" ("France's Policy in the Post-Soviet Space"), *Современная Европа* (*Modern Europe*), no. 2013 (2013): 86.
[469] Svetlana Krivokhizh and Elena Soboleva, "The EU and China: How Do They Fit in Central Asia?" *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 722, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2115009.
[470] TRACECA**,** "TRACECA History," https://traceca-org.org/en/about-traceca/history-of-traceca/ (accessed March 31, 2025).
[471] TRACECA, "Basic Documents," https://traceca-org.org/md/home/basic-documents/ (accessed March 31, 2025).
[472] Cornell and Starr, *A Steady Hand*, 19.
[473] European Commission, "EU Support to the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor," Brussels, 28 February 2012, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_12_141 (accessed March 31, 2025).

Asia's position in world politics.[474] Voloshin Georgiy also highlights in his book that, due to its remote geographical location, Central Asia remained outside the EU's focus in the early years of cooperation. Additionally, he argues that the EU's primary focus was on the post-communist transition of Russia and Eastern European countries, and the EU didn't have a well-defined political or economic interest in cooperating with Central Asian countries.[475] Similarly, Central Asian scholars have expressed the same arguments. Rustem Kurmanguzhin noted that until the mid-1990s, the EU didn't consider Central Asia an independent area of foreign activity.[476] Furthermore, the list of projects mentioned earlier also demonstrates that the EU did not specifically focus on Central Asia during this stage. Rather, it included the region in broader projects without launching any initiatives specifically focused on Central Asia. As Laure Delcour puts it, and as most researchers agree, the EU was a latecomer to Central Asia.[477] It was not active in the region during the early years of the Central Asian countries' independence and only began to engage more actively in the early 2000s. This marked the beginning of the second stage of cooperation, which will be discussed in detail in the following subchapter.

5.2.2. "Wake-up call" stage (2001-2007)

The geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia have shifted significantly at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and as a result, bringing the region into a new phase of transformation. From experts' points of view, the region is experiencing a revival of the *Great Game*, similar to that of the nineteenth century, but with new players involved in the game. Historically, Central Asia has always been a focal point for various empires and states, and in many ways, the region has been engaged in a continuous *Great Game* throughout its history.[478] Several factors make Central Asia a geopolitically important region at this stage of cooperation. First, it has rich energy resources, second, its strategic location places it at the crossroads of major powers such as Russia, China, India, and Iran. Third, the instability in Afghanistan further increases its geopolitical significance.

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[474] A. A. Strelkov, "Политика Европейского союза в постсоветском регионе" ("The European Union's Policy in the Post-Soviet Region"), *Актуальные проблемы Европы* (*Actual Problems of Europe*), no. 2011 (2011): 12.
[475] Voloshin, *The European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia*, 7-8.
[476] Kurmanguzhin, "Kazakhstani Proposals for Cooperation," 81.
[477] Laure Delcour, *Shaping the Post-Soviet Space? EU Policies and Approaches to Region-building* (Ashgate, 2011), 91.
[478] Mirzokhid Rakhimov, "Central Asia in the Context of Western and Russian Interests," *Europe en formation* 1 (2015): 140, https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.375.0140.

The EU's focus on Central Asia increased significantly in the early 2000s, marking the beginning of a new phase of cooperation. Işık Kuşçu Bonnenfant also supports this point, arguing that before the September 11 terrorist attacks and the following military operations in Afghanistan, the EU was not actively engaged with Central Asia,[479] and the beginning of the military operation in Afghanistan became a *wake-up call* for the EU to revise its policy towards Central Asia. Another reason that forced the EU to revise its policy toward Central Asia during this period was the need to diversify energy sources. Central Asia's energy potential became increasingly attractive to Brussels, especially after the January 2006 gas conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

During this stage, the EU's policy in Central Asia shifted from promoting the transition to a market economy in post-Soviet Central Asia to prioritizing security concerns, in particular, maintaining stability and security in the region and ensuring the EU's energy security. As Zhanibek Arynov points out, this shift in EU policy was largely influenced by the September 11 terrorist attack and the subsequent intervention in Afghanistan, which redirected the EU's attention to Afghanistan and its neighbouring Central Asian countries.[480] Central Asia's geopolitical importance grew further with the entry of the International Security Assistance Force into Afghanistan in 2001. As part of counterterrorism efforts, and with Russia's approval, NATO countries established temporary military bases in Central Asian countries. The United States set up bases at Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan and Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, while Germany stationed forces in Termez in southern Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan hosted a French Air Force contingent at Dushanbe Airport.[481] These temporary missions aimed to provide support for NATO operations in Afghanistan. The airports and other bases served as key logistics and supply hubs for NATO's operations in Afghanistan.[482]

Another factor that influenced the EU's growing attention toward Central Asia was the EU's eastern enlargement in 2004, which brought Central Asia geographically closer to the EU.[483] At this stage, EU policy toward Central Asia was increasingly shaped by the region's growing geostrategic importance. As Esra Çayhan highlights, shortly after the 2001 terrorist attacks, the EU Troika visited Central Asia at the ministerial level. Following this visit, on

[479] Kuşçu Bonnenfant, "Normative Power Europe in Central Asia," 99.
[480] Arynov, "Changing Perceptions," 65.
[481] Nargis Kassenova, "The EU in Central Asia: Strategy in the Context of Eurasian Geopolitics," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 4, no. 46 (2007): 100.
[482] Eurasianet, "Tajikistan: The French Military Remains a Welcome Presence in Dushanbe," March 17, 2009, https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-the-french-military-remains-a-welcome-presence-in-dushanbe (accessed April 1, 2025).
[483] Arynov, "Changing Perceptions of the European Union in Central Asia," 65.

December 10, 2001, the EU's General Affairs Council decided to strengthen ties with the region. They agreed to: (i) increase political dialogue with all Central Asian countries through existing agreements and develop direct engagement between EU member states and Central Asian countries, (ii) restart development aid to Tajikistan through the TACIS framework and begin negotiations on a PCA with Tajikistan, (iii) support Central Asian countries in key areas such as poverty reduction, economic and social development, governance, and environmental issues, particularly water management, (iv) assist Central Asian countries in combating drug trafficking, (v) develop an action plan on border security, arms smuggling, and non-proliferation, while promoting regional cooperation among the five Central Asian countries on shared challenges.[484]

As EU-Central Asia cooperation deepened, in October 2002, the European Commission introduced the "Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia," as part of the TACIS program. This strategy document served as the EU's first basic framework for cooperation with Central Asia. The strategy paper outlined three main goals: (i) promoting stability and security in Central Asia, (ii) reducing political and economic tensions, and (iii) supporting economic growth and helping the region reduce poverty. To achieve these goals, the EU increased its financial support to the region, and by 2005, Central Asian countries had received over €100 million in financial assistance through EU programs.[485]

An important institutional development during this stage came in July 2005, when the EU Council created the position of EU Special Representative for Central Asia to improve coordination and consistency in the EU's external activities in the region.[486] The Special Representative reports directly to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and works under his/her supervision. Ján Kubiš was appointed as the first EU Special Representative for Central Asia. The role of the EU Special Representative includes: (i) building strong relations between Central Asia and the EU, based on shared values and agreements, (ii) enhancing stability and cooperation among the Central Asian countries, (iii) promoting democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and human rights,

[484] Esra Çayhan, "The European Union's Central Asia Strategy," *Bilig*, no. 26 (June 2003): 23.
[485] Danuta Hübner, "Europe-Central Asia – on the Way to Cooperation and Understanding?," Plenary Session of the Europe-Central Asia Forum (organized by the Foundation Institute for Eastern Studies), Krynica Górska, Poland, December 14, 2005, 4, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/speech_05_798/SPEECH_05_798_EN.pdf (accessed April 1, 2025).
[486] EEAS, "EU Special Representative for Central Asia," https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-special-representativecentral-asia_en (accessed May 21, 2024).

(iv) addressing major security threats affecting both Central Asia and Europe, (v) expanding the EU's influence in the region by strengthening cooperation with other organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).[487] Additionally, each Central Asian country hosts an EU Delegation, responsible for representing the EU and fostering relations with the respective nation. These delegations opened at different times, the first was established in Kazakhstan in 1993, and the fifth was opened in Turkmenistan in July 2019.[488]

During this stage, the EU also introduced two new security-focused projects, Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) and Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), to address emerging challenges in the region. These initiatives aimed to improve border security and fight drug trafficking. While security became the EU's main priority during this time, and the "EU has not stopped the diffusion of its norms to Central Asia."[489] Through various mechanisms in different sectors, the EU continued advocating its values in the region. Despite these developments, the EU remained a weak actor in Central Asia compared to other global and regional powers. Many of its policies and projects lacked visibility in the region. Danuta Hübner, a former European Commissioner for Regional Policy, described EU-Central Asia relations in 2005 as "under construction" and noted that interregional relations were in their "relative infancy."[490] Hübner identified three key reasons why Central Asia was important to the EU: (i) political importance, the EU aimed to build a partnership for peace and cooperation with Central Asian countries, recognizing that stability, security, prosperity, and democracy in the region would benefit all parties involved, (ii) economic significance, the region's rich reserves of oil and natural gas made it an attractive partner for Europe, (iii) geographical proximity, the EU's 2004 enlargement made Central Asia more relevant geopolitically.[491]

These developments led to the EU's first formal strategy for Central Asia, marking the end of this phase and the beginning of a new stage in EU-Central Asia relations. Later, during Germany's EU Presidency in 2007, a more comprehensive document, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership,* was introduced. Unlike the 2002 document, which was an internal European Commission strategy paper, this was an EU-wide strategy

[487] Giovanni Grevi, "The EU Special Representative for Central Asia," in *Pioneering Foreign Policy: The EU Special Representatives* (Paris, 2007), 119.
[488] Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia," 21.
[489] Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, "The EU and Central Asia," 228.
[490] Hübner, "Europe-Central Asia – on the Way to Cooperation."
[491] Hübner, "Europe-Central Asia – on the Way to Cooperation."

officially adopted by the European Council, and it became a directive for EU policy in the region.

5.2.3. Partnership and Growing Relationship stage (2007-2019)

For a long period, the EU did not have a clear and effective policy toward Central Asia. At that time, as Neil Melvin noted, the EU played a relatively small role in the region, particularly in the earlier years before adopting and defining a unified policy and its interests toward Central Asia.[492] According to several experts, the "European Union lost several opportunities in Central Asia and now has to face stronger competitors."[493] In this context, Sebastiano Mori argues that the geostrategic significance of the Heartland led Brussels to rethink its involvement in the region.[494] Accordingly, in early 2007, when Germany held the presidency of the EU Council, one of its main tasks was to reconsider and clarify the EU's approach to the region. On May 31, 2007, the EU adopted its first strategy, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership,* following limited talks between the EU and Central Asia, which mainly reflected Germany's Presidency of the EU Council and its goal of promoting its foreign policy agenda at the European level.[495] The adoption of this strategic document was widely seen as marking the start of a new phase of cooperation. Undoubtedly, this document became the main EU program for working with Central Asia from 2007 onward. The EU's goals for Central Asia during this period were to promote human rights, the rule of law, and good governance, as well as to ensure stability and security, reduce poverty, and improve living conditions in line with the Millennium Development Goals. The EU also worked to strengthen regional cooperation, both among Central Asian countries and between the region and the EU, particularly in the areas of energy, transport, higher education, and environmental protection. The 2007 EU Strategy also recognized the region's strategic role as a bridge between Europe and Asia. The strategy prioritized the following areas of cooperation:

• Promoting human rights, the rule of law, good governance, and democracy.

• Investing in youth and education.

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[492] Neil Melvin, "The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia," in *Engaging Central Asia: The European Union's New Strategy in the Heart of Eurasia*, ed. Neil J. Melvin (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2008), 139.

[493] Sebastiano Mori, "The New Great Game: An Opportunity for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy," *European Institute for Asian Studies*, Briefing paper, June 2016, 19.

[494] Mori, "The New Great Game," 19.

[495] Ana-Maria Andreea Anghelescu, *European Union in Central Asia During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Crisis Response and Future Recovery*, Policy Briefs Series, No. 10 (Bucharest: European Institute of Romania, 2021), 8.

• Encouraging economic growth, trade, and investment.
• Strengthening energy and transport cooperation.
• Supporting environmental sustainability and managing water resources.
• Addressing common regional challenges.
• Encouraging cultural exchange to connect communities.[496]

The strategy included the establishment of regular political discussions and initiatives. Since then, EU-Central Asia ministerial meetings, multilateral dialogues like the High-Level Political and Security Dialogue, and working groups such as the Environment and Climate Working Group have been held regularly, which is one of the achievements of this strategy.[497] Two other initiatives supported by the EU in the region are the European Education Initiative and the EU Rule of Law Initiative. It also introduced separate human rights talks with each Central Asian country. However, the strategy was widely criticized for treating Central Asia as a single entity and not considering the distinct characteristics of each country when preparing and adopting the strategy, which, in turn, made the strategy too broad and less effective.

Despite its shortcomings, one of the 2007 strategy's significant achievements was helping the EU establish a presence in the region by opening delegations in all five Central Asian countries.[498] Between 2007 and 2020, the EU provided over 1.7 billion euros in assistance, both bilaterally with each Central Asian country and through regional cooperation.[499] At first, the document was expected to be valid for the period from 2007 until 2013, but the EU did not update the strategy in 2013. Subsequently, in June 2017, the EU Council began work on a new strategy, which was finalized in 2019.[500] This time, the approach was different, with Central Asian countries being more involved in the process. As Peter Burian, the former EU Special Representative for Central Asia, explained, the EU wanted to better understand the priorities, challenges, and views of its partners on how the EU could help address regional issues.[501]

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[496] Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, Brussels, 31 May 2007, accessed December 1, 2024, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/pdf.
[497] Ministry for Environment, Land and Sea Protection of Italy, *European Union Strategy for Central Asia*, 2023, https://www.mase.gov.it/pagina/european-union-strategy-central-asia (accessed July 12, 2024).
[498] Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia," 21.
[499] Anghelescu, *European Union in Central Asia*, 8.
[500] General Secretariat of the Council, *Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia* (2017), 6, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf (accessed September 29, 2023).
[501] Heinecke, "EU–Central Asia relations," 7.

5.2.4. Intensification of Cooperation Stage (2019-onward)

After two years of preparations and consultations, on May 15, 2019, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented the Joint Communication *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* to the EU Council.[502] This document, which was approved on June 17, 2019, became the updated EU Strategy for Central Asia. The strategy focused on building a stronger, modern, and more inclusive partnership with the region. While the strategy retained some core ideas from the previous 2007 strategy, such as interconnectedness, sustainability, and inclusivity, the new strategy differed in that it did not establish specific platforms, allowing for greater flexibility and adaptability. This new strategy is based on three key pillars, which bring the areas of cooperation together. The first is partnering for resilience, which includes promoting democracy, human rights, migration policies, and the rule of law. The first section of the partnering for resilience group is "promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law."[503] The EU highlights its intention to increase efforts to promote democracy, the rule of law, and good governance. It specifically aims to invest in justice and legal reforms as well as in fighting corruption and gender equality in Central Asia.[504] The EU plans to achieve its goals in the region through the following initiatives, including "using regional programmes to support the sharing of experience in legal and judicial reform, human rights, international labour standards, good governance, electoral reform and women's empowerment between the EU and Central Asia,"[505] and by developing training for human rights advocates and civil society activists.[506] The second focus area under "partnering for resilience" involves "strengthening cooperation on border management, migration and mobility, and in addressing common security challenges."[507] The EU aims to intensify cooperation in the sphere of security with Central Asian countries, including fighting against terrorism and violent extremism, organized crime, migrant smuggling, drug and human trafficking. Additionally, it includes cooperation in cybersecurity and addressing irregular migration. To achieve these goals, the EU uses existing initiatives and programmes,

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[502] European Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, JOIN(2019) 9 final, Brussels, 15 May 2019, accessed December 1, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf.

[503] European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, JOIN(2019) 9 final, Brussels, May 15, 2019, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed December 1, 2024).

[504] Ibid.

[505] Ibid.

[506] Ibid.

[507] Ibid.

both bilaterally and regionally.[508] The third section focuses on environmental, climate, and water resilience. A new element is the EU's support for Central Asian countries in reforming the energy sector and transitioning to a low-carbon economy. The EU aims to share its experience in sustainable management of natural resources, ecological tourism, and biodiversity protection. Additionally, the EU aims to develop cooperation to promote integrated water resource management by training experts from Central Asia. Importantly for both regions, the EU aims to cooperate with Central Asian countries on climate change, and it is highlighted in the strategy that the EU will help Central Asian countries in the implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.[509]

The second is partnering for prosperity. This group consists of four subsections, which focus on developing a competitive private sector, improving skills, supporting research and innovation, and emphasizing opportunities for young people. The EU aims to promote business-to-business dialogues between the EU and Central Asian countries and support Central Asian countries' statistical systems. More importantly, the EU aims to develop trade and investment cooperation between both regions and inter-regional cooperation between Central Asian countries. This also includes supporting World Trade Organization (WTO) membership and sustainable connectivity. The EU aims to develop cooperation on transport, energy, digital connections, and people-to-people contacts. In the sphere of education, the strategy highlights that the EU supports countries of the region in increasing the quality of education, higher education, and vocational training. Additionally, the EU aims to support cultural cooperation and research cooperation, and it aims to support research on Central Asia and EU-Central Asia relations.[510] Finally, the third priority, working better together, and this group consists of three subsections. It encourages stronger political dialogue, more meaningful exchanges with Central Asian countries, and greater involvement of civil society.[511]

Importantly, the EU's approach was customized to fit the specific needs of each Central Asian country, fostering closer ties with those willing to strengthen their relations. A key innovation in the strategy was the focus on improving connectivity between Europe and Central Asia. The main goal of the EU in Central Asia at this stage is "to forge a stronger and non-exclusive partnership with Central Asian states so that the region develops as a more

[508] Ibid.
[509] Ibid.
[510] Ibid.
[511] Ibid.

resilient, prosperous, and closely interconnected economic and political space."[512] Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the rapidly changing geopolitical environment, achieving the goals set out in the strategy will be challenging for the EU. Taking into account the latest developments, discussions are ongoing within EU institutions to update the EU's strategy towards Central Asia.[513] Further research is needed to evaluate how successful the strategy has been and how much of it has been put into action. While many priorities in the updated EU strategy stayed the same, the main difference is that the priorities were grouped. It is important to mention that, according to experts in the field, the 2019 strategy is "the old EU Central Asia strategy in a fresh PDF."[514] Despite these shortcomings, the updated strategy represents a new phase in the EU's relationship with Central Asia.[515]

In detail, the content analysis of both the 2007 and 2019 EU strategies, along with bilateral agreements, is discussed in the following subchapter. After the adoption of this strategy, the intensification of political relationships became evident. The beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 marked a turning point in the relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries. Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022, the EU's interest in Central Asian countries has grown significantly. In October 2023, the EU and the five Central Asian countries agreed on and adopted a joint roadmap to enhance cooperation. Since the adoption of the 2019 strategy, high-level meetings between EU officials and representatives from the five countries have become more frequent. High-level meetings between the EU and Central Asian countries have intensified in recent years. For example, EU officials met with the heads of state of Central Asia in October 2022 in Kazakhstan and in June 2023 in Kyrgyzstan. On April 4, 2025, the first EU-Central Asia Summit, with the participation of the President of the European Council, António Costa; President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen; and the heads of the Central Asian countries, held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. This is another indicator of the intensification of EU-Central Asia relations. Additionally, regular ministerial meetings have been held between the EU and Central Asia. The latest, the 20th EU-Central Asia Ministerial

[512] EEAS, "Basis for the EU–Central Asia Cooperation," March 25, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/basis-eu-%E2%80%93-central-asia-cooperation_en (accessed April 1, 2025).
[513] The Astana Times, "European Parliament Report Calls for Updated Central Asia Strategy," January 2024, https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/european-parliament-report-calls-for-updated-central-asia-strategy/ (accessed May 22, 2024).
[514] Catherine Putz, "The European Union's (Not So) New Central Asia Strategy," *The Diplomat*, May 16, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/the-european-unions-not-so-new-central-asia-strategy/ (accessed November 23, 2024).
[515] Qodirov, "The European Union and Central Asia," 22-23.

Meeting, took place on March 27, 2025, in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.[516] EU member states are also intensifying their cooperation with Central Asian countries. For instance, in September 2023, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with the heads of state of the Central Asian countries at the first Germany-Central Asia summit in Berlin.[517]

In terms of bilateral relationships, the EPCA signed between the EU and Kazakhstan was ratified in 2020, and the EPCA signed between the EU and Kyrgyzstan is set for 2024. The EU and Uzbekistan are preparing the EPCA for signature, and the EU began discussions with Tajikistan to upgrade the PCA to EPCA at the beginning of 2023. This shows that, bilaterally, the EU is also intensifying its cooperation with the countries of the region, with four of them having their PCA upgraded or in the process of upgrading to EPCA, indicating mutual interest in strengthening relations. The following subsection analyzes in detail the bilateral agreements in force between the EU and Central Asian countries and attempts to find the similarities and differences in their content.

It can be concluded that the EU's relationship with Central Asian countries has strengthened. The EU is now the region's second-largest trading partner and the biggest investor, with over 40% of the investment in the region coming from the EU.[518] It is important to note here, from a geopolitical perspective, that the EU has never been considered one of the main external players in Central Asia. Brussels clearly lags behind traditional actors such as Moscow, Beijing, and Washington in terms of influence. The EU also faces significant competition from second-tier players like Türkiye, Japan, South Korea, and several Arab countries.[519] The EU's approach to Central Asia is shaped by two key factors that distinguish it from other actors. First, unlike some actors in the region, the EU stands out as an actor with a clearly defined strategy in the form of adopted documents that are publicly available. However, the effectiveness of these EU-adopted strategies remains in question and requires further research. Second, compared to other actors, the EU prioritizes normative power both

[516] EEAS, "EU-Central Asia: 20th Ministerial Meeting Held in Ashgabat," March 27, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-central-asia-20th-ministerial-meeting-held-ashgabat_en (accessed April 1, 2025).
[517] Lidia Gibadło and Marcin Popławski, "The 'Central Asian Five' in Berlin: Time for a Strategic Partnership," Centre for Eastern Studies, October 5, 2023, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-10-05/central-asian-five-berlin-time-a-strategic-partnership.
[518] European Council, "First EU-Central Asia Summit to Take Place on 3-4 April 2025," press release, February 12, 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/02/12/first-eu-central-asia-summit-to-take-place-on-3-4-april-2025/ (accessed April 1, 2025).
[519] Vokhidova, "The European Union's Cooperation as a Tool for Mutual Understanding," 228.

in its policies and actions.[520] These approaches are evident not only in Central Asia but also in Brussels' broader foreign policy.

5.3. EU Foreign Policy Priorities: Analyzing Regional and Bilateral Documents on EU-Central Asia Relations

This part of the chapter analyzes the content of strategies adopted by the EU towards Central Asia and the legally binding agreements that the EU has signed with Central Asian countries. The following subsections discuss the EU's regional approach towards Central Asia by analyzing the content of the two latest EU strategies. In terms of the bilateral approach, one of the sections examines the PCAs and the EPCA currently in force between the EU and individual Central Asian countries. The main aim of this subchapter is to understand which areas of cooperation are prioritized by the EU in both regional and bilateral relationships.

5.3.1. EU Regional Strategies for Central Asia

The EU adopted its first strategy paper towards Central Asia back in 2002, but this strategy was not an independent policy of the EU from the TACIS programme. Back then, the EU adopted a country strategy paper towards participating countries in its TACIS programme, but an individual strategy paper for Central Asian countries was not adopted, unlike other TACIS participating countries.[521] Instead, the EU adopted a regional strategy paper towards Central Asia, and this strategy paper included the TACIS Indicative Programme for Central Asia for 2002-2004.[522] The main goal of the EU's 2002 strategy paper was "to promote the stability and security of the countries of Central Asia and to assist in their pursuit of sustainable economic development and poverty reduction."[523] Considering that this 2002 strategy is not an independent policy of the EU, it has not been selected for analysis in this section. It should be noted that the thesis refers to the first strategy as the EU adopted strategy in 2007, and the second strategy as the latest strategy adopted by the EU in 2019. The content of both strategies is analyzed below to better understand the level of progress in engagement and the areas on which the EU focused more during different periods of the relationship. In

[520] Murat Laumulin, "The European Union is Readjusting Its Central Asian Strategy," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 12, no. 4 (2011): 32.
[521] Matveeva, "EU Policy towards Central Asia," 86.
[522] Çayhan, "The European Union's Central Asia Strategy," 13.
[523] Ibid.

addition to analyzing the content, this section also tries to analyze the success and failure of the strategies based on earlier conducted research.

5.3.1.1. EU Strategy 2007

In 2007, the Council of the EU adopted *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*. This strategy became the main and first official document guiding the EU's interactions with Central Asia. By the time of its adoption, both sides had gained considerable knowledge about each other from the previous stages of cooperation. The strategy aimed to promote stability and security in Central Asia and support economic development.[524] It was expected that the EU would update the strategy in 2013, but it hasn't been replaced by a new strategy on time, and this strategy remained valid for six more years until the adoption of the 2019 strategy. At that time, the adoption of the strategy was seen as a real breakthrough in EU-Central Asia relations, marking the beginning of a new phase of cooperation.[525] For the first time, the Strategy connected the general political goals of the EU in Central Asia to a clear plan of action in the region.

In this part of the chapter, the word frequency function of ATLAS.ti was used to analyze the first strategy of the EU, and the data from this analysis provides valuable insights into the EU's strategic priorities towards Central Asia from 2007 onwards until the adoption of the other strategy in 2019. Figure 3 shows the table of the most frequently mentioned words, and the screenshot is taken from the ATLAS.ti desktop version.

[524] Council of the European Union, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*, Brussels, 31 May 2007, accessed December 1, 2024, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/pdf.
[525] Arynov, *Decaying Beauty?*, 1.

Figure 3: List of the most frequently mentioned words in the EU's 2007 strategy towards Central Asia.[526]

Word	Length	Count	%	Strategy 2007	%
cooperation	11	53	2.04	53	2.04
energy	6	50	1.93	50	1.93
support	7	40	1.54	40	1.54
development	11	33	1.27	33	1.27
human	5	33	1.27	33	1.27
rights	6	29	1.12	29	1.12
assistance	10	22	0.85	22	0.85
dialogue	8	22	0.85	22	0.85
trade	5	20	0.77	20	0.77
economic	8	18	0.69	18	0.69
education	9	17	0.65	17	0.65
water	5	16	0.62	16	0.62
security	8	14	0.54	14	0.54
political	9	13	0.50	13	0.50
partnership	11	11	0.42	11	0.42

Source: Author's data, analyzed with the support of ATLAS.ti.

The most mentioned word in the text of the Strategy is cooperation. This is natural, as the strategy aimed at developing cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries. The term cooperation is mentioned 53 times, which constitutes 2.04% of the text. The percentage in the word frequency shows which topic was a key theme in the strategy and the percentage of the text it occupies. The term cooperation covers different areas of cooperation and highlights the EU's commitment to partnerships in various sectors. Energy became the second most mentioned word in the Strategy. It was mentioned 50 times, taking up around 1.93% of the text. During this period, the EU aimed to diversify energy sources to reduce dependency on Russia, and Central Asian countries were seen as one of the options for diversification. The high frequency of the term energy highlights the strategic interest in Central Asia's natural resources, which was a major driver of EU engagement. The Strategy

[526] The word counting function of ATLAS.ti counts only individual words and does not capture complete phrases or concepts.

recognizes the EU's reliance on external energy resources and sets out the goal of working with Central Asian countries to improve European energy security and strengthen energy markets within Central Asia.[527]

The term support is mentioned 40 times, making up 1.54% of the text. This shows that the EU, during this period of cooperation, remained one of the donors to Central Asian countries. The word assistance also appears frequently, being mentioned 22 times, or 0.85% of the text, reflecting the EU's role in supporting the development of Central Asian countries. Development is another term widely mentioned in the strategy. It appears 33 times, accounting for 1.27% of the strategy, and highlights the EU's focus on developing relationships in the first place, as well as supporting the socioeconomic and institutional development of Central Asian countries.

The EU also prioritized its normative power in cooperation with Central Asian countries, as the document mentions the term human 33 times (1.27%) and rights 29 times (1.12%). This indicates that, during this period, the promotion of EU norms, including human rights advocacy, rule of law reforms, civil society support, and democratization, was prioritized in cooperation with Central Asian countries. The strategy specifically focuses on "good governance, the rule of law, human rights, and democratization" as "key areas where the EU is willing to share experience and expertise."[528]

To implement the aims mentioned in the strategy, the EU uses the term dialogue, which is mentioned 22 times, accounting for 0.85% of the text. This highlights the preference for a diplomatic and consultative approach based on mutually beneficial dialogues. Trade and economic relations are other priorities for the EU in its cooperation with Central Asian countries. Trade is mentioned 20 times (0.77%), and economy 18 times (0.69%). These terms suggest that, during this period, the EU aimed to develop economic and trade relationships. Education is another key topic mentioned frequently in the text, appearing 17 times (0.65%), indicating the EU's focus on capacity-building initiatives, such as scholarship programs, university partnerships, and vocational training.

Water and security are two other topics that are mentioned frequently. Water is mentioned 16 times (0.62%), reflecting the EU's focus on transboundary water management, an important issue in the region. Security was a top priority for the EU in both the first and

[527] Neil Melvin and Jos Boonstra, *The EU Strategy for Central Asia @ Year One*, EUCAM Policy Brief No. 1 (October 2008): 1.
[528] Crawford, "EU Human Rights and Democracy Promotion," 175.

second stages of cooperation, and in this stage, it remained a key priority. The term security appears 14 times (0.54%), as security and stability (mentioned 10 times, 0.39%) are necessary to develop relationships in other areas of cooperation. It should be noted that, in terms of security cooperation, the EU primarily focuses on soft security, such as border management, prevention of human and drug trafficking, and the prevention of radicalization and improving regional stability. Most of the EU's projects in the region focus on soft security issues.

In addition to these areas of cooperation, there are other areas that received attention at different levels. Some of the areas that received more attention include: border (mentioned 10 times, or 0.39% of the text), showing the EU's interest in strengthening border management in Central Asian countries due to shared borders with Afghanistan; investment and market, each mentioned 10 times (0.39%); migration, mentioned 9 times (0.35%); environmental, mentioned 8 times (0.31%); and transport, mentioned 7 times (0.27%).

The word frequency distribution in the EU's 2007 Central Asia Strategy suggests that the document was primarily framed around cooperation in the areas of energy, the promotion of normative power such as human rights, and economic and trade relations. These are the three top areas of cooperation according to word frequency analysis of the strategy. It is also important to highlight some achievements and failures of this strategy based on its implementation and the aims mentioned in the Strategy.

The strategy outlined key areas for both bilateral and regional cooperation and introduced several initiatives to improve engagement. These included the Rule of Law Initiative, an Education Initiative, political dialogues at the ministerial level, and Human Rights Dialogues on a bilateral level with all Central Asian countries.[529] In the Strategy, it was mentioned that the EU, for achieving its mentioned aims, doubled its funding to the region, which became equal to €750 million for the period of 2007 to 2013.[530] The strategy also determined how much of the funding would be used for regional cooperation and how much of it would be used for bilateral cooperation, and it is divided as follows, seventy percent of the assistance is for bilateral efforts, while thirty percent is for promoting regional cooperation.[531] The EU also promised to open delegations in each Central Asian country in the Strategy, and this

[529] Jakob Lempp and Jan Niklas Rolf, "European Union Action Towards Central Asia," in *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation*, ed. Jakob Lempp and Sebastian Mayer (Springer Nature, 2024), 64.
[530] Grevi, "The EU Special Representative for Central Asia," 127.
[531] Cornell and Starr, *A Steady Hand*, 31.

was one of the aims which the EU fully achieved,[532] despite the fact that in the period until 2013, which was to be the last date of the Strategy, as the strategy was prolonged until 2019, and later in 2019, the last delegation of the EU in Turkmenistan was opened, which became a reason for becoming more politically visible in the region.

Overall, after years of implementation of this strategy and upgrading it to a new strategy, the success and failure of the Strategy are now clearer. On the one hand, the document allowed the EU to outline its main interests in the region and create some institutional mechanisms to improve relations at both regional and bilateral levels. It also gave Central Asian countries a chance to learn about Europe.[533]

In addition to political presence by opening delegations and embassies, another achievement of the EU's first strategy was securing its presence in the region through a series of programs that became symbolic markers of the EU's presence. The EU launched annual human rights dialogues with all five Central Asian republics, providing a unique platform for discussing human rights issues in the region. The strategy influenced various programs and initiatives led by the European Commission and individual EU member states to address development challenges in Central Asia, such as the Rule of Law Initiative, the EU-Central Asia Education Initiative, Border Management Programme in Central Asia, Central Asia Drug Action Programme, and the EU Central Asia Invest Programme.[534] From the achievements of this strategy, it may be counted that it established its representatives and improved regular political dialogues at the level of foreign ministers, intergovernmental consultations, and increased funding for EU-backed projects in Central Asia and developed trade and economic relations and set up a regular energy dialogue with the Central Asian states.[535]

At the beginning, the expectations were high for the strategy. However, the strategy had only partially achieved its goals. As experts claim, while there were some positive outcomes, the strategy partially failed because "the goals were too broad, and the means to achieve them were too narrow," as the EU tried to cover too many areas at once without clearly defined

[532] Ibid.
[533] Domenico Valenza, *The New EU Strategy for Central Asia: A Case for Cultural Diplomacy*, Policy Brief, Institute for European Studies, Issue 2018/6 (April 2018): 3.
[534] Zh. Zharmakhanova and Antonio Alonso Marcos, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia: Barriers for Its Successful Implementation," *Халықаралық қатынастар және халықаралық құқық сериясы* (International Relations and International Law Series) No. 2 (98), 2022: 75-76, https://doi.org/10.26577/IRILJ.2022.v98.i2.08.
[535] Kolesnikova, "The New EU Strategy," 138.

implementation mechanisms.[536] Additionally, the EU was criticized for its weak foreign policy, indecision, and focus on secondary issues. These criticisms came not only from external observers but also from within EU member states.[537] The other criticism was about the fact that in the Strategy, the EU viewed the region as a single, homogeneous region, and the EU failed to consider the significant political and economic differences among the five countries.[538] Rick Fawn et al. point out that it was partly the EU's limited knowledge of the region before 2007.[539] The biggest problem seems to be the gap between the goals in the document and the resources provided for their implementation.[540] There also was a lack of coordination, as Yuqn Shao mentioned, between the European Commission and member states, as he mentioned, "there should be a division of labor between the EC and the member states, but, in fact, there is no clear division."[541] Therefore, this can be seen as one of the reasons for not achieving the full aims mentioned in the strategy. There also was low interest from Central Asian countries in the strategy as well, as in the process of preparing the document, the EU didn't take Central Asian counterparts' views into consideration and didn't fully consider the needs of the Central Asian countries in their cooperation with the EU. Taking this into consideration, in the 2019 strategy, the EU organized consultation meetings to take the Central Asian countries' and civil societies' views on the new strategy. In general, as Jacopo Maria Pepe argues, the first strategy was mainly an attempt to shape the EU's relations with the Central Asian region based on EU's normative values and to balance its trade and energy policy interests.[542] The former EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Peter Burian, in an interview in 2019 after the adoption of the new strategy, accepted the shortcomings of the 2007 strategy. He highlighted that the EU "realised that the strategy of 2007 was too large, too ambitious, and in some areas, we were not able to fully implement what we actually wanted to."[543] According to Burian, the main shortcomings of the strategy were the "limited understanding of specific needs, priorities, and ambitions" of Central

[536] Khaydarali Yunusov, "EU Policy in Central Asia: A Vortex of Balances or a Tightrope Walker on the Rope," *European International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Management Studies* 2, no. 12 (December 2022): 42, https://doi.org/10.55640/eijmrms-02-12-09.
[537] Zharmakhanova and Marcos, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia," 70.
[538] Rick Fawn, Karolina Kluczewska, and Oleg Korneev, "EU–Central Asian Interactions: Perceptions, Interests and Practices," *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 624, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2134300.
[539] Fawn, Kluczewska, and Korneev, "EU–Central Asian Interactions," 624.
[540] Valenza, *The New EU Strategy for Central Asia*, 3.
[541] Yuqn Shao, *The EU's Central Asia Policy and Its Implications for China*, Discussion Paper 9/2008 (Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2008), 17.
[542] Jacopo Maria Pepe, "The EU in Central Asia," in *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation*, ed. Jakob Lempp and Sebastian Mayer (Springer Nature, 2024), 312.
[543] Heinecke, "EU–Central Asia Relations," 5.

Asian countries in the process of preparing and adopting the strategy.[544] While the 2007 strategy cannot be considered a success, it was also not a complete failure, and was a process that EU learned from the mistakes. Taking these shortcomings into consideration, the EU adopted the new strategy towards Central Asia in 2019, which the following subchapter discusses by using word frequency analysis.

5.3.1.2. EU Strategy 2019

In June 2016, the EU adopted the Global Strategy, which has since guided its external relations with other actors of international relations. The adoption of this strategy became a reason for the EU to update its earlier adopted strategies toward regions or countries and to sign legally binding agreements according to the Global Strategy's aims. As a result, this led to it and became one of the reasons for the adoption of a new EU strategy for Central Asia in June 2019 and the upgrading of the PCA's to the next generation of the EPCA with the countries of Central Asia. In addition to this, the latest geopolitical developments in the region influenced the upgrading of the EU's strategy toward Central Asia, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the expansion of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, and China's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative.[545] These developments pushed the EU to redefine its global role and adjust its regional strategy. As a result, the Central Asia Strategy became one of the first regional strategies adopted after the EU Global Strategy was released.

On June 17, 2019, the European Council adopted the updated EU Strategy on Central Asia, with the title *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*. The new strategy builds on past experiences. During the process of drafting this strategy, Brussels this time involved the Central Asian governments and civil society representatives and consulted them to consider the Central Asian needs in the preparation of the new strategy, which was criticized in the previous strategy for not taking the Central Asian countries' perspectives into consideration.[546] These points were mentioned by Peter Burian, who stated that "the strategy of 2019 was developed in close consultations with our partners. We wanted to avoid an approach, which might be considered sometimes paternalistic—that we develop our own strategy and present it to our partners in a form that it is the best way of addressing

[544] Heinecke, "EU–Central Asia Relations," 5.
[545] Ana-Maria Anghelescu, "The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements," in *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation*, ed. Jakob Lempp and Sebastian Mayer (Springer Nature, 2024), 94.
[546] Kizekova, *The European Union in Central Asia*, 4.

their problems."[547] The new EU strategy is a detailed policy document that builds on the experience gained over the past 12 years, and the EU moved from a *strategy for a new partnership* to *new opportunities for a stronger partnership*. The EU is focusing on areas where it believes it has advantages over other external actors in the new strategy.

The EU's new strategy for Central Asia focuses on creating a "stronger, modern and non-exclusive partnership."[548] The strategy aims to build a partnership based on "strong mutual interests" to make the region "a sustainable and closely interconnected economic and political space."[549] This strategy aims to put the EU in a stronger position to help develop the Central Asian countries and better represent its own interests in the region, considering the rapidly changing geopolitical and local situations in and around Central Asia.[550] The word frequency analysis of the second strategy, conducted through ATLAS.ti, is presented in the following part, and the following figure shows the list of most frequently mentioned words.

[547] Heinecke, "EU–Central Asia Relations," 5.
[548] A. B. Kuzembayeva and B. M. Balaubayeva, "Women's Empowerment Issue: A New Platform for the EU-Kazakhstan Cooperation," *Вестник Карагандинского университета* (Vestnik of Karaganda University), no. 2 (2020): 123, https://doi.org/10.31489/2020HPh2/122-128.
[549] Kuzembayeva and Balaubayeva, "Women's Empowerment Issue," 123.
[550] Fabienne Bossuyt, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia: All About Balance," *The Diplomat*, July 2, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/new-eu-strategy-for-central-asia-all-about-balance/ (accessed April 1, 2025).

Figure 4: List of the most frequently mentioned words in the EU's 2019 strategy towards Central Asia.

Word	Length	Count	%	Strategy 2019	%
cooperation	11	93	2.29	93	2.29
development	11	51	1.26	51	1.26
promote	7	42	1.03	42	1.03
security	8	36	0.89	36	0.89
sustainable	11	34	0.84	34	0.84
economic	8	29	0.71	29	0.71
dialogue	8	28	0.69	28	0.69
connectivity	12	25	0.62	25	0.62
human	5	25	0.62	25	0.62
rights	6	24	0.59	24	0.59
trade	5	24	0.59	24	0.59
investment	10	23	0.57	23	0.57
energy	6	22	0.54	22	0.54
water	5	22	0.54	22	0.54
partnership	11	21	0.52	21	0.52

Source: Author's data, analyzed with the support of ATLAS.ti.

In this strategy, as in the previous one, the word “cooperation” is the most frequently used word, appearing 93 times in the document, which is 2.29 percent of the total text. This underlines the EU’s collaborative approach toward Central Asia. “Development” is the second most mentioned word, appearing 51 times, which accounts for 1.26 percent of the text. “Promote” is another widely used word, showing that the EU frequently refers to promoting its normative power in Central Asian countries. It is mentioned around 42 times, which equals 1.03 percent of the text. “Security,” which is one of the important areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries since the early years of their cooperation, is mentioned 36 times, accounting for 0.89 percent of the text. The attention given to security in the 2019 strategy significantly increased compared to 2007 (14 times), showing the growing importance of security relations to the EU. Unlike the 2007 strategy, which focused mainly on soft security issues like human trafficking, border control, and border management, the 2019 strategy also addresses these issues but adds cyber threats and

digital security. “Sustainable” is the fifth most repeated word in the strategy, appearing 34 times, which accounts for around 0.84 percent of the text. This word was not among the most frequently repeated words in the 2007 strategy, showing the EU’s focus on sustainability in economic, environmental, and energy cooperation with the countries of the region. The EU is interested in and has included promoting climate-friendly policies, water resource management, and sustainable agriculture in the region.

The term “economic” is mentioned 29 times, equaling 0.71 percent. The analysis shows that the EU aims to develop its economic relations, trade, and investment. “Trade” is mentioned 24 times, equaling 0.59 percent of the text. In this strategy, trade relations have expanded beyond raw materials and energy to include technology, agriculture, and the digital economy. “Investment” is mentioned 23 times, equaling 0.57 percent of the text. This is higher than in the previous strategy, where it was mentioned only 10 times, showing a major shift from the 2007 aid-based approach to an investment-driven development model. The EU’s investments focus on, but are not limited to, infrastructure, the digital economy, green technology, and education.

Compared to the previous strategy, energy cooperation is no longer a top priority in this strategy. The term “energy” is mentioned 22 times, equaling 0.54 percent. Energy cooperation remains important but is no longer the dominant theme, decreasing from 50 mentions in 2007 to 22 in 2019. In the 2019 strategy, the focus shifts from fossil fuels to renewable energy and energy efficiency.

“Human” (25 times, 0.62 percent) and “rights” (24 times, 0.59 percent) are another important area that the EU aims to develop in Central Asian countries. However, it should be noted that these terms are slightly less emphasized in the 2019 strategy compared to 2007. The 2019 strategy uses softer language regarding normative power. While the 2007 strategy explicitly mentioned democratization, the 2019 strategy refers to it more indirectly as the promotion of democracy. This shows that the EU has taken a more pragmatic approach in norm promotion in the region. The EU still prioritizes and supports the promotion of its core norms, such as human rights initiatives, good governance, and democracy promotion in the region. A new term in the 2019 strategy is “connectivity,” which was not present in the 2007 strategy. It is mentioned 25 times, around 0.62 percent of the text. EU connectivity in Central Asia refers to the EU’s efforts to enhance economic and transport connections, digital integration, energy networks, and people-to-people linkages between Europe and Central Asia. “Water” (mentioned 22 times, 0.54 percent) management remains a priority for the EU

in Central Asia as water issues continue to be a major challenge due to transboundary water disputes in the region.

Based on the top priorities mentioned in the strategy, it may be concluded that, compared to the 2007 strategy, the EU's policy has moved away from a donor-driven aid approach and heavy energy reliance toward a more balanced relationship. As a result, the EU policy shifts from a donor-recipient model to a more equal economic and political partnership.

Currently, assessing to what extent the strategy has been successful or has failed in achieving its aims in Central Asia is somewhat premature, considering the geopolitical and epidemiological changes in the world during the first years of its adoption, which have affected the implementation process of the EU strategy in the region. Just a few months after the adoption of the strategy, the COVID-19 pandemic started, the war between Russia and Ukraine began, and the Taliban took over the government in Afghanistan. These are just a few examples of events that have impacted the implementation of the strategy. However, it is also important to mention some strengths and weaknesses of the new strategy of the EU towards the Central Asian countries.

According to Alica Kizekova, the strategy's goals are clear and reasonable, but the EU's presence in the region remains limited compared to other actors.[551] The 2019 strategy has a more positive and optimistic tone compared to the 2007 strategy. The new strategy is broader in scope, as the earlier strategy was heavily centered on energy security, with Europe looking for new energy sources at the time.[552] However, many of the previous priorities are still included. These priorities are just newly labeled and grouped, with most of these areas having been covered in the previous strategy, and the new strategy closely follows the language and goals of the EU's Global Strategy.[553] While this grouping of cooperation areas in the strategy makes sense, the strategy doesn't seem to acknowledge that, even though these areas of cooperation appeared in the 2007 version of the strategy, there hasn't been much progress in many of these areas.[554]

[551] Kizekova, *The European Union in Central Asia*, 4.
[552] Jos Boonstra, *A New EU Strategy for Central Asia: From Challenges to Opportunities*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 1, 2019, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/new-eu-strategy-central-asia-challenges-opportunities-24062 (accessed April 1, 2025).
[553] Bossuyt, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia."
[554] Putz, "The European Union's (Not So) New Central Asia Strategy."

Shairbek Dzhuraev notes that despite launching the new strategy, the EU's priorities for the region have largely remained the same, both in content and approach.[555] A similar argument is made by Catherine Putz about the new strategy of the EU, and after analyzing the strategy, the author comes to the conclusion that "the new strategy isn't so new."[556] According to Jos Boonstra, instead of being a full strategy, it looks like a to-do list.[557] In fact, only a few of the priorities from the past have been dropped from the new strategy. The EU has simply made it clearer where it plans to focus its resources and has set concrete priorities.[558] Given the limited resources the EU has for Central Asia, there's a risk that trying to focus on so many areas could reduce its ability to succeed in these efforts.[559] The new strategy shows that the EU is moving toward a more practical approach that focuses on material and economic interests.[560] Vasa László believes that the new strategy was adopted to better fit the current situation, but the strategy still seems to lack focus, clear goals, and content that is well-matched to the region's needs.[561]

The new strategy has some strengths that are important to highlight. While the EU has often been criticized for taking a broad, general approach to the region, the new strategy highlights the need to "differentiate between specific country situations."[562] The EU aims "to deepen its engagement with those Central Asian countries willing and able to intensify relations."[563] It also suggests new areas of cooperation, such as the digital economy, e-governance, and connectivity, where EU companies could make a significant contribution due to their expertise and experience.[564]

Looking at the new EU strategy, it is clear that the EU aims to establish what is described in the document as a "non-exclusive partnership" with Central Asia. This means the EU wants its interactions with the region to be open for cooperation with other partners, including

[555] Shairbek Dzhuraev, "The EU's Central Asia Policy: No Chance for Change?" *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 639, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2054951.
[556] Putz, "The European Union's (Not So) New Central Asia Strategy."
[557] Jos Boonstra, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia: First Reactions," *EUCAM Watch* 21 (2019): 2.
[558] Cornell and Starr, *A Steady Hand*, 48.
[559] Bossuyt, "New EU Strategy for Central Asia."
[560] Yunusov, "EU Policy in Central Asia," 41.
[561] Vasa, "The European Union Strategy on Central Asia," 128.
[562] European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, JOIN(2019) 9 final, Brussels, May 15, 2019, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed December 1, 2024).
[563] Ibid.
[564] Catherine Putz, "Sebastien Peyrouse on the EU's New Central Asia Strategy," *The Diplomat*, July 16, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/sebastien-peyrouse-on-the-eus-new-central-asia-strategy/ (accessed April 1, 2025).

Russia, China, and other neighboring countries, as well as international organizations and development banks. On the other hand, the EU makes it clear that it does not want to engage in geopolitical competition with major players in the region, preferring instead to cooperate where possible.[565]

Considering the latest geopolitical changes and criticisms of previous strategies, the EU has decided to upgrade its strategy toward Central Asia in the coming years. From a legal point of view, these strategies do not have a legally binding character, in contrast to the bilaterally signed agreements with Central Asian countries, which have a legally binding character and regulate relations. The next section briefly analyzes the content of the bilateral agreements signed between the EU and Central Asian countries.

5.3.2. EU Bilateral Agreements with Central Asian States

At the bilateral level, the PCAs and EPCA that are in force between the EU and Central Asian countries aim to regulate and strengthen the bilateral relationship. Article 1 of the EPCA signed between the EU and Kazakhstan highlights that respect for democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law are an essential part of this agreement. The article continues by stating that both parties reaffirm their commitment to a free market economy and emphasize the importance of promoting sustainable development and economic growth.[566]

Similarly, Article 2 of the PCAs signed between the EU and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan highlights that respect for democracy, principles of international law, human rights, and the principles of a market economy is an essential part of these agreements.[567] This shows that the EU is prioritizing its promotion of its core and minor norms in cooperation with Central Asian countries. In 2015, Kazakhstan became the first country in

[565] Kolesnikova, "The New EU Strategy in Central Asia," 142.
[566] "Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Kazakhstan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Union*, Volume 59, February 4, 2016, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/enhanced_partnership_and_cooperation_agreement.pdf.
[567] "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Tajikistan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Union* L 350/3, December 29, 2009, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22009A1229(01)&qid=1495981934450&from=EN; "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 229, August 31, 1999, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:1999:229:FULL.

the region to sign the EPCA with the EU, which entered into force in 2020 and allowed Kazakhstan to start cooperating with the EU at a more advanced level. The key signed bilateral documents with the Central Asian countries and their status are shown in the following table. The content of the agreements is analyzed in detail in the following section to better understand which areas the EU is prioritizing in its bilateral relationship.

Table 5: Key bilateral agreements between the EU and Central Asian countries

Country	Agreement type in force	Status
Kazakhstan	EPCA	PCA upgraded to EPCA, EPCA in force since 2020
Kyrgyzstan	PCA	PCA in place; EPCA signed in June 2024, expected to be ratified soon
Tajikistan	PCA	PCA in place; negotiations on EPCA started in 2023
Turkmenistan	Interim Agreement	PCA signed in 1998 but not ratified; Interim Agreement on trade matters in force
Uzbekistan	PCA	PCA in place; negotiations on EPCA concluded in July 2022, agreement pending signature

Source: Data collected by the author.

This part analyzes the content of the PCAs the EU signed with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as the EPCA signed with Kazakhstan. It should be noted that this analysis focuses on the documents that are currently in force and regulating the relationships. The EU signed a PCA with Turkmenistan in 1998, which was not ratified by the European Parliament. Additionally, the EU upgraded its agreement with Kyrgyzstan to an EPCA agreement, which was signed in June 2024 but has not been ratified yet. These documents are not included in the analysis, as they are not in force yet. For Kyrgyzstan, the PCA currently in force is selected for analysis, while in the case of Turkmenistan, the EU's interim agreement, which covers only trade and trade-related matters, is not included in the analysis.

5.3.2.1. PCA with Kyrgyzstan

In the PCA agreement the EU signed with Kyrgyzstan, the most frequently mentioned word is "cooperation," which is mentioned 132 times and equals 2.33 percent of the text, highlighting the EU and Kyrgyzstan's focus on strengthening the partnership at a bilateral level. The second most frequently mentioned word is "development," which is mentioned 51 times and equals 0.90 percent of the text of the agreement, showing the EU's commitment to supporting Kyrgyzstan's development politically and economically and its transition to a

market economy. The word “economic” comes next with 46 mentions, equal to 0.81% of the text, reflecting the importance of economic relations between the EU and Kyrgyzstan, showing that in bilateral relations, the economy is mentioned as a top priority. “Trade” is mentioned 30 times, equal to 0.53%, showing that the EU and Kyrgyzstan aim to improve economic exchanges. The EU also expresses its interest in the agreement in the energy sector with 28 mentions, equal to 0.49% of the text, as the EU aimed to diversify its energy sources, with even the smallest energy source being important, but it’s not as prominent in Kyrgyzstan’s document compared to other countries. Other key areas include “assistance,” which is mentioned 24 times, equal to 0.42%, showing the EU’s aim and role in providing support for Kyrgyzstan in different fields, from the social sphere to the security sector. It should be noted that during more than thirty years of relationships, Kyrgyzstan has been one of the largest aid receivers from the EU. The term “legislation” is mentioned 18 times, which equals 0.32% of the text, indicating the focus on improving the legal frameworks of Kyrgyzstan and bringing laws closer to EU standards. The EU highlights its readiness to support legal reform in Kyrgyzstan based on its experience. Other less frequent words include “transport” (18 mentions, 0.32%), “market” (16 mentions, 0.28%), “investment” (15 mentions, 0.26%), and “business” (13 mentions, 0.23%), all of which highlight the interest of both sides in developing relationships in these areas. From the normative aspect of the area, human rights are prioritized, as the word “rights” is mentioned 13 times, which equals 0.23 percent of the whole text. In comparison to other areas, this did not receive much attention, and it should be noted that this agreement was signed back in 1995.

5.3.2.2. PCA with Tajikistan

In the case of the PCA signed with Tajikistan, “cooperation” is also the most frequently mentioned word, with 149 mentions, equal to 2.14%, showing both sides’ strong focus on partnership. The other word, “development,” is mentioned 55 times, equal to 0.79%. As with the PCA of Kyrgyzstan, "economic" is a widely discussed area of cooperation and is a top priority, mentioned 45 times, which equals 0.65 percent. “Energy” is mentioned 41 times, equal to 0.59%, highlighting the EU’s interest in developing energy relations with Tajikistan, and this is mentioned more than with Kyrgyzstan. The term “assistance” is mentioned 27 times, which is around 0.39 percent, showing the EU’s support for Tajikistan’s development in the post-war period. Tajikistan has received the most humanitarian aid from the EU among Central Asian countries. “Training” is another word that appears frequently, marking the

EU's readiness to train specialists in various areas of cooperation with Tajikistan. The same as a PCA of Kyrgyzstan, the words “legislation” (24 mentions, 0.35%) and “transport” (24 mentions, 0.35%) are also areas of focus, highlighting the improvement of legal and logistical frameworks. Other terms such as “investment” (20 mentions, 0.29%), “business” (17 mentions, 0.24%), and “market” (19 mentions, 0.27%) show the EU’s aim to promote trade and business relations and to increase its investment in Tajikistan. The word “rights” is mentioned 16 times (0.23%), showing the EU's aim to promote human rights in cooperation with Tajikistan as well. While this area is not as prominent as economic relations, it is still one of the important areas mentioned in the PCA of the EU signed with Tajikistan. It’s important to highlight that the consultation for the preparation of this PCA started right after the civil war in Tajikistan, and the document was signed in 2004 and ratified in 2010.

5.3.2.3. PCA with Uzbekistan

In the PCA with Uzbekistan, “cooperation” is again the most frequently mentioned word (158 mentions, 2.27%). Similarly, to the other PCAs, the word “development" is mentioned as the second most frequently mentioned word, with 58 mentions (0.83%), followed by economic relations, with the word “economic” mentioned 49 times (0.70%). “Energy” is the fourth most mentioned word, with 47 mentions (0.67%), showing the EU's interest in developing energy relations with Uzbekistan as well. “Trade” is mentioned 39 times (0.56%), highlighting the EU's focus on developing trade relations with Uzbekistan. Other important areas include "assistance" (27 mentions, 0.39%) and “transport” (27 mentions, 0.39%), showing the EU's role in supporting Uzbekistan's economy and infrastructure development. Similarly, to Tajikistan’s PCA, the training of personnel is also an area where the EU wants to support Uzbekistan. Like the previously discussed PCAs, “investment” is one of the top areas in which the EU is interested in cooperation with countries of the region. Other words such as “market” (19 mentions, 0.27%) and “business” (16 mentions, 0.23%) also highlight the EU’s interest in promoting trade and business activities and the transition of Central Asian countries from the Soviet-style planned economy to the free market economy. Interestingly, the word “rights” is mentioned 16 times (0.23%), and it holds the same position among the most frequently mentioned words in the PCA with Uzbekistan as it does in the PCAs with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This shows that from the early years of cooperation, the EU still focused on promoting its norms in Central Asian countries, even if

to a lesser degree. During this period, the EU, in addition to its main norms, also promoted its norms in the areas of economic, trade, and investment, where the EU shared its experience. The details of the most frequently mentioned words are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: List of most frequently mentioned words in bilateral agreements in force signed between the EU and Central Asian countries.

#	EPCA Kazakhstan			PCA Kyrgyzstan			PCA Tajikistan			PCA Uzbekistan		
	word	count	%	word	count	%	word	count	%	word	count	%
1	Cooperation	311	1.25	Cooperation	132	2.33	Cooperation	149	2.14	Cooperation	158	2.27
2	Rights	215	0.86	Development	51	0.90	Development	55	0.79	Development	58	0.83
3	Trade	107	0.43	Economic	46	0.81	Economic	45	0.65	Economic	49	0.70
4	Energy	99	0.40	Trade	30	0.53	Energy	41	0.59	Energy	47	0.67
5	Law	96	0.39	Energy	28	0.49	Trade	36	0.52	Trade	39	0.56
6	Development	91	0.37	Assistance	24	0.42	Assistance	27	0.39	Assistance	27	0.39
7	Economic	78	0.31	Legislation	18	0.32	Training	26	0.37	Transport	27	0.39
8	Customs	53	0.21	Transport	18	0.32	Legislation	24	0.35	Training	22	0.32
9	Business	52	0.21	Market	16	0.28	Transport	24	0.35	Investment	20	0.29
10	Transport	50	0.20	Investment	15	0.26	Investment	20	0.29	Market	19	0.27
11	Natural	49	0.20	Business	13	0.23	Rights	18	0.26	Business	16	0.23
12	Market	48	0.19	Rights	13	0.23	Business	17	0.24	Rights	16	0.23

Source: Based on the author's analysis using ATLAS.ti's word frequency function.

5.3.2.4. EPCA with Kazakhstan

The EPCA with Kazakhstan differs from the PCA agreements with the other countries due to its more advanced status in the relationship. The EU and Kazakhstan signed the EPCA in 2015, and after ratification in 2020, the PCA was upgraded to EPCA, which became the official document regulating the relationship. The document notes that the EU and Kazakhstan express their readiness to move to a new level of relations and to enhance their mutually beneficial partnership. The agreement covers 29 areas, and the most frequently mentioned words highlight the more focused areas of cooperation at the bilateral level. The word “Cooperation” remains the most frequently mentioned word (311 mentions, 1.25%) in the EPCA between the EU and Kazakhstan. The main difference is that the EU, in the EPCA,

prioritized its normative power in cooperation with Kazakhstan. The second most mentioned word is “Rights” (215 mentions, 0.86%), with the vast majority of these references associated with human rights in the EPCA. This suggests that the EU is paying greater attention to the development and promotion of human rights in Kazakhstan. “Trade” and “Energy” are other words that maintained the same position they had in the previously discussed PCAs. “Trade” is mentioned 107 times (0.43%), and “Energy” is mentioned 99 times (0.40%), reflecting the EU's interest in strengthening energy and trade relations with Kazakhstan. “Law” is also an important theme in the EPCA with Kazakhstan (96 mentions, 0.39%), and this word is mostly associated with the rule of law, indicating the EU's focus on normative power, more so than in the PCAs signed with Central Asian countries in the first and second stages of cooperation. Other areas include “Development” (91 mentions, 0.37%), “Economic” (78 mentions, 0.31%), “Customs” (53 mentions, 0.21%), “Business” (52 mentions, 0.21%), “Transport” (50 mentions, 0.20%), and “Natural” (49 mentions, 0.20%), which mostly refer to the importance of natural resources in cooperation. Lastly, as in the PCAs, the term “Market” holds its position among the most frequently mentioned words in the EPCA, appearing 48 times (0.19% of the text). Meanwhile, the prominence of economic and energy-related terms confirms that these sectors remain a priority for both parties.

5.3.2.5. Comparison of the PCAs and the EPCA

When comparing all three PCAs in force, it can be concluded that there are not many differences in the PCAs signed between the EU and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The findings from the word frequency analysis show that the three PCAs are mostly identical, as the areas mentioned in the PCAs are mostly similar and take the same positions hierarchically. Only the priorities have slightly changed their positions, with differences in the number of times they are mentioned (more or less). From this data, it is obvious that the cooperation in the spheres of economic, trade, and energy relations was a priority for the EU, followed by other areas such as promoting human rights. In the period when these PCAs were signed, Central Asian countries were in need of technical assistance, which the EU considered, and this topic became one of the priorities of its cooperation with all Central Asian countries. Despite the fact that tangible areas of cooperation are mentioned more frequently than norm-based areas in the PCAs, the EU actively promotes its norms through various fields of cooperation, including trade relations. While the frequency of references to norm-based cooperation is lower compared to other sectors, cooperation in these normative areas was nevertheless a key priority and served as a basis for the development of cooperation in other areas, as outlined in the PCAs. For instance, this is clearly reflected in

Article 2 of the PCA signed between the EU and Tajikistan, which states that respect for democratic principles and fundamental human rights is a core element of the agreement. The significance of this article is further reinforced by Article 94, which allows either party to take appropriate measures if this part of the agreement is violated.[568] This means that if one party fails to respect human rights or democratic principles, the other party has the right to take measures such as limiting cooperation or imposing political sanctions. It is clear from the analysis that the EU's focus of cooperation has shifted slightly over time with the countries of the region. In 2015, when the EPCA was signed with Kazakhstan, the EU prioritized its norms in cooperation with Kazakhstan, showing a slight change in priorities compared to the PCAs. It can be concluded that, at the bilateral level, the EU first prioritized economic relationships, and normative relationships were second. Step by step, these areas have changed their positions, and the EU is trying to place them in the same position in the latest agreements. Clearly, the areas of cooperation have shifted towards a more normative agenda in the EPCA signed with Kazakhstan compared to the PCA texts signed with the other Central Asian countries. The other EPCAs, either coming into force or to be signed in the coming years, will likely be similar, as analysis of the PCAs shows that, more or less, they are identical. It is expected that the other EPCAs the EU signs with other Central Asian countries will resemble the agreement signed with Kazakhstan.

To achieve the goals mentioned in the EPCA and PCAs and to coordinate the cooperation, the EU and Central Asian countries established an institutional framework, which is identical in the bilateral cooperation of the EU with each individual Central Asian country. In both the EPCA signed between the EU and Kazakhstan and the PCAs signed with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the following institutional frameworks are mentioned as joint structures with the aim of becoming platforms for dialogue: the Cooperation Council, a Cooperation Committee, various specialized subcommittees or bodies, and a Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. The Cooperation Council meets annually at the ministerial level to discuss and review the implementation of the PCA/EPCA. The Cooperation Council is supported by the Cooperation Committee in fulfilling its functions, including preparing its meetings, which are composed of senior civil servant representatives from both sides. The Cooperation Council may also create specialized subcommittees or bodies to assist with its responsibilities. The Parliamentary Cooperation Committee serves as a forum for members

[568] "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Tajikistan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Union* L 350/3, December 29, 2009, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22009A1229(01)&qid=1495981934450&from=EN.

of the four Central Asian countries' Parliaments and the European Parliament to meet and share perspectives at the bilateral level.

In general, these bodies are responsible for overseeing the implementation of the PCAs and EPCA, addressing key issues arising within the framework of the PCA and EPCA, and discussing other matters of mutual interest. These priorities mentioned in strategies and agreements should be checked by how visible they are in Central Asian mass media, expert opinions, and official perspectives, which the following chapters will do. The next subsection discusses in detail the main areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries.

5.4. EU-Central Asia Relations: Key Areas of Cooperation

This subchapter analyses the most developed areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries, based on content analysis of the strategies and bilateral agreements signed between the EU and Central Asian states, as presented in the above subchapter, as well as literature reviews and statistical data. It provides a detailed analysis of the following key areas: political, economic, and energy cooperation, the promotion of human rights, and cooperation on connectivity, security, and water management.

5.4.1. Political relations

In recent years, the EU has intensified its cooperation in different areas with Central Asian countries, including political engagement through high-level visits and summits, and the launching of new programs and initiatives. In 2022, the leaders of Central Asian countries and the President of the European Council met for the first time at a high level, marking a new chapter in their political engagement. A major milestone was the first-ever EU-Central Asia Summit in April 2025, where leaders from the European Council, the European Commission, and all five Central Asian states came together in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and officially established the C5+EU format at the highest level. This summit was a key opportunity for the EU to reinforce its political presence in the region, alongside its role as a major economic partner, donor, and investor.

The EU and Central Asian countries regularly engage in high-level political talks, including meetings between foreign ministers. The annual ministerial meeting between the EU and

Central Asian countries has become a platform for regular coordination of cooperation and the clarification of its parameters. In the 2023 ministerial meeting in Brussels, foreign affairs ministers from Central Asian countries, along with EU officials and foreign ministers from member states, adopted the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia, highlighting the intensification of political cooperation. The roadmap highlights five priority areas: (i) deepening interregional political dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, (ii) enhancing economic ties, trade, and investment, (iii) developing energy cooperation, (iv) strengthening people-to-people contacts, and (v) addressing common security challenges. The priorities include 79 action points, outlining specific steps that both sides have agreed to take in order to strengthen their relationship.[569]

Before the adoption of the first strategy, there were no high-level summits between the EU and Central Asian countries at the bilateral or regional level. Only occasional ministerial "Troika" visits took place, and during the first two stages of cooperation, political engagement remained modest. In terms of regional political dialogue, the 2007 strategy introduced several platforms for political dialogue, including the High-Level Security Dialogue, aimed at intensifying relations. The adoption of the 2019 strategy further deepened EU engagement and introduced new platforms for strengthening regional cooperation. The adoption of these two strategies, along with ongoing discussions about a new strategy in response to geopolitical developments, demonstrates the EU's growing cooperation with Central Asian countries.

It is important to highlight that political dialogues have intensified not only at the regional level between the EU and Central Asia but also at the bilateral level between the EU and individual Central Asian countries. This has been facilitated through established channels of PCAs and EPCAs. As discussed above, PCAs and EPCAs have established several institutional formats to deepen cooperation, including: (i) the Cooperation Council, (ii) Cooperation Committees, and (iii) the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. In addition, EU member states are also individually working to intensify political dialogue with Central Asian countries—both regionally (e.g., the Germany-Central Asia Summit) and bilaterally through direct engagements with individual Central Asian states.

[569] Council of the European Union, *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia*, Luxembourg, October 23, 2023, 14587/23, COEST 575, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14587-2023-INIT/en/pdf.

The EU has expanded its diplomatic presence in Central Asia, and EU delegations now exist in all five Central Asian countries. On the other hand, Central Asian countries' embassies in Brussels simultaneously function as their representative missions to the EU. Additionally, the EU has created the position of Special Representative for Central Asia, a role that has played an important part in shaping EU strategies for the region. In addition to EU delegations, Central Asian countries host embassies from EU member states, with the number of embassies varying depending on the level of bilateral relations. However, the political presence of EU member states' embassies remains limited in Central Asian countries. The decision by EU member states to open embassies in Central Asian countries serves as an important factor in increasing visibility.

The table below shows EU member states' embassies in Central Asian countries that have been established to date. For example, in Tajikistan, only two EU member states have opened embassies, whereas in Kazakhstan, 21 member states have diplomatic missions. This also serves as an indicator of the level of engagement between different EU member states and Central Asian countries, and it can influence the visibility of these relationships in Central Asian media. Germany and France are the only EU countries with embassies in all five Central Asian states. Following them, Italy, Romania, and Hungary have established embassies in three Central Asian countries. It is evident that Kazakhstan is the EU's main economic and political partner in the region, as most EU member states have embassies there, while also using them to cover other Central Asian countries. Other EU countries maintain regional coverage of Central Asia through embassies in neighboring states or by appointing roving ambassadors based in their capitals.[570]

[570] Neil J. Melvin, "Introduction," in *Engaging Central Asia: The European Union's New Strategy in the Heart of Eurasia*, ed. Neil J. Melvin (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2008), 2.

Table 7: Embassies of EU Member States in the Capital Cities of Central Asian Countries.

Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan
France Germany	France Germany Hungary	France Germany Italy Romania	France Germany Italy Romania Bulgaria Hungary Spain Latvia Poland Slovakia Czech Republic	France Germany Italy Romania Bulgaria Hungary Spain Latvia Poland Slovakia Czech Republic Austria Belgium Greece Lithuania Netherlands Portugal Finland Croatia Sweden Estonia

Source: Data collected by the author from the websites of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Central Asian countries.[571] The list does not include diplomatic representatives of EU member states residing in third countries.

In more than thirty years of cooperation, the EU's engagement with Central Asian countries has increased politically. As a result, the EU's profile in the region has gradually improved in terms of both quantity and quality. However, these developments have not made the EU one of the most influential actors in the region when compared to other global and regional powers.[572] It may be concluded that the history of over thirty years of cooperation has never been linear. The stages of cooperation discussed above show that the EU has had to change

[571] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Diplomatic List - 2024* (2024), https://mfa.tj/uploads/main/2024/04/Kitobi-Haiati-diplomati-2024.pdf; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, *Diplomatic Representations of Foreign States and International Organizations Accredited in Turkmenistan*, January 27, 2017, https://www.mfa.gov.tm/en/articles/64 (accessed April 2, 2025); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Diplomatic Corps*, 2024, https://2014-2024.mfa.uz/ru/pages/diplomaticheskiy-korpus (accessed April 2, 2025); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, *Diplomatic Directory*, 2025, https://mfa.gov.kg/docs/2025/DK_Bishkek.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Contacts of Foreign Diplomatic Representative Offices and Consular Institutions in Kazakhstan*, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/page/contacts/kontakty-zarubezhnyh-diplomaticheskih-predstavitelstv-i-konsulskih-uchrezhdeniy-v-kazahstane (accessed April 2, 2025).

[572] Arynov, "Changing Perceptions of the European Union in Central Asia," 66-67.

its strategy, policy, and position in the region multiple times.[573] There is still room for further development of political relations and engagement with Central Asian countries at different levels. The EU has opportunities to strengthen its relationships and increase its visibility in Central Asia.

5.4.2. Economic, Trade, and Investment Cooperation

The economic and trade relationship is one of the top priorities of the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia at both regional and bilateral levels. The content analysis of the two strategies of the EU and the PCAs and EPCA signed between the EU and individual Central Asian countries confirms this. In the first stage of cooperation, the EU primarily served as a technical supporter and donor and supported the Central Asian countries in their transition to liberal markets. After the adoption of the strategy in 2007, the EU outlined a more comprehensive plan for economic, trade, and investment cooperation with Central Asian countries.

The EU and Central Asian countries' trade relationship is growing gradually. Regionally, the EU is the second-largest trading partner of Central Asia and a key source of direct investment in the region.[574] The EU has surpassed Russia and the USA in trade relations when viewed regionally, and Central Asian countries view the EU as their key trade partner.[575] The EU exports manufactured goods like medicines, cars, and machinery to Central Asia, while the EU's imports from Central Asia are dominated by raw materials and high-value commodities such as oil from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, gold from Kyrgyzstan, aluminum and textiles from Tajikistan, and chemicals and textiles from Uzbekistan.[576] Agricultural production is also an important source of exports for Central Asian countries.[577] Top EU export partners for Central Asian countries include Italy, the Netherlands, France, Spain, and

[573] Khaydarali Yunusov, "Balanced Policy of the EU in Central Asia," *International Journal of Law and Criminology* 3, no. 6 (2023): 44, https://doi.org/10.37547/ijlc/Volume03Issue06-07.
[574] European Commission, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Central Asia 5*, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/region/details_central-asia-5_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025).
[575] Cornell and Starr, *A Steady Hand*, 26.
[576] Martin Russell, *The EU's New Central Asia Strategy*, Briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, January 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162_EN.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025).
[577] Azimzhan Khitakhunov, "New Phase of the European Union – Central Asia Cooperation: Temporary or Strategic Rapprochement?" *Eurasian Research Journal* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2023): 31, https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2023.1-02.

Germany,[578] and these factors may also influence the visibility of these EU countries in the mass media of Central Asian countries, which is discussed in the next chapter.

In terms of bilateral trade relationships, the EU ranks among the top five partners of Central Asian countries bilaterally, as shown in the following table. Trade relations between the EU and Central Asian countries vary in scope. Kazakhstan is a notable leader in this area, with its abundant natural resources, particularly in the energy sector. The partnership with Kazakhstan is the most rapidly developing among Central Asian countries, making a substantial contribution to the overall trade volume. Additionally, EU countries account for around half of foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan's economy.[579] The following table shows the top five trade partners of Central Asian countries, confirming the position of the EU in Kazakhstan's economy. According to the data, the EU is Kazakhstan's largest trading partner, accounting for 37% of the country's total exports and nearly 28% of its total trade in 2023. It is also Kazakhstan's top foreign investor, with EU investments reaching €54.8 billion in 2022.[580] It is important to highlight that the EU has surpassed Russia and China in Kazakhstan in terms of total trade, taking the top position. However, when looking at imports and exports separately, in exports, the EU is the largest trade partner of Kazakhstan, while in imports, Russia and China hold the leading positions, with the EU in third place. More than 15% of Kazakhstan's imported goods come from the EU.[581]

Looking at the EU's perspective, Table 9 shows the position of Central Asian countries in the EU's total trade in 2023, indicating that Kazakhstan leads among Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan ranked 25th among all EU trade partners, with total trade amounting to 0.8% of the EU's world trade.[582]

[578] T. K. Tokaev (Т. К. Токаев), "Сотрудничество Республики Казахстан с Европейским Союзом" ("Cooperation of the Republic of Kazakhstan with the European Union"), *Вестник РУДН. Серия: Международные отношения (RUDN Journal of International Relations)*, no. 1 (2010): 65.
[579] Qodirov, "The EU's Engagement with Central Asia," 76-77.
[580] European Commission, *EU Trade Relations with Kazakhstan: Facts, Figures and Latest Developments*, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/kazakhstan_en (accessed April 2, 2025).
[581] European Commission, *European Union: Trade in Goods with Kazakhstan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kazakhstan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025).
[582] Ibid.

Table 8: Top five total trade partners (imports and exports) of Central Asian countries and the position of the EU in the total trade of Central Asian countries in 2023.

Rank	Kazakhstan (Value Mio € / % World)	Kyrgyzstan (Value Mio € / % World)	Tajikistan (Value Mio € / % World)	Turkmenistan (Value Mio € / % World)	Uzbekistan (Value Mio € / % World)
1.	**EU27 - 36,159 / 27.9**	China - 4,970 / 31.6	Russia - 1,893 / 23.6	China - 9,352 / 57.9	China - 9,913 / 19.5
2.	Russia - 25,805 / 19.9	Russia - 2,590 / 16.5	Kazakhstan - 1,457 / 18.2	Türkiye - 2,430 / 15.1	Russia - 8,110 / 16.0
3.	China - 23,094 / 17.8	Switzerland - 1,865 / 11.9	China - 1,445 / 18.0	**EU27 - 1,848 / 11.4**	**EU27 - 6,113 / 12.0**
4.	Türkiye - 6,365 / 4.9	Kazakhstan - 1,389 / 8.8	Uzbekistan - 634 / 7.9	Azerbaijan - 684 / 4.2	Kazakhstan - 3,996 / 7.9
5.	South Korea - 5,585 / 4.3	**EU27 - 921 / 5.9**	**EU27 - 572 / 7.1**	Uzbekistan - 600 / 3.7	Türkiye - 2,901 / 5.7

Source: Collected by the authors from the European Commission's reports.[583]

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, China is the top trade partner with 31.6% of total trade, followed by Russia, Switzerland, Kazakhstan, and the EU in fifth place with 5.9% of the total trade. Kyrgyzstan takes the third position among the Central Asian countries in the list of the EU's total trade partners, and globally it takes the 83rd position with €2.8 billion, which is equal to 0.1% of the EU's global trade.

In the case of Tajikistan, the EU also takes the fifth position with 7.1% of Tajikistan's total trade. Russia, Kazakhstan, China, and Uzbekistan hold leading positions in Tajikistan's total trade. Among the Central Asian countries, Tajikistan takes the last position in the list of the EU's total trade partners, and it takes the 132nd position with €500 million.

The EU takes the third position in Turkmenistan's total trade with 11.4% of total trade. For Turkmenistan, China is the largest trade partner with 57.9% of total trade, and Türkiye takes the second position with 15.1% of the total trade. Turkmenistan ranks 98th in the list of the EU's total trade partners with €1.87 billion in trade.

Similarly, to Turkmenistan, in Uzbekistan, the EU ranks third with 12% of the total trade. China and Russia take the first and second positions, respectively, with 19.5% and 16% of

[583] European Commission, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Kazakhstan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kazakhstan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Kyrgyz Republic*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kyrgyz-republic_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Tadjikistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_tadjikistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Uzbekistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_uzbekistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Turkmenistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_turkmenistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025).

the total trade. Uzbekistan ranks 65th in the list of the EU's total trade partners in 2023, with €5.1 billion, which is equal to only 0.1% of the EU's total foreign trade.

Table 9: The position of Central Asian countries as total trade partners (import and export) of the EU in 2023.

#	Position	Partner	Value Mio €	% Extra-EU
1.	**25**	Kazakhstan	42,407	0.8
2.	**65**	Uzbekistan	5,132	0.1
3.	**83**	Kyrgyz Republic	2,846	0.1
4.	**98**	Turkmenistan	1.875	0.0
5	**132**	Tajikistan	500	0.00

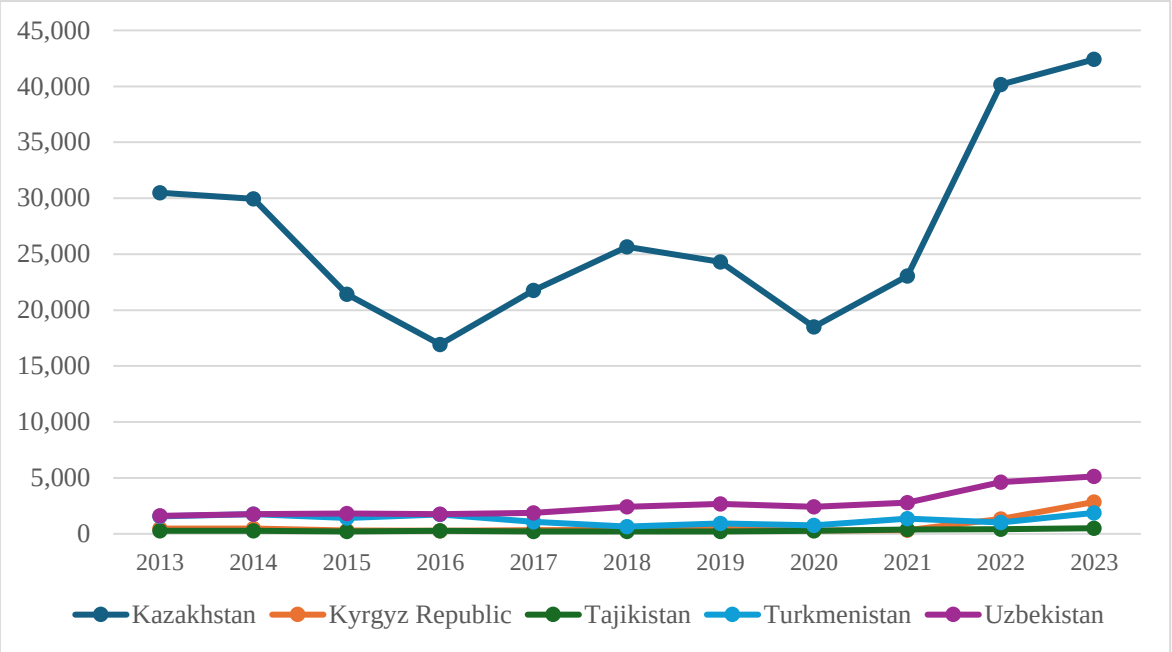
Source: Collected by the authors from the European Commission's reports.[584]

The following figure (figure 5) also shows the total trade relationship of the EU with Central Asian countries for the period from 2013 to 2023**.** This figure shows the leading position of Kazakhstan among the Central Asian countries in the trade relationship. Kazakhstan has consistently been the EU's largest trade partner in the region. From €30.5 billion in 2013, the total trade increased to €42.4 billion in 2023, which is the highest point in the trade relationship. The energy sector is the primary driver of EU-Central Asia trade, with about 80% of EU imports from Kazakhstan being oil products.[585]

[584] European Commission, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Kazakhstan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kazakhstan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Kyrgyz Republic*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kyrgyz-republic_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Tadjikistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_tadjikistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Uzbekistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_uzbekistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Turkmenistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_turkmenistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025).

[585] Peyrouse, "A Donor Without Influence," 4.

Figure 5: Total trade of the EU with Central Asian countries at the bilateral level for the period from 2013 to 2023.



Source: Collected by the authors from the European Commission's reports.[586]

In the case of Uzbekistan, significant growth in trade relations is noticeable. In 2013, total trade was €1.6 billion, which increased to €5.1 billion in 2023. The growth of total trade is particularly noticeable since 2021, likely influenced by Uzbekistan's inclusion in the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) program, which grants trade preferences. It is important to highlight that the EU offers non-EU countries access to its market in exchange for their acceptance of EU rules and standards.[587] One of the main tools the EU uses to promote its normative power is the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) and GSP+ programs. Through these programs, countries that qualify can export goods to the EU duty-free, but they must commit to respecting 27 international conventions related to good governance, human rights, and environmental protection.[588] Three out of five Central Asian

[586] European Commission, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Kazakhstan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kazakhstan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Kyrgyz Republic*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kyrgyz-republic_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Tadjikistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_tadjikistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Uzbekistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_uzbekistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025); European Commission, *European Union: Trade with Turkmenistan*, May 16, 2024, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_turkmenistan_en.pdf (accessed April 2, 2025).

[587] Ryo Oshiba, "A Japanese View of the EU," *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs* 2 (2012): 104.

[588] Onel, "Assessing European Union's Actorness," 299.

countries, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, enjoy preferential access to the EU market through the GSP or its enhanced version, GSP+. While Tajikistan qualifies for the standard GSP, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have secured GSP+ status, which offers even greater trade benefits. In contrast, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, classified as upper-middle-income economies, no longer qualify for these trade preferences.[589]

In the case of the EU and Kyrgyzstan, total trade in 2013 was €473 million, increasing to €2.8 billion in 2023. Turkmenistan's trade with the EU in 2013 was €1.57 billion, reaching a peak of €1.7 billion in 2016, dropping to €652 million in 2018, and then recovering to €1.87 billion in 2023. Turkmenistan's economic relationship with the EU is also quite weak compared to China's longstanding dominance and Türkiye's growing influence in the economy of Turkmenistan.

Compared to the other Central Asian countries, the EU and Tajikistan's trade over these ten years has been relatively small, despite the fact that it increased from €283 million in 2013 to €500 million in 2023. The EU's economic influence in Tajikistan is relatively limited, especially compared to Russia and China. The EU has been an important financial donor to Tajikistan, but its economic influence remains limited.[590]

Among the areas of cooperation, the energy relationship has gained much more interest from the EU, particularly for diversifying its energy sources, which is also visible in the bilateral and regional documents. Energy cooperation is one of the main cornerstones of the development of the EU's economic relationship. In order to have a detailed analysis of this area of cooperation, the following section analyzes the EU's energy cooperation with Central Asian countries.

5.4.3. Energy relations

The energy sector remains one of the primary areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries in the last two stages of cooperation, at regional and bilateral levels, as highlighted in adopted and signed documents. Since the Ukraine-Russia gas dispute in

[589] European Commission, "EU Trade Relations with Central Asia. Facts, Figures and Latest Developments," https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en (accessed April 2, 2025).
[590] Rustami Sukhrob, "Взаимоотношения Европейского Союза и Таджикистана в 1991–2007 годах" ("Relations Between the European Union and Tajikistan in 1991–2007"), Учёные записки (Scientific Notes) No. 2(59) (2019): 71.

January 2006, energy security has become a top priority on the European policy agenda. Officials in Brussels and across EU member states have been working to reduce their dependence on Russia's energy. Central Asia's energy resources are seen as key to reducing this dependency. As a result, European companies have significant investments in Central Asia's oil and gas reserves, especially following European transnational companies such as Shell (Netherlands), Total (France), and Eni (Italy) that operate in the region.[591]

The EU began to recognize the potential importance of Central Asia during the preparation of the first strategy in 2007, which coincided with the Ukraine-Russia gas dispute, and the energy relationship then became one of the main points of the strategy. The region's oil and gas reserves, which could be connected directly to Europe through the South Caucasus and Turkey, were seen as a partial solution to the need for diversifying energy sources.

The EU has also built partnerships through bilateral Memorandums of Understanding on energy cooperation with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, and three of the five Central Asian countries have significant energy reserves.[592] Kazakhstan has the largest reserves and ranks among the global top ten for oil and the top fifteen for gas. Turkmenistan holds large gas reserves, while Uzbekistan is also a notable gas producer.[593] In Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan account for 11% of Eurasia's oil production and 15% of its gas production.[594]

A major barrier to energy sector cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries is the high cost of transportation, underdeveloped transport infrastructure, and the lack of a direct border with the EU. In the case of transportation, Central Asian countries must pass through third countries, including Russia, which affects energy trade due to EU-Russia political relations.[595] Before the Russia-Ukraine war, as of 2021, Kazakhstan had established itself as the EU's third-largest non-OPEC oil supplier, with over 70% of its oil exports directed to Europe, accounting for 6% of the EU's total oil consumption. Data show that 90% of Kazakhstan's oil exports to the EU are transported through Russia via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium. In 2021, before the war, 53.1 million tons of oil were transported through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, accounting for over 90% of Kazakhstan's total oil

[591] Nurdavletova and Zharmakhanova, "Analysis of the Activities of European Oil and Gas TNCs," 34.
[592] European Commission, "Energy is an Important Area of Cooperation between the EU and Central Asia," https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/international-cooperation/key-partner-countries-and-regions/central-asia_en (accessed April 2, 2025).
[593] International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: What Role for the European Union?* 3.
[594] Nurdavletova and Zharmakhanova, "Analysis of the Activities of European Oil and Gas TNCs," 34.
[595] Mantel, "EU-Central Asia Relations," 67.

exports, while an additional 11 million tons were shipped through the Atyrau-Samara pipeline. Together, these routes accounted for 94.8% of total oil exports.[596] Central Asia's strategic importance as an energy supplier has increased following the Russia-Ukraine war, but still more work is needed to find alternative routes for transporting energy from Central Asia to the EU.

To develop energy cooperation, the EU initiated projects, two of which are particularly notable. The Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE) program was a key EU initiative aimed at enhancing energy cooperation between the EU and partner states from the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.[597] The program was active from 1996 until 2016. The EU's primary objective in launching INOGATE was to extract and transport oil and gas from this region to energy-deficient European markets. During its operation, the program focused on four key areas: (i) strengthening energy security, (ii) bringing participating countries' energy markets in line with EU rules and standards, (iii) promoting sustainable energy development, and (iv) attracting investment in projects of common and regional interest.[598] Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the EU launched the Sustainable Energy Connectivity for Central Asia (SECCA) program in 2022. This initiative "aims to promote a more sustainable energy balance in CA in accordance with EU best practices,"[599] by allocating €6.8 million to the five Central Asian countries from March 2022 to March 2026.[600]

[596] Muratova, Mariya, Houman Sadri, Zhanar Medeubayeva, and Ainur Issayeva. "The EU and Kazakhstan in the Latest Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Conditions: New Dimensions of Partnership." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* (2023): 1. https://doi.org/10.1177/18793665231215799.
[597] Vladimir Paramonov, Aleksei Strokov, and Zebiniso Abduganieva, "Влияние Европейского Союза на Центральную Азию: Обзор, анализ и прогноз" ("The Influence of the European Union on Central Asia: Overview, Analysis, and Forecast"), May 2017, Фонд им. Фридриха Эберта (Friedrich Ebert Foundation), 2017, 10.
[598] Yazdani, "The European Union and Central Asia," 249.
[599] Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan. "European Union's New Project to Boost Sustainable Energy in Central Asia." November 17, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/european-union%E2%80%99s-new-project-boost-sustainable-energy-central-asia_en?s=222 (accessed April 2, 2025).
[600] Ibid.

5.4.4. Promotion of Human Rights, the Rule of Law, Good Governance, and Democracy

As stated by Ian Manners, normative power is not simply what an actor does but what it is.[601] The EU itself is built upon certain norms, such as human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and good governance. It promotes these norms around the world in cooperation with third countries. Ian Manners divides the EU norms into core and minor norms, which are discussed in detail in the theoretical chapter. In cooperation with Central Asian countries, the EU also prioritizes value-based areas of cooperation from the first years of the relationship. The European External Action Service mentions on its website that "promotion of human rights and democracy is an important pillar of EU-Central Asia cooperation."[602] The content analysis of the regional strategies the EU has adopted for Central Asia and the bilateral agreements signed between the EU and Central Asian countries also confirm this. This shows that value-based areas of cooperation receive special attention from the EU side in its cooperation with Central Asian countries, both bilaterally and regionally. As discussed in the theoretical framework chapter, the EU applies different norm diffusion mechanisms, such as contagion, informational diffusion, procedural diffusion, transference, overt diffusion, and cultural filter. Among these, in the case of EU norm diffusion in Central Asia, procedural diffusion and transference have been the most effective mechanisms, compared to the other four mechanisms.

The most effective mechanism of norm diffusion in the case of EU norm promotion in Central Asian countries is procedural diffusion. The procedural diffusion mechanism refers to the institutional integration of norms into agreements and legal frameworks. In the case of Central Asian countries, the EU operationalizes this primarily through PCAs and EPCA, which are signed bilaterally between the EU and each Central Asian country. One of the main parts of these agreements is specifically dedicated to cooperation in areas related to the promotion of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and good governance. For example, Article 2 of the PCAs the EU signed with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan explicitly states that "respect for democracy, principles of international law and human rights" is essential.[603]

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[601] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 252.

[602] EEAS. "Strengthening Values: EU-Central Asia Cooperation on Democracy and Rights." February 18, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strengthening-values-eu-central-asia-cooperation-democracy-and-rights_en (accessed April 2, 2025).

[603] "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 229, August 31, 1999, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:1999:229:FULL.

Similarly, the PCA with Tajikistan states in the same article that "respect for democratic principles and fundamental and human rights" is a fundamental element of the agreement.[604] In the case of the EPCA the EU signed with Kazakhstan, the "respect for democratic principles and human rights" is moved to Article 1, where it is also highlighted that it "constitutes an essential element of this Agreement."[605]

As these agreements are legally binding, they include sanctions for noncompliance with any of their provisions by both parties. For example, Article 95 of the PCA of the EU with Uzbekistan, together with the related Joint Declarations, states that a violation of the essential elements of Article 2, such as respect for democracy, international law, and human rights, would be considered a violation of the agreement and could result in the suspension of trade or other privileges, as well as the imposition of sanctions.[606] Only once, from Central Asian countries to Uzbekistan, the EU applied sanctions for human rights violations after the Andijan massacre,[607] and these sanctions were soon lifted. The sanctions against Uzbekistan included an arms embargo and a visa ban for 12 officials, but they were scaled down to just the arms embargo within a year.[608] Overall, the analysis of bilateral agreements shows that human rights are not only mentioned but are treated as essential for maintaining bilateral cooperation.

In addition to the legally binding bilateral agreements, the EU also promotes its norms through its regional strategies adopted toward Central Asia. Democracy, good governance, the rule of law, and human rights are among the seven priorities outlined in the 2007 strategy adopted by the EU. One of the results of this strategy was the establishment of the Human Rights Dialogue, which takes place annually between the EU and individual Central Asian

[604] "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Tajikistan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Union* L 350/3, December 29, 2009, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22009A1229(01)&qid=1495981934450&from=EN.

[605] "Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Kazakhstan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Union*, Volume 59, February 4, 2016, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/enhanced_partnership_and_cooperation_agreement.pdf.

[606] "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, of the Other Part," *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 229, August 31, 1999, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:1999:229:FULL.

[607] The Andijan massacre happened in May 2005 in Uzbekistan, when government forces shot at a large group of people who were protesting in the city of Andijan. Many civilians were killed, and the event was strongly criticized by the international community.

[608] Human Rights Watch, *EU Imposes Sanctions on Uzbekistan Over Massacre*, October 2, 2005, https://www.hrw.org/news/2005/10/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-uzbekistan-over-massacre (accessed June 15, 2025).

countries at the official level. These annual meetings are typically accompanied by civil society seminars. The EU and its Central Asian partners meet to discuss recent developments in human rights, focusing on topics such as the judicial system, human rights, minority rights, cooperation with international organizations, EU-supported projects, and individual cases of concern.[609] In the latest adopted strategy, the EU maintained its special attention to promoting its values in Central Asia. The 2019 EU strategy toward Central Asia grouped all the norms mentioned above in the 2007 strategy into a group called the Partnership for Resilience, which includes cooperation in the field of human rights, the rule of law, and governance.[610] In general, the EU actively promotes its norms through the procedural diffusion mechanism at both the bilateral and regional levels in Central Asian countries.

The promotion of EU norms in Central Asia has also been channeled through transference diffusion. According to the definition of Ian Manners, transference refers to the diffusion taking place "when the EU exchanges goods, trade, aid or technical assistance with third parties through largely substantive or financial means."[611] Transference usually occurs when the EU shares best practices and standards through trade relationships with Central Asian countries and through technical and developmental assistance. For instance, through the TACIS programme, the EU practiced the diffusion of norms by transference through the exchange of best standards and experiences and the promotion of values within joint projects in newly independent Central Asian countries and other post-Soviet states until 2007.

Another example of the transference of norm diffusion in the EU is its conditional trade preferences, such as GSP+. These provide an additional tool to promote human rights and labour standards in cooperation with Central Asian countries. There are certain strict criteria for joining GSP+ for Central Asian countries. Firstly, the country must be vulnerable without diversified sectors of the economy. Secondly, import levels from the EU must be low. And thirdly, which is more important to the EU, the country must have ratified 27 conventions on human and labor rights, the environment, and other socially important issues.[612] From Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are already benefiting from this trade preference,

[609] Jos Boonstra, "The EU's Interests in Central Asia: Integrating Energy, Security and Values into Coherent Policy," *EDC2020 Working Paper*, no. 9 (January 2011), 11.
[610] European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, JOIN(2019) 9 final, Brussels, May 15, 2019, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed December 1, 2024).
[611] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 244-245.
[612] Sarvar Jalolov, "*European Union's Normative Power in Central Asia*," *CABAR.asia*, April 11, 2020, https://cabar.asia/en/european-union-s-normative-power-in-central-asia (accessed June 15, 2025).

and Tajikistan has announced its readiness for GSP+ and started negotiations with the EU. Two other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, are not eligible for this trade preference of the EU, as they have more developed economic relationships. As Sarvar Jalolov highlights, the EU's ability to leverage its trade preferences in exchange for the implementation of norms is becoming a real power in Central Asia, because the countries of the region are showing their readiness, which can be justified by the fatigue of the controversial power of the main external players in the region.[613]

From the EU's norm diffusions, procedural diffusion and transference have since remained the main norm diffusion mechanisms in the EU's toolkit in Central Asia. The other norm diffusion mechanisms mentioned by Ian Manners are used by the EU in Central Asia to promote its norms as well, but they are not as effective as these two diffusion mechanisms mentioned above.

Overt diffusion is another way of spreading the norms, which refers to the direct presence of EU institutions in third countries. This method suggests that the EU can diffuse norms and values through its existence in third countries. The EU has a Special Representative for Central Asia and Delegations in all Central Asian countries. In addition, member states of the EU have embassies and other diplomatic missions in the region. However, despite this presence, their impact remains limited in promoting norm-based policies in Central Asia, largely due to information barriers and lack of visibility. As Sébastien Peyrouse observed, even though the EU Delegation in Kyrgyzstan is "one of the most active, generous and broadly-oriented donors supporting democratic development," but "this support is not well-known among the general public."[614] This shows that the overt diffusion channels of norm promotion by the EU are weak in Central Asia, despite the physical presence of the EU in all five Central Asian countries.

The other norm diffusion mechanism is contagion diffusion. According to the point of view of Ian Manners, contagion refers to the passive diffusion of norms, and it means when the EU spreads its values simply by being what it is, and it is not through direct action, but through example and attraction.[615] This can happen when non-EU countries observe the success areas of the EU and voluntarily adopt its norms and practices. Nevertheless, there are not many examples in which Central Asian countries have successfully adopted EU

[613] Ibid.
[614] Peyrouse, *How Does Central Asia View the EU?*, 7.
[615] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 244-245.

norms through the contagion diffusion way, and so far, this norm diffusion mechanism is not very effective in Central Asia. However, there are areas where Central Asian countries can see the EU as a model and follow its experience in an adapted way to their culture and interests. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 7 from the perspective of experts, raising the ways in which they see the EU as a model for Central Asian countries to follow.

In addition, the EU also uses an informational diffusion mechanism in Central Asia, which is based on raising awareness and promoting values through public campaigns, civil society, and the media. Through this mechanism, the EU promotes its norms through an annual EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, which was launched in 2019, and a Regional Civil Society Facility for Central Asia, which was launched in 2024 with a budget of EUR 4.5 million.[616] However, it seems that, compared to the other mechanisms, the effectiveness of this mechanism is limited in the promotion of the EU norms in Central Asia. The content analysis conducted on the Kazakhstan and Tajikistan mass media, whose results are presented in the next chapter, shows that the EU is not very active in the media, as most of the news related to the EU in the media is based on information from Central Asian official agencies, and only a few of them are based on information from EU Delegations in the region. Moreover, a short look at the social media accounts of EU Delegations also confirms that not all of the EU Delegations are actively posting their activities regularly, and most of the time they are not posting in the language of the accredited state to be understandable to their readers in the region.

One of the other central mechanisms in the diffusion of norms is the cultural filter, which significantly influences how external norms are interpreted, accepted, modified, or rejected by third countries. In the context of the efforts of the EU to project its values abroad, the concept of the cultural filter helps to explain why some norms are internalized in certain contexts while others are resisted. Ian Manners defines the cultural filter as "the interplay between the construction of knowledge and the creation of social and political identity by the subjects of norm diffusion."[617] Moreover, scholars are increasingly arguing that the cultural filter deserves a more central role. It not only affects the direct transmission of norms but also underlies and shapes the entire diffusion process. As Lorenzo Fioramonti and Sonia Lucarelli emphasize, no norm is perceived in a vacuum but rather is interpreted "in the light

[616] EEAS. "Strengthening Values: EU-Central Asia Cooperation on Democracy and Rights." February 18, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strengthening-values-eu-central-asia-cooperation-democracy-and-rights_en (accessed April 2, 2025).
[617] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 245.

of pre-existing dynamics" between the norm-sender and norm-receiver.[618] Therefore, the success of norm diffusion depends largely on the degree of normative fit between the values promoted by the EU and the domestic context of the recipient. When this fit is strong, norms are more likely to be adopted and internalized. On the other hand, when norms conflict with local political culture, identity, or traditions, they may be resisted or adopted superficially without meaningful normative change.

In the context of Central Asia, the cultural filter plays a particularly crucial role. Countries in the region are not passive recipients of EU-promoted norms. Instead, they interpret these norms through their own lenses shaped by historical experiences, domestic politics, and cultural values. According to Natalia Chaban et al., "outsiders' expectations and perceptions influence the impact of EU foreign policy role performance," which makes local cultural and perceptual contexts essential for any analysis of norm diffusion.[619] Due to cultural and historical differences between the EU and Central Asian states, certain EU norms face challenges in gaining acceptance. For example, norms related to minority rights, particularly LGBT+ rights, are frequently viewed as incompatible with the traditional values of the region and are often perceived as a threat to local culture.[620] At the same time, not all EU norms are rejected. Norms such as sustainable development, education modernization, or environmental standards are often seen positively and may even serve as examples to follow, as interviews with experts from Central Asian countries conducted for this research confirm. These findings are consistent with Jeffrey Checkel's observation that "diffusion is more rapid when a cultural match exists between a systemic norm and a target country."[621] In some cases, Central Asian states attempt to adapt EU norms in ways that align more closely with their own political and social realities. There are criticisms of the promotion of EU norms in Central Asia by scholars from the region, and one of the most significant criticisms comes from Guli Yuldasheva, who argues that EU projects often focus on aligning with European standards and values while overlooking traditional norms and values in the region.[622]

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[618] Lorenzo Fioramonti and Sonia Lucarelli, "Conclusion: Self-Representations and External Perceptions – Can the EU Bridge the Gap?" in *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor*, ed. Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti (London: Routledge, 2010), 224.
[619] Natalia Chaban, Ole Elgström, and Martin Holland, "The European Union as Others See It," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 11, no. 2 (2006): 248, https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2006019.
[620] Zhanibek Arynov, "Opportunity and Threat Perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 744, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1917516.
[621] Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Norms, Institutions, and National Identity in Contemporary Europe," *International Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1999): 87.
[622] Guli Yuldasheva, "EU-Central Asia Cooperation: An Opinion from Uzbekistan," *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook* 2015 (Riga: 2015), 136.

Despite these initiatives, scholars and policy analysts have raised concerns about the real impact of EU normative efforts in Central Asia. According to one analysis, the EU's normative impact in the region has translated into only few positive changes in the field of democracy, human rights, good governance and the rule of law.[623] Emilian Kavalski concludes that the EU has emerged as only a "bit player" in the region, with "very limited impact and leverage on Central Asian affairs."[624]

However, the analysis of the signed agreements of the EU with Central Asian countries and the adopted strategies shows that the EU continues to project itself as a normative power in Central Asia. However, the success of its strategy depends on contextual understanding, genuine dialogue, and understanding of the perceptions of Central Asian countries about the normative values of the EU. In the next chapters, the thesis tries to understand and analyze the perceptions of the Central Asian countries on the EU and its norms in Central Asian countries.

5.4.5. Security and water management

Central Asia faces many security challenges due to its location in a "hot zone" between Russia, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and the Caspian Sea, which makes the region vulnerable to drug and human trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism. In addition to this, water shortages and management are also causing tensions between the countries of the region.[625] After the EU's expansion in 2004, Central Asian countries geographically became the neighbors of neighbors to the EU, and the stability and security of the region became one of the EU's priorities. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 further strengthened the role of Central Asian countries in maintaining regional and EU security. One of the key concerns of the EU is the increased risk of terrorism and violent extremism spilling over from Afghanistan.

EU-Central Asia security cooperation is intensifying. The EU sees itself as a security partner of Central Asian countries, and in its 2007 strategy, security was highlighted as one of the

[623] Emilian Kavalski, *Central Asia and the Rise of Normative Powers: Contextualizing the Security Governance of the European Union, China, and India* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012), 98.
[624] Ibid.
[625] Jos Boonstra, "The EU Strategy for Central Asia says 'security'. Does this include Security Sector Reform?" *EUCAM Policy Brief*, no. 10 (November 2009), 4.

priority areas.[626] The EU aims to cooperate with Central Asian countries based on shared security interests. Both of the EU's strategies put a strong focus on addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, extremism, organized crime, drug trafficking, water and border management, environmental issues, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Security cooperation is one of the areas of collaboration that Central Asian authorities are also particularly interested in developing with the EU.

The EU has been working closely with Central Asian countries in both regional and bilateral approaches through various security-related projects. Two major EU initiatives are the Central Asia Drug Action Programme, launched in 2001, and the Border Management Programme for Central Asia, launched in 2003. The EU provides training, technical assistance, and guidance on implementing international security standards and EU practices through these projects. BOMCA is an EU-funded initiative implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Its main goals are to strengthen border security in Central Asia by combating illegal trafficking and facilitating trade. BOMCA provides support for border management, including border guard training, equipment, and infrastructure at border crossings.[627] CADAP is another EU project in Central Asia that focuses on reducing drug consumption and minimizing the social and financial damage caused by drug addiction. Its priority tasks include improving the work of control agencies at major airports in the region, strengthening cooperation between law enforcement agencies in Central Asia and EU states to combat drug trafficking, and creating a unified information network to coordinate the efforts of special services, border guards, ministries of the interior, and customs services in Central Asian countries. Additionally, in 2013, the EU proposed the High-Level Security Dialogue as a new platform for cooperation with Central Asian countries. This cooperation format shows the shared interest of the EU and Central Asian countries in strengthening dialogue and collaboration on security matters.[628]

The most significant internal challenge facing Central Asia is the water management problem, with experts arguing that failing to find a solution could be a reason for conflict between Central Asian countries. Three Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, are rich in energy but struggle with insufficient water resources for crop irrigation, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two mountainous countries in the region, are

[626] Boonstra, "The EU Strategy for Central Asia," 1.
[627] Onel, "Assessing European Union's Actorness," 293.
[628] Soliev, R. A. "Сотрудничество между Республикой Таджикистан и Европейским Союзом в сфере безопасности" ("Cooperation between the Republic of Tajikistan and the European Union in the Field of Security"). УЧЁНЫЕ ЗАПИСКИ (Scientific Notes) no. 4 (53) (2017): 74.

rich in water resources but lack energy resources.[629] Considering this, there is growing tension between the two upstream countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and the downstream countries, especially Uzbekistan, over the division of water and its management. Earlier research shows that water management is one of the areas where experts believe the EU can make a significant impact.[630]

To support Central Asian countries in water management, the EU launched the Central Asia Water and Energy Program under the EU's 2007 Strategy for Central Asia. The program focuses on improving energy and water security in the region by promoting closer cooperation between Central Asian countries.[631] In addition to this program, the EU–Central Asia Platform on Environment and Water Cooperation was established in 2009, and through this platform, the EU implemented the European Union–Central Asia Water, Environment, and Climate Change Cooperation (WECOOP) project until 2023.[632] The project aimed to "enhance national environment, climate change and water policies and to promote green investments in Central Asia."[633] The project includes a variety of activities, such as meetings to coordinate national water policies, study trips to learn from EU environmental practices, workshops on renewable energy, and training sessions on creating investment projects.[634] The next chapter will analyze to what extent these EU projects were visible in the selected mass media, but the question of how much these already finished projects achieved their aims remains open for further research.

5.4.6. Connectivity

The word "connectivity" became more visible in the second strategy of the EU towards Central Asia. In response to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the EU developed its own connectivity strategy. The EU defined connectivity as "the physical and non-physical infrastructure through which goods, services, ideas, and people can flow unhindered."[635] In terms of physical connection, transport and infrastructure are major areas where the EU and Central Asia share interests in developing cooperation. Central Asia's geographic position

[629] Boonstra, "The EU Strategy for Central Asia," 4.
[630] Peyrouse, *How Does Central Asia View the EU?*, 6.
[631] Nurdavletova, S., and Zharmakhanova, Zh. "Analysis of the Implementation of the Central Asia Water & Energy Program in the Framework of the New EU Strategy for Central Asia." Халықаралық қатынастар және халықаралық құқық сериясы (International Relations and International Law Series) no. 1 (93) (2021): 43. https://doi.org/10.26577/IRILJ.2021.v93.i1.05.
[632] WECOOP. "About." https://wecoop.eu/about/ (accessed April 2, 2025).
[633] WECOOP. "The European Union's WECOOP Project Closed." https://wecoop.eu/wecoop-project-closed/ (accessed April 2, 2025).
[634] Kudryashova, "EU Policy for the Stabilization of Central Asia," 141.
[635] Russell, *The EU's New Central Asia Strategy*.

gives the region huge potential as a transit hub. The region connects the EU and China, which is one of the EU's biggest trading partners. The EU and China are both interested in developing transportation infrastructure through Central Asian countries. China is eager to use Central Asia's transport routes to expand its trade with Europe and has started taking steps in this direction through its BRI strategy.[636] On the other hand, for Central Asian countries, new infrastructure and transport projects mean better access to global markets, and as a result, they have become a major economic opportunity for the region. The countries of the region are interested in intensifying their cooperation in these areas with all international relations actors.

The EU supports infrastructure and transportation in Central Asia through the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia project. With financial and technical support from the EU, TRACECA was first introduced in 1993 at a Brussels conference, and the program was officially launched in 1998 after rounds of negotiations. The main aim of the project is to create modern transport corridors linking the South Caucasus and Central Asia with Europe. Experts believe that, despite its ambitious start, the EU's involvement in TRACECA has gradually declined.[637] In addition to this project, the EU launched another initiative in 1996, INOGATE, which aimed to develop energy infrastructure for transporting oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caspian region to Europe.

Through educational and cultural programs, the EU tries to develop people-to-people contacts between the EU and Central Asian countries. In the early years of their relationship, educational relations with Central Asian countries were established through the TEMPUS project of the EU and later continued through the Erasmus Mundus project. The latest project through which the EU continues cooperation in education is the Erasmus+ project. This project covers cooperation in the field of education, specifically in higher education, student exchanges, and academic cooperation. Individual EU countries also have their own education and cultural programs in Central Asian countries, such as scholarship programs and cultural centers, which aim to develop people-to-people contacts with the EU.

Despite these efforts, the EU's people-to-people contacts are not as developed compared to Russia and China. Russia has historically been one of the main actors in the region, and during the Soviet Union, the countries of Central Asia shared 70 years of history. Additionally, the Russian language holds de facto status of a second language in all five

[636] Kolesnikova, "The New EU Strategy in Central Asia," 139.
[637] Pepe, "The EU in Central Asia," 308.

Central Asian countries. Furthermore, Russia hosts a large number of labor migrants from Central Asian countries. These factors have contributed to a more developed and connected people-to-people relationship.

China is also expanding its people-to-people contacts by opening language learning centers across most regions of Central Asian countries and by being a top economic partner of the region, making it a more favorable destination for travel and business trips. Additionally, China is investing in various projects in the region, and Chinese specialists and workers regularly visit Central Asia. These factors have contributed to growing people-to-people contacts between Central Asia and China.

In addition, Russia has a visa-free policy with Central Asian countries, which has become one of the main reasons for its strong people-to-people contacts, as it allows for easier movement. In contrast, EU countries implement a restrictive visa policy for Central Asian countries. There is ongoing discussion between the EU and Kazakhstan to facilitate the Schengen visa regime to enhance people-to-people contacts. This strict visa policy and application process are among the main reasons for less-developed people-to-people contacts between the EU and Central Asian countries.

5.5. Summary

This chapter examined the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia and focused on the main areas of cooperation that the EU prioritizes in its relations with the region. By analyzing EU strategies and bilateral agreements with Central Asian countries, this chapter addressed the first research question and identified key areas of cooperation. Over the years, the EU has developed its ties with Central Asia, and the increasing number of high-level political visits confirms this trend. To better understand the development of EU-Central Asia relations, this chapter divides cooperation into four stages based on the level of the relationship and the priority areas that the EU has emphasized in its cooperation with Central Asian countries. In the early years, cooperation was largely focused on technical assistance for economic reforms, state-building, and democratization. Later, in the next stages of cooperation, the scope expanded to include a broader range of areas, such as economic, trade, and investment relations; energy, including green energy; the promotion of human rights; democratization and the rule of law; security and stability; water management; education; and connectivity, including people-to-people contact. These areas have become the EU's main priorities in the region. The next chapter explores how the EU and its policies are portrayed in the media of

Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. This will provide insight into how the EU is perceived in Central Asia and which areas of cooperation receive the most attention.

PART III: EU'S PERCEPTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN

Chapter 6: Perception of the EU in the Mass Media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

6.1. Overview

In the context of International Relations, understanding the perceptions that countries have of one another is key to understanding their foreign policies. In fact, Robert Jervis highlighted that it is often impossible to explain foreign policy decisions without understanding how states perceive each other.[638] This is because "there is a direct causal link between perception and behavior in world affairs – many decisions are made based on perceived realities."[639] This statement highlights the importance of perception in shaping not only the behavior of states but also the dynamics of their interactions. In today's world, as many authors agree, most people "have no direct personal experience of foreign countries and issues: it is the news media that provide them with information on world affairs."[640] In this way, "the news media are the major international image makers."[641] Especially in regions like Central Asia, where direct contact between European and local populations is still limited, the role of media becomes even more central. The research shows that "despite increased people-to-people contact between the political elite of the EU and Central Asian states, the contact remains minimal among other layers of the populations of these regions."[642] Instead, they rely on mass media to understand and evaluate what the EU is, what it does, and why it matters. Therefore, understanding how the media in these two countries talks about the EU is essential to understand how the EU is actually perceived there. Considering the observation made by Alpo Rusi, most people shape their images in

[638] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 29.
[639] Xinsheng Liu and Yi Edward Yang, "Examining China's Official Media Perception of the United States: A Content Analysis of *People's Daily* Coverage," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 20 (2015): 387, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-015-9340-8.
[640] Li Zhang, "EU Perceptions in Northeast Asia: A Cross-National Comparative Study of Press Coverage and Citizens' Opinion," *Asia Europe Journal* 8 (2010): 162, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-010-0254-y.
[641] Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., *Foreign News in the Media: International Reporting in 29 Countries* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1985), 54, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000065257.
[642] Dilafroz Gulomova, "The EU and Central Asia: Mutual Perceptions," in *The EU as an Actor in Central Asia: External Impacts, Regional Responses*, ed. Sebastian Mayer and Jakob Lempp (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 141, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51354-1.

international politics through second-hand contacts,[643] and the media is a "useful channel… to collect information about image-objects and to influence the image."[644] In this way, mass media becomes the main actor in constructing the image of the EU in Central Asian countries.

The perception of the EU in these countries is not a simple matter. Perception, as a concept in international relations, plays a central role in shaping the behavior of countries and political actors. Ole Elgström and Natalia Chaban emphasize that "what the world thinks about the EU is an important factor in facilitating or opposing the achievements of EU policies." [645] This means that whether the EU is seen in a favorable or unfavorable light can affect how its policies are received and implemented in different regions. Veronika Orbetsova and Jing Men highlighted that the "media is crucial to the formation of the country image which affects the relationship between countries both at official and people-to-people level."[646] This is particularly true for Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, where the media is the primary source of information about the EU and its policies. In this context, the portrayal of the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan holds significance for understanding the EU's image in Central Asia. Over recent years, the EU has made efforts to increase its presence and cooperation with Central Asian nations. However, the extent to which these efforts are understood and welcomed by local populations largely depends on how the media presents the EU. According to Serena Kelly and Nicholas Smith, "perceptions can act as a fruitful resource to systematically evaluate the EU, providing insight into the effectiveness of EU international action from the perspective of outsiders."[647] The previous chapter analyzed how the EU represents itself in Central Asian countries, while this chapter analyzes how the Central Asian media views and portrays the EU to the public. This analysis helps to understand the extent to which the EU has been successful in implementing its policies in

[643] Alpo Rusi, "Image Research and Image Politics in International Relations—Transformation of Power Politics in the Television Age," *Cooperation and Conflict* 23, no. 1 (1988): 32–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/001083678802300103.
[644] Gan, *The EU in Chinese Print Media*, 5.
[645] Ole Elgström and Natalia Chaban, "Studying External Perceptions of the EU: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches," in *Perceptions of the EU in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa: Looking in from the Outside*, ed. Veit Bachmann and Martin Müller (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 20.
[646] Veronika Orbetsova and Jing Men, "The EU and China: How Do They Perceive Each Other?" *International Communication Gazette* 78, no. 1–2 (2016): 4, https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048515618096.
[647] Serena Kelly and Nicholas Ross Smith, "The EU's Reaction to the Arab Spring: External Media Portrayals in China, India and Russia," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 18, no. 2 (2013): 220, https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2013014.

Central Asian countries. The conclusion chapter briefly discusses how the EU presents itself and how it is perceived by Central Asian countries.

Since media perception is only one aspect of the external image, this chapter does not claim to represent all dimensions of public opinion. However, as previous research has shown, "the extent of media coverage is perhaps the most transparent tool to measure the EU's visibility among the wider public."[648] In addition to the media's portrayal of the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the next chapter analyzes the experts' views and official perspectives of the selected Central Asian countries towards EU policies in Central Asia.

It is also important to highlight here that the portrayal of the EU in the media is also influenced by the political orientation of the mass media. Due to the fact that "political orientation and party affiliation significantly influence press positions,"[649] and in this research, the balance of state-funded and privately funded media was maintained in the selection of mass media, which is discussed in detail in the Methodology chapter. The subchapters comparatively analyze the state-funded and privately funded media of each country and also examine the portrayal of the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan from a comparative perspective, in order to better understand the similarities and differences between the two types of media and the two countries.

This chapter aims to answer the research question of how the EU is portrayed in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan mass media. By doing this, it aims to contribute to this emerging research area by providing an empirical analysis of how the EU has been represented in the eight selected mass media of both countries over the period from 2019 to 2023. Based on the recommendations of previous researchers, this study examines the attention intensity, image, and thematic dimensions of the EU in the news articles collected for this research to understand how the EU is portrayed in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.[650] The first part of this chapter focuses on the attention intensity of EU coverage in the media of both countries. It looks at how often and how prominently the EU is featured in news articles over time. The second section of this chapter analyzes the categorization of the collected news

[648] Nora Babalova and Idesbald Goddeeris, "Towards Stronger Political Ties? The EU's Shifting Image in the Indian Media during the EU-India Summit of October 2017," in *Changing Indian Images of the European Union: Perception and Misperception*, ed. Rajendra K. Jain (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 121.
[649] Yiannos Katsourides, "Negative Images of Europe in an Era of Crisis: The Media and Public Opinion in Cyprus," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 71, https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2014.986440.
[650] Dechun Zhang, "EU-China Relations: Through the Narrative of China's Media," *Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan (Journal of Government & Politics)* 12, no. 2 (2021): 159.

articles, which they broadly categorized into “domesticated” and “external” categories of news to make the analysis easier in the following subchapters and to understand which categories of news related to the EU mostly attracted the attention of Central Asian media. The third subchapter analyzes the image of the EU by analyzing whether the tone of the coverage is positive, neutral, or negative. The fourth subchapter explores the thematic dimensions of the coverage, focusing on the subject distribution in media content and analyzing which areas of cooperation are more visible in the news articles covering the bilateral relationship. Lastly, a short conclusion of this chapter is presented. Through these subchapters, the chapter aims to provide a detailed understanding of the portrayal of the EU in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

6.2. Attention Intensity

The level of attention given to the EU by the mass media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan is a key indicator of the EU being perceived as an important partner for Central Asian countries. This section analyzes the attention given to the EU by the selected media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan during the chosen time periods. Attention intensity is the first component of perception, and it refers to “how much attention one pays to another.”[651] Previous studies suggest that there is “a direct correlation between the level of importance attached to a foreign country and the intensity (or volume) of attention directed toward that country.”[652] Figure 6 was designed to analyze attention intensity by using the number of EU-related news publications in the selected media, which were collected for this research. Presenting the number of published news items on a monthly basis was technically not feasible in the figure, as the list would have become too long and unreadable on the chart. Therefore, the data are grouped by quarters. The quarters are structured as follows: Q1 covers news items published from January to March; Q2 covers April to June; Q3 covers July to September; and Q4 represents the final quarter, from October to December, with the year of publication also indicated. The attention intensity for the entire period selected for this research is shown below, covering the timeframe from the third quarter (Q3) of 2019 until the end of 2023. A

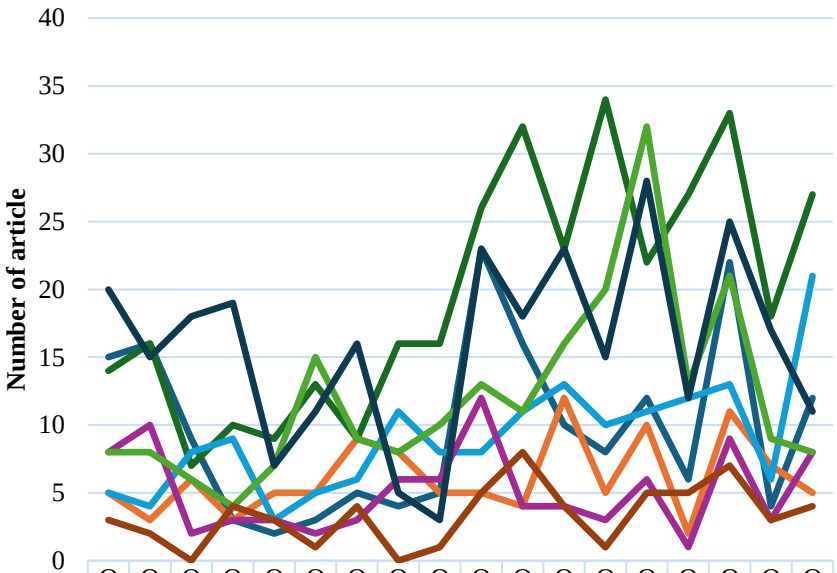
[651] Xinsheng Liu and Yi Edward Yang, “Examining China’s Official Media Perception of the United States: A Content Analysis of People’s Daily Coverage,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 20, no. 3 (2015): 389, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-015-9340-8.
[652] Ibid.

higher number of publications in the selected mass media suggests a greater level of attention from that media toward the EU compared to the other selected mass media.[653]

It is worth emphasizing once again that a total of 1,454 relevant news articles were collected for further analysis. Among them, 175 news articles were published by *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 352 by *Kazinform*, 110 by *Vremya*, and 161 by *Zakon.kz*, which together amount to 798 news items from Kazakhstan's mass media. This data shows that *Kazinform* leads in covering news related to the EU, while *Vremya*'s attention to EU-related news is relatively limited compared to the other Kazakh mass media. In the case of Tajikistan, a total of 656 news articles were collected from four selected mass media during the chosen period. These include 92 articles published by *Jumhuriyat*, 286 by *Khovar*, 218 by *Asia-Plus*, and 60 by *Avesta*. These data indicate that *Khovar* holds the leading position in Tajikistan, while *Avesta*'s coverage of EU-related news remained marginal. The detailed attention intensity for each quarter over the years selected for this research is shown in the following figure, and a more in-depth analysis is provided afterward.

[653] Nosirkhon Qodirov, "Understanding EU Perceptions in Central Asian Media: A Comparative Analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan," *Economic Diplomacy* (forthcoming).

Figure 6: Attention intensity toward the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (measured on a quarterly basis)



	Q 3. 2019	Q 4. 2019	Q 1. 2020	Q 2. 2020	Q 3. 2020	Q 4. 2020	Q 1. 2021	Q 2. 2021	Q 3. 2021	Q 4. 2021	Q 1. 2022	Q 2. 2022	Q 3. 2022	Q 4. 2022	Q 1. 2023	Q 2. 2023	Q 3. 2023	Q 4. 2023
Kazakhstanskaya Pravda	15	16	9	3	2	3	5	4	5	23	16	10	8	12	6	22	4	12
Vremya	5	3	6	3	5	5	9	8	5	5	4	12	5	10	2	11	7	5
Kazinform	14	16	7	10	9	13	9	16	16	26	32	23	34	22	27	33	18	27
Zakon.kz	5	4	8	9	3	5	6	11	8	8	11	13	10	11	12	13	6	21
Jumhuriyat	8	10	2	3	3	2	3	6	6	12	4	4	3	6	1	9	3	8
Asia-Plus	8	8	6	4	7	15	9	8	10	13	11	16	20	32	13	21	9	8
Khovar	20	15	18	19	7	11	16	5	3	23	18	23	15	28	12	25	17	11
Avesta	3	2	0	4	3	1	4	0	1	5	8	4	1	5	5	7	3	4

Source: Author's data.

The numbers in the chart show that the dynamics of attention intensity in both countries are quite different, and they also highlight some noticeable changes from quarter to quarter. When we look at the starting point of the selected time period, the third quarter of 2019, we can see that Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's selected media published the same number of news articles about the EU, with each country's media publishing 39 news items related to the EU.

Looking at the attention intensity in Kazakhstan's media in the fourth quarter of 2019, it shows that despite some minor fluctuations in the number of news items across individual mass media, the overall level of attention remained the same as in the third quarter, with 39

news items dedicated to the EU. For example, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* published 15 and 16 articles in Q3 and Q4 of 2019. *Vremya* also started with 5 and 3 articles, and *Kazinform* with 14 and 16 articles. *Zakon.kz* had 5 and 4 articles in those quarters. The media in Tajikistan also demonstrated certain changes. Unlike Kazakhstan, which maintained a stable level of attention toward the EU, Tajikistan's media showed a slight decrease in the fourth quarter of 2019, with a total of 35 news items published during this quarter. For example, *Jumhuriyat* published 8 and 10 articles in Q3 and Q4 of 2019. *Asia-Plus* had 8 articles in both quarters. *Khovar* published 20 and 15 articles, and *Avesta* 3 and 2 articles in Q3 and Q4, respectively. The main reason for the mass media's attention in the last two quarters of 2019 was the development of the relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries, and specifically the adoption of the new EU Strategy toward Central Asian countries, which kept the EU in the headlines of the media throughout these two quarters of 2019.

In the first half of 2020, the attention intensity dropped in both countries compared to the previous year. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* published only 9 and 3 news items in Q1 and Q2 of 2020, and *Kazinform's* publications dropped to 7 and 10 in the first two quarters of 2020. *Vremya* remained quite stable with publications of 6 and 3 articles compared to its last two quarters of 2019. *Zakon.kz* published 8 and 9 news items in Q1 and Q2 of 2020. Tajikistani media also showed a decrease in covering EU-related news. *Jumhuriyat* went from 2 to 3 articles from Q1 to Q2 of 2020, respectively. *Asia-Plus* had 6 and 4 articles, and *Khovar* published 18 and 19 articles, which is the highest number of publications in these quarters among the selected media. *Avesta* did not publish any EU-related news in Q1 of 2020 and published 4 news articles in Q2.

In the second half of 2020, a few changes were visible in the attention intensity of the media toward the EU. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* had only 2 and 3 articles, showing very low attention in Q3 and Q4 of 2020. *Vremya* remained at 5 articles in both quarters. *Kazinform* published 9 and 13 articles in Q3 and Q4, with a slight increase compared to the first two quarters of 2020. *Zakon.kz* stayed around 3 and 5 articles. In Tajikistan, *Jumhuriyat* published 3 and 2 news items in Q3 and Q4 of 2020. *Asia-Plus* published 7 and 15 articles, and *Khovar* published 7 and 11 articles. *Avesta* published 3 and 1 news articles in Q3 and Q4, respectively.

The main reasons for the low attention to the EU in Central Asian media in 2020 were the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the postponing and canceling of high-level visits, in-person meetings, and consultations bilaterally and regionally. Due to the

closing of borders, the pandemic also affected other areas of cooperation, including people-to-people contacts. Half of the news articles published in this period were mostly related to the COVID-19 situation in EU areas and the cooperation of the EU with Central Asian countries in preventing the spread of the virus and vaccinating the population.

In 2021, the attention intensity in Kazakhstan media started to grow again. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* increased to 5, 4, 5, and 23 articles in each quarter of this year, respectively. *Vremya* was quite stable compared to the previous years, with 9, 8, 5, and 5 articles in this year. *Kazinform* had 9, 16, 16, and 26, showing serious growth at the end of the year. *Zakon.kz* published 6, 11, 8, and 8 articles in the four quarters of 2021. Tajikistani media also increased attention toward the EU. *Jumhuriyat* moved from 3 to 6 to 6 to 12 articles in the quarters of 2021. *Asia-Plus* went from 9 to 8 to 10 to 13, and *Khovar* also showed significant attention, with 16, 5, 3, and 23 articles. *Avesta* published 4, 0, 1, and 5 news items in the four quarters of 2021.

In this year, COVID-19 was also one of the main topics of coverage related to the EU, both in bilateral cooperation news and news related to the EU's internal and foreign policy. It is evident that the attention of the Central Asian countries toward the EU increased, particularly in the last quarter of 2021, in most selected mass media. On November 22, 2021, the 17th meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Central Asian countries and the European Union was held in Dushanbe, which became one of the reasons for the increased visibility of the EU in the media of both countries. Another reason is that in October 2021, the President of Tajikistan visited Brussels and met with EU officials, and similarly, in November 2021, the President of Kazakhstan paid an official visit to Brussels and met with EU officials.

In 2022, the attention intensity in Kazakhstan media was also high. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* published 16, 10, 8, and 12 articles in the four quarters of 2022. *Vremya* was more active this year, and in Q2 of 2022, it published 12 news items, which was the peak indicator for this media, and in Q4, it published 10 news articles. *Kazinform* reached its highest attention intensity toward the EU this year, with 32 news items published in Q1, 23 in Q2, and 34 in Q3, which is the highest indicator of attention intensity of all time among all selected Kazakhstani and Tajikistani media, and 22 articles in the last quarter of 2022. *Zakon.kz* published 11, 13, 10, and 11 articles in the four quarters of 2022.

In the case of Tajikistani mass media in 2022, *Jumhuriyat* was not very active in covering news related to the EU, publishing 4, 4, 3, and 6 news articles in the four quarters of 2022.

On the other hand, *Asia-Plus* showed a significant increase in covering the EU during this period, especially in Q4, when it published 32 articles, the highest number for this media during the period selected for analysis. *Khovar*, in this period, published 18, 23, and 15 articles in the first three quarters of 2022, and in Q4, it published 28 articles, which was the highest number for this media in covering the EU. Compared to the previous year, *Avesta*'s coverage of the EU did not show much change, and it published 8, 4, 1, and 5 news articles in the four quarters of 2022.

The high attention intensity during this period is associated with the reopening of borders, the easing of lockdowns, and the gradual control of the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified contacts in both political and people-to-people terms and strengthened cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries. The number of official visits by Central Asian officials to the EU and EU officials to the region increased during this time. In addition to this, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which affected the geopolitics of the region, made the EU one of the headline topics in the media, especially regarding its positions and sanctions policies toward Russia, which became a major focus in Central Asian media. Furthermore, news related to the COVID-19 situation in EU member states also became one of the other topics that drew significant attention from Central Asian media when covering the EU's internal affairs.

In 2023, the last year in the selected time frame of this research, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* published 6, 22, 4, and 12 articles in the four quarters of the year. *Vremya* published 2, 11, 7, and 5 news articles. *Kazinform* stayed active with 27, 33, 18, and 27 news articles compared to the other media of Kazakhstan. *Zakon.kz* published 12, 13, 6, and 21 news articles in this year. From the Tajikistani mass media side, *Jumhuriyat* published only 1, 9, 3, and 8 news articles during this time. *Asia-Plus* published 13, 21, 9, and 8 news articles in the four quarters of 2023. *Khovar* showed some stability with 12, 25, 17, and 11 articles when compared to the previous years of its publication. *Avesta* published 5, 7, 3, and 4 articles in this period, and as usual, this media covered fewer EU-related news items.

The EU member states intensified political contacts with Central Asian countries in this year, which became one of the reasons for the visibility of the EU member states and EU institutions. For instance, the first Germany-Central Asia Forum, with the participation of the Heads of State of Central Asia and Germany, was held in Berlin. At the EU level, the second Summit of the Heads of State of Central Asia and the European Union was held in the city of Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, in June 2023. The event was attended by the President

of the European Council and the Heads of State of the Central Asian countries, which shows the intensification of political contacts and became a reason for the visibility of the EU in Central Asian mass media. In addition to this, ministerial-level discussions between EU member states' foreign affairs ministers and their Central Asian counterparts took place in Luxembourg in October 2023, where the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia was adopted. These official meetings were widely covered in the media, which became another reason for the visibility of the EU in Central Asian mass media.

6.2.1. State-Funded vs. Privately Funded media: A Comparative Analysis of Attention Intensity in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

If we look at the ownership of the selected media to analyze comparatively, the main finding is that state-funded media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan often showed higher attention compared to privately funded media. For example, *Kazinform* published 34 articles in Q3 2022, which is the highest number in the whole period, and *Khovar* also had 28 articles in Q4 2022, showing the high interest of state-funded mass media in covering the EU. Privately funded media like *Vremya* and *Avesta* usually had lower numbers compared to the other media of the respective countries. However, *Asia-Plus*, even though private, was quite active in some quarters, especially in Q4 2022 with 32 articles.

In Kazakhstan, state-funded media always had more articles than privately funded media. For example, in the third quarter of 2019, state-funded media published 29 news articles related to the EU, while privately funded media published only 10 news articles related to the EU. This gap remained the same in the following quarters. In contrast to Kazakhstan's privately owned media, in Tajikistan, *Asia-Plus*, which is privately owned, showed more interest in covering EU-related news. However, in general, when comparing the number of state-funded and privately funded media, the same finding as in Kazakhstan is applicable to the case of Tajikistan, where state-funded media covered more EU-related news compared to privately funded media. Over time, the attention from both state-funded and privately funded media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan increased, but the gap between them remained the same.

The difference between state-funded and privately funded media is easily visible in the above figure. The reason for the active coverage by state-funded media is that it is one of the functions and obligations of these media outlets to report daily on the activities of their respective governments. This is also visible from the previous subchapter of this chapter,

which showed that state-funded media mostly covered news related to the bilateral relations of the Central Asian countries with the EU.

The findings show that attention usually grows when the EU and Central Asian countries organize high-level meetings, launch new strategies, or hold international events where the EU is one of the main actors, or during events that affect the EU, such as the Ukraine war, internal developments and changes within the EU, such as elections, COVID-19 lockdowns, climate change, and political developments in the EU.

6.2.2. Comparison of Attention Intensity in the Mass Media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

When comparing Kazakhstan and Tajikistan media publications, Kazakhstan's media published more articles during the entire period selected for this research. Especially, *Kazinform* and *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* were more active in covering news related to the EU. Tajikistani media like *Khovar* and *Asia-Plus* also published many articles, but not as consistently as Kazakhstani media. Comparing the entire period of research shows that Kazakhstan always published more articles about the EU than Tajikistan. The previous chapter's data shows that the EU is the largest trade partner of Kazakhstan and that around half of the direct investment in Kazakhstan comes from EU countries, and this is one of the reasons the EU is more visible in Kazakhstani media. The attention of both countries' media changed over time, but the overall trend is clear, with both countries starting with lower numbers in 2019 and reaching the highest numbers in the last two years of the timeframe.

In conclusion, the attention intensity of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's media was not stable in the timeframe selected for research. It changed from month to month, as shown in this subchapter quarter by quarter, but the general picture shows that interest in the EU was growing. Usually, state-funded media in both countries paid more attention to the EU. Comparatively, Kazakhstani media were more active in general compared to Tajikistani media. In terms of analyzing the quarters comparatively, some quarters, like Q4 2021, Q1-Q4 2022, and Q2 2023, saw the highest numbers, and this pattern shows strong interest during those times. Finally, the data from this subchapter shows two important things. First, Kazakhstani media gave more attention to the EU than Tajikistani media during the entire period. Second, in both countries, state-funded mass media were more active than privately owned media when covering news about the EU. The attention changed from quarter to quarter, but the general picture shows that interest in the EU was growing in both Central

Asian countries. To answer the question of whether EU visibility in the region is high or low, further research is needed to compare the attention intensity of the EU from Central Asian media in comparison with other active actors in the region to understand the position of the EU in Central Asian media.

6.3. Categorization of News Articles

This thesis followed the suggested categorizations of Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi for categorizing the news articles, and all news articles were initially categorized as either "external" or "domesticated" news.[654] According to the author's definition of the "external" news category, it was found that in the case of this research the "external" news consisted of EU-focused news items, where the news articles of Kazakhstani and Tajikistani mass media covered the news about the EU that took place within EU territory, without any involvement of Central Asian countries. It also included EU-news abroad which means all news articles covering the EU's foreign policy abroad without the involvement or related to Central Asian countries. In general, the externally categorized news items encompass news where the EU's relations with Central Asia are not involved, such as articles focused on EU internal affairs and EU foreign policy more broadly. In this thesis, the codes "EU foreign policy" and "EU internal policy" were applied to the externally categorized news items. The "domesticated" news category consisted of two components. The first is EU news in the home country, meaning news items published in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's media covering bilateral relations of these Central Asian countries with the EU. The second component is EU news in the region, which covers the EU's relations with Central Asia at the regional level. In general, the domesticated category includes news related to the EU's regional and bilateral relations with Central Asian countries. In this research, the codes "EU-Central Asia," "EU-Kazakhstan," and "EU-Tajikistan" are classified as "domesticated" categories of the news.

The "domesticated" news category is the main focus of this chapter, and it is analyzed in detail to understand which areas of cooperation are visible in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan when covering news related to cooperation with the EU. In addition to this, a brief

[654] Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., *Foreign News in the Media: International Reporting in 29 Countries* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1985), 38-39, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000065257.

overview is provided of the topics that attracted the attention of Central Asian countries when covering "external" categories of the news presented.

6.3.1. Categorization of News Articles in Kazakhstani Mass Media

When examining the media coverage from Kazakhstan, it becomes evident that "domesticated" news are the more prominent in the selected mass media. Out of 798 total articles published by four Kazakhstani mass media, nearly half (365) news articles, which equals 45.74% of all the news articles, fall under the category "EU-Kazakhstan." This shows that the EU is most often mentioned in the media when it is directly linked to Kazakhstan. This trend is particularly noticeable in state-funded media. Specifically, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* stands out as the most bilaterally-focused mass media, with 147 out of 175 articles, which equals 84% of all the articles of this media, dedicated solely to EU-Kazakhstan relations. *Kazinform*, another public news agency, follows this pattern, with 137 articles, equalling 38.92% of all news articles, covering the same topic. Privately owned mass media show slightly less focus on bilateral relations. For example, *Zakon.kz* published only 36 articles. These indicators show that state-funded media in Kazakhstan, compared to privately funded media, prioritize news about the EU when it is directly involved with Kazakhstan. The following table provides the detailed code-document analysis that ATLAS.ti generated after coding the news articles of the four selected media from Kazakhstan. The table shows the number of codes (EU-Central Asia, EU-Kazakhstan, EU's Foreign Policy, and EU's Internal Policy—arranged in alphabetical order) applied to the document groups (Kazinform, KazPravda, Vremya, Zakon.kz**,** arranged in alphabetical order).

Table 10: Code-Document analysis of news article categorization in Kazakhstani mass media.

	Kazinform 352 1389	KazPravda 175 506	Vremya 110 388	Zakon.kz 161 337	Totals
EU-Central Asia 109	22 6.25%	8 4.57%	7 6.36%	2 1.24%	39 4.89%
EU-Kazakhstan 365	137 38.92%	147 84.00%	45 40.91%	36 22.36%	365 45.74%
EU's Foreign Policy 242	43 12.22%	6 3.43%	25 22.73%	76 47.20%	150 18.80%
EU's Internal Policy 454	150 42.61%	14 8.00%	33 30.00%	47 29.19%	244 30.58%
Totals	**352** 100.00%	**175** 100.00%	**110** 100.00%	**161** 100.00%	**798** 100.00%

Source: Screenshot taken from ATLAS.ti

In contrast, coverage of the EU's regional cooperation with Central Asia is quite limited compared to the bilateral relations. Only 39 articles across all four mass media, representing

just 4.89% of the total news articles, fall under the EU-Central Asia category. Among them, *Kazinform* contributed 22 articles (6.25%), while *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Zakon.kz* published only 8 (4.57%) and 2 (1.24%) articles, respectively. *Vremya* published 7 articles (6.36%) on EU and Central Asian relations at the regional level.

The EU's Foreign Policy is another moderately covered theme in the mass media of Kazakhstan, with a total of 150 articles, equivalent to 18.80%. In comparison to the "domesticated" news categories, private media in Kazakhstan take the lead in covering the EU's foreign policy. *Zakon.kz* shows the highest percentage, publishing 76 articles on EU's foreign policy, which accounts for approximately half of its EU-related publications. *Vremya* also covered the EU's relations with other international actors, publishing 25 articles (22.73%) on this topic. In contrast to privately funded media**,** state-funded media dedicate significantly less attention to the EU's foreign affairs. *Kazinform* published only 43 articles (12.22%), and *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* published 6 articles (3.43%). This finding suggests that privately owned media are more interested in the EU's role in international affairs, which could be due to their editorial policy and the preferences of their readers.

Articles about the EU's Internal Policy account for 244 publications (30.58%) overall in the media of Kazakhstan. *Kazinform* published the highest share in this category, with 150 articles (42.61%), indicating that this media actively reports on developments within the EU itself to its readers, thereby shaping their views on the EU's internal policies. Privately owned media, *Vremya* and *Zakon.kz*, also show interest in this topic, contributing 30 articles (30.00%) and 47 articles (29.19%) respectively to coverage of the EU's internal policy in the media of Kazakhstan. In contrast, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* published only 14 articles (8.00%), which once again highlights its heavy preference for covering bilateral relations.

In general, Kazakhstani mass media, specifically state-funded media**,** mostly cover news directly related to EU-Kazakhstan relations. After bilateral relations, the EU's internal affairs is the second topic that attracts attention from both state-funded and privately funded media in Kazakhstan. In both state-funded and privately funded media, there is less attention given to covering news related to regional relationships, and moderate attention to covering the EU's foreign affairs in comparison to other categories of news. In contrast to state-funded media**,** privately funded media like *Zakon.kz* are slightly more inclined to present the EU as a global player, covering EU foreign policy beyond Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

6.3.2. Categorization of News Articles in Tajikistani Mass Media

When looking at the categorizations of news in Tajikistani mass media, a similar pattern to that of Kazakhstan becomes apparent. Just like in Kazakhstan, out of a total of 656 articles across the four selected media outlets of Tajikistan, the majority of the news focuses on EU-Tajikistan relations. Specifically, 284 articles, which account for 43.29% of all EU-related news articles collected from these four outlets for this research**,** are about the EU's direct bilateral relations with Tajikistan. This shows that, similar to Kazakhstan, the EU is mostly mentioned in the context of its direct relations with Tajikistan. However, the percentage in the case of Tajikistani media is slightly lower compared to the level of bilateral coverage in Kazakhstan. The following table, similar to the one above, provides a detailed code-document analysis generated by ATLAS.ti after coding the news articles from the four selected Tajikistani media outlets. The table displays the number of codes (EU-Central Asia**,** EU-Tajikistan**,** EU's Foreign Policy**,** and EU's Internal Policy—listed in alphabetical order) applied to the document groups (AsiaPlus*,* Avesta*,* Jumhuriyat*,* Khovar—also listed alphabetically).

Table 11: Code-Document analysis of news article categorization in Tajikistani mass media.

	AsiaPlus 218 733	Avesta 60 197	Jumhuriyat 92 305	Khovar 286 961	Totals
EU-Central Asia 109	41 18.81%	7 11.67%	9 9.78%	13 4.55%	70 10.67%
EU-Tajikistan 284	80 36.70%	21 35.00%	75 81.52%	108 37.76%	284 43.29%
EU's Foreign Policy 242	36 16.51%	26 43.33%	6 6.52%	24 8.39%	92 14.02%
EU's Internal Policy 454	61 27.98%	6 10.00%	2 2.17%	141 49.30%	210 32.01%
Totals	218 100.00%	60 100.00%	92 100.00%	286 100.00%	656 100.00%

Source: Screenshot taken from ATLAS.ti

Looking more closely, *Jumhuriyat*, a state-funded newspaper, published the largest share in the EU-Tajikistan news category, 75 out of the 92 articles collected from this journal (81.52%), are about EU-Tajikistan relations. This mirrors the pattern observed in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, which also focuses heavily on bilateral EU-Kazakhstan relations. Notably, both journals hold similar statuses as official, state-affiliated media in their respective countries. *Khovar*, the state news agency, also shows strong attention to this topic, with 108 articles (37.76%) out of 286 falling into the same category. In contrast to Kazakhstan's privately funded media, the private media outlets in Tajikistan also show a comparable level of interest in covering bilateral news. Specifically, *Asia-Plus* and *Avesta*

covered 80 articles (36.70%) and 21 articles (35.00%) respectively on EU-Tajikistan relations. These numbers clearly suggest that both public and private Tajik media prioritize the EU mainly when it is directly involved in cooperation with Tajikistan.

When it comes to EU–Central Asia relations, Tajikistani mass media pays more attention compared to Kazakhstani media. Out of the 656 articles, 70 articles (10.67%) fall into this category, which is approximately 6 percentage points higher than the Kazakhstani figure.

Asia-Plus leads in covering regional EU–Central Asia relations among the media outlets in both Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, with 41 articles (18.81%) which is a notable achievement for a single media. In contrast, *Khovar* published only 13 articles (4.55%), *Jumhuriyat* just 9 articles (9.78%), and *Avesta* only 7 articles (11.67%). This suggests that regional cooperation receives relatively more attention in Tajikistan than in Kazakhstan, but it still remains a secondary topic compared to bilateral relations.

When we look at coverage of the EU's foreign policy in Tajikistani media, it remains quite limited. Only 92 out of 656 articles (14.02%) fall under this category. *Avesta*, perhaps surprisingly, shows the highest percentage of EU foreign policy coverage, publishing 26 articles, which accounts for 43.33% of its total EU-related content. *Asia-Plus* published 36 articles (16.51%) on this topic, while *Khovar* and *Jumhuriyat* paid less attention, with 24 articles (8.39%) and only 6 articles (6.52%) respectively.

Finally, coverage of the EU's internal policy accounts for 210 articles (32.01%) across all four Tajik media outlets. Interestingly, *Khovar* leads by a large margin, with 141 articles, which equals 49.30% of its EU-related coverage, focused on the internal affairs of the EU. This indicates that *Khovar* reports on both bilateral relations and internal EU policies at roughly the same level. *Jumhuriyat* published only 2 articles (2.17%) on this topic, while the private media outlets *Asia-Plus* and *Avesta* published 61 articles (27.98%) and 6 articles (10.00%) respectively. Overall, among Tajik media, *Khovar* is the main contributor to this category. When comparing Tajik and Kazakh media, both countries show more or less a similar level of attention to the EU's internal policy. A particularly interesting point here is that *Kazinform* and *Khovar*, each a state-owned media outlet in their respective countries, demonstrate a similar level of interest in covering EU internal affairs.

In total, here may conclude that the media in both countries mostly reported on similar categories of EU-related news. As in Kazakh media, Tajik media also focus most of their

attention on the EU when the news directly involves the EU–Tajikistan relationship. The second most-covered category in Tajik media is the EU's internal policy. Meanwhile, regional EU–Central Asia relations receive only minor attention, and EU foreign policy gets a moderate level of coverage in Central Asian media.

In the following subpart, I briefly discuss which topics within the EU's internal and foreign policy categories gained the attention of Central Asian media. Another upcoming subchapter will explore the areas of cooperation that appeared most frequently in news articles covering bilateral relations between the EU and Central Asian countries. This analysis will help to understand and compare which areas of cooperation are more visible in the media, and how these align with the EU's stated priorities in the region, as analyzed in the previous chapter.

6.3.3. Analysis of "External" Categories of News Articles

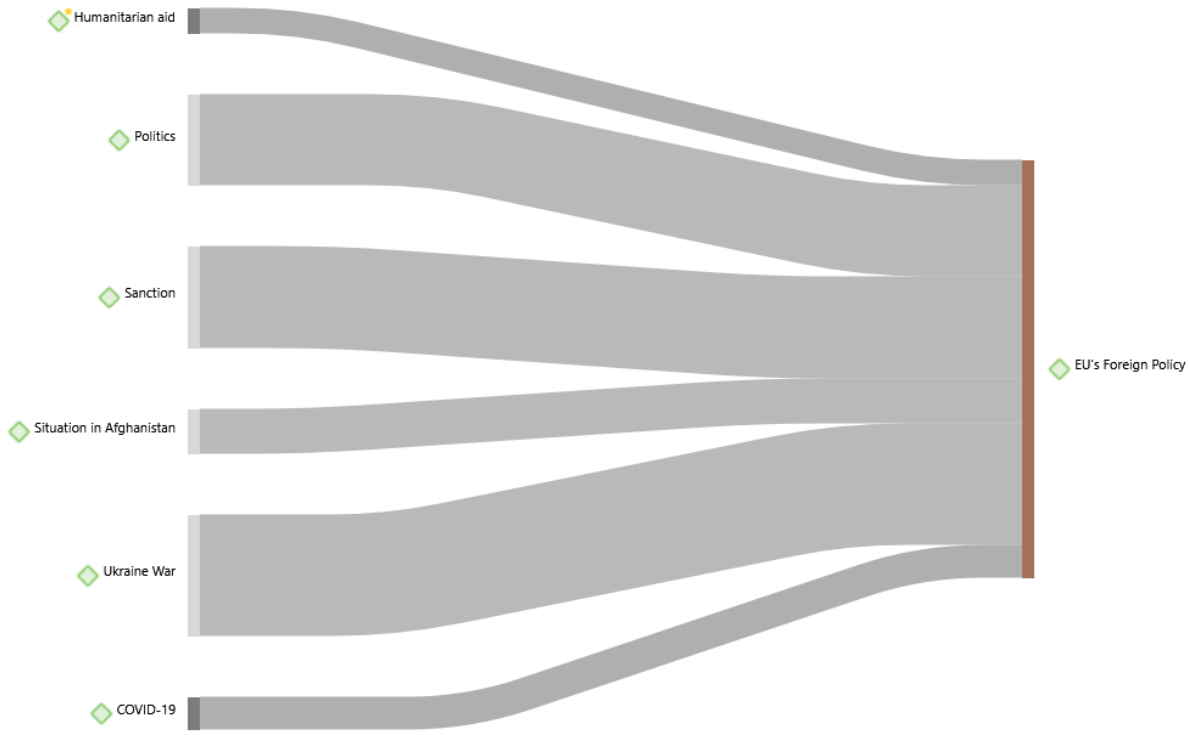
This part analyzes the coverage of the EU's internal and foreign affairs by Central Asian media. To do this, the co-occurrence coding analysis function of ATLAS.ti was employed to examine how frequently the codes "EU's foreign policy" and "EU's internal policy" appeared alongside other codes in the mass media of both countries. This approach helps to identify the main topics discussed in news articles categorized under "EU's foreign policy" and "EU's internal policy." It is important to note that the news category codes ("EU's foreign policy" and "EU's internal policy") were applied to the full text of each article. After this, different segments of the articles were coded according to the research questions. The co-occurrence analysis function in ATLAS.ti was then used to determine which codes appeared together in articles tagged under "EU's foreign policy" and "EU's internal policy." In addition, this function of ATLAS.ti helped analyze the image of the EU in different news categories. It also made it possible to identify which areas of cooperation were more visible in the mass media of both countries when the media focused on "domesticated" news categories.

As shown in Figure 7, the co-occurrence analysis of the "EU's Foreign Policy" code with other topics highlights the areas most frequently covered by media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The war in Ukraine appears as the most prominent topic, co-occurring 63 times with the "EU's Foreign Policy" code. This high frequency indicates that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, along with the EU's stance and response to it, became a central focus of EU-related foreign policy news in both countries' media. Sanctions emerged as another major theme. The EU's use of sanctions as a tool to pressure Russia received considerable

attention, with the code “sanction” co-occurring 53 times with “EU’s Foreign Policy.” This close connection suggests that media coverage extended beyond the war itself to include the EU’s use of economic and diplomatic instruments. The news articles covering the EU’s sanctions toward Russia are also indirectly relevant to Central Asia, as Russia is a key political and economic partner for most countries in the region. Consequently, the EU’s sanctions toward Russia may impact Central Asian countries in various ways and to differing extents.

Political relations between the EU and other international actors were another recurring theme, appearing 47 times alongside the “EU’s Foreign Policy” code in ATLAS.ti. Another notable topic was the situation in Afghanistan, which co-occurred 23 times with the EU’s foreign policy code. This reflects that the EU’s approach toward Afghanistan, particularly following the Taliban’s return to power, remained a regional concern. As Afghanistan is an immediate neighbor to Central Asian countries, media outlets closely followed and regularly reported on the EU’s policies regarding Afghanistan. COVID-19, which had a global impact during the timeframe in which the news articles were collected, co-occurred 17 times with the foreign policy code. During this period, the pandemic dominated international headlines, and the EU’s foreign actions, such as international aid, vaccine diplomacy, and cooperation with non-EU countries in combating the spread of the virus, also drew the attention of Central Asian media. Humanitarian aid was another frequently co-occurring theme, appearing 13 times in the context of the EU’s foreign policy. This was mainly tied to the EU’s response to crises both in its neighboring regions and globally. In the following figure, a sankey diagram generated by ATLAS.ti illustrates the codes that most frequently co-occurred with the “EU’s Foreign Policy” code.

Figure 7: Sankey diagram of the most frequent co-occurrences of the "EU's Foreign Policy" code with other codes.

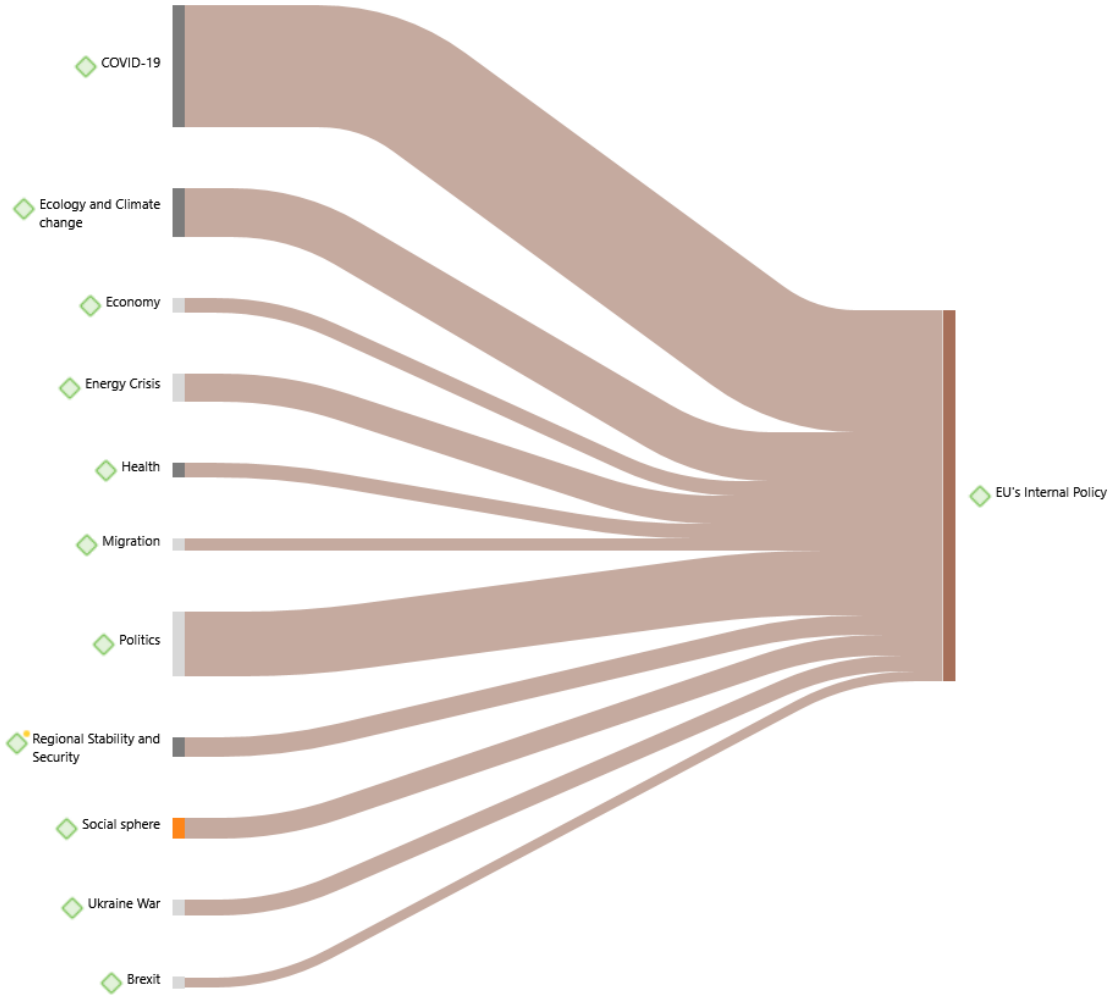


Source: Diagram generated by ATLAS.ti.

The most frequently co-occurring code with "EU's Internal Policy" was "COVID-19," with 126 co-occurrences, as shown in the following sankey diagram generated by ATLAS.ti (Figure 8). This result reflects the strong interest of Kazakh and Tajik media in how the EU handled the pandemic domestically, including health policies, economic recovery efforts, and institutional responses by the European Commission, other EU bodies, and member states. Due to lockdowns and high numbers of COVID-19 infections, Italy, France, and Germany were particularly highlighted in the news items published in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The second most co-occurring code with "EU's Internal Policy" was "Politics," which appeared 67 times. This figure shows that the media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan demonstrated steady interest in the EU's institutional and legislative processes, elections, and internal debates—such as the corruption scandal in the EU Parliament, internal political crises between EU institutions and member states. Ecology and climate change also received significant attention, appearing 50 times in co-occurrence with the "EU's Internal Policy" code. News articles covered the European Green Deal initiatives and also reported on natural disasters occurring in EU territory as a result of climate change effects. The "Energy Crisis"

was another code that co-occurred with “EU’s Internal Policy.” The energy crisis in Europe is closely tied to the Russia-Ukraine war, and the code “Energy Crisis” co-occurred 29 times with “EU’s Internal Policy.” Other social and economic themes also appeared frequently: the “Social Sphere” (21), “Regional Stability and Security” (20), “Health” (15), and “Migration” (13). These numbers indicate that concerns about the EU’s internal resilience held relevance for Central Asian audiences as well. An interesting point here is that the “Ukraine War” was not only treated as a foreign policy issue but also appeared 17 times with the “EU’s Internal Policy” code. This suggests that the Russia-Ukraine war was seen as a challenge affecting both the EU’s external strategies and its internal unity, economy, and energy security. These findings show that the media paid special attention to “external” news categories, and tried to keep readers updated about important developments in the EU’s internal and foreign policy. In the following subsection, the image of the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan is analyzed to fully address the research question.

Figure 8: Sankey diagram of the most frequent co-occurrences of the "EU's Internal Policy" code with other codes



Source: Diagram generated by ATLAS.ti.

6.4. EU's Image in the Mass Media

The tone of news coverage is an important indicator of how the EU is perceived in the media and how it is presented to readers. According to Xinsheng Liu and Yi Edward Yang, the image of an actor in the media is often measured by the tone of the reporting, whether it is positive, negative, or neutral.[655] All news articles collected for this research were coded based on the tone of their coverage, and the following tables in this subchapter show the tone of coverage in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

[655] Liu and Yang, "Examining China's Official Media Perception," 389.

After coding all the news articles from the selected mass media outlets of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the image of the EU becomes immediately clear from the following tables generated by ATLAS.ti. The EU is predominantly portrayed in a positive light in the tone of the news coverage. This subchapter analyzes the image of the EU in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan by focusing on the tone of the coverage of the news articles related to the EU in detail. Additionally, it examines the tone of the different categories of news articles, which helps to understand when news articles covering bilateral relations are more positive or when those covering the EU's internal policy are more positive.

6.4.1. EU's Image in Kazakhstan's Media

Most of the articles in the four mass media outlets of Kazakhstan were reported in a positive tone about the EU and its institutions. Out of 798 articles collected and analyzed for this research, 448 articles (56.14%) were positive in tone. Additionally, 262 news articles from Kazakhstani media**,** which account for 32.83%**,** were coded as neutral, while only 88 news items (11.03%) were coded as negative. The tone of the coverage varied across different media outlets in Kazakhstan, as shown in the following table.

Table 12: Tone of news articles in Kazakhstani media.

	Kazinform 352 1389	KazPravda 175 506	Vremya 110 388	Zakon.kz 161 337	Totals
negative 187	65 18.47%	5 2.86%	7 6.36%	11 6.83%	88 11.03%
neutral 438	79 22.44%	18 10.29%	53 48.18%	112 69.57%	262 32.83%
positive 829	208 59.09%	152 86.86%	50 45.45%	38 23.60%	448 56.14%
Totals	352 100.00%	175 100.00%	110 100.00%	161 100.00%	798 100.00%

Source: Author's data, table of code-document analysis generated by ATLAS.ti.

From the state-funded media, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* had the highest proportion of positive-toned news articles. Out of 175 articles, 152 (86.86%) were positive, and only 5 (2.86%) were negative. *Kazinform* also leaned positive, with 208 out of 352 articles (59.09%) being positive. However, compared to *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, a greater number of negative articles were published by *Kazinform*, with 65 articles (18.47%) being coded as negative based on the tone of coverage. The reason for this higher number of negative articles in *Kazinform* compared to *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* is that *Kazinform* published more "external" category news, which had a higher tendency to receive negative codes. This trend is analyzed in greater detail in the following sections of this subsection. In contrast to state-funded media, the analysis of privately funded media shows a tendency to use a neutral tone

in covering EU-related news. *Vremya*, which published 110 articles, had nearly half of its articles (48.18%) classified as neutral. Additionally, 45.45% of the articles were positive, and only 6.36% were negative. *Zakon.kz* exhibited the most neutral tone of coverage among Kazakhstani mass media, with 69.57% of its 161 articles classified as neutral. Only 23.60% were positive, and 6.83% were negative. It is important to highlight that privately funded media predominantly covered "external" categorized news, which, as discussed in the above subchapter, often attracted neutral and negative tone codes. Overall, the EU is viewed positively in Kazakhstan's media, and the EU enjoys a relatively positive image in the country's media environment.

6.4.2. EU's Image in Tajikistan's Media

The following table shows that the EU is mostly presented in a positive light by the selected Tajikistani mass media. The tone of coverage in Tajikistan is also similar to that in Kazakhstan. Out of 656 articles collected from Tajikistani media, the majority of them, 58.08%**,** or 381 news articles—were coded as "positive" based on the tone of their coverage. The "neutral" code was applied to 26.83% of the news articles, which is equal to 176 news items, while the "negative" code was applied less frequently and accounted for 15.09% of the news articles collected from Tajikistani media, equating to 99 articles. This suggests that the EU is generally viewed positively**,** similar to the perception in Kazakhstan's media**.**

Table 13: Tone of news articles in Tajikistani media.

	AsiaPlus 218 733	Avesta 60 197	Jumhuriyat 92 305	Khovar 286 961	Totals
negative 186	26 11.93%	1 1.67%		72 25.17%	99 15.09%
neutral 438	85 38.99%	22 36.67%	9 9.78%	60 20.98%	176 26.83%
positive 823	107 49.08%	37 61.67%	83 90.22%	154 53.85%	381 58.08%
Totals	218 100.00%	60 100.00%	92 100.00%	286 100.00%	656 100.00%

Source: Author's data, table of code-document analysis generated by ATLAS.ti.

Analyzing the tone of coverage in each selected Tajikistani media outlet shows that *Jumhuriyat*, a state-funded media, takes the lead in framing the EU mostly in a positive light. Out of 92 collected articles from this journal, 83 were coded as "positive," which accounts for 90.22% of its total articles. The remaining 9 articles were coded as "neutral," and none of the news articles from *Jumhuriyat* were coded as "negative" based on the tone of reporting. Another state-funded media, *Khovar*, also published more positive articles than negative or neutral ones, and 53.85% (154 out of 286) of its news articles were coded

"positive," while 25.17% were coded "negative" and 20.98% "neutral." When it comes to privately funded media, the tone is slightly more balanced but still leans toward positive. *AsiaPlus* published 49.08% positive articles, 38.99% neutral, and 11.93% negative coded news articles. Meanwhile, *Avesta* had the highest share of positive coverage among privately funded mass media outlets in both countries, and 61.67% of its news articles were coded as positive, and only one article (1.67%) was coded as negative, which shows a clearly favorable image of the EU. In short, the data shows that across both state-funded and privately funded media in Tajikistan, the positive image of the EU dominates.

6.4.3. Image of the EU by news Categorization

Looking beyond the type of media and national context, the tone of EU coverage also varies depending on the category of news being reported in the article. Unsurprisingly, articles about bilateral relations, whether between the EU and Kazakhstan or the EU and Tajikistan, are overwhelmingly reported in a positive tone. In fact, coverage of EU–Tajikistan relations is 94% positive, and EU–Kazakhstan relations 90% of related articles are coded as "positive." The news articles about economic and trade relations, development aid, regional cooperation, or diplomatic visits are among the most positively coded news, as these topics lend themselves to positive reporting. Around 8% of the EU–Kazakhstan categorized news articles have a neutral tone, with only 2% of them coded as negative. In the case of Tajikistan, approximately 4.5% of news articles categorized as EU–Tajikistan are presented in a neutral tone, and the remaining 1.5% are coded as "negative" in terms of the tone of coverage. It's important to highlight that the negative tone is only used when some EU institutions criticize the activities of their Central Asian counterparts. For instance, when the European Parliament criticized the actions of Kazakhstan's government regarding the "January events,"[656] the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, responded in an exclusive interview with the media. He commented on the European Parliament's resolution regarding Kazakhstan in relation to this event, and he mentioned that "My attitude towards the European Parliament as an institution is quite rational. Since the institution exists, if people knew how much it costs the member states, perhaps the critical attitude towards this institution would be stronger. But in any case, I don't want to comment because this is the European Union's matter. If they deem it necessary to maintain such an institution at such a

[656] In January 2022, mass protests took place in Kazakhstan after the government sharply increased fuel prices. These protests quickly turned into wider demonstrations against social and political issues, and the authorities responded with force and also invited troops from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to help stabilize the situation.

cost, then fine."[657] This represents one of the few instances of negative coverage towards the EU in the media of Kazakhstan. The following table was created using the code co-occurrence analysis function of ATLAS.ti, which analyzes the co-occurrences of the categorization codes with the tone of coverage codes.

Table 14: Tone of different categories of News Articles

	negative 187	neutral 438	positive 829
EU-Central Asia 109	1 (0.00)	18 (0.03)	90 (0.11)
EU-Kazakhstan 365	6 (0.01)	29 (0.04)	330 (0.38)
EU-Tajikistan 284	4 (0.01)	13 (0.02)	267 (0.32)
EU's Foreign Policy 242	13 (0.03)	188 (0.38)	38 (0.04)
EU's Internal Policy 454	162 (0.34)	188 (0.27)	102 (0.09)

Source: Author's data, table of code-document analysis generated by ATLAS.ti.

Articles covering EU-Central Asia relations are mostly coded as "positive" (83%). However, compared to other categories of news, the coverage of regional relations received less attention overall. In this category, only one article was coded as negative, while the remaining articles were coded as neutral. In contrast to the "domesticated" categories of news, news articles reporting on the EU's internal affairs, particularly political and economic issues, the COVID-19 pandemic, or crises, are mostly coded as negative in terms of the tone of coverage. Out of the 454 articles published in this category across both countries, 36% (162 articles) were coded as "negative," which is the highest number of negative-coded articles in any category. Additionally, 41% (188 articles) were coded as neutral, and 23% (38 articles) were coded as positive. The EU's internal policy is the area where negativity outweighs positivity. Coverage of the EU's foreign policy falls somewhere in between in terms of tone. It is mostly neutral (78%), with relatively few positive-coded articles (16%), and about 6% of news articles were coded as "negative" in this category. These findings suggest clear differences in the tone of coverage for different categories of news related to the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan media. In the "domesticated" categories, the EU is

[657] Arylým Murat, *Касым-Жомарт Токаев прокомментировал принятую резолюцию Европарламента в отношении Казахстана* (Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev commented on the adopted resolution of the European Parliament regarding Kazakhstan) (January 29, 2022), *Kazinform*, https://www.inform.kz/ru/kasym-zhomart-tokaev-prokommentiroval-prinyatuyu-rezolyuciyu-evroparlamenta-v-otnoshenii-kazahstana_a3892661, accessed April 25, 2025.

portrayed positively, and is seen as an important partner in areas where its role is considered constructive and beneficial to both countries and the region. However, in the "external" category, the news is mostly reported in a neutral tone.

In general, the findings of this research suggest that the selected mass media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan generally perceive the EU positively. Across the 1,454 articles collected from mass media in both countries, around 57% (829 news articles) are positive, 30% (438 articles) are neutral, and only 13% (187 articles) report in a negative tone.

6.5. Thematic Dimensions

After presenting the attention intensity, categorization of news articles, and the image of the EU in Central Asian media, this part shifts to a more nuanced analysis by examining the perceptions of the EU in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan along thematic dimensions**.** To understand the thematic dimensions of the collected news articles, each article was coded according to the specific area of the relationship it addresses. Some news articles were coded with a single area of relationship if they focused exclusively on one topic, while others had different segments coded with multiple areas if they covered content related to more than one theme.[658]

In the previous sub-chapter, the most discussed topics in the "external" categories were identified, and this sub-chapter's aim is to understand how the EU is portrayed thematically in news articles covering bilateral relations**.** To achieve this, I examined the co-occurrence of the codes "EU–Kazakhstan" and "EU–Tajikistan" with other applied codes. Specifically, the codes "EU–Kazakhstan" and "EU–Tajikistan" were analyzed for their 15 most frequently co-occurring topics, allowing to trace which areas of EU engagement are most visible in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The aim of this part is to analyze what kinds of cooperation are associated with the EU in the media coverage of bilateral relations in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan**.** This analysis helps to understand which areas of cooperation the Central Asian countries are prioritizing by focusing more on these topics in their media coverage. Since state-funded media primarily covers bilateral relations, these findings suggest the areas of relations prioritized by the

[658] Nosirkhon Qodirov, "Understanding EU Perceptions in Central Asian Media: A Comparative Analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan," *Economic Diplomacy* (forthcoming).

selected governments of Central Asian countries. Understanding this is crucial because "perceptions held by Central Asians partly determine what kind of actor the EU can be and what kind of policies it can successfully implement."[659]

In the following tables of the subparts, the fifteen most discussed areas of cooperation are presented, based on the results from the ATLAS.ti database. The analysis of coded news articles collected from eight prominent mass media sources in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan reveals several prominent themes in their coverage of relations with the EU. First, the most discussed areas of cooperation in Kazakhstan are presented, followed by an analysis of the most discussed areas in the media of Tajikistan, and lastly, a comparative analysis of both countries is provided in this subchapter.

6.5.1. Dominant Themes Related to the EU in Kazakhstan's Mass Media

The selected mass media of Kazakhstan present the EU as a strategic, political, and economic partner. The following table, based on a code-occurrence analysis of 365 news articles coded as "EU–Kazakhstan" from four Kazakhstani mass media outlets, shows in detail the 15 most frequently co-occurring areas of cooperation (Table 15).

The most prominent code co-occurring with "EU–Kazakhstan" is "Political Relations," which appears 202 times. This indicates a substantial focus on political interactions and issues within the media. The "Political Relations" code was applied to news articles or segments that covered meetings between officials, consultations, summits, and the signing of agreements. Political relations between Kazakhstan and the EU became more active after the EPCA entered into force in 2020. This agreement includes cooperation in 29 different areas, which shows the growing importance of bilateral relations. Besides political relations, economic relations, trade, and investment are also widely covered in the Kazakhstani media. The code "Economic Relations, Trade, and Investment" co-occurred 172 times together with the "EU–Kazakhstan" code. This result shows that economic cooperation is one of the main themes when the EU is mentioned in the context of Kazakhstan. Compared to Tajikistani media, economic topics are much more present in Kazakhstani outlets. This can be explained by the fact that Kazakhstan has stronger economic ties with the EU. As the biggest economy in Central Asia, Kazakhstan is rich in oil, gas, and other natural resources, and the EU is one of its most important trading partners. Many of the news articles refer to areas such as

[659] Arynov, "Opportunity and Threat Perceptions," 734.

economic cooperation, foreign investment by the EU in Kazakhstan, growing trade volumes between Kazakhstan and EU member states, and also the indirect impact of EU sanctions on Russia on Kazakhstan's economy. It should also be mentioned that in the context of economic and energy cooperation, the topics of green economy and sustainable energy are presented in a very positive way. These areas are usually highlighted as EU priorities and are portrayed as part of the EU's support to Central Asian countries. The code "Green Economy" was found 21 times in combination with "EU–Kazakhstan," which shows that both sides are interested in cooperation in this field. In the media, the EU is often shown as a leader in green development, and its willingness to help Central Asia in this area is frequently underlined.

Table 15: Code Co-Occurrence Analysis of "EU-Kazakhstan" with other codes

		EU-Kazakhstan 365
Agriculture	38	15
Aviation cooperation	15	11
Cultural Relations	35	12
Digitization	26	11
Ecology and Climate change	111	14
Economic Relations, Trade and Investment	288	172
Education	46	19
Energy	75	29
Human right	52	23
Logistic and Transportation	52	35
Political relations	403	202
Regional Stability and Security	98	13
Situation in Afghanistan	95	11
Transport Corridor	16	14
Visa Regime	15	14

Source: Author's data, screenshot from ATLAS.ti.

Due to Kazakhstan's geostrategic location, which connects Asia to Europe, significant attention is given in the Kazakhstani media to cooperation in the areas of transportation and logistics. An analysis of the co-occurrence code "EU–Kazakhstan" shows that it co-occurred 35 times with the code "Logistics and Transportation" and 14 times with the code "Transport Corridor." Kazakhstan is using its geostrategic location to try to become a transit hub between East and West, and this is becoming a reason to develop its cooperation with the EU in the fields of logistics and transportation. Additionally, the EU's Global Gateway strategy and broader interests in Eurasian connectivity are making these areas of cooperation more visible in the media. Kazakhstan's position as central to the Middle Corridor and other trans-Caspian routes that bypass Russia is also contributing to this visibility and making EU investment in infrastructure and transit cooperation particularly relevant in the case of Kazakhstan.

Energy also emerges as another major area of cooperation highlighted in the media, as it co-occurred 29 times with the code "EU–Kazakhstan." Among Central Asian states, Kazakhstan plays a leading role as a major supplier of energy resources, particularly oil, with the EU serving as one of its primary importers. Recent geopolitical developments, especially after the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine, have made the EU more focused on diversifying its energy imports. This situation has likely strengthened cooperation in the energy sector and increased media attention on this topic. Kazakhstan's role in the EU's energy security is seen as important, and both sides are also interested in developing cooperation in critical raw materials, green transition partnerships, and renewable energy.

The EU's normative power is rarely seen among the most visible areas of cooperation. Among the EU's core and minor norms, only human rights appeared in the list of the top 15 most visible cooperation areas. Human rights were discussed the least among the top five themes, indicating relatively limited media focus on this topic. The code "Human Rights" co-occurred 23 times with the "EU–Kazakhstan" code. These results suggest that, despite the fact that the EU often includes its normative agenda in its relations with Central Asian countries, through regional and bilateral instruments like the EU Strategy for Central Asia and country-specific agreements such as the EPCA in the case of Kazakhstan, the EU's normative power is not as visible in the media as the EU itself might expect or promote.

Other codes also appeared, though with less frequency. For instance, "Education" co-occurred 19 times, with news articles mostly covering EU-implemented projects in Kazakhstan related to higher and vocational education, as well as student and academic exchanges through Erasmus+ and other bilateral programs. "Agriculture" was co-occurred

15 times; “Ecology and Climate Change,” 14 times; “Regional Stability and Security,” 13 times; “Cultural Relations,” 12 times; and the “Situation in Afghanistan,” 11 times. Despite being a major geopolitical issue, the Afghanistan topic was rarely mentioned in relation to the EU in Kazakhstani media, especially when compared with Tajikistani media. This may reflect Kazakhstan’s physical distance from the Afghan border, which makes the issue less central in discussions with the EU. “Digitization,” “Aviation Cooperation,” and “COVID-19” each co-occurred 11, 11, and 10 times respectively with the “EU–Kazakhstan” code, placing these areas in the middle range of media attention among the selected outlets. Additionally, the Kazakhstani media is focusing on the topic of visa facilitation and simplification of the visa regime for Kazakhstani citizens, with the code “Visa Regime” co-occurring 14 times with the code “EU-Kazakhstan.” Articles often cover the process of consultations between Kazakhstan and the EU and highlight the hope for simplifying the Schengen visa process.

This study shows that Kazakhstani mass media mostly present the EU as a strategic partner. Political cooperation is the most common topic, while economic cooperation such as trade, investment, and energy are also strongly represented. This reflects Kazakhstan’s interest in building closer economic ties with the EU. Many articles emphasize Kazakhstan’s role as a bridge between Europe and Asia, highlighting transport and logistics as priority areas of cooperation. However, the normative side of the EU is only partially visible, with human rights being the only value-based topic included among the 15 most frequently discussed cooperation areas. This indicates that its normative power is not strongly visible in Kazakhstan’s mass media. The media’s focus remains largely on cooperation areas where results are more tangible, such as economic development, infrastructure, energy, and trade.

6.5.2. Dominant Themes Related to the EU in Tajikistan’s Mass Media

The visibility of areas of cooperation with the EU in Tajikistani mass media is quite different compared to Kazakhstan. In Tajikistan’s media, similarly to Kazakhstan’s media, the code “Political Relations” appears as the most frequently co-occurring code, co-occurring 133 times with the code “EU–Tajikistan.” The code “Economic Relations, Trade, and Investment” is, as in Kazakhstan, the second most frequently co-occurring code, but with a lower number of co-occurrences, only 75 times with the code “EU–Tajikistan.” A total of 284 news articles, categorized as articles covering the bilateral relationship in the four selected Tajikistani media outlets and coded as “EU–Tajikistan,” were analyzed for the co-occurrence analysis. Following this, the co-occurrence table of the code “EU–Tajikistan”

with other codes related to areas of cooperation is presented in alphabetical order in the following table (Table 16). The table was generated by ATLAS.ti, and the darker the color, the more frequently the code co-occurred with "EU–Tajikistan."

Table 16: Code Co-Occurrence Analysis of "EU- Tajikistan" with other codes

		EU-Tajikistan 284
Agriculture	38	18
Border Management	17	12
COVID-19	179	24
Cultural Relations	35	21
Ecology and Climate change	111	26
Economic Relations, Trade and Investment	288	75
Education	46	24
Fighting against Terrorism and Extremism	21	16
Health	37	17
Human right	52	16
Humanitarian aid	42	22
Political relations	403	133
Regional Stability and Security	98	43
Situation in Afghanistan	95	39
Water Resourses and Management	39	16

Source: Author's data, screenshot from ATLAS.ti.

The first two areas of cooperation were the same as in Kazakhstan. Despite being less frequently co-occurred, they are still among the top two areas of cooperation. Moreover, the interest in cooperation in the security sphere is far more prominent in Tajikistan's mass media than in Kazakhstan. The code "Regional Stability and Security" co-occurred 43 times, and the code "Situation in Afghanistan" co-occurred 39 times. These two codes appear among the top five most co-occurred codes with "EU–Tajikistan," and this indicator is much higher compared to Kazakhstani media. The reason for Tajikistan's media focus on the security sphere is that the country shares the longest border with Afghanistan and the

Taliban's return to power has been a consistent concern. Tajikistan is actively seeking international partners to support areas like "Border Management" (co-occurred 12 times) and "Fighting Against Terrorism and Extremism" (co-occurred 16 times), as well as combating drug trafficking and human trafficking. In all bilateral or regional meetings with the EU, the situation in Afghanistan remains a top priority of the Tajikistani side. Tajikistan is considered a key partner in EU programs such as BOMCA and CADAP, and these programs are well-covered in Tajikistan's mass media.

Another major difference in the visibility of cooperation areas in Tajikistani media compared to Kazakhstani media is the focus on humanitarian and social support themes. For example, the code "COVID-19" co-occurred 24 times, "Humanitarian Aid" co-occurred 22 times, and "Health" co-occurred 17 times. These co-occurrence data suggest that the EU is perceived as an actor responding to crises and social needs. Humanitarian support and vaccine diplomacy by the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the increased visibility of the EU's health-related cooperation in Tajikistani media. From this data, it becomes clear that one of the primary pillars of EU–Tajikistan bilateral relations is development assistance, particularly in the form of technical and financial aid. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan, underwent political and economic transformations and became recipients of development aid from Western countries, including the EU and its member states. Over time, the EU and other Western donors expanded their development activities to nearly all spheres of life in Central Asia, from education to infrastructure development. Among Central Asian countries, the EU's development assistance appears most visible in Tajikistan. To this day, the EU continues to support the region across various areas of cooperation. Notably, Tajikistan received the largest share of EU assistance allocated to Central Asia for the 2014–2020 period: €251 million out of a total €1.06 billion. This funding was not assigned to individual projects but was instead directed toward three key sectors, education, healthcare, and rural development.[660] It is also important to highlight that development assistance does not feature as prominently as a cooperation area in Kazakhstan's mass media, unlike in Tajikistan. This is partly because Kazakhstan, classified as an upper-middle-income country since 2014, has not received any bilateral development aid from the EU since then, and now only benefits from regional financial and technical instruments provided by the EU.[661] The frequency of

[660] Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, "The EU and Central Asia," 241.
[661] Arynov, "Opportunity and Threat Perceptions," 740.

co-occurrence codes related to development assistance in Tajikistani media clearly reflects the image of the EU as a significant provider of aid.

Unlike in Kazakhstan's media, the code "Ecology and Climate Change" and "Water Resources Management" appeared relatively high in the Tajikistani media, showing 26 and 16 co-occurrences respectively with the code "EU–Tajikistan." Water diplomacy remains one of the priorities of Tajikistan's foreign policy, and the country has introduced several global water-related initiatives. Additionally, water management in Central Asia has become a growing issue, and as Tajikistan is located at the headwaters of the region's major rivers, it views the EU as a key partner and donor capable of assisting in managing water resources among Central Asian countries. The EU is seen as an important partner in the fields of water governance and environmental sustainability in Tajikistan and in Central Asia more broadly.

Other areas of cooperation were coded less frequently in co-occurrence with "EU–Tajikistan" compared to the main areas mentioned above. For instance, the code "Education" co-occurred 24 times, "Cultural Relations" co-occurred 21 times, and "Agriculture" co-occurred 18 times.

These results show that while these areas are present in Tajikistani media, they are less visible compared to the other key spheres of cooperation. Similarly to Kazakhstan, among the EU's promoted norms, only human rights are somewhat visible in Tajikistani media. The code "Human Rights" co-occurred 16 times with the code "EU–Tajikistan," ranking it among the top 15 most visible areas of cooperation in the Tajikistani media.

Overall, the visibility of the EU's cooperation areas in Tajikistan's media shows several important differences compared to Kazakhstan. While political and economic relations remain the most frequently mentioned topics in both countries, Tajikistani media gives more attention to security cooperation and development assistance, perceiving the EU as a political, economic, and security partner as well as a donor. Similar to Kazakhstan, the EU's normative power is barely visible in Tajikistan's mass media.

6.5.3. Comparative Analysis of EU-Related Themes in Kazakhstan's and Tajikistan's Mass Media

The way the EU is represented in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan provides valuable insight into how the EU is perceived as a partner, and which areas of cooperation are prioritized in their relationship with the EU. Both countries value cooperation with the EU and prioritize different areas in their relationship. The EU is not widely seen as a

"normative power" in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The EU's norms in news articles covering bilateral relations with these two Central Asian countries are barely visible. Among the EU's most visible core norms is human rights, and among the EU's minor norms, sustainable development is also visible to a lesser degree in the media of both countries. Instead, the EU in both countries is portrayed as a political and economic partner and showing a similar position in the visibility of these two areas of cooperation. In Kazakhstan, the EU is mostly described as a strategic political and economic partner, and the Tajikistani mass media also portrays the EU first and foremost as a political and economic partner. After these two shared priorities, however, the other visible areas of cooperation differ between the countries.

This difference shows that the EU is not seen in the same way across Central Asia. Its role depends on the needs, challenges, and goals of each country. In Kazakhstan, the EU is also seen as a partner in the areas of energy, logistics, and transportation cooperation. By contrast, in the case of Tajikistan, cooperation in the areas of regional security and stability, including the situation in Afghanistan, along with development assistance, receives more attention in the media coverage of EU cooperation.

6.6. Summary

This chapter has examined the portrayal of the EU in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan through an analysis of 1,454 news articles collected from eight selected mass media outlets in both countries, with the support of ATLAS.ti. The goal was to understand how the EU is portrayed in these two Central Asian countries by analyzing the intensity of media attention, the tone of coverage, and the thematic dimensions of EU-related news.

The findings from the attention intensity subpart show that while the EU does not receive overwhelming coverage in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the level of attention has remained consistent across the observed period, from the third quarter of 2019 to the fourth quarter of 2023. However, Kazakhstan's media gave more frequent attention to EU-related topics compared to Tajikistan, when looking at the total number of news articles collected from the mass media of both countries. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of state-funded and privately funded media shows that state-funded media covered the EU more frequently than privately funded media. This trend can be explained by the fact that most bilateral and regional diplomatic activities between the EU and Central Asian countries are covered primarily by state-funded media.

When it comes to the tone of the media coverage, the analysis shows that the EU is generally portrayed in a positive tone. Out of 1,454 articles, approximately 57% were coded as positive, 30% as neutral, and only 13% as negative. This positive portrayal is particularly visible in articles that fall into the "domesticated" category, meaning coverage that focuses on EU cooperation with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan or the broader Central Asian region is presented in a positive tone. In contrast, the articles categorized under "external" topics, such as the EU's internal political issues, economic struggles, or global affairs, were reported more in a neutral or negative tone. Thus, the data suggest that the mass media in both countries strategically present the EU in a favorable light when covering EU-Central Asia relations, both on a regional level and in the bilateral relations of the EU with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The thematic dimension analysis provides further depth by analyzing which areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries are most often discussed in the media. This part of the chapter specifically focused on articles that were coded as related to bilateral relations (EU–Kazakhstan and EU–Tajikistan) and examined what themes co-occurred most frequently with these codes. In Kazakhstan, in addition to political relations, the EU was most often associated with economic cooperation, investment, energy, and logistics**,** and transportation. Tajikistan's media, while also associating political and economic relations with the EU as top priority areas, also emphasized the EU as a donor that supports development projects, humanitarian aid, and also prioritized cooperation in the security sector. Interestingly, both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's media rarely portrayed the EU as a normative power. Topics such as democracy promotion, human rights, and the rule of law were not dominant themes in the news articles collected from the mass media. When looking comparatively at Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's mass media, the comparative analysis of the two countries further highlights important differences in perception. Kazakhstan, having deeper institutional and economic ties with the EU, portrays the EU more as an economic partner. In contrast, Tajikistan, which has less intensive economic engagement with the EU, portrays the EU more as a donor and supporter in the security and stability spheres.

In conclusion, returning to the main research question of this chapter, it may be concluded that the findings indicate that the EU enjoys a generally positive image in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The Kazakhstani and Tajikistani mass media similarly portray the EU as a political and economic partner. However, in terms of differences, the EU is seen as a partner

in energy, logistics, and transportation in Kazakhstan's media, while Tajikistani media focus more on the EU as a donor and security partner.

Chapter 7: Understanding the views of officials and experts on EU–Central Asia relations

7.1. Overview

Following the previous chapter, this part's aim is to analyze the official perspectives and experts' views on the EU and its relations with Central Asian countries. The experts' views are analyzed based on the conducted interviews by the author, which are discussed in detail in the methodology chapter, where the process of conducting interviews is explained. The analysis of the Central Asian official perspective of the EU is based on a careful analysis of speeches, official documents, and press releases from the official websites of the government representatives and agencies of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The official documents were collected from the main official governmental sources, such as the presidents' and ministries of foreign affairs' websites of both selected countries, and additionally, the interviews related to the research topics given by officials to the mass media from the relevant media were collected for further analysis.

Moreover, the primary objective of this chapter is to answer the research question of how Central Asian officials and experts view the EU and its relationship with Central Asian countries. As discussed in the introduction part of the thesis, for a better understanding of the perceptions of the EU, the case of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan was selected as the case studies among the Central Asian countries. The findings of the literature review chapter show that, so far, only a few studies have been conducted with the specific aim of analyzing how the EU is perceived from the experts' views and official perspectives in Central Asia. Therefore, in order to answer the research question in a more detailed way, in the first subpart of this chapter, the official perspectives are discussed in detail, and in the second subpart, the views of experts towards the EU and its policy in Central Asia are discussed based on the conducted interviews.

7.2. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's official perspectives on the EU and its relations with Central Asia

This subchapter aims to give a deeper analysis of the official perspectives of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan on the broader cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. The analysis of official documents, speeches, press releases, and statements shows that Kazakhstan and

Tajikistan mostly see the EU as a strategic and economic partner. They also view the EU as a partner in energy cooperation and green transition, as well as a security and connectivity partner. These are the main images of the EU according to official views, and they will be explained in more detail in the following sections, where the officials' views are presented.

7.2.1. EU as a Strategic Partner

From the beginning, it is essential to note that both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have presented the EU as one of their most important strategic partners in the international arena. In Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept (2020–2030), the EU is described as a "strategic partner" and the "development of cooperation with the European Union and the European countries is defined as one of the most important priorities," as Deputy Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, Roman Vassilenko, highlighted.[662] In a similar way, in the official documents analyzed from Tajikistan, it is highlighted in many statements that "we consider the European Union among our important partners in the international arena,"[663] and the President of Tajikistan has highlighted that "Tajikistan supports the initiative to elevate the relationship to the level of strategic partnership."[664] Roman Vassilenko, has made this point clear on numerous occasions. He stated that "throughout the years of Kazakhstan's independence, we have considered our relations with Europe as one of the key components of a multi-vector, pragmatic, balanced foreign policy of the country."[665] This shows that Kazakhstan's approach to the EU is part of its broader foreign policy strategy, which aims to maintain a balanced relationship with major global players like Russia, China, and Western countries. As further explained by Margulan Baimukhan, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the EU, in an interview with Euractiv media, "there is a concept of "strategic partnership", and we have such with the Russian Federation, we have such with the People's Republic of China, and we have a strategic partnership with the EU and its member

[662] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Cooperation with the EU and European states is one of the most important priorities of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy*, March 11, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/519799, accessed May 17, 2025.

[663] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Шурои Иттиҳоди Аврупо Антониу Кошта [Meeting with the President of the European Council António Costa]*, April 3, 2025, https://president.tj/event/news/50424, accessed May 17, 2025.

[664] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Комиссияи Иттиҳоди Аврупо хонум Урсула фон дер Ляйен [Meeting with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen]*, April 4, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16828/muloqot-bo-prezidenti-komissiyai-ittihodi-avrupo-khonum-ursula-fon-der-lyaien, accessed May 17, 2025.

[665] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Cooperation with the EU and European states is one of the most important priorities of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy*, March 11, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/519799, accessed May 17, 2025.

states."[666] This notion of "strategic partnership" is not simply rhetorical in the case of the EU and Kazakhstan. It is institutionalized in documents such as the EPCA, which Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country to have signed and ratified so far. Roman Vassilenko, emphasized this by pointing out that "Kazakhstan is the only country in the region to have signed and ratified a "second generation" agreement – the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU and its member states."[667] The significance of the EPCA is highlighted in almost every official document and press release analyzed for this research. The President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, calls it "the backbone of the Kazakh-EU multifaceted engagement,"[668] and underscores its role as a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for cooperation across 29 defined areas and even beyond, including "rare earth metals, green hydrogen, batteries, development of transport and logistics potential, and diversification of commodity supply chains."[669] Tajikistan, while still in the process of finalizing its version of the EPCA, has also emphasized the importance of this document in almost all bilateral meetings with EU representatives. According to one of these documents, "the parties exchanged views on the importance of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Tajikistan and the European Union, which has reached the final stage of coordination."[670]

Currently, in strengthening the strategic partnership, visa facilitation with the EU is an important goal of the Kazakh government. Kazakhstan holds a leading position among Central Asian countries in dialogue with the EU on visa issues. As Deputy Minister Vassilenko noted, "Kazakhstan has been providing visa-free travel to citizens of all EU countries since 2017."[671] He continued by stating that "the EU's decision to launch visa facilitation negotiations with Kazakhstan reflects its recognition of Kazakhstan as a reliable

[666] Georgi Gotev, "Kazakhstan Ambassador: 2021 Has Been a 'Special Year' in Kazakh-EU Relations," *Euractiv*, December 22, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/interview/kazakhstan-ambassador-2021-has-been-a-special-year-in-kazakh-eu-relations/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[667] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Cooperation with the EU and European states is one of the most important priorities of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy*, March 11, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/519799, accessed May 17, 2025.
[668] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Kassym-Jomart Tokayev Met with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen*, April 3, 2025, https://www.akorda.kz/en/1-333421, accessed May 17, 2025.
[669] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Cooperation with the EU and European states is one of the most important priorities of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy*, March 11, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/519799, accessed May 17, 2025.
[670] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Шурои Иттиҳоди Аврупо Антониу Кошта [Meeting with the President of the European Council António Costa]*, April 3, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16824/muloqot-bo-prezidenti-shuroi-ittihodi-avrupo-antoniu-koshta, accessed May 17, 2025.
[671] "Connecting East and West," interview, *IPS Journal*, January 8, 2025, https://www.ips-journal.eu/interviews/connecting-east-and-west-8009/, accessed May 17, 2025.

and key partner in the region, while also strengthening bilateral cooperation and opening new avenues for engagement, and fostering business-to-business and people-to-people ties."[672] Deputy Prime Minister — Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Murat Nurtleu, highlighted that "the issue of facilitation of the EU visa regime for citizens of Kazakhstan is one of the priority issues of bilateral cooperation" in a meeting with EU officials.[673] The goals are to reduce visa fees, increase access to multiple-entry visas, and streamline document requirements for citizens of Kazakhstan. At the beginning of the year, official consultations between EU and Kazakh authorities began, and according to the official statement, "the negotiation process will address key aspects of simplifying visa procedures... and it is expected that the agreement will enable citizens of Kazakhstan to obtain visas to EU countries under more streamlined and accessible conditions."[674] As one of the documents states, the beginning of visa facilitation consultations shows Kazakhstan's unique role as being "the only country in Central Asia with which the EU plans to conclude a Visa Facilitation Agreement."[675]

In contrast, Tajikistan does not yet have a bilateral visa dialogue of the same scale. The visa facilitation issue was also one of the most widely covered topics in the selected mass media of Kazakhstan, as discussed in the previous chapter, and this topic also dominates in the official meetings of the Kazakh representatives with EU officials.

However, viewing the EU as a strategic partner in Central Asian countries does not mean that there are no sensitive issues between the EU and Central Asian countries. The most frequently mentioned issue concerns the EU's stance on the human rights situation in Central Asian countries. After the "January events" in 2022 in Kazakhstan, the European Parliament adopted a critical resolution on the situation in Kazakhstan and condemned "the violations of fundamental freedoms and human rights committed by the Kazakh authorities against demonstrators, media workers and activists."[676] The Kazakh government responded quickly

[672] Derya Soysal, "Interview with Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vassilenko," *EU Reporter*, April 18, 2025, https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2025/04/18/interview-with-kazakhstan-deputy-minister-of-foreign-affairs-roman-vassilenko/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[673] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Issues of Comprehensive Development of Cooperation with EU Discussed at Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan*, June 14, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/573548, accessed May 17, 2025.
[674] Derya Soysal, "Interview with Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vassilenko," *EU Reporter*, April 18, 2025, https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2025/04/18/interview-with-kazakhstan-deputy-minister-of-foreign-affairs-roman-vassilenko/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[675] Derya Soysal, "Interview with Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vassilenko," *EU Reporter*, April 18, 2025, https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2025/04/18/interview-with-kazakhstan-deputy-minister-of-foreign-affairs-roman-vassilenko/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[676] European Parliament, *Joint Motion for a Resolution on the Situation in Kazakhstan*, January 19, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2022-0065_EN.html, accessed May 17, 2025.

to this resolution, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan issued a statement and noted that "the resolution on the situation in Kazakhstan adopted by the European Parliament on 20 January 2022 is not only biased but also based on prejudiced opinions and assumptions."[677]

The former Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the EU in Brussels, and current member of the Parliament of Kazakhstan, Aigul Kuspan, in an interview with Euractiv, also criticized the European Parliament's resolution and mentioned that "I am absolutely sure that the EP resolution is the product of precisely this kind of "toxic" cooperation that undermines trust between Europe and Central Asia."[678] The Kazakh official highlighted that "unfortunately, many of them [the MEPs] are at the mercy of stereotypes which remind me of former Soviet propaganda,"[679] and claimed that some deputies "allow themselves to be manipulated by fugitive Kazakh criminals who dress up like political martyrs."[680] Kazakhstan expressed its dissatisfaction at the highest level regarding this resolution of the EU, which, in the previous chapter, discussed the Kazakh president's comments to the media in this regard, which the president criticized the resolution and the European Parliament, and highlighted that it perceives it as unfair criticism from the European Parliament.

In general, Kazakhstan's and Tajikistan's officials' perspectives present a consistent and positive outlook toward the EU and view the EU as a key international and strategic partner. The EU is also seen as an economic power from the official perspectives, which the following sections analyze it.

7.2.2 EU as an Economic Partner

A dominant theme in the official perspective of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan is the economic dimension of their cooperation with the EU. Both governments view the EU as their key

[677] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, January 21, 2022, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/315149?lang=en, accessed May 17, 2025.
[678] Georgi Gotev, "Aigul Kuspan: Most MEPs Have Only a Rough Idea of Kazakhstan," *Euractiv*, May 7, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/interview/aigul-kuspan-most-meps-have-only-a-rough-idea-of-kazakhstan/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[679] Georgi Gotev, "Aigul Kuspan: Most MEPs Have Only a Rough Idea of Kazakhstan," *Euractiv*, May 7, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/interview/aigul-kuspan-most-meps-have-only-a-rough-idea-of-kazakhstan/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[680] Georgi Gotev, "Aigul Kuspan: Most MEPs Have Only a Rough Idea of Kazakhstan," *Euractiv*, May 7, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/interview/aigul-kuspan-most-meps-have-only-a-rough-idea-of-kazakhstan/, accessed May 17, 2025.

economic partner, and for both governments, trade and investment relations with the EU form the basis of bilateral engagement.

Kazakhstan views the EU as its most significant economic and investment partner. According to the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, "today the EU is one of Kazakhstan's key economic and trade partners."[681] Kazakhstan presents itself as already an economic hub for the EU. The current trade turnover has reached nearly $50 billion, which, as highlighted by Vassilenko in one of his interviews, this number "representing 80% of EU trade with Central Asia."[682] Moreover, more than 3,000 companies from EU member states operate in Kazakhstan, including major firms like Total, Siemens, and Alstom.[683] President Tokayev repeatedly emphasizes the EU's role as Kazakhstan's most important economic actor. He later adds with precision that "the EU is the largest investor into the Kazakhstan economy with a total investment of $160 billion. In turn, Kazakhstan is the leading trade partner of the EU in the region."[684] These figures show the depth and seriousness of this cooperation. In this context, analyzing the official perspectives shows that Kazakhstan aims to develop its economic and trade relations with the EU to a new level of economic cooperation. As the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vassilenko affirms, "we believe there is room for further growth of the trade as we identify new avenues of the cooperation."[685]

Tajikistan, while having a smaller economic base, is also seeking deeper trade and investment ties. The President of Tajikistan, in a meeting with EU officials, mentioned that, "we aim to expand exports of products from Tajik manufacturers to European markets, including through the use of mutual trade preferences."[686] Tajikistan is working toward

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[681] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *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, 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, accessed May 17, 2025.

[682] Derya Soysal, "Interview with Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vassilenko," *EU Reporter*, April 18, 2025, https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2025/04/18/interview-with-kazakhstan-deputy-minister-of-foreign-affairs-roman-vassilenko/, accessed May 17, 2025.

[683] Derya Soysal, "Interview with Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vassilenko," *EU Reporter*, April 18, 2025, https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2025/04/18/interview-with-kazakhstan-deputy-minister-of-foreign-affairs-roman-vassilenko/, accessed May 17, 2025.

[684] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev Holds Bilateral Meeting with President of the European Council Charles Michel*, November 26, 2021, https://www.akorda.kz/en/president-kassym-jomart-tokayev-holds-bilateral-meeting-with-president-of-the-european-council-charles-michel-411373, accessed May 17, 2025.

[685] Derya Soysal, "Interview with Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roman Vassilenko," *EU Reporter*, April 18, 2025, https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2025/04/18/interview-with-kazakhstan-deputy-minister-of-foreign-affairs-roman-vassilenko/, accessed May 17, 2025.

[686] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Иштирок дар Ҳамоиши Осиёи Марказӣ ва Иттиҳоди Аврупо [Participation in the Central Asia–European Union Forum]*, April 4, 2025,

joining the GSP+ system of the EU, which would facilitate easier market access for Tajik products. As stated in one of the official press releases, in the meeting with EU officials, the Tajikistani side "stressed the need to accelerate the process of Tajikistan's accession to the European Union's Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP+)."[687] Such a framework would allow duty-free access for many Tajik products to the EU market, particularly agricultural and textile exports.

On investment cooperation, both countries stress the importance of the EU's investment in key sectors. From analyzing the official perspective of Kazakhstan, it becomes visible that Kazakhstan is mostly interested in the EU's investment in the following areas, such as "agriculture, transport connectivity, pharmaceuticals and energy."[688] Tajikistan is interested in the EU's investment in the following areas, "industry, mineral extraction, infrastructure, agriculture, tourism, education and healthcare."[689] Both countries highlighted the importance of the development of cooperation with the EU in the digital economy and artificial intelligence areas of partnership. In addition, both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan fully align themselves with the EU's green development agenda and are interested in developing relationships with the EU in this sphere. One of the main messages in Tajikistan's official statements is convergence with the EU in green development. The phrase "Tajikistan shares the EU's view in advancing "green economy" policy" is repeatedly mentioned.[690]

Overall, it can be concluded that the official vision of both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan portrays the EU as an important economic partner. As the previous chapter's data show, the mass media of both countries also portrays the EU as an economic partner, and it was one of the most visible images of the EU in the mass media of the region.

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https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16831/ishtirok-dar-hamoishi-osijoi-markazi-va-ittihodi-avrupo, accessed May 17, 2025.

[687] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Шӯрои Аврупо Шарл Мишел [Meeting with the President of the European Council Charles Michel]*, June 3, 2023, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/12752/muloqot-bo-prezidenti-shuroi-avrupo-sharl-mishel, accessed May 17, 2025.

[688] "Connecting East and West," interview, *IPS Journal*, January 8, 2025, https://www.ips-journal.eu/interviews/connecting-east-and-west-8009/, accessed May 17, 2025.

[689] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Иттиҳоди Аврупо Шарл Мишел [Meeting with the President of the European Union Charles Michel]*, October 27, 2022, https://president.tj/event/foreign_trips/26852, accessed May 17, 2025.

[690] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Шурои Иттиҳоди Аврупо Антониу Кошта [Meeting with the President of the European Council António Costa]*, April 3, 2025, https://president.tj/event/news/50424, accessed May 17, 2025.

7.2.3. EU as a Partner in Energy Cooperation and Green Transition

One of the most deeply integrated and forward-looking aspects of EU–Central Asia relations is cooperation in the field of energy, as framed by official discourse. Both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan express a strong political and strategic will to develop cooperation with the EU in traditional energy markets, green transition, and even emerging sectors like green hydrogen and rare earth materials. Kazakhstan frames energy cooperation as foundational in its relations with the EU. During high-level talks with EU leaders, President Tokayev explicitly named "energy, major infrastructure and industrial projects, digital innovation, and artificial intelligence" as sectors where cooperation is prised by Kazakhstan and should develop further.[691] Moreover, the data from previous chapters show that the EU is one of the biggest consumers of Kazakhstan's energy sector, and Kazakhstan provides the EU with "crude oil, petroleum products, uranium, hydrogen," and other energy-related commodities.[692] Kazakhstan's leadership clearly sees an opportunity to go beyond fossil fuel exports, and Tokayev underlined that "a separate subject of cooperation is "green" energy. I believe we might be able to collaborate closely here."[693] In the words of Vassilenko, "we launched cooperation in areas new to us – rare earth metals, green hydrogen, batteries, development of transport and logistics potential, and diversification of commodity supply chains."[694] This shows Kazakhstan's readiness to not only continue oil and gas exports but also to become a key partner in the EU's energy transition, and Kazakhstan sees itself as a future provider of green energy to Europe.

In addition, Tajikistan also sees green energy as a future-oriented field in its cooperation with the EU. As a mountainous country and rich in hydropower, Tajikistan is naturally aligned with the EU energy-transition goals. The collected official texts from Tajikistan show this emphasis strongly. For example, it is mentioned regularly in a press release published after official meetings with EU officials that "Tajikistan shares the EU's vision in

[691] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Kassym-Jomart Tokayev Met with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen*, April 3, 2025, https://www.akorda.kz/en/1-333421, accessed May 17, 2025.
[692] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Kazakhstan – EU Cooperation*, February 15, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/article/details/486, accessed May 17, 2025.
[693] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *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, 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, accessed May 17, 2025.
[694] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Cooperation with the EU and European states is one of the most important priorities of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy*, March 11, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/519799, accessed May 17, 2025.

advancing green economy policy."[695] The country's green economy strategy until 2037 includes a full transition to renewable energy, and in one of the texts it was mentioned that "by 2037, Tajikistan plans to produce all electricity from renewable sources."[696]

The Central Asian countries are expecting EU support for the green energy transformation and are interested in the EU's investment in these areas of cooperation. According to one of the official texts, "a call was made for the European Union to support, either through bilateral cooperation or under the "Global Gateway" initiative, the construction and renovation of hydropower facilities, which are examples of green economy and energy."[697]

It may be concluded that energy cooperation is at the center of the cooperation between the Central Asian countries and the EU. Furthermore, similar findings of prioritizing energy cooperation between the Central Asian countries and the EU are visible in the mass media research as well. The Central Asian countries see the EU as a model of transitioning to green energy, support its policies related to green energy, and are interested in intensifying their cooperation in this field.

7.2.4. EU as a Security Partner

From the official point of view, cooperation with the EU in the field of security is more emphasized and considered more important in Tajikistan's official documents. Tajikistan strongly emphasizes the role of the EU in contributing to regional stability, especially concerning Afghanistan. In official documents, the Afghan crisis is framed as a threat to regional peace, and this leads Tajikistan to urge further cooperation with the EU and other actors in the region. Multiple references are made to the programs the EU is supporting, such

[695] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Шурои Иттиҳоди Аврупо Антониу Кошта [Meeting with the President of the European Council António Costa]*, April 3, 2025, https://president.tj/event/news/50424, accessed May 17, 2025.

[696] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Комиссари Иттиҳоди Аврупо оид ба шарикии байналмилалӣ Йозеф Сикела [Meeting with EU Commissioner for International Partnerships Jozef Síkela]*, March 14, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16757/muloqot-bo-komissari-ittihodi-avrupo-oid-ba-sharikii-bainalmilali-iozef-sikela, accessed May 17, 2025.

[697] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Иштирок дар Ҳамоиши Осиёи Марказӣ ва Иттиҳоди Аврупо [Participation in the Central Asia – European Union Forum]*, April 4, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16831/ishtirok-dar-hamoishi-osijoi-markazi-va-ittihodi-avrupo, accessed May 17, 2025.

as BOMCA, CADAP, that help in "strengthening the protection of the Tajik-Afghan border."[698]

The EU's engagement through these programs, which include border modernization, customs training, and counter-narcotics, is seen by Tajikistan as essential. Similarly, as in the mass media findings, security cooperation is mostly prioritized by Tajikistan's officials, which is mirrored in the Tajik mass media. In most press releases published after meetings with the EU officials, the following points are highlighted, "during the discussion of security issues, the parties focused on strengthening security and stability in our country, the entire Central Asian region, and Afghanistan, as well as enhancing defense capabilities along the Tajik-Afghan border to ensure security in the region,"[699] and "the beneficial joint efforts of the parties, particularly strengthening the Tajik-Afghan border through BOMCA and CADAP, were emphasized."[700]

On the other hand, Kazakhstan's official perspectives also highlight the importance of cooperation with the EU in the security sphere, but not as much as Tajikistan does in seeing the EU as a security actor. When referring to the EU as a security actor in Central Asia, it mainly relates to soft security, where the EU contributes to the security sector of Central Asian countries by financing various relevant projects.

7.2.5. EU as a Connectivity Partner

Another important area of cooperation from Central Asian official perspectives with the EU is the emphasis on developing infrastructure, transport corridors, and digital connectivity. In the case of Kazakhstan, President Tokayev underlines this point by stating that "Kazakhstan could contribute by acting as a "buffer market" between East and West, South and North."[701]

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[698] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Намояндаи олии Иттиҳоди Аврупо оид ба сиёсати хориҷӣ ва амниятӣ Ҷозеп Боррелл [Meeting with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell]*, November 22, 2021, https://president.tj/event/meetings/24694, accessed May 17, 2025.

[699] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Намояндаи махсуси Иттиҳоди Аврупо оид ба Осиёи Марказӣ хонум Тери Ҳакала [Meeting with the European Union Special Representative for Central Asia, Ms. Terhi Hakala]*, October 12, 2021, https://president.tj/event/meetings/24394, accessed May 17, 2025.

[700] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Ноиби Президенти Комиссияи Аврупо, Намояндаи олии Иттиҳоди Аврупо оид ба сиёсати хориҷӣ ва амният Ҷозеп Боррелл [Meeting with the Vice President of the European Commission, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell]*, October 11, 2021, https://president.tj/event/foreign_trips/24388, accessed May 17, 2025.

[701] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Phone Conversation with President of the European Council Charles Michel*, July 4, 2022, https://www.akorda.kz/en/phone-conversation-with-president-of-the-european-council-charles-michel-464718, accessed May 17, 2025.

This role is strategic and economic at the same time for Kazakhstan and the region. It builds upon Kazakhstan's central geographic position and is supported by its participation in both the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union's Global Gateway project. As described in one of the official statements analyzed for this research of Kazakhstan, "Kazakhstan's strategic geographic location and its role as a key transit hub for global trade routes underscore its status as a middle power."[702] The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route receives particular attention in the official documents of Kazakhstan. Vassilenko explains that priority is given to "developing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, ensuring food security, addressing energy and climate change issues."[703] This corridor is framed as a critical infrastructure of connectivity between Central Asia and Europe. Minister Nurtleu similarly emphasized "the relevance of deepening cooperation in the development of Trans-Caspian International Transport route, including within the framework of the "Global Gateway" EU strategy."[704]

Moreover, in addition to physical transport, there is a growing focus on digital integration. Tokayev identifies "energy, major infrastructure and industrial projects, digital innovation, and artificial intelligence" as four areas where Kazakhstan can deepen cooperation with the EU.[705] Vassilenko also acknowledges the expansion of cooperation to new spheres like "batteries, development of transport and logistics potential, and diversification of commodity supply chains."[706]

Tajikistan, as a landlocked country with more challenging logistics infrastructure, also sees connectivity as a strategic sector of cooperation. The official statements highlight that in the bilateral meetings the "expansion of sustainable transport corridors,"[707] "construction of

[702] "Connecting East and West," interview, *IPS Journal*, January 8, 2025, https://www.ips-journal.eu/interviews/connecting-east-and-west-8009/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[703] Assel Satubaldina, "Officials in Brussels Highlight Strong and Diversifying Kazakhstan-EU Relations," *The Astana Times*, June 7, 2024, https://astanatimes.com/2024/06/officials-in-brussels-highlight-strong-and-diversifying-kazakhstan-eu-relations/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[704] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Kazakh Foreign Minister received EU Special Representative for Central Asia*, July 12, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/587569, accessed May 17, 2025.
[705] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Kassym-Jomart Tokayev Met with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen*, April 3, 2025, https://www.akorda.kz/en/1-333421, accessed May 17, 2025.
[706] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Cooperation with the EU and European states is one of the most important priorities of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy*, March 11, 2023, https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/519799, accessed May 17, 2025.
[707] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Намояндаи олии Иттиҳоди Аврупо оид ба корҳои хориҷӣ ва сиёсати амниятӣ [Meeting with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy]*, March 27, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16804/muloqot-bo-namoyandai-olii-ittihodi-avrupo-oid-ba-korhoi-khoriji-va-sijosati-amniyati, accessed May 17, 2025.

infrastructure,"[708] and "communications infrastructure"[709] are discussed with the EU officials. One of the documents confirms that "Tajikistan also cooperates with the EU under the "Global Gateway" initiative."[710] Tajikistan is interested not only in transport but also in communication and digital infrastructure. As mentioned in the text, cooperation was emphasized in areas such as "digitization, transition to e-government, and development of artificial intelligence."[711] The country proposes that EU investment support goes into infrastructure and communication sectors, for instance, "investment in energy, agriculture, industry, transport, and communication infrastructure was considered important," areas of cooperation in the bilateral meetings.[712]

Therefore, from both countries' official perspectives, infrastructure is not seen only as an economic investment but as an element of regional integration, sustainability, and geostrategic positioning. The connectivity agenda includes both hard infrastructure such as roads, rail, and energy transmission lines, and soft elements such as digital transformation. These perspectives of Central Asian countries align well with the EU's own priorities in Central Asia, as discussed in Chapter Four.

7.3. Expert Views on EU and its relations with Central Asian countries

The analysis of the conducted interviews among the experts from Central Asia shows that the overall perception of the EU among experts from Central Asia can be characterized as cautiously positive, but not without criticism. In general, interviewees highlighted that the

[708] Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Иттиҳоди Аврупо Шарл Мишел [Meeting with the President of the European Union Charles Michel]*, October 27, 2022, https://president.tj/event/foreign_trips/26852, accessed May 17, 2025.

[709] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Иштирок дар Ҳамоиши Осиёи Марказӣ ва Иттиҳоди Аврупо [Participation in the Central Asia and European Union Summit]*, April 4, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16831/ishtirok-dar-hamoishi-osijoi-markazi-va-ittihodi-avrupo, accessed May 17, 2025.

[710] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Муносибатҳои Тоҷикистон бо Иттиҳоди Аврупо [Relations of Tajikistan with the European Union]*, January 18, 2024, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/160/munosibathoi-tojikiston-bo-ittihodi-avrupo, accessed May 17, 2025.

[711] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Мулоқот бо Президенти Комиссияи Иттиҳоди Аврупо хонум Урсула фон дер Ляйен [Meeting with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen]*, April 4, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16828/muloqot-bo-prezidenti-komissiyai-ittihodi-avrupo-khonum-ursula-fon-der-lyaien, accessed May 17, 2025.

[712] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Иштирок дар Ҳамоиши Осиёи Марказӣ ва Иттиҳоди Аврупо [Participation in the Central Asia – European Union Forum]*, April 4, 2025, https://mfa.tj/tg/main/view/16831/ishtirok-dar-hamoishi-osijoi-markazi-va-ittihodi-avrupo, accessed May 17, 2025.

relationship between the EU and the countries of Central Asia has improved over the years of cooperation, over the past thirty-three years, and has the potential to become even stronger. One interviewee noted that "the current state of relations between the European Union and Central Asian countries is stable and gradually improving, but still far from reaching its full potential."[713] This point shows that while the base of cooperation is solid, it suggests that both sides need to take more steps to reach the level of partnership that is truly beneficial for each party in this cooperation.

Moreover, several experts in the interview highlighted that historically, Central Asia was not in the center of the EU foreign policy priorities. This lack of attention has contributed to the feeling that the EU's presence in the region is not always consistent and strong. As one interviewee mentioned, "the EU mainly pays attention to Central Asia only during times of crisis."[714] Some interviewees also said that the EU lacks a full understanding of the realities of the region and, as a result, this limits its ability to develop effective long-term strategies.

However, many experts agreed that the EU's interest in the region has increased in recent years, especially after the Russia-Ukraine war and the rising influence of China. For example, the EU is now looking at Central Asia not only as a recipient of development aid, but also as a partner for trade, energy cooperation, and regional security. Despite this growing interest, experts criticized both sides for not fully using the existing opportunities. One interviewee highlighted clearly that "Central Asian countries are not making the most of the opportunities offered by the European Union."[715] At the same time, the EU is also seen as failing to present a strong and clear long-term engagement. It was noted that "the EU's efforts lose their effectiveness when compared to the more strategic approaches of other global actors."[716] In this context, experts in the interviews underlined the need for a more strategic and pragmatic investment in the relationship from both the EU and Central Asian countries.

Several experts underlined that the EU enjoys a mostly positive reputation among Central Asian populations, but that this positive image is often vague and not based on detailed knowledge. As one expert said, "I would say that the perception of the European Union among the general public in Central Asia is rather limited and often vague."[717] This comment

[713] Interview 5
[714] Interview 9
[715] Interview 8
[716] Interview 9
[717] Interview 5

reflects a general opinion that the image of the EU is more symbolic than based on direct experience or knowledge of what the EU actually does among the public in Central Asia. The expert continued that "while among experts, students of international relations, and people working in the development or education sectors there is generally a positive view of the EU, the average citizen, especially in rural areas, does not have a clear idea about what the EU is, what it does, or how it affects their lives."[718] Another expert added that "I don't think ordinary people in Central Asia are aware of all the modalities of the EU work and structure."[719] This difference between professional awareness and public understanding was confirmed by several other experts in the process of the interview. One expert said, "on average, there's low awareness of the EU as an institution and of its policies in Central Asia, but that's not unique to Central Asia, and it's true in many other regions of the world as well."[720] This quote suggests that the problem is not only regional but also part of a broader trend of the EU's low profile outside Europe. The lack of public diplomacy, limited branding, and weak communication strategies are seen as major obstacles for the EU's visibility in Central Asia by the experts analyzing the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia, and who are well acquainted with the geopolitics of Central Asia.

Several experts acknowledged that EU programs such as Erasmus+ and other educational or environmental projects are well known within specific sectors, but their connection to the EU is not always visible to ordinary people. This was explained in the following way, that "EU-funded programs in agriculture, education, and water management exist, but very few people know they are EU initiatives because they are often implemented by partner organizations or NGOs with little EU branding or publicity."[721] This lack of visibility is critical, as it means that while the EU is active on the ground, it does not always receive credit for its efforts.

However, despite this limited visibility, the EU is often perceived as "neutral" and "benevolent" in contrast to more dominant and assertive players like Russia, China, and the US. One expert put it clearly in the following format, "the EU is often perceived as a more neutral and benevolent player compared to other powers. Central Asian countries tend to view the EU as a partner that supports their sovereignty and independent development without the geopolitical competition."[722] This gives the EU a comparative advantage in

[718] Interview 5
[719] Interview 4
[720] Interview 1
[721] Interview 5
[722] Interview 3

creating a more favorable image in the region, even if it is less active than other actors in the region. Interestingly, several experts noted that the EU's positive image is often based more on a general idea of "Europe" than on detailed knowledge of the EU. As one interviewer put it in the following way, "people generally have positive views of the EU, but this is not because the EU is doing particularly good things that are highly visible in the region. One of the main reasons the EU is perceived positively is that people often confuse the EU with Europe."[723] This statement shows that the public in Central Asia often associates the EU with the broader idea of Europe, rather than with its specific policies, institutions, or actions. This "Europe factor," shaped historically by perceptions during the Soviet era and reinforced through education, migration, and media, creates a symbolic association of the EU with freedom, development, and prosperity.[724]

On the one hand, people admire the EU for being a place of personal and professional opportunity. As one expert pointed out "the EU, in my opinion, has gained the status of free and developed societies with major opportunities for personal and economic growth in the minds of Central Asians."[725] On the other hand, there are also criticisms, especially against liberal cultural values that some people in the region see as threatening to their traditional norms. One expert rightly pointed this out in the interview that "it is also common to hear criticism of liberal movements and trends within EU among Central Asians,"[726] and another expert said that "some countries in Central Asia are even making efforts to prevent the introduction of such trends."[727]

This creates a dual image, and the EU is admired for its economic, educational, and life standards, but criticized for its social and moral values. In general, the experts see the EU and its relations with Central Asian countries as a political actor, as an economic partner, as a normative actor, and as a model, which is discussed in detail in the following subsections.

7.3.1. EU as a Political Actor

Based on the findings of the conducted interviews with experts from Central Asia, it becomes evident that the perception of the EU as a political actor is mixed and depends on different factors. There are both supporters and critics among the experts on the role of the EU as a

[723] Interview 1
[724] Interview 1
[725] Interview 4
[726] Interview 4
[727] Interview 9

political actor. Most of the interviewees recognize the EU as an important political actor in international relations, but at the same time, they highlighted that the EU is not very active in Central Asia compared to other powers in the region, such as Russia and China. Analyzing experts' interviews shows that there was a recognition that the EU has a positive image among many people regarding the EU as a political actor, especially in cities and among educated people, but this image is mostly symbolic. As one expert explained, "the EU is generally perceived as an opportunity rather than a threat,"[728] but the other interviewee highlighted that this perception is partly due to "low awareness."[729] He continued by saying that people "don't know much about the EU, so they don't associate it with harm."[730] In contrast, he pointed out that people in the region "know a lot about China, Russia, and the US,"[731] including their actions abroad, which causes more skepticism.

Moreover, the EU is seen as a less dominant and more respectful partner. According to one interviewee, "Central Asian countries tend to view the EU as a partner that supports their sovereignty and independent development without the geopolitical competition that characterizes relations with Russia and China."[732] This perception contributes to trust and allows the EU to be viewed more positively, even if its visibility is lower. For example, one expert noted that "the European countries are more welcome than all other countries of the world … there is a high level of trust and a high level of interest."[733] But at the same time, this trust comes partly from the fact that the EU is perceived as distant and not interfering in local affairs too directly.

Additionally, one of the main points raised by several experts was that the EU often pays attention to Central Asia only during moments of crisis or geopolitical urgency. As one interviewee pointed out, "the EU mainly pays attention to Central Asia only during times of crisis. It often issues statements criticizing the shortcomings of the countries in the region, which is not a beneficial approach for either side."[734] While the EU has increased its engagement in Central Asia since the Ukraine crisis, many experts questioned whether this would be sustained in the long term. As one expert highlighted, "we are currently observing a certain intensification of the EU's relationship with Central Asian countries, however, it

[728] Interview 3
[729] Interview 1
[730] Interview 1
[731] Interview 1
[732] Interview 3
[733] Interview 6
[734] Interview 9

appears to be primarily driven by external factors. It remains unclear whether this shift is temporary and context-specific, or whether it represents a more structural transformation."[735] Another issue raised was that the EU still does not fully understand the specific political, economic, and cultural conditions of Central Asia. One interviewee mentioned that "the EU still does not fully understand the Central Asian region and, in reality, is not yet prepared to use all available opportunities to expand its engagement."[736] According to this perspective, the EU often formulates its policies based on its own norms and expectations, without adapting them to the unique context of Central Asian societies.

Several interviewees argued that EU norms and standards, especially those connected to human rights, rule of law, and democracy, are sometimes perceived as political pressure and interference in internal affairs, rather than genuine support in Central Asian countries. For example, it was stated that "the prevailing moral norms in the EU, which are seen as incompatible with Eastern culture and as distorting the cultural values of the Central Asian countries, are unacceptable for many in the region."[737] Most experts highlighted that the political conditions of Central Asia are very different from the European context. One interviewee commented that "we cannot directly copy everything from the EU, because our political, historical, and cultural contexts are very different."[738] In his view, trying to implement EU norms without adaptation "does not yield the desired results."[739] This suggests that while Central Asians admire certain political aspects of the EU, they also believe that these models cannot be transferred automatically into their systems.

Several experts also criticized the EU's overly bureaucratic nature. One interviewee described the EU as "a very complex and bureaucratic institution,"[740] which creates obstacles for local actors who want to apply for EU funding and participate in EU projects. In addition to this, language barriers and complicated application procedures were also mentioned as practical limitations that reduce the effectiveness of EU programs. As a result, some experts felt that many local actors are excluded from meaningful participation in EU-funded projects.[741]

[735] Interview 1
[736] Interview 9
[737] Interview 9
[738] Interview 5
[739] Interview 9
[740] Interview 1
[741] Interview 5

When talking about the EU's strategy, especially the 2019 EU-Central Asia Strategy, the experts again had mixed views. Some said the strategy was a positive step. As one expert stated, "the EU's 2019 Central Asia Strategy effectively addresses the region's many needs and priorities."[742] This strategy, according to him, brought "notable improvements in economic cooperation, resilience and regional connectivity."[743] Another expert noted that the 2019 strategy was more "practical and implementation-oriented"[744] than the earlier version from 2007, which focused mainly on "European norms and values, human rights, and other elements of the European conception of the rule of law."[745] However, others remained skeptical about the impact of the strategy. One interviewee stated that "the strategy has addressed many of the region's priorities, but its implementation has been slow and inconsistent."[746] The other expert mentioned that despite the changing geopolitical environment, "Central Asia has been pushed into a secondary or even tertiary priority for the EU."[747] Another expert noted that, "the effectiveness and implementation methods of the strategy are also crucial. Unfortunately, up to now, I have not observed major changes in the EU's policy toward the region,"[748] and the same argument was made by the other expert: "there is still a gap between strategy and implementation."[749]

A very important topic that emerged in the interviews with experts from Central Asia was how the EU differs as a political actor from other influential actors in the region. According to the experts who were interviewed, an important distinction is the EU's cooperation, which prioritizes the promotion of norms in cooperation with Central Asian countries. Another important distinction is that compared to the other actors, the EU mostly emphasizes multilateralism and regional cooperation. Experts stressed that the EU often promotes dialogue and cooperation among Central Asian countries, especially on transboundary issues like water management, environment, and energy. One interviewed expert rightly pointed out, "one of the main differences is the EU's emphasis on multilateralism and regional cooperation."[750] In terms of development assistance, the EU was seen as more focused on long-term capacity building and sustainability compared to China's infrastructure-heavy lending and Russia's political-security orientation. One interviewee summarized this in this

[742] Interview 3
[743] Interview 3
[744] Interview 6
[745] Interview 6
[746] Interview 10
[747] Interview 9
[748] Interview 9
[749] Interview 5
[750] Interview 2

way, “the EU provides substantial development assistance focused on sustainable development, education and health… This contrasts with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which focuses heavily on infrastructure projects and loans, and Russia’s emphasis on political and military influence.”[751] In this way, the EU is viewed as a potentially more stable partner. Nevertheless, there was criticism about the EU’s position compared to other major powers. Some experts argued that while the EU is appreciated as a “neutral and benevolent player,”[752] its influence is still limited compared to more assertive actors such as China and Russia. One interviewee mentioned that “the EU’s efforts lose their effectiveness when compared to the more strategic approaches of other global actors.”[753] In general, the EU is viewed by Central Asian experts as a unique actor with a different approach compared to other actors in the region, with its unique characteristics of promoting norms, regional cooperation, and prioritizing cooperation through sustainable development approaches.

In conclusion, based on these interviews, it can be said that the EU is seen as a political actor with potential, but one that still needs to adjust its approach to the realities of Central Asia. While the EU promotes normative values such as rule of law and democracy, there is a gap between what the EU offers and what the region actually needs or wants, according to the expert’s views. The EU’s strategy, from the experts' perspective, is appreciated for its aims, but criticized for its weak implementation and limited visibility. As discussed in the previous subchapter, according to the experts' perspective, the EU’s political image is shaped more by historical and symbolic associations with “Europe” than by its concrete actions on the ground.

7.3.2. EU as an Economic Partner

One of the most frequently highlighted points by experts during the interviews was the economic role of the EU in the region. The EU is often viewed as a strong and reliable economic partner by the Central Asian experts. Many interviewees highlighted that both sides, Central Asia and the EU, have not yet fully used the economic potential of the partnership, despite the high level of economic engagement. For instance, one expert noted that “Central Asian countries have benefited from EU cooperation, especially in terms of development assistance and trade. However, they can further expand their interaction by diversifying their economic ties and reducing their dependence on individual countries or

[751] Interview 3
[752] Interview 3
[753] Interview 9

regions."[754] This point shows that while the high level of economic relations between the EU and some of the Central Asian countries exists, they are still limited and not balanced. The earlier research suggests that economic diversification and reduction of over-dependence on neighboring countries such as Russia and China are among the main motivations for Central Asian countries to engage with the EU.[755]

Moreover, several experts mentioned that the EU is one of the largest foreign investors in Central Asia, especially in energy and infrastructure projects. In one of the interviews, the expert mentioned that "initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway aim to counterbalance China's Belt and Road Initiative by investing in sustainable, high-standard infrastructure."[756]

One of the very clear messages from the interviews was the need to prioritize trade and investments that help the local economy. One expert advised that the EU should support "small and medium-sized enterprises and strengthen trade relations by simplifying trade rules and providing technical assistance."[757] According to him, "tailored economic initiatives can help improve the business environment and attract more EU investment."[758] He explained that "the new strategy has helped attract EU investment and strengthened economic ties, although challenges remain in fully realizing these opportunities due to logistical and regulatory barriers."[759] Taking into account this challenge, as one of the interviewees noted, "the EU has initiated several regional projects aimed at improving connectivity, environmental sustainability and economic diversification."[760] These connectivity projects, including transport corridors such as the Middle Corridor, are viewed by experts as essential for helping Central Asia reach European markets and, also, for reducing dependence on routes controlled by Russia.

Some experts also mentioned the EU's potential role in the energy sector, both in terms of trade and knowledge transfer. One interviewee said that the EU "could extend the cooperation with the Central Asian countries in energy sector and raw materials,"[761] and he noted that energy efficiency is a big problem in the region. According to another expert, the issue is not the lack of energy resources, but "inefficient use of the energy that we have."[762]

[754] Interview 3
[755] Peyrouse, *How Does Central Asia View the EU?*, 11.
[756] Interview 3
[757] Interview 3
[758] Interview 3
[759] Interview 3
[760] Interview 3
[761] Interview 4
[762] Interview 1

In this context, the EU is seen not only as an investor but also as a model for learning and reform in the energy sector, which will be discussed in detail in one of the following subchapters, where the EU as a model is discussed in detail.

One of the experts noted that the EU should not treat the region only as a source of raw materials or a new market in its economic relationship. He warned that the EU should avoid using "Central Asia as a new market for sales and resources," and instead adopt "mechanisms to ensure that the accumulated capital from investing in Central Asian economies remains in Central Asia, rather than being pumped back to the EU."[763]

In conclusion, the economic partnership between the EU and Central Asia is seen by experts as very valuable but underutilized by both sides. The EU is respected for its stable economy, long-term development focus, and high standards in Central Asia by experts, officials, and the general public. However, the cooperation is often slowed by barriers in implementation, regulatory problems, and limited visibility of EU projects. Experts recommend that the EU should focus more on small and medium enterprises, provide more direct assistance to the local private sector, and avoid being seen as a neo-colonial actor. Finally, according to the suggestions of the experts, energy efficiency, sustainable trade, and connectivity are among the top areas where economic cooperation can be improved.

7.3.3. EU as a Normative Actor

In the conducted interviews, many experts reflected on the EU's role as a normative power in Central Asia, especially in promoting democracy, good governance, the rule of law, human rights, and institutional reform. As it was discussed in the literature review chapter on the visibility of the EU's normative power research around the world, the findings from the experts' interviews in Central Asia also show that experts have mixed opinions about its relevance and promotion of its norms in Central Asian countries. A common argument among the interviewees was that the EU focuses too much on promoting its own values, without fully understanding the local context. One expert highlighted that while "the European Union tries to support political reforms, improve governance systems, legal order, and the rule of law in the region. However, this approach does not fully meet the real needs of the Central Asian countries."[764] According to him, while this approach "may appear

[763] Interview 8
[764] Interview 9

appealing to society,"[765] it "often comes across as political manipulation."[766] From these comments, it becomes clear that some experts feel that the EU's normative agenda, while theoretically valuable, is not always implemented in a culturally or politically appropriate way. This resistance is not necessarily a rejection of all EU norms, but rather a call for cultural sensitivity. One expert explained that "European principles are specific to European conditions and capacities," and when these are applied in Central Asia, "they often conflict with the mindset, capabilities, and circumstances of the region."[767] Therefore, the message is not to reject EU norms, but to localize them to find ways to adapt the best practices of the EU in ways that fit the Central Asian reality.

On the other hand, many experts emphasized that good governance, transparency, and anti-corruption measures are essential for the political modernization of Central Asian countries. One expert stated clearly that "strengthening governance and the rule of law through judicial reforms, anti-corruption measures and capacity building is critical. The EU can provide technical assistance and training to improve the legal framework and institutional capacity in Central Asia."[768] Another respondent underlined that "the EU's emphasis on good governance, the rule of law and anti-corruption measures highlights the importance of transparent and accountable governance," which is seen as a "scourge of our region."[769] Thus, we can see that there is a real interest in learning from the EU, but it has to be done respectfully and gradually.

In general, the EU is recognized and differentiated as a normative actor from other actors in Central Asia, but this role is met with both appreciation and criticism from the experts in the region. While many Central Asians admire the EU's promotion of good governance, sustainable development cooperation, and institutional reform, others feel that EU values must be adapted to the local context, and the EU needs to recognize the Central Asian cultural differences.

7.3.4. EU as a Model

A significant number of experts in the interviews expressed their views on the EU as a model, not only in the political or economic sense, but also as an institutional, social, and regional

[765] Interview 9
[766] Interview 9
[767] Interview 9
[768] Interview 3
[769] Interview 3

example. It was repeatedly said that Central Asia can learn a lot from the EU experience, especially in the areas of regional integration, institutional development, governance, and sustainable development. One key theme under this topic was the EU's experience in regional integration, which was highlighted by experts as an important example of the EU as a model. In the process of the interview, one of the experts highlighted that "one of the most important lessons is the importance of regional cooperation and integration,"[770] which Central Asian countries can learn from the EU. Additionally, as the expert highlighted, Central Asia still faces many unresolved regional challenges like "water distribution, energy sharing, trade barriers, and border issues,"[771] and it is possible to address them if the region follows the EU's path of integration and cooperation mechanisms. Another expert supported this idea and emphasized that "regional integration does not mean losing sovereignty, but rather strengthening it by solving problems together."[772] Several interviewees mentioned that in Central Asia, "national-ethnic identity plays an important role" and that it often creates tensions between countries.[773] During the interview, one of the experts proposed that "maybe based on the EU experience, the Central Asian states should build their regional cooperation starting from the values common to the entire region and develop a medium free from all the national-specific reference and coloring."[774] This suggests that EU-style regionalism, which is based on economic and legal cooperation instead of ethnic or historical identity, could be an ideal model for the Central Asian countries. As mentioned in the interview process, one expert described the EU as "a union of institutions,"[775] highlighting that "they have a very complicated system of engagement between all these EU countries and all these legislative mechanisms."[776] According to one of the interviewees, one of the "most valuable things we can learn from the EU is their institutional structure," which can help with the region's integration process.[777]

Besides this, the EU is also admired for its emphasis on transparency, good governance, and accountability. One expert pointed out that "EU support for judicial reforms and institutional strengthening can serve as a model for Central Asian countries seeking to improve their legal frameworks and institutional capacity."[778] Education was also discussed as a domain where

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[778] Interview 3

the EU acts as a model. Many experts praised Erasmus+ and Jean Monnet programs, which "have had a significant impact on higher education reform and academic cooperation."[779] According to them, these educational opportunities are helping a new generation of Central Asians learn from European experiences, and creating a programme like Erasmus in Central Asian countries can improve people-to-people contact in the region and, as a result, can influence regional integration.

Still, there were some critical voices as well. One expert warned that "we cannot directly copy everything from the EU, because our political, historical, and cultural contexts are very different."[780] The other expert explained that sometimes EU standards "conflict with the mindset, capabilities, and circumstances of the region."[781] This shows that while the EU is respected as a model, the process of applying and adopting it needs to be context-specific. This suggests that Central Asia should accept and adapt rather than imitate blindly, when applying any EU examples in Central Asian countries.

Moreover, environmental sustainability and climate change also featured prominently in the experts' list of reasons to take the EU as a model. Central Asia is a region facing severe environmental challenges, including water scarcity, land degradation, and energy shortages. Several experts suggested that the EU could share its best practices in renewable energy, water management, and sustainable agriculture. As one expert highlighted, "climate change could also be an area where the EU would be quite helpful," to learn from its experience.[782] There was consensus among the experts that the EU should continue prioritizing sustainable development and environmental issues in cooperation with Central Asian countries. They highlighted that sustainable development is an area where the EU can share its experience and solutions. As one expert noted, "the EU's commitment to sustainable development offers a roadmap for Central Asian countries."[783] In addition, the following areas, green energy, renewable technologies, and digital transformation, were named as sectors with great potential for cooperation and areas to learn from the EU by the experts.

Looking generally, according to the experts' perspective, the EU is perceived as a model for Central Asia mainly in four dimensions: institutional structure, regional integration,

[779] Interview 3
[780] Interview 5
[781] Interview 9
[782] Interview 1
[783] Interview 3

education, and sustainable development. Experts believe that Central Asia has a lot to learn from the EU, but this learning process should be adjusted to local needs and cultural realities.

7.4. Summary

Analyzing the viewpoint of officials in two Central Asian countries shows that the EU–Central Asia partnership is becoming more mature and multi-dimensional. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, two Central Asian countries with different levels of economic development and geopolitical positions, both view the EU as an important strategic partner. The EU is seen as an important partner for economic and trade relationships, energy cooperation, and as a supporter of the transition to a more sustainable development path. It is also viewed as a partner that helps to create modern infrastructure connecting Asia and Europe through various projects, as well as supporting initiatives related to regional security and stability. President Tokayev underscores the long-term commitment to the relationship with the EU by stating that Kazakhstan seeks to "deepen its cooperation with Europe, including energy, major infrastructure and industrial projects, digital innovation, and artificial intelligence."[784] This list shows the areas of interest from Kazakhstan's side in deepening cooperation with the EU to benefit from its experience. Analyzing the official perspectives shows that Tajikistan also considers cooperation with the EU as an important direction of its foreign policy, not only for the EU's development support, but also for addressing global challenges such as climate change, energy security, and regional conflict resolution, in addition to economic and political relations.

At the same time, there is a critical layer in Kazakhstan's official discourse regarding mutual understanding, particularly in the political dialogue with the European Parliament. The Kazakhstani side is calling for more accurate and respectful engagement from EU political institutions. The criticism toward European Parliament resolutions is not a rejection of the EU as such, but a demand for greater contextual understanding and the avoidance of double standards in cooperation with countries of the region, according to the official perspective. One of the Kazakhstani officials, in an interview with the media, mentioned that European officials should demonstrate more respect toward Central Asian values and contexts, and take them into consideration before adopting their resolutions. A Kazakh official emphasized

[784] Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Kassym-Jomart Tokayev Met with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen*, April 3, 2025, https://www.akorda.kz/en/1-333421, accessed May 17, 2025.

that “I would advise my colleagues in the EP who criticize Kazakhstan to always keep in mind the special civilizational mission of Europe. … [which includes] respect for other cultures by studying and understanding them,” and suggested that this foundational European ideal should guide mutual engagement.[785] The Kazakh official further claimed that some MEPs “allow themselves to be manipulated by fugitive Kazakh criminals who dress up like political martyrs.”[786] This sentiment reflects the Kazakh government's perception that EU actors sometimes base their criticisms on unbalanced or politicized sources. In sum, while both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan emphasize partnership with the EU in different areas of cooperation, Kazakhstan in particular calls for more mutual recognition and nuanced political engagement, especially from the European Parliament. The countries of the region seek to deepen ties comprehensively in different areas of relations, including trade, investment, energy, security, education, and technology. The analyzed data shows that while both countries actively suggest mechanisms and projects to improve this cooperation, they are also suggesting that the EU should respect their values, cultures, and their priorities in cooperation with them.

The interviews with Central Asian experts show that the perception of the EU in the region is complex, layered, and influenced by different levels of awareness, historical imagination, and the real presence of the EU. The views of the experts show that while the EU enjoys a mostly positive image, especially among urban and educated populations, it is often shallow or vague due to low visibility and poor communication. Its general visibility remains limited, especially among rural populations and those not directly following internal and international politics. According to the experts, the EU is seen as a symbol of development, opportunity, and peaceful cooperation, but also as a distant and sometimes culturally different actor among the populations in Central Asia. The public image of the EU is shaped more by imagination than experience, and while this brings symbolic advantages of a positive image, it also shows limits. Therefore, improving public diplomacy and increasing the visibility of EU-funded projects is essential, as one of the experts pointed out that the EU still has weak communication channels in the region.[787] One recommendation was that the EU should “improve its communication and public diplomacy in Central Asia.”[788] The

[785] Georgi Gotev, “Aigul Kuspan: Most MEPs Have Only a Rough Idea of Kazakhstan,” *Euractiv*, May 7, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/interview/aigul-kuspan-most-meps-have-only-a-rough-idea-of-kazakhstan/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[786] Georgi Gotev, “Aigul Kuspan: Most MEPs Have Only a Rough Idea of Kazakhstan,” *Euractiv*, May 7, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/interview/aigul-kuspan-most-meps-have-only-a-rough-idea-of-kazakhstan/, accessed May 17, 2025.
[787] Interview 5
[788] Interview 5

expert explained that "many people in the region do not fully understand the scope of the EU's engagement," and "the EU should invest more in public diplomacy campaigns and media outreach to explain its policies and programs."[789]

In general, experts from Central Asia welcome EU engagement, but they also express strong dissatisfaction with how the EU designs and implements its policies in the region. The key criticisms include a lack of strategic consistency, insufficient knowledge of the local context, bureaucratic complexity, weak public diplomacy, and an overemphasis on norms that are not always suitable or welcomed in Central Asian societies. The experts highlighted several sectors where Central Asian countries are especially interested in deepening their cooperation with the EU. These include economic and trade, green energy, connectivity (especially through the Middle Corridor), agriculture, climate adaptation, energy efficiency, and security.

In sum, the general perception is that EU–Central Asia relations are improving, but both sides still operate below their full potential. The experts also view positively the EU's role and its relationship with Central Asian countries. The EU is mostly seen as a political actor, an economic partner, and a model to follow in specific areas of cooperation. To a smaller extent, it is also seen as a normative power, but this role receives some criticism from the perspective of Central Asian experts. While experts appreciate the positive steps taken by the EU, they also criticize the lack of a long-term vision, weak communication with local societies, and limited understanding of regional realities.

When looking comparatively at the EU's self-perception as a normative power, as defined by Ian Manners, and its image in Central Asia, based on official documents and expert opinions, it becomes clear that this normative role is not always visible in practice. While the EU presents itself as a value-based actor, the perspectives of officials and experts in countries like Kazakhstan and Tajikistan often describe the EU in more practical terms, such as a strategic, economic, energy, and security partner.

Among the EU's minor norms, according to Manners' categorization, the EU is seen in Central Asia as an actor that prioritizes cooperation in sustainable development. This area is most appreciated in both official and expert views, and Central Asian countries are interested in developing their relationship with the EU in this sphere. Good governance is also seen as an area where Central Asian countries could learn from the EU, according to expert

[789] Interview 5

perspectives. This means that among the EU's promoted norms, sustainable development appears to be the most visible and welcomed area where the EU can achieve more concrete results. These findings confirm previous research discussed in the literature review chapter, which analyzed global perceptions of the EU and noted that its norms are barely visible around the world.

This indicates a gap between how the EU sees itself and how it is perceived in the region. The next chapter, which is the conclusion, will analyze all the key questions addressed in this thesis and, by bringing all the findings together, will explain in more detail how the EU is presenting itself and how the countries of Central Asia are viewing it.

PART IV: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 8. Conclusions

The findings of this research strongly support the argument of Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti that "the way in which the EU is perceived by other countries is likely to have direct bearing on its success as a player in the international arena."[790] As previously stated in the Introduction chapter and in the first sub-chapter of the theoretical framework chapter about the importance of studying perceptions of the EU, the success of any actor actively engaging with Central Asian countries is partly related to the policy and interest of the specific actor in Central Asia, and the other part is related to the perceptions of Central Asian countries toward the specific actor. In this context, the same applies to the EU, and considering this, I divided this work into two parts, to analyze both the self-representations of the EU by analyzing the foreign policy of the EU in Central Asia and the perceptions of the EU.

Following the introduction, in the second part, this thesis analyzed the foreign policy of the EU in Central Asia (Chapter 5), and in the third part, it analyzed the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (Chapters 6 and 7). Subsequently, the following sections of this conclusion chapter present in detail the main findings of the research, and before presenting them, it is important to review the main goals of the thesis mentioned in the introduction chapter to analyze to what extent this thesis achieved its stated goals.

To begin with, the first objective was to analyze and explore the relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries by conducting an extensive literature review, analyzing the legal bases of the relationships, examining the foreign policy concepts of Central Asian countries, reviewing speeches and interviews of officials from both the EU and Central Asian countries, and collecting data from publicly available sources provided by relevant authorities in both the EU and Central Asia. The results of the findings are presented in chapter five of this thesis.

[790] Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti, "Introduction: The EU in the Eyes of the Others—Why Bother?," in *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor*, ed. Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

Furthermore, the second purpose I set before this research project was to analyze the perceptions of the EU in Central Asia through mass media coverage from June 2019 to December 2023, as well as through official views based on document analysis and experts' opinions gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted by the author. The results of the findings are presented in chapters six and seven.

Moreover, the third aim set before this research was to apply a more innovative approach to studying the EU's perception by using computer-assisted data analysis software to analyze the collected data to improve its efficiency. In the research process, from literature reviews to data analysis collected from the media, expert interviews, and official perspectives, I used ATLAS.ti, which, on the one hand, made the process easier and, on the other hand, helped the findings become more transparent and efficient.

Finally, the last goal was to contribute to the literature in the field, and I hope the findings of this research may be useful to researchers studying Central Asian politics, the EU's foreign policy, studies of EU-Central Asian relations and perception studies. Of course, this research area and this thesis remain open to discussion and need improvement, and I offer a few suggestions for this research field and the stakeholders, which are presented at the end of this chapter.

In general, the main aim of this research was to answer the following main research question, what are the main elements of the EU's foreign policy towards Central Asia, and how do Central Asian countries perceive the EU and its policies towards the region? To answer this question and other sub-questions in general, the thesis was divided into two parts, the first part analyzing the self-perceptions of the EU and the second half analyzing the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In the following part, I summarize the main findings of both parts.

8.1. EU Self-Representations in Central Asia

In the first part of this thesis, I tried to answer the following research question to understand the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia: Which areas of cooperation does the EU prioritize in its cooperation with Central Asian countries? Since the EU represents itself as a normative power, this question leads to an important sub-question: Do these areas of cooperation underpin the concept of EU normative power? The results of the findings show that the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia is strongly influenced by its self-perception as a normative power.

The academic literature related to EU foreign policy in general and specifically the literature that analyzes EU foreign policy in Central Asia shows that the EU is a unique type of actor in Central Asia due to the way it conducts relationships with the countries of the region. To better understand the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia, this thesis, in the theoretical chapter, examined the self-perceptions of the EU based on theoretical perspectives. The widely accepted and applied theory on the EU's foreign policy is the Normative Power Europe theory, proposed by Ian Manners, which this thesis focuses on and applies to understand the foundation of EU foreign policy in Central Asia.

Importantly, the concept has been widely debated for more than two decades and remains relevant in EU foreign policy studies, specifically regarding the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia. Ian Manners pointed out that the EU is a different normative power actor in global politics because it is "constructed on a normative basis" and "acts in a normative way."[791] According to the perspectives of normative power, the EU promotes the following core norms in its cooperation with other actors in international relations: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, the promotion of the following minor norms, social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance, are among the priorities of the EU's cooperation with other international actors.

Furthermore, the literature review of previously conducted research and the findings of this research show that the EU, in its foreign policy, prioritizes normative power in cooperation with Central Asian countries. In this context, Chapter 5 examined the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia and focused on the main areas of cooperation that the EU prioritizes in its relations with the region to understand the self-representations of the EU in Central Asia. Over the years, the EU has developed its ties with Central Asia, and the increasing number of high-level political visits and political consultations confirms this trend. Therefore, to better understand the development of the relations between the EU and Central Asia, chapter five divided the stages of cooperation into four phases, based on the level of the relationship and the priority areas that the EU has emphasized in its cooperation with Central Asian countries. Specifically, in the early years, cooperation focused primarily on technical assistance for economic reforms, state building, and democratization in Central Asian countries, with which the EU supported the countries of the region through this transition. Subsequently, in the later stages of cooperation, the scope expanded to include a broader

[791] Manners, "Normative Power Europe," 252.

range of areas, such as the promotion of human rights, democratization and the rule of law, economic, trade, and investment relations, energy, security and stability, water management, education, and connectivity, including people-to-people contact. It is obvious that these areas have become the main priorities of the EU in the region, and analyzing the EU's strategies towards Central Asia and the bilateral agreements signed between the EU and individual Central Asian countries confirms this. These findings show that the EU actively promotes its norms in cooperation with Central Asian countries and represents itself as a normative power.

These priorities, which the EU has emphasized in cooperation with Central Asian countries, were examined with regard to how visible they are in Central Asian mass media, expert opinions, and official perspectives, which chapters six and seven analyzed. In the following subsection, the main findings of the analysis of the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are presented.

8.2. EU's Perceptions in Central Asia

The present study is of considerable importance in view of the intensification of the relationship between the EU and the Central Asian countries, especially since misperceptions tend to adversely affect mutual cooperation and dialogue between the regions. Therefore, studying the perception of the EU in Central Asian countries helps to examine whether Central Asian countries also view the EU the same way it perceives itself.

In the second part of this thesis, I analyzed the perceptions of the EU in Central Asia through three main sources, namely media portrayal, official documents, and the views of experts. The analysis mainly focused on Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In this part, I aimed to answer the question of how the EU is portrayed in the mass media of these two countries. Based on this, several sub-questions were also explored, such as what are the dominant themes in the news articles collected from the media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, what are the differences between state-funded and independent media in portraying the EU, and finally, whether the EU appears as a normative actor in the Kazakh and Tajik media. In order to understand the opinions of officials and experts on the EU and its policy in Central Asia, I also tried to answer another question, which is how Central Asian officials and experts view the EU and its relationship with the countries in the region. This question also led to a sub-question, which is whether the EU appears as a normative power for Central Asian officials and experts.

In particular, the findings of the literature review chapter show that, at the international level, the self-perception of the EU and its perception by other actors often contradict each other. For this reason, the EU does not meet its potential. According to the findings of this research, there is little evidence that the EU is regarded as a "normative power" in Central Asian countries. Interestingly, similar findings were also found in other parts of the world regarding perceptions towards the EU, and Anna Skolimowska rightly pointed out that the "identity of a normative actor adopted by the European Union in the international relations is in crisis."[792]

In addition, the findings from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, which were selected as case studies, reveal both similarities and differences in the way the EU is perceived in the mass media analysis, official perspectives and the opinions of experts from these selected countries. Specifically, both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are more focused on the EU's economic cooperation and other tangible areas of relationships, rather than its appeal as a normative power. These findings align with previous studies on the perceptions of the EU around the world, since Sonia Lucarelli's findings show that the perceptions of the EU widely record that the power of the EU as an actor is primarily assessed from the aspect of its economic capability.[793] Similarly, in the case of previous studies conducted on understanding EU perceptions in different Central Asian countries, such as Zhanibek Arynov's work on the case of EU perceptions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's intermediary elites, the findings show a similar pattern. They see mainly the EU as an economic power and partner.[794]

As highlighted in the Introduction chapter of this thesis, the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were analyzed through mass media analysis to understand the portrayal of the EU in the selected mass media, and official documents of both selected countries related to the EU and their foreign policies, to understand the elites' views about their relations with the EU and the EU in general, and lastly, through expert interviews to know their views on the EU and its relations with Central Asian countries.

The third part of the thesis, which consists of two chapters, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 in detail presents the findings on the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. To elaborate, Chapter Six has examined the portrayal of the EU in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan through an analysis of 1,454 news articles collected from eight selected mass

[792] Anna Skolimowska, "Conclusions," in *Perceptions of the European Union's Identity in International Relations*, ed. Anna Skolimowska (London: Routledge, 2019), 306.
[793] Lucarelli, "Seen from the Outside," 7.
[794] Arynov, "Opportunity and Threat Perceptions."

media outlets in both countries, which were published in the period from June 2019 to the end of 2023. The analysis was carried out with the support of ATLAS.ti. The goal was to understand how the EU is portrayed in these two Central Asian countries by analyzing the intensity of media attention, the tone of coverage, and the thematic dimensions of EU-related news. In particular, the findings of this chapter suggest that the selected media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan generally perceive the EU positively. Of the 1,454 articles collected from the mass media in both countries and analyzed to understand the perceptions of the EU, around 57% are positive, 30% are neutral, and only 13% of news articles covering EU-related news are reported in a negative tone. Furthermore, the data analyzed show that the positive portrayal of the EU is particularly visible in articles that fall into the category of "domesticated", meaning coverage that focuses on EU cooperation with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan or the broader Central Asian region is presented in a positive tone. In contrast, articles classified under "external" topics, such as the EU's internal political issues, economic struggles or global affairs, are reported more in a neutral or negative tone. In general, these findings suggest that the media in both countries strategically present the EU in a favorable light when covering EU–Central Asia relations, both on the regional level and in the bilateral relations of the EU with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Moreover, the findings from the attention intensity of publications related to the EU in the media of both countries show that, while the EU does not receive overwhelming coverage in the mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the level of attention has remained consistent throughout the observed period. However, Kazakhstan's media have given more frequent attention to EU-related topics compared to Tajikistan, when looking at the total number of news articles collected from the mass media of both countries. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of state-funded and privately funded media shows that state-funded media have covered the EU more frequently than privately funded media. This trend can be explained by the fact that most bilateral and regional diplomatic activities between the EU and Central Asian countries are mainly covered by state-funded media.

In addition, the thematic dimension analysis of the news articles in this chapter provides further depth by showing which areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries are most frequently discussed in the media. Specifically, in the Kazakhstan mass media, in addition to political relations, the EU is most often associated with economic cooperation, investment, energy, logistics, and transportation in the analyzed news articles. On the other hand, Tajikistan's media, while also associating political and economic relations with the EU as top priority areas, emphasizes the EU as a donor that supports development

projects and humanitarian aid, and also prioritizes cooperation in the security sector, based on the thematic analysis of the collected news articles from Tajikistani mass media.

Interestingly, despite the fact that the EU is investing more energy in the promotion of its normative powers in Central Asia, the media in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan rarely portray the EU as a normative power, which confirms the previous findings of studies of EU perceptions around the world, which show that the EU's norms are barely visible globally. The EU's most visible core norm in selected mass media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan is human rights, while among its minor norms, sustainable development is also visible to a lesser extent in the media of both countries.

Looking comparatively at the Kazakhstan and Tajikistan mass media, the analysis also highlights important differences in perception. In Kazakhstan, the EU is mostly described as a strategic political and economic partner, and the Tajikistani mass media also portray the EU first and foremost as a political and economic partner. However, after these two shared priorities, the other visible areas of cooperation differ between the countries. This difference shows that the EU is not seen in the same way in Central Asia. Instead, its role depends on the needs, challenges and goals of each country. For example, in Kazakhstan, the EU is also seen as a partner in the areas of energy, logistics, and transportation cooperation. On the contrary, in the case of Tajikistan, cooperation in the areas of regional security and stability, including the situation in Afghanistan, together with development assistance, receives more attention in the media coverage of EU cooperation.

This research shows that the normative power of the EU is not clearly visible in the Kazakhstan and Tajikistan mass media. Instead, the media's focus remains largely on cooperation areas where results are more tangible in general, such as economic development, infrastructure, energy, and trade. Despite the fact that there is a difference in the self-representations of the EU in Central Asia and the perceptions of Central Asian countries of the EU and its policies in Central Asia, it can be concluded that the findings of the mass media analysis show that the EU enjoys a generally positive image in both the Kazakhstan and Tajikistan media.

The next part of the analysis, namely Chapter 7, covers the analysis of the data collected to understand the perceptions of the EU according to the official and expert perspectives. Analyzing the points of view of officials in two Central Asian countries shows that the EU–Central Asia partnership has become more mature and multidimensional. Both countries regard the EU as an important strategic partner. Specifically, the EU is perceived as an

important partner for economic and trade relationships, energy cooperation, and as a supporter of the transition to a more sustainable development path.

In addition, the EU is also considered by officials as a partner that helps to create modern infrastructure connecting Asia and Europe through various projects, as well as supporting initiatives related to regional security and stability. Finally, the analyzed official documents demonstrate that while both countries actively prioritize cooperation with the EU in different areas of cooperation, they also suggest that the EU should respect their values, cultures, and priorities in cooperation with them.

The views of Central Asian experts indicate that the EU enjoys a mostly positive image among experts in the region. However, according to the findings of expert interviews, the visibility of the EU remains limited in Central Asia, particularly among rural populations and those who do not closely follow domestic or international politics. Furthermore, according to the findings of the experts' interviews, the EU is considered a symbol of development, opportunity and peaceful cooperation, but also as a distant and sometimes culturally different actor among the populations in Central Asia. From the perspective of experts, the EU is mainly perceived as a political actor, an economic partner and a model to follow in specific areas of cooperation. To a lesser extent, it is also seen as a normative power, but this role is subject to some criticism from the perspective of experts in Central Asia. In general, experts from Central Asia welcome the engagement of the EU, but they also express strong dissatisfaction with how the EU designs and implements its policies in the region. Specifically, key criticisms include a lack of strategic consistency, insufficient knowledge of the local context, bureaucratic complexity, weak public diplomacy, and an overemphasis on norms that are not always suitable or welcomed in Central Asian societies.

Furthermore, experts highlighted several sectors where Central Asian countries are especially interested in deepening their cooperation with the EU. These sectors include economic and trade, green energy, connectivity (especially through the Middle Corridor), agriculture, climate adaptation, energy efficiency, and security.

After analyzing the perceptions of the EU through analysis of the media, official perspectives and views of experts, it can be generalized that the EU enjoys a generally positive image in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Furthermore, the findings suggest that, from the core norms of the EU, only human rights are barely visible in the analysis of perceptions of the EU through this triangle analysis. Among the minor norms of the EU, according to Ian Manners' categorization, the EU is seen in Central Asia as an actor that prioritizes cooperation in

sustainable development. Importantly, this area is most appreciated in all three, in mass media portrayal, official, and expert views. Consequently, Central Asian countries are also interested in developing their relationship with the EU in this area. This implies that among the promoted norms, human rights and sustainable development appear to be the most visible among the other norms of the EU, but compared to the other areas of cooperation, these areas remain barely visible in the perceptions of Central Asian countries. Among these norms, sustainable development is the most welcomed area where the EU can achieve more concrete results.

Ultimately, this finding indicates a gap between how the EU self-perceives and how the EU is represented in Central Asia and how it is perceived in the region by two Central Asian countries. This observation is in line with the work of other scholars who have analyzed the perceptions of the EU around the world and some Central Asian countries, which were discussed in detail in the literature review chapter.

Furthermore, the findings of this research and previously conducted research around the world on the perceptions of the EU are now opening up discussions about whether we can still call the EU a normative power. When looking at the self-perception of the EU as a normative power, as defined by Ian Manners, compared to its image in Central Asia, based on analysis of the media, official documents and expert opinions, it becomes clear that this normative role is not always visible in practice. Furthermore, the findings of this research show that the identity of the EU as a normative actor in Central Asia is facing a crisis, which is similar to the findings around the world. While the EU presents itself as a value-based actor, the portrayals of the EU in the mass media and the perspectives of officials and experts in countries like Kazakhstan and Tajikistan often describe the EU in more practical terms, such as a strategic, economic, energy, and security partner.

In general, the findings of this research show that the self-representations of the EU and the perceptions of the EU are only partially matching, and the normative power of the EU is barely visible in the region. The findings of this research show that the EU represents itself as a normative power in Central Asia by prioritizing its normative values in cooperation with the countries of the region. However, in contrast to the EU's self-representation, the image of the EU in Central Asian countries is closer to the concept of a civilian power.

8.3. Recommendations for the Development of Relationships and Improving EU Visibility in the Region

As Nargis Kassenova pointed out rightly, the successful policy of the EU depends on a deep knowledge of the specific characteristics of each of the countries with which the EU is actively cooperating.[795] The results of this research show that there is a gap between the self-representations of the EU and the perceptions of the EU in the region. Furthermore, the EU is expected to propose a new strategy for Central Asia in the near future, as discussions have already started in the corridors of the EU's institutions. It is expected that a new strategy will significantly increase the EU's attention to Central Asia.

In light of this research result and the EU's goal of adopting a new strategy, the following policy recommendations can be presented to the EU to improve its relations with Central Asian countries and its visibility in the region.

First, the importance of making the presence of the EU more visible and understandable to local populations must be emphasized. Many people in the region do not fully understand the scope of the EU's engagement, and there are often misconceptions about its role. The EU should invest more in public diplomacy campaigns and media outreach to explain its policies, programs, and values in a way that resonates with the Central Asian public. This includes clearer branding of EU-funded projects, more active use of local media, and direct engagement with communities. For example, simply looking at the social media pages of some delegations of the EU in Central Asian countries shows that they are not very active in covering the EU's activities in the region. In those cases where they post related activities, the publications are mostly in the English language, which is not an understandable language for most Central Asians. In order to become more accessible and informative to the audience, the delegations need to improve this and must also post in the local languages. By increasing its visibility and outreach, particularly through digital platforms and local media, the EU can build trust and understanding.

Second, there was a strong recommendation that the EU should focus more on tangible and pragmatic outcomes rather than abstract normative goals, as expressed by experts during the interview process. While the EU's values such as human rights, good governance, and the rule of law are appreciated, experts cautioned that they should not dominate the agenda at the expense of urgent developmental and economic needs.[796] Therefore, the priority of the EU should be to continue to focus on cooperation in human rights, but should take into

[795] Kassenova, "The EU in Central Asia," 107.
[796] Interview 9

account local ideas, practices, and possibilities. Currently, Central Asian countries have benefited from EU cooperation in terms of development assistance and economic and trade relations. However, both sides can further expand their interaction by diversifying their economic ties and reducing their dependence on individual countries or regions. Currently, the main need of Central Asian countries is support for economic development, economic diversification, and competitive investment. Furthermore, analysis of the official documents shows that the Central Asian governments are interested in cooperating with the EU in the fields of transport and logistics, infrastructure, mining of rare earth metals, energy, ecology and security. The EU has this opportunity to develop the relationship in these areas. In addition, I also think the EU should focus on strengthening trade relations by simplifying trade rules and providing technical assistance to the Central Asian countries with which the EU has a less developed economic and trade relationship.

Third, it is highly recommended that the EU strengthen its support for regional cooperation and integration between Central Asian countries. Since Central Asian countries can learn several valuable lessons from the EU's experiences in regional cooperation and integration, the EU can act and improve its visibility by acting as a facilitator of intraregional initiatives, such as water management, environmental protection, and infrastructure connectivity, where shared interests exist. As one of the experts pointed out rightly, the EU should continue to promote regional cooperation among Central Asian countries, similar to its own model of regional integration.[797] This could include support for regional initiatives that improve economic, political, and security cooperation. In addition, the EU should encourage multilateral cooperation by engaging all five Central Asian countries in joint projects and dialogues to address common issues such as water resource management, environmental sustainability, and regional security.

Fourth, it is strongly recommended to deepen cooperation in people-to-people contacts, especially in areas such as education and youth engagement between the EU and Central Asian countries. The official-level relations between the EU and its member states with Central Asian countries have been developing steadily, while people-to-people relationships remain underdeveloped and require serious attention. In fact, education is a sustainable investment in mutual understanding and future partnership. Therefore, expanding mobility programs, launching joint academic institutions and supporting curriculum development were all considered important steps towards strengthening cooperation in people-to-people

[797] Interview 5

contacts. Moreover, there is also interest from Central Asian countries in opening branch campuses or joint universities, which the EU can take into consideration. By doing so, people-to-people contact in cooperation will improve to some extent.

Fifth, among the minor norms of the EU, sustainable development is the most visible area of cooperation, and Central Asian countries are also interested in developing further relationships in this area. Accordingly, the EU should continue to prioritize sustainable development and environmental issues. This area is particularly open to cooperation, as it is a universally shared concern without regard to any geopolitical or political sensitivities.

The EU has been a global leader in promoting environmental sustainability and combating climate change. Central Asian countries, facing significant environmental challenges such as water scarcity and land degradation, can adopt the best practices of the EU in resource management, renewable energy development, and climate resilience. Furthermore, in this area, green energy, renewable technologies and digital transformation were named sectors with great potential for cooperation, as reflected in the three sources, the media, official perspectives, and experts' opinions. Therefore, support for projects that address environmental challenges will improve the relevance of the EU in the region.

Sixth, the EU must maintain a consistent and active presence in the region, rather than engaging only in response to geopolitical developments or paying attention to Central Asia only during times of crisis. While the EU has indeed increased its engagement with the region after the Russia-Ukraine war, there are now concerns about whether this level of involvement will be sustained in the long term. Therefore, to build lasting influence and cooperation, the EU must embed its policies in stable mechanisms and local partnerships, rather than in temporary geopolitical calculations.

Lastly, the EU should prioritize collaboration on security issues, including counterterrorism, border management, and organized crime. By doing so, the EU can contribute to regional stability. Additionally, supporting conflict prevention and resolution initiatives will further strengthen the role of the EU as a stabilizing force.

In conclusion, the situation around Central Asia is changing and there is a good opportunity for the EU to improve cooperation in new dimensions and trajectories with Central Asian countries. For this, the EU needs to consider the priorities and needs of Central Asia, as well as its own perception in the region. In general, these recommendations are centered on three main ideas: increasing the visibility and understanding of the EU in Central Asian countries; responding to and prioritizing practical and development-based needs; and building long-

term, culturally sensitive partnerships that take into account the different cultures of Central Asian countries.

I believe that if the EU can act on these suggestions, its relations with Central Asian countries can become stronger, more strategic, and more mutually beneficial. In general, by prioritizing these strategies, the EU can improve the effectiveness of its policies and improve its perceptions in Central Asia.

8.4. Recommendations for Further Research

Together with the results presented, this research also highlights some directions that could be studied more deeply in future works. Most importantly, the time frame selected for mass media publications includes only news articles published between June 2019 and December 2023, and the findings reflect the portrayals of the EU in the mass media of both countries during this period. Since perceptions change gradually, more research is needed to analyze the perception of the EU in the period before 2019 and after 2023, which includes the current period of the relationship. In this sense, the findings of this research can be used as a comparative basis for future studies, which may analyze either the period before the selected time frame or the period after the one selected for this research.

Secondly, after analyzing the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia, this research was limited to analyzing the perception of the EU in only two Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the perceptions of the EU in other Central Asian countries in order to have a broader picture of the EU in the region.

In addition, more research is needed to understand the image of the EU in social media, as well as by selecting other outlets on the media. This research was limited to eight selected traditional media outlets in both electronic and printed forms. Thus, further research on social media analysis and the analysis of other traditional media may provide a broader picture of the EU.

Lastly, as there is emerging research that aims to understand the perceptions of the EU in Central Asian countries, there is also a need to conduct research to understand the perceptions of Central Asian countries within the institutions of the EU by analyzing official documents and the perceptions of Central Asian countries in different EU member states. Currently, there is a lack of detailed analysis in this research area.

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Appendix A: List of interviewed experts

№	Citation in Text	Academic Title / Position	Full Name	Institutional Affiliation
1	Interview 1	Dr.	Zhanibek Arynov	Nazarbayev University
2	Interview 2	Independent Researcher on Central Asian Foreign Policy		
3	Interview 3	PhD, Assoc. Professor	Meiram Sarybayev	al-Farabi University, Satbayev University, Narxoz University
4	Interview 4		Ismoil Sadullozoda	Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan (RCST)
5	Interview 5	Expert on EU and Central Asian Relations		
6	Interview 6	Dr.	Albina Muratbekova	
7	Interview 7	Expert on Central Asian Politics		
8	Interview 8	Non-Resident Research Fellow	Eldaniz Gusseinov	Haydar Aliyev Research Center for Eurasian Studies
9	Interview 9	PhD Candidate	Saidahtam Talbakov	Institute for the Study of the Problems of the Asian and European Countries of the National Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan
10	Interview 10	Independent Researcher on Central Asian Foreign Policy		

Appendix B: Written interview questionnaire

1.	**Interview Information and Instructions**

a. Purpose of the Interview: The interview aims to gather insights from researchers and practitioners regarding the European Union's policy and perceptions in Central Asia. The gathered insights will serve as valuable contributions to the PhD research.
b. Author's Information: Nosirkhon Qodirov – PhD Candidate, Doctoral School of Law and Political Sciences, University of Szeged, Hungary.
c. Participation: Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. There is no obligation to respond to all questions, and you may skip any that you prefer not to answer. Please feel free to express your opinions in as much detail as you find convenient.
d. Confidentiality and Use of Data Collected from Interviews: Your participation is invaluable, and your responses will be used solely for academic purposes. The data collected will be kept protected and will not be shared with any third party. It will contribute to my dissertation and potentially to academic articles, which may be published based on part of the dissertation. Depending on your choice in section 2, your insights will be cited (with your full information, or only with your full name, or only with your affiliation, or as anonymous). The dissertation will be accessible both in hard copy and online through the University of Szeged's Library Repository after submission.
e. Submission of Your Insights: I would appreciate it if you could provide your insights within 30 days of receiving this invitation. You can send your completed questionnaire back to me via email at the address provided below, or simply by replying to the invitation email you received.
f. Contact: If you have any questions or concerns about the interview process, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at qodirovnosirkhon@gmail.com or qodirov@polit.u-szeged.hu

2.	**Interviewee's Information**

Please fill out the following form:

This is solely for informational purposes. You will select options on how you wish to be cited in the next subsection.

a. Academic Title (if any):
b. Full Name:
c. Affiliation (if any):

How would you prefer to be cited in research work? *Please choose from the options below and mark your answer (x) accordingly.*

d. With full provided information (Section 2: part a, b, and c):
e. With full name only (Section 2: part b):
f. With affiliation only (Section 2: part c):
g. Anonymously:
h. Other *(please write your option here)*:

3.	Interview Questions

Please provide your comments on the following questions. Feel free to elaborate on each question as much as you wish. If there are any questions you prefer not to answer, you may skip them. Your valuable contributions are highly appreciated and essential to the success of my dissertation.

a.	How would you evaluate the current state of relations between the European Union and Central Asian countries? To what extent do you perceive the EU as being active in the region, and do you believe it is effectively utilizing all available opportunities to strengthen its position? From your perspective, are Central Asian countries fully maximizing the benefits of cooperation with the EU, or do you see areas where they could further enhance their engagement and collaboration?
	Place for your comment:
b.	The European Union adopted a new strategy towards Central Asia in 2019. From your perspective, do you believe that this strategy is effectively addressing the region's needs and priorities? Have you observed any notable changes in the EU's actions or

	engagement in Central Asia since the adoption of this strategy? If so, what are some of these changes, and how do you assess their impact on EU-Central Asia relations?
	Place for your comment:
c.	In your opinion, how do people in Central Asia perceive the European Union? To what extent do you believe individuals in Central Asia, or in specific countries within the region, have awareness and knowledge about the European Union and its activities? Additionally, have you noticed any significant differences in the level of awareness across different demographics or regions within Central Asia?
	Place for your comment:
d.	In what ways do you think the European Union's engagement with Central Asian countries differs from that of other actors in the region? Are there specific aspects of the EU's approach, priorities, or impact in the region that distinguish it from other international players?
	Place for your comment:
e.	In your opinion, what are some valuable lessons that Central Asian countries can learn from the EU's experiences, policies, or practices?
	Place for your comment:
f.	Looking ahead, what strategies do you believe the EU should prioritize to enhance both its policy effectiveness and its perception in Central Asia?
	Place for your comment:
g.	If you have any further comments, suggestions, or recommendations, please share them here.
	Place for your comment: