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**ABBREVIATIONS**

BOMCA Border Management Programme in Central Asia

BRI Belt and Road Initiative

CA Central Asia

CACO Central Asian Cooperation Organization

CADAP Central Asia Drug Action Programme

CAEC Central Asian Economic Community

CAREN Central Asian Regional Education Network

CAREC Central Asian Regional Environmental Center

CARICC Central Asian Regional Information Coordination Center

CAWEP Central Asia Water and Energy Program

CICA Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building

 Measures in Asia

CIS Commonwealth of Independent States

COVID Coronavirus disease

CSTO Collective Security Treaty Organization

DCI Development Cooperation Instrument

EAEU Eurasian Economic Union

EEAS European External Action Service

EIDHR European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights

EMU Economic and Monetary Union

ENP European Neighborhood Policy

EU European Union

EU HR European Union High Representative

EUGS EU Global Strategy

EUCAM Europe - Central Asia monitoring project

GD DEVCO General Directorate for Development and International

 Cooperation

IFCA Investment Facility for Central Asia

IWRM Integrated Water Resources Management

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OSCE Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

OPEC Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

PCA Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

 PfP Partnership for Peace

RLI Rule of Law Initiative

SCO Shanghai Cooperation Organization

SEIS Shared Environmental Information System

SMEs Small and Medium Enterprises

TACIS Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of

 Independent States

TAIEX Technical Assistance and Information Exchange

UN United Nations

UN SDG United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

WECOOP European Union - Central Asia Water, Environment and

 Climate Change Cooperation

WTO World Trade Organization

**INTRODUCTION**

**General characteristics of dissertation research.** The key point of the dissertation work lies in the examination of the EU and Central Asia cooperation in the framework of EU-CA strategy of 2019 and determination of regional touch point and factors of cohesion. It is well known that the two major crises, that to certain characteristics could be considered phenomena with the greatest global impact in the twenty-first century, have occurred. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to severe stagnation in the world economy, created problems in supply chains and caused financial difficulties both in certain countries and at the global level, thus forcing individual countries to reassess their own priorities and set some new ones for the future. The Ukrainian crisis broke out in February 2022 and rapidly exceeded the boundaries of the regional conflict, thus becoming a multidimensional global problem accompanied by a worrying increase in energy poverty that had existed even before the Ukrainian crisis.

Bearing in mind that, due to Ukrainian crisis the EU has stopped the supply of natural gas from Russia, it is reasonable to expect the EU to intensify efforts to establish quality relations with a region that is rich in energy resources, stable and, at the same time, outside of direct conflict zones. That region is Central Asia. The EU-Central Asia strategy, which sets the framework for stronger cooperation and greater regional integration, was updated in 2019. Building on this long-standing cooperation and in the name of making Central Asia a region with strong interconnections and a favourable environment for investment, trade and private sector development, the EU launched three ambitious multi-annual programmes in 2019, to support the rule of law, trade, investment and growth in the region.

The **relevance** of this study is primarily due to a number of significant factors that have affected the EU-CA cooperation in the framework of this Strategy. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, Europe faced problems in ensuring energy security, which were further complicated by its decision to stop importing natural gas from the Russian Federation. Thus, we consider that it is crucial to examine the cooperation between two regions from this period to 2024, when the Strategy of 2019 logically came to the end. Moreover, the growing geopolitical importance of Central Asia and the need to strengthen the strategic partnership of the region with the European Union, taking into account current global trends and challenges of various nature.

 Since the adoption of the EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2019, the region has been affected by significant external factors, such as Russia’s illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and China’s increasingly assertive foreign policy, as well as internal instability, notably violent unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022, brutal repression following Pamiri protests in Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in November 2021 and May 2022 and in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, in July 2022, as well as repeated clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Thus, it is relevant to examine the outcomes of the Strategy and what role this Strategy played on cohesion of Central Asian states. Rethinking the EU's foreign policy in relation to the region, identifying both its strong and less effective sides, followed by an analysis of the causes of these phenomena, is designed to help discover new opportunities for effective interaction.

Among the main factors contributing to the preservation and strengthening of the interest of the European Union in Central Asia, the following stand out:

- the geostrategic position of the region, located at the crossroads of the geopolitical interests of world powers;

- a small geographical area is already a super-concentrated multipolarity or a very dense concentration of a number of powers and major geopolitical players, such as Russia, the USA, China, Iran, Turkey, India, Japan, South Korea, etc.;

- high transit potential of Central Asia for trade flows between Europe and Asia;

- the presence in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, of significant energy and natural resource potential (especially hydrocarbons);

- the close proximity of the Central Asian states to Afghanistan, which increases the risks of spreading security threats in the region (terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, etc.) and large-scale transit migration (especially against the background of the crisis that arose in the summer of 2021 in connection with the arrival of to the power of the Taliban).

The dissertation work is devoted to the study of the stages of the evolutionary development of the policy and strategy of the European Union in relation to the Central Asian region, their impact on Kazakhstan and the Central Asian states, the definition and disclosure of interaction mechanisms, the identification of trends, as well as promising areas of cooperation in the context of a changing balance of power in the global system of international relations, in general, and Central Asia itself in particular. At each of these stages, the EU faced the need to achieve certain goals related both to the development of priority areas of cooperation and geopolitical issues. As one of the tasks set before the EU policy in Central Asia is the development of intra-regional integration, it is important to examine cohesion of Central Asian states. Brussels sought to transfer its positive experience of European integration to the Central Asian region and use significant funds to implement this task, believing that this would help solve the problems of the countries of the region.

 The policy of the European Union in relation to the region is built through the implementation of relevant program documents (strategies) that define the range of tasks achieved with the help of appropriate mechanisms and tools. The main tools for the practical implementation of strategies are country and regional programs.

Moreover, Kazakhstan was the first of the Central Asian countries in February 1993 to establish diplomatic relations with the European Union. Here, in November 1994, the EU opened its first representative office in the region. In addition, the Republic of Kazakhstan became the first country in Central Asia with which the European Union on January 23, 1995 signed an agreement on partnership and cooperation. Taking into account the political, economic and social transformations that have taken place over 20 years, on December 21, 2015, the parties signed a fundamentally new Agreement on Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation. It should be noted that the EU is the largest investor and trade partner of Kazakhstan.

The official visit of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev to Brussels in November 2021 gave a powerful impetus to strengthening strategic partnerships between Kazakhstan and the European Union and opened up new avenues for in-depth interaction.

Having developed the Joint Communique “The European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” [1], which entered into force on June 17, 2019 after the adoption of the relevant conclusions of the EU Council [2], which de facto became the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, Europeans are demonstrating their readiness to initiate and pursue, taking into account the proposals of the Central Asian countries, a policy aimed at expanding interaction with the region.

 The Central Asian states, in turn, are interested in the high-quality implementation of the Strategy as a driver of interregional and intraregional cooperation, as well as an additional tool for ensuring the sustainable development of the region and each country individually.

However, we can no longer call the EU Strategy of 2019 a new one. No doubt, the EU tried to learn from the outcomes of the previous Strategy and enhanced the Strategy of 2019. However, after five years of the Strategy implementation, we have to agree that the Strategy does not correspond to the nowadays realities and it is outdated. On the other hand, we can view a whole historical process of EU trying to be one of the dominating actors in Central Asian region.

 **The chronological framework of the study** is determined by the purpose and objectives of this study. The work covers the period from 1991 to 2024, which makes it possible to analyze the modernization of the EU foreign policy in the Central Asian direction: from the first EU assistance programs to conceptual documents of a strategic nature. When we talk about the foreign policy strategy of the European Union as a unique global actor in relation to Central Asia, we mean a conceptual plan of well-thought-out and interconnected measures of the European integration association to achieve its long-term goals in the most effective and least expensive way in relation to the five Asian republics formed after the collapse of the USSR – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The strategy is supplemented by multi-year regional indicative programs. Since 1991, the formation and development of the EU strategy in Central Asia has gone through several important stages. Moreover, it is important to highlight the cooperation period between the EU and Central Asian states during the covid and post-covid period of time. We also considered the recent internal and external political situations and their influence on Central Asia and cooperation between Central Asia and the EU.

The **object** of the research is the cooperation between the European Union and Central Asia, with a particular focus on the factors of cohesion that influence and shape this partnership.

The **subject** of the research refers to the key factors and dynamics that contribute to cohesion in the EU-CA cooperation under the framework of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia.

The **goal** of the research is to analyze the factors of cohesion in the EU-Central Asia cooperation under the framework of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia (2019), focusing on how these factors contribute to the strengthening and deepening of relations between the EU and the Central Asian states. The research aims to examine the evolving nature of the EU’s policy towards Central Asia, identify the key elements that influence cooperation, and assess the challenges and opportunities that shape the mutual engagement between the two regions. Through this analysis, the dissertation seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategic priorities of the EU in Central Asia, the role of regional cooperation, and the factors that determine the effectiveness and sustainability of partnership in the context of geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics.

It is also vital to study the process of transformation of the policy and strategy of the European Union in Central Asia and to identify the factors of cohesion of the countries of Central Asia within the framework of the EU Strategy of 2019 and its influence on the region. Moreover, the research work focuses on the effectiveness of a new EU Strategy in Central Asia. It is significant to study the progress and effectiveness of EU Strategy of 2019, as the EU formulated its strategy for 2019 in consultation with Central Asian experts. As we know, Central Asia did not take part in the formation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2017.

 In accordance with the goal, the following **tasks** are defined:

- to compare the theoretical foundations of the foreign policy of the European Union and explore the key trends in the contemporary foreign policy of the European Union;

- to study the process of diversification of the EU foreign policy approaches to Central Asia;

- to conduct a comparative analysis of the EU strategies in Central Asia and the main results of their implementation (including intermediate stages);

- to examine the process of implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2019 including Covid period till 2024;

- to analyze factors of Central Asia cohesion under the new EU Strategy for Central Asia and to conduct a SWOT-analysis of the Strategy.

- to examine the influence of internal and external factors in the process of implementation of the Strategy;

- to determine the contribution of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states to the formation and development of European foreign policy in relation to the region;

- to identify major problems and barriers during the implementation of strategy in Central Asia;

- to develop a recommendatory base for increasing the effectiveness of cooperation between the European Union and the Central Asian region for the future strategical documents.

**General research methodology.** This section outlines the research methodology employed in analyzing the European Union-Central Asia cooperation, particularly focusing on the factors of cohesion under the new EU Strategy for Central Asia. The methodology is designed to comprehensively assess the evolving nature of EU-CA relations, the strategic drivers, and the key elements fostering cohesion within this partnership. The analysis of EU-Central Asia cooperation, particularly in light of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, requires a multi-method approach.

The methodological basis of the study is the scientific principles of research objectivity and reliability, which is confirmed by work with primary sources, extensive factual and scientific data, taking into account the specifics of political, economic and other aspects of EU policy and strategy in Central Asia. The principle of completeness of data reflection made it possible to research the issues under study and identify the strengths of the EU's cooperation with the Central Asian states, as well as aspects of interaction that require additional elaboration.

The application of a systematic approach used throughout the work made it possible to consider the EU's foreign policy in Central Asia as a complex of interrelated elements that are in constant interaction with each other and with the environment in order to form the most appropriate ways for its development. Thanks to this, it was possible to identify the features of the EU approaches towards the Central Asian countries at different stages of the evolution of its policies and strategies and to determine the degree of effectiveness of their results.

Historical-descriptive and political-descriptive methods were used in the work for systematization and general analysis of primary factual information. With the help of a comparative historical method and system analysis, the main periods of the formation of the EU policy in Central Asia are structured and interpreted, causal relationships are established and key trends in the development of EU interaction with the countries of the region are identified.

One of the primary methods used in this research is comparative analysis, which involves comparing the EU-CA relations before and after the adoption of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia (2019). This analysis aims to identify shifts in EU policies, priorities, and objectives towards the region and assess the effectiveness of the new strategy in fostering stronger cohesion between the EU and Central Asian countries. The comparison focused on political and economic priorities outlined in the pre- and post-strategy frameworks; key sectors of cooperation (e.g., trade, security, infrastructure) and their evolution over time; institutional and strategic adjustments made by both the EU and CA countries in response to the strategy.

The method of comparative analysis made it possible to determine the common and distinctive features of each of the EU strategies in Central Asia considered in the study. This method is also used to compare the scientific approaches of various researchers on the issue under consideration. Methods of comparative and statistical analysis were applied to identify the dynamics of the EU's interaction with Central Asia, as well as with other major regions of the world from an economic perspective.

The study of EU-CA cooperation is also based on the dialectical method of research, which consists in the perception of relationships as a general system of processes and phenomena, even opposite ones, in unity and continuous development. It also provides an opportunity to identify and compare factors and conditions for the genesis and modernization of EU policies and strategies in the region.

The research follows a qualitative approach, as it aims to analyze the intricate and dynamic political, economic, and social factors shaping the EU-CA cooperation. The study focuses on understanding the underlying reasons for evolving cooperation, key actors, and the broader geopolitical context in which these interactions take place. The methodology is based on a comparative analysis of official documents, policies, and statements issued by the EU and Central Asian countries.

Case studies of specific EU-CA projects or initiatives (e.g., trade agreements, regional security cooperation, environmental projects) were analyzed to identify practical examples of cooperation and the factors that have driven success or failure in these areas. These case studies help to illustrate how the EU and Central Asia navigate challenges and build cohesion in specific sectors. SWOT analysis was also used in the research, which helped to highlight main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of EU Strategy for Central Asia.

The research employs integration theory and geopolitical analysis as primary frameworks to understand the EU-CA cooperation. Integration theory helps explain the processes of cooperation between regions, highlighting factors like economic interdependence, political alignment, and security cooperation. Geopolitical analysis helps contextualize the role of external actors, such as Russia and China, and examines how regional powers influence EU-CA relations.

The central focus of the research is the identification and analysis of key factors of cohesion in EU-CA relations. These factors may include: economic interdependence (trade relations, investment flows, energy cooperation, and infrastructure projects); political alignment (shared democratic values, human rights promotion, and governance cooperation); security cooperation (joint efforts in counterterrorism, border security, and conflict prevention); regional stability (the role of Central Asia in broader regional stability, especially in relation to Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the broader Eurasian region); soft power and cultural diplomacy (the influence of EU’s educational, cultural, and human development programs in fostering deeper ties).

A qualitative content analysis of the policy documents and official statements conducted to identify recurring priorities and shifts in EU policy towards Central Asia. This includes both explicit mentions of cooperation areas and implicit goals related to cohesion. Through content analysis, the study focused on identification of key areas of cooperation, such as trade, human rights, governance, energy, and regional security; discourses surrounding the EU’s role in promoting stability, democracy, and economic development in Central Asia; inferences about cohesion based on the alignment or divergence of policy statements and priorities between the EU and CA countries.

Policy network analysis was used to explore the relationships and interactions among the key actors involved in EU-CA cooperation, including the EU institutions, Central Asian governments, regional organizations and other external actors (Russia, China, the US). This method focuses on mapping the key actors involved in decision-making processes related to EU-CA cooperation; examining the flow of information and resources within the policy networks, including how policies are developed and implemented; identifying the power dynamics between the EU and CA countries, and the influence of other geopolitical factors. Policy network analysis helps clarify the mechanisms through which cohesion is achieved and maintained in EU-CA relations, as well as the roles of various stakeholders in shaping cooperation outcomes.

A geopolitical analysis was applied to assess the broader context in which EU-CA relations occur, taking into account the strategic importance of Central Asia, as well as the influence of competing powers such as Russia and China. This method involves understanding the regional and global power dynamics affecting EU-CA cooperation; assessing the EU’s strategic interests in Central Asia, including access to energy resources, geopolitical positioning, and regional stability; evaluating the role of external actors. Geopolitical analysis offers a framework for understanding the external factors influencing the cohesion of EU-CA cooperation, especially within the context of regional competition and global power struggles.

Other methods of scientific knowledge used in the work were the methods of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction which were used while examining Strategies of the EU in Central Asia and EU programs in the framework of the Strategy.

With the help of theoretical and methodological tools, the evolution of the policy and strategy of the European Union in Central Asia, geopolitical and economic factors contributing to its formation are studied. By employing these methods of analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the factors contributing to the cohesion of EU-CA cooperation under the new EU Strategy for Central Asia. Each method contributes to a fuller picture of how these cooperation dynamics evolve, the challenges they face, and the opportunities for strengthening the partnership.

**The theoretical basis of the work** is mainly based on the provision of the theory of normative power. It lies in the fact that the European Union adheres to such universal norms and values as human rights, democracy and sustainable development, both in external regulation and in integration construction, as well as in foreign policy. The essence of this concept is that “normative power” is neither military nor economic, it comes from the generation of ideas, opinions and approaches, it forms ideas about the “correct” things, concepts and phenomena. The theory of normative power has presented the EU as an international political actor capable of expressing a sense of normality and respect for norms among other international actors. According to J. Manners, normative power is closely related to “ideological power” or “power over opinion”, denoting “the ability to shape concepts of norm”. He emphasizes that the essence of European soft power lies in its ability not only to promote norms, but also to do so in a normative way.

In addition, as the EU acts as a rational actor seeking to maximize its economic potential and political significance and in order to emphasize international cooperation and the rejection of power politics as the main principles of foreign policy interaction between states, the theory of liberalism and neoliberalism are used in the dissertation work.

While not a state, the European Union is nonetheless endowed with political power and has a political system (formed on the basis of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty). At the same time, in order to determine the model of legitimacy inherent in any political system, it is important to understand its characteristic features - in the EU it is the decentralization of power, multi-level management, asymmetry and differentiation with a significant influence of supranational institutions [3]. The intention to secure one's legitimacy as an international actor through fundamental rights representing the European Union was realized through the Charter of the European Union on Human Rights; reference to this document was also included in the Lisbon Treaty.

The main distinguishing feature and pillar of the European Union are the instruments of the so-called "soft power". The European Union has played a significant role in international relations by spreading its brand of integration through enlargement, neighborhood policies and various forms of association and partnership with third countries. The EU is inclined towards a liberal path of entry into the region through “soft” penetration: programs of development, support and assistance, the purpose of which is systemic reforms and modernization, in our case, of each of the Central Asian states. Thus, the theory of "soft power" was also woven into the process of researching the policy and strategy of the EU in Central Asia.

Integration theory is central to understanding the mechanisms of cooperation between regions and the processes that facilitate cohesion. This theory emphasizes the gradual process through which states or regions move from cooperation on specific issues to deeper, more comprehensive forms of integration. In the context of EU-CA relations, integration theory helps explain the gradual convergence of interests between the EU and Central Asia, particularly in areas such as trade, security, governance, and development. Key aspects of integration theory relevant to this study include functionalism, neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism.

Functionalism suggests that regional cooperation often begins with technical or economic issues (such as trade and infrastructure) and gradually broadens to include more complex political and social dimensions. The EU-CA cooperation can be viewed through this lens, as initial cooperation on economic development may pave the way for deeper political and security partnerships. Neofunctionalism theory builds on functionalism but highlights the role of supranational institutions in promoting integration. In the case of the EU-CA partnership, the EU institutions, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission, play a crucial role in fostering cohesion by setting the agenda for cooperation and ensuring coordination across different sectors. Intergovernmentalism focuses on the role of national governments in driving cooperation. In the case of EU-CA relations, the differing political systems and priorities of the Central Asian countries may influence the level and nature of cooperation. This theory helps explain the importance of state sovereignty and the impact of individual country preferences on the success of regional cooperation.

Geopolitical theory offers insight into the role of geography and power relations in shaping international cooperation. Central Asia, located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, is a region of strategic importance for both the EU and external powers like Russia, China, and the United States. The theory highlights how regional powers, and global actors shape the political and economic landscape of Central Asia, influencing EU-CA cooperation. Geopolitical theories relevant to this research include regional security complex theory (RSCT). This theory, developed by Barry Buzan, suggests that regions are interconnected through shared security concerns. For Central Asia, issues such as border security, terrorism, and the stabilization of Afghanistan are central to the region’s security dynamics. The EU’s interest in promoting stability and security in Central Asia can be understood through this lens, as the EU seeks to address these shared security concerns while balancing the influence of Russia and China.

The concept of geoeconomics refers to the use of economic instruments to achieve geopolitical objectives. The EU’s strategies in Central Asia often combine economic cooperation with political goals, such as promoting democratization, human rights, and regional stability. The EU uses its economic power, such as trade agreements, investments, and financial assistance, as a tool to shape the region’s development in alignment with its interests.

Constructivism is an important theoretical approach for understanding how identities, values, and norms shape international relations and cooperation. In the context of EU-CA relations, constructivism helps explain how shared values (e.g., democracy, human rights, rule of law) and institutional norms influence cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries. The theory emphasizes the role of ideas, beliefs, and identities in shaping state behavior. Key aspects of constructivism that are relevant to EU-CA cooperation include:

- Normative Power Europe (NPE). This concept, developed by Ian Manners, suggests that the EU’s power lies not only in its economic and military capabilities but also in its ability to shape the international order through the promotion of values and norms such as human rights, democracy, and sustainable development. The EU’s strategy toward Central Asia emphasizes the promotion of these values as a key component of its partnership with the region.

- Identity and Regionalism. Constructivism also highlights the role of identity in shaping regional cooperation. The EU’s engagement with Central Asia is partly motivated by the desire to promote regional integration and cooperation based on shared European norms, even though Central Asian countries have distinct historical and cultural identities. Constructivist theory helps explain how the EU can promote cohesion despite these differences, by emphasizing common goals such as regional stability and economic development.

Theories of regionalism provide insight into the processes through which states and regions cooperate in political, economic, and social spheres. These theories examine why countries in a specific region choose to cooperate and the mechanisms through which they do so. In the context of EU-CA relations, regionalism theories help explain how the EU’s strategy can contribute to the formation of stronger regional cooperation in Central Asia.

Dependency theory and world-systems theory offer a critical perspective on international relations by focusing on the economic and power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South. These theories argue that the international system is structured in a way that perpetuates inequality, with peripheral countries (such as those in Central Asia) remaining dependent on the core powers (such as the EU and Russia).

Another significant theory that was used in the dissertation work is the theory of regionalism. Thus, we are examining cooperation of both regions and cohesion of Central Asian states in the framework of Strategy.

The theoretical basis of this study combines elements of integration theory, geopolitical theory, constructivism, regionalism, and dependency theory to analyze the complex dynamics of EU-Central Asia cooperation. These theoretical frameworks provide the analytical tools necessary to understand the factors of cohesion, the challenges of cooperation, and the evolving nature of the EU’s engagement with Central Asia under the new EU Strategy. Through these lenses, the study will explore how the EU navigates the geopolitical, economic, and normative challenges in fostering a cohesive and sustainable partnership with Central Asia.

**The source base** of the dissertation is extensive and therefore divided into groups.

*The first* groupincludes legislative and regulatory acts of the EU and the Central Asian states on foreign policy issues, as well as documents regulating the activities of various structures in the field of international relations [4-12].

*The second group* includes official statements, speeches and interviews of politicians and statesmen of the European Union, heads of state and other officials of the Central Asian region [13-29].

*The third group* of sources consists of various diplomatic documents, treaties, conceptual documents of a strategic nature (strategies, concepts, foreign policy doctrines) published by EU structures and Central Asian states, as well as stored in the archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan [30-35].

*The fourth group* includes statistical data that cover a wide range of activities of the European Union and its relations with third countries (including trade between the EU and the Central Asian countries, the influx of European investments in the Central Asian economies, data on EU assistance provided to the states of the region) [36-43].

*The fifth group of sources* is represented by materials from periodicals and news agencies, official websites of EU institutions and departments of the Central Asian states, as well as materials from foreign and Central Asian expert circles [44-55].

**The degree of scientific elaboration of the problem.** The issue related to the development of the EU foreign policy, in particular in Central Asia, has been present in scientific discourse for a long time, while the share of works devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the EU strategy of 2019 in the region and examination of internal and external factors influencing the implementation of the strategy, including the COVID-19 and the effectiveness of the strategy overall is low.

As for Kazakhstan, the priority of the European vector in the country's foreign policy is confirmed, first of all, by the work of the first persons of Kazakhstan: the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - N. Nazarbayev and the Head of State K. Tokayev. Fundamental coverage of the problems of geopolitics in Central Asia and its impact on Kazakhstan was reflected in the works of N. Nazarbayev "The Critical Decade" [56], "The Era of Independence" [57] and in a number of others. The works of K. Tokayev “Under the banner of independence” [58], “Foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan during the formation of a new world order” [59], “Diplomacy of the Republic of Kazakhstan” [60] are devoted mainly to the priorities of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, in which the equivalent attention is paid to the relations of the Republic of Kazakhstan both with the world community and with the Central Asian neighbors.

It should be noted that the intention to expand partnership and cooperation with the European Union and its member states is reflected in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030 [61], developed in accordance with the goals and objectives defined in the Strategy for Long-term and Sustainable Development until 2050, the Plan of the Nation "100 Concrete Steps to Implement Five Institutional Reforms" and the annual messages of the President to the people of Kazakhstan.

 The study of the problems of European politics and strategies was devoted to the work of both domestic and foreign researchers. Among the studies of Kazakh scientists devoted to the policy of the European Union in the states of Central Asia in general and in Kazakhstan, in particular, it is first of all necessary to name the works of K. Bayzakova [62], M. Gubaidullina [63], Zh. Ibrashev and E. Yesenbayeva [64] , S. Kushkumbaev [65], M. Laumulin [66], B. Sultanov [67], G. Rakhmatulina [68], G. Movkebaeva [69], A. Chebotarev [70], S.Nurdavletova [71-72], Zh.Medeubayeva [73], R.Zhanbulatova [74].

 The monograph by T. Suleimenov "Kazakhstan and the countries of Eastern Europe: the main directions and prospects of cooperation" [74] contributed to the formation of a complete understanding of the reform processes in the Eastern European countries, as well as the mechanisms for the formation of the Eastern European vector of Kazakhstan's foreign policy.

 In the works of M. Laumulin, the first analytical materials of European researchers were clearly analyzed, in which the possible attitude of the EU countries to the Central Asian region and the Caspian was formulated [75]. Separately, the work of Timur Tokayev should be singled out, which presents a deep analysis of the evolution of cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the European Union until 2008 [77].

 A relatively new view on EU cooperation with the Central Asian countries and, in particular, with the Republic of Kazakhstan is presented in the monograph by R. Kurmanguzhin [78], which contains a qualitative analysis of Kazakhstani initiatives on the European track of diplomacy in the period from 2000 to 2010. A significant support for this study was the works of Kazakh scientists A. Chebotarev and M. Gubaidullina, dedicated to the policies and strategies of the EU in Central Asia at different stages of cooperation - in 2007-2013 [79], as well as within the framework of the recently announced Strategy for 2019 [80].

 Among the few comprehensive works devoted to the activities of the European Union in Central Asia, the works of some Central Asian researchers deserve special mention. Thus, the work of Uzbek experts V. Paramonov, A. Strokov and Z. Abduganieva provides an opportunity to better understand the results of EU cooperation with the countries of the region since the 1990s. Along with highlighting the strengths of European policy, the opinion of Uzbek experts that “the positions of the European Union in Central Asia are insignificant and, moreover, continue to decline” looks rather controversial [81].

Among Uzbek researchers, we need to highlight the works of M.Rakhimov, who clearly focused on transformation of the EU-CA cooperation, internal and external dynamics of regional cooperation in Central Asia [82-84].

 A broader understanding of the research topic was facilitated by the study of the work of Kyrgyz authors E. Juraev and N. Muratalieva, which examines the factors that prevented the successful implementation of EU policy in the region in the 2000s. Timely was an attempt to analyze the new EU strategy in Central Asia from 2019 and the conjugation of the strategies of other international actors in the region – China, the USA and Russia [85].

The opinion of the researcher F. Tolipov [86], according to which the EU Strategy should be more focused on the regional approach, seems rational from the point of view of Uzbekistan. Obviously, this will contribute to a more effective solution of joint problems by the Central Asian countries, however, on the other hand, it will not allow taking into account the individual needs and capabilities of each of them.

Among foreign studies on the issues under study, especially those published in recent years, it is important to note the works of Antonio Alonso Marcos, who specifically focuses on EU-CA cooperation [87-90].

It is also worth highlighting the work of Spanish scientists M. Esteban and N. de Pedro, written with the participation of Kazakhstani experts. It presents quite well the policies of the world's leading actors in the region, including the European Union. The conclusion that the European Union has no geopolitical ambitions in Central Asia seems to be partially justified in the context of the expediency of strengthening the economic and educational component [91].

O. Speiser's monograph was very interesting for analytical understanding of the results of European-Central Asian cooperation. This is one of the few works that rightly questions the EU's traditional claim of universal applicability and effectiveness of European norms/regulatory power as a tool of soft power [92]. One cannot but agree with some of the reasoned arguments leading to the idea that the European Union needs to develop a realistic discourse that can meaningfully change its foreign policy, in which the emphasis should be placed on ensuring international order and security.

 An undoubted contribution to this study was made by the work of F. Starr and S. Cornell [93-94]. Thus, one can partly agree with the authors that the policy of the West, represented by the US and the EU, was uncoordinated in Central Asia, where issues of promoting democracy and human rights were shortsightedly put at the forefront, rather than pragmatic goals. At the same time, Western scholars suggest that the countries of Central Asia could become an example for the entire Muslim world as a model of developed and properly governed Muslim states.

In addition, a significant amount of information for understanding the subject of research will be drawn from the periodical press and materials from analytical centers, among which are the Euractiv and New Europe publishing houses, the Belgian Royal Institute of International Relations Egmont, the European Institute of Asian Studies, the European information portal of the Europe - Central Asia monitoring project ( EUCAM), coordinator of which is the authoritative analyst J. Boonstra, as well as the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences [95].

**The scientific novelty of the study** lies in the fact that for the first time in it:

1.*Exploration of the New EU Strategy of 2019 for Central Asia.*
While previous studies have focused on individual aspects of EU-CA relations, such as trade, security, or governance, this research provides a holistic examination of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia and its impact on fostering cohesion between the EU and the five Central Asian countries. By analyzing the specific goals, instruments, and initiatives introduced in the 2019 strategy, the study fills a gap in understanding how the EU’s updated framework influences the alignment of EU and CA priorities, and the degree to which it contributes to regional stability, economic development, and political cooperation.

2. *In-Depth Comparison of Two Different Policy Frameworks (2007, 2019).*The research provides a comprehensive, side-by-side comparison of the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia and the 2019 EU Strategy, demonstrating how the EU's strategic objectives and priorities have evolved over the course of more than a decade. The novelty lies in identifying the key shifts in the EU’s approach to the region, such as the transition from a primarily bilateral approach to a more regional and multilateral focus, as well as the heightened emphasis on economic cooperation, sustainability, and geopolitical context. This comparative perspective offers a deeper understanding of how the EU's approach has adapted to changing global dynamics and the growing influence of external actors like Russia and China.

3. *Identification and analysis of cohesion factors.* The research offers a fresh perspective by systematically identifying and analyzing the factors of cohesion that underpin EU-CA cooperation. These factors, including political alignment, economic interdependence, security cooperation, and cultural influence, are examined in relation to how they contribute to or hinder the development of a stronger, more integrated EU-CA partnership. This focus on cohesion, which is often underexplored in EU-CA scholarship, provides a deeper understanding of the conditions necessary for the EU to strengthen its influence in Central Asia and achieve sustainable cooperation.

4. *Integration of geopolitical and normative dimensions.* The study integrates both geopolitical and normative dimensions of EU-CA relations, examining how the EU's external relations framework intersects with global power dynamics (e.g., Russia, China) and the EU's promotion of values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The research innovatively connects these two dimensions by analyzing how geopolitical competition influences the EU's normative agenda and the potential for Central Asian countries to align with or resist the EU’s values-based approach. This dual perspective adds a new layer of analysis to the literature on EU foreign policy and Central Asian geopolitics.

5. *Use of multi-method approach.* The study employs a multi-method approach, combining document analysis, comparative policy analysis, and case studies of EU-CA cooperation projects. This methodological innovation allows for a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the dynamics at play in EU-CA relations. By triangulating different data sources, the research provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to cohesion in EU-CA cooperation and offers new insights into how EU policies are operationalized in practice.

6. *Identification and analysis of key barriers.* The study offers an innovative approach to categorizing and analyzing the barriers that impede the implementation of the EU’s strategy in Central Asia. These barriers are explored across multiple dimensions, including geopolitical, economic, political, and cultural factors. The research highlights specific challenges.

The scientific novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive, multidimensional analysis of the factors driving cohesion in EU-CA cooperation, its novel integration of geopolitical and normative considerations, and its empirical approach to understanding the impact of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia.

**Theoretical and practical significance of the research.** This study is intended to qualitatively supplement the existing body of work on cooperation between the European Union and Central Asia. The main provisions and conclusions can be used by specialists in international relations and foreign policy in the implementation of scientific developments, the preparation of textbooks and the teaching of special courses in higher educational institutions.

In practical terms, the proposals and recommendations contained in the study can be applied in the state structures of Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries, as well as public and research institutions that cooperate and deal with the issues of interaction between the European Union and Central Asia.

**Basic provisions for defense.** The work puts forward the following hypotheses:

*1. The new EU Strategy for Central Asia (2019) significantly shapes the nature of EU-CA cooperation.*

The study demonstrates that the EU’s revised Strategy for Central Asia (2019) has led to notable changes in the dynamics and goals of EU-CA relations. It introduces a more comprehensive approach, emphasizing not only economic cooperation but also human rights, good governance, security, and sustainable development. This new strategic framework provides a clear vision for deeper collaboration and alignment of interests, addressing both the EU’s priorities and the evolving needs of Central Asian countries.

2. *Cohesion in EU-CA cooperation is driven by multiple interrelated factors.*

The research argues that the cohesion of EU-CA cooperation is determined by a combination of political, economic, security, and normative factors. The study identifies key areas where cooperation fosters mutual benefits, such as economic interdependence; political alignment; security cooperation: cultural and normative cooperation.

3. *Central Asia’s agency in EU-CA cooperation is a key determinant of success.*

A core finding of the research is the recognition of Central Asian countries as active agents in shaping the nature and direction of EU-CA relations. The study argues that the countries in Central Asia do not simply follow EU directives but make strategic decisions based on their own national interests and regional priorities. The dynamics of EU-CA cooperation, therefore, depend on the willingness and ability of Central Asian states to engage with the EU in a manner that aligns with their geopolitical, economic, and security objectives.

4. *The EU’s normative power is central to fostering cohesion.*

The study defends the concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE) as a critical factor in strengthening cohesion in EU-CA cooperation. By promoting European values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, the EU influences the political and social development of Central Asia. The research shows that the EU’s normative power, when effectively applied, contributes to greater cohesion in the partnership, despite the differences in political systems and cultural contexts between the EU and Central Asia.

5. *The EU Strategy for Central Asia faces challenges but offers opportunities for long-term cooperation.*

While the study acknowledges the challenges inherent in the EU’s engagement with Central Asia, it also highlights the long-term opportunities presented by the revised EU strategy. The challenges include the region’s political fragmentation, competing external influences, and differing priorities across Central Asian countries. However, the study argues that these challenges can be mitigated through consistent diplomatic efforts, adaptive policies, and strategic partnerships that align with the changing geopolitical and economic realities of the region.

**Approbation of the main provisions of the study**. The main theoretical provisions and conclusions of the dissertation work are presented by the author in ten publications, including journals in the Scopus database – 1, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education – 3, and materials of international conferences – 7:

1. Analysis of activities of European oil and gas TNC in Central Asia // Security and Society Insights Journal. – 2020. - №4, volume 3 (co-authored with S. Nurdavletova)

2. Analysis of the policy of Kazakhstan and Sweden on building effective communications between the state and society // Central Asia’s Affairs (Astana: Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan). – 2020. - №4, volume 80 (co-authored with S. Nurdavletova)

3. Analysis of the main trends and problems of distance learning in Germany and Kazakhstan at the pandemic time // materials of the scientific-practical conference: Distance education: new global challenges (Astana, 2020) (co-authored with S. Nurdavletova)

4. The fourth UN Sustainable Development Goal "Quality Education": an analysis of implementation in the countries of the European Union and Central Asia // materials of the scientific-practical conference: 75 years of the UN: contribution to peace, the rule of law and sustainable development (Astana, 2020) (co-authored with S. Nurdavletova)

5. Analysis of the implementation of the Central Asia Water and Energy Program in the framework of new EU Strategy for Central Asia // Bulletin of KazNU. International Relations and International Law Series. – 2021. - №1, volume 93 (co-authored with S. Nurdavletova)

6. Analysis of the activities of European transnational corporations in Central Asia: problems and prospects // Bulletin of ENU. International Relations Series. – 2021. - №4 (137) (co-authored with R.Elmurzaeva, S.Nurdavletova)

7. The policy of the European Union in Central Asia in the context of security in the framework of the EU strategy for Central Asia // Central Asia and the Caucasus. – 2021. - №3, volume 24 (co-authored with S. Nurdavletova, L.Akhmetzhanova)

8. New EU Strategy for Central Asia: barriers for its successful implementation // Bulletin of KazNU. International Relations and International Law Series. – 2022. - №2, volume 98 (co-authored with Antonio Alonso Marcos)

9. EU-CA cooperation on the field of environment, climate change and water resources // Central Asia and European Union: in Search of Sustainability. - 2024.

10. Energy policy of the EU in Central Asia // Energy Policy Journal (SCOPUS) - 2024. - №1, volume 27 (co-authored with S.Nurdavletova, A.Issayeva, G.Kenzhalina, A.Zhurasova)

**The volume and structure of the work** correspond to the main goal and subject of the study. The dissertation consists of an introduction, three sections, a conclusion, including recommendations and a list of sources used. The structure is determined by the nature of the work, the level of development of the problem, the tasks and logic of the study.

The volume of the dissertation research is 100 pages, prepared in accordance with the requirements for the design of dissertations.

**1 FORMATION AND EVOLUTION OF THE MECHANISM OF EU’S EXTERNAL ACTIVITY IN REGARD TO CENTRAL ASIA**

**1.1. Historical background: prerequisites for adopting a new strategy**

Since the emergence of the new independent states of Central Asia, the European Union has begun work on establishing partnerships with them bilaterally. How difficult this process was for the European Union is evidenced by the chronology of events. In 1995–1996 were concluded and only in 1999 did the standard EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan come into force. It is also important to note that the European Parliament named the Enhanced Partnership and State Agreement (EPSA) as the basis for cooperation with the Central Asian states. The only Central Asian country to have ratified such an agreement with the European Union is Kazakhstan. It entered into force in March 2020. At the same time, the EPSA in Kyrgyzstan, the international agreement on which ended in 2019, remains unregistered, despite the fact that it "was considered the most democratic country in relations with an active civil society and free media." MEPs call on the EU Council and the European Commission to close important issues and sign EPSAs with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan without delay, as well as to achieve success in the ongoing EPSA negotiations with Tajikistan, which increases the scope of bilateral cooperation and exchanges with this country. "Failure to sign such agreements after the conclusion of relevant provisions in relation to the authority of the EU as a global player" [96].

Turkmenistan is the only country in Central Asia that is not bound to the EU by a partnership and cooperation agreement. Although the PCA was signed in 1998, the European Parliament has not ratified the document due to the situation with human rights and fundamental freedoms in Turkmenistan.

In 1991, the European Commission launched a program of technical assistance to the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) in terms of supporting state-building processes, conducting economic reforms, and attracting foreign direct investment. The beneficiaries of the program were, among other things, all five Central Asian republics, for which a special regional program was later developed for the period 2002-2006, which has not just a geographical, but a semantic focus [81].

The turning point here should be considered the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States and the beginning of the US antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan with the support of European allies as part of the International Security Assistance Force. Central Asia has become of strategic interest to the European Union, not only in terms of energy security - the region has significant hydrocarbon reserves, but also in terms of the challenges of transnational terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking, and the radicalization of Islam.

By 2004, the European Union had developed a "new neighborhood" policy that included the Eastern Partnership and the Mediterranean Initiative. The South Caucasus and the European part of the CIS were included in the Eastern Partnership program. At the same time, the Central Asian republics began to be regarded as “neighbors of the EU neighbors”.

On the possibility of rapprochement and cooperation with Central Asia, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland Pertti Torstila cited his arguments during his visit to Kazakhstan in October 2006: " The Central Asian region is no longer a distant and unknown part of the world for the European Union" and the Europeans are ready to pay more attention to the countries of Central Asia [80].

 Brussels sought to transfer its positive experience of European integration to the Central Asian region and use significant funds to implement this task, believing that this will help solve the problems of the countries of the region. In October 2002, the EU published the document "Strategy for 2002-2006”, in which the development of regional cooperation with Central Asian countries was considered a priority, which provided for specific forms of financing programs aimed at promoting regional ties. As it was noted in the "Strategy ...", "the regional cooperation program is aimed at creating good-neighborly relations and cooperation between the countries of Central Asia, using a pragmatic format of "variable geometry" where the EU has strategic interests. This includes the creation of transport and energy networks, the sustainable use of natural resources, the introduction of international environmental, legal and domestic political standards.” [80].

However, the EU's desire to put the creation of conditions for the development of integration processes in the region at the forefront of its policy in Central Asia is not progressing very successfully. It is well known that neither the experience of the CIS, nor the experience of other regional organizations, many created with the participation of the countries of Central Asia, has so far been able to provide an economic basis for integration that opens the way to political integration. There are many reasons for this. After many years of being in the USSR, the countries gained political independence, but not the experience of independent existence. Their statehood is developing, but has not yet reached the level when the advantages of centripetal rather than centrifugal processes become obvious.

We should note that the strategic importance of Central Asia for the European Union has been measured from the very beginning by issues of security and competition with Russia. In security matters, the EU has moved, first of all, in the wake of the United States, taking into account the opinion of which Afghanistan, drug trafficking, and terrorist threats were at the center of the agenda. In particular, the European Union came up with the idea of transatlantic cooperation in Central Asia. But at the same time, the EU has also formed its own security agenda in the region, linking it with human rights issues. This allowed Brussels to immediately assign itself the status of a “democratic auditor” and, on this basis, demand that partner countries implement various legal recommendations.

The first EU Central Asia Strategy was adopted back in 2007, and the second in 2019. Both clearly express the idea of bringing the EU and the countries of the region closer together through energy projects (including within the framework of the transition to “green energy” from 2019), transport projects, cooperation in the field of security and human rights.

The landmark events in terms of developing the EU strategy in Central Asia in 2007 were the large-scale expansion of the number of participants in the regional integration association in 2004 and 2007 and the launch of the Eastern Partnership programme with respect to six former Soviet republics in the European part of the post-Soviet space – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The issue now was the fragmentation and actual differentiation of the EU’s ideas about the post-Soviet space as homogeneous. Those who hoped to join the EU in the long term and/or expressed a desire to get closer to it in one format or another were offered political association and partial economic integration. The Central Asian states remained on the outskirts of the post-Soviet space and the periphery of the EU’s interests. They did not raise the question of a “European choice” for themselves, but they came closer to the Union’s borders in territorial and geographical terms. Now they have become the “neighbors of the neighbors” of the European Union and, for the most part, they have sought to become more actively involved in global economic and political processes and diversify their external relations.

By building its own system of presence and influence in the region, the European Union has thereby contributed to the strengthening of the competitive struggle of external players in Central Asia, primarily limiting Russia’s non-military capabilities and resources without directly threatening the security of the Russian Federation. The EU’s model of strategy in the region, relying on the resources and instruments of “soft power” and a special strategic culture, seemed to be an alternative to the predominantly military-political cooperation of the United States with the Central Asian republics, their primary efforts to destroy Russia’s monopoly on energy exports from the region and actions to contain China.

The Central Asian Strategy was adopted only in 2007, after the eastward expansion, when the post-Soviet space found itself on the EU border. The increased attention to the region can also be explained by the protracted anti-terrorist operation of the international coalition in Afghanistan. Military missions of France and Germany were located in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively, and the region was considered a transit zone for supplying troops in Afghanistan. Finally, the Russian-Ukrainian gas wars prompted the EU to think about the problem of diversifying energy imports, and Central Asia was a potential source. The importance of regional cooperation is invariably emphasized at joint meetings at the level of foreign ministers and relevant ministries of the EU and Central Asia, at inter-parliamentary meetings.

However, in recent years, the Strategy has been implemented rather by inertia. Its update began only 12 years after its adoption, which is a very long period for modern international relations with their rapidly changing agenda. During this period, cooperation developed in areas that do not represent so-called sensitive issues. The EU managed to launch a number of interesting regional projects and programs that are still functioning and have become brands of European presence in the region. Regular bilateral and multilateral consultations, even if their effectiveness raises questions, ensure that the parties remain in a constant dialogue mode. However, a number of goals declared in 2007 were not achieved. For example, the energy corridor project linking the EU and Central Asia was not implemented, and the situation with human rights and democratization remains difficult.

A distinctive feature of the new Strategy of 2019 compared to the previous document was a more specific explanation of the process of regional expansion of CA ties. The project component of the Strategy is now considering its implementation in the region as a unity - Central Asia together with Afghanistan and Mongolia. The EU supports political dialogue in the region and economic cooperation in a broader format - between the countries of Central Asia and Central Asia with Afghanistan and Mongolia. In fact, there is a conceptual rethinking of the regional dimension of Central Asia, its territorial and geographical expansion, that is, going beyond the five post-Soviet countries.

The European Commission pursues a policy in the region, the leitmotif of which is expressed in program actions entitled "The EU creates a strong and modern partnership with Central Asia." [80].

 The joint communication between the Commission and the High Representative of the EU "EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Closer Partnership" provides a brief overview of the areas of this partnership, where the focus of current actions in the field of sustainable development is in one way or another related to the sphere of trade, economic, financial and social questions.

The energy and transport sectors of the previous and new strategies remain in the priorities of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, since the Europeans consider these areas to be priority and basic in the process of possible integration of the Central Asian countries among themselves, as well as integration into international markets and corridors. It remains in the interests of the EU to seek to expand the Southern Energy Corridor to Central Asia and promote the EU's multilateral energy initiative. The EU is also ready to support the development of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency in Central Asia.

The strategy remains a document in which the principles that should guide relations between the two regions, in addition to the areas of common interest, the areas in which they intend to cooperate are set out in an orderly and systematic way and which EU programmes can be implemented. There remains a general framework for interaction between the two protagonists, open to specific proposals that can be launched later, such as the Erasmus+ programme, which students from Central Asia have been benefiting from for many years and which allows for people-to-people contacts between the two regions [88].

However, in January 2024, a discussion on the effectiveness of the Central Asian Strategy was held in the European Parliament. The EU's cooperation with Kazakhstan was recognized as the most significant for its implementation. It was with Kazakhstan that the Memorandum of Understanding and Strategic Partnership in the Field of Raw Materials, Batteries and Renewable Hydrogen was signed on 7 November 2022. As a result, the discussion focused on the integration of the Central Asian Strategy into the large-scale EU project “Global Gateway”.

In addition, in 2023, at the initiative of the EBRD, a study was conducted on “Sustainable Transport Links between Europe and Central Asia”. The document influenced the development of the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Transport and Logistics Links between the EU and Central Asia, approved during the 19th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting on 23 October 2023.

 As a result of the discussion, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or the so-called “Middle Corridor”, came into the spotlight of European officials. The EU has repeatedly expressed great interest in developing the route, which, as noted in the above-mentioned study, is “not only a regional economic zone, but also an alternative and sustainable route between Asia and Europe that does not cross Russian territory.”

Taking into account the development of transport and energy connectivity, it is obvious that the EU perceives Central Asia as a supplier of resources. And by separating it from Russia, Brussels is trying to win the competition in the post-Soviet space not only from Moscow, but also from Beijing. However, it is the Russian factor that has become fundamental for the development of the EU's Central Asian strategy.

**1.2. Main trends in modern foreign policy of the European Union in Central Asia**

The Central Asian region is of particular interest to the world community, primarily due to the presence of rich energy resources. Despite the fact that expectations of the discovery of hydrocarbon deposits comparable to the Persian Gulf in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea did not materialize, Western companies back in the 1990s occupied the energy niche in a number of countries in the region. In the 21st century the energy resources of Central Asia are also attracted by China, which “sees” in this region its own hydrocarbon storehouse, which is so necessary for Beijing to maintain economic well-being.

European diplomats are lobbying for the construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline to provide access to cheap Turkmen gas to the European market. The US is making efforts to create alternative pipeline systems to Russia in Central Asia. At the same time, Washington does not intend to cede the palm in this struggle to Beijing. However, the failures with the trans-Caspian gas pipeline and the TAPI project (laying a pipeline from Turkmenistan to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan) testify to the futility of a number of Washington's energy projects in Central Asia.

In the 21st century there is a tendency to use the transit potential of Central Asia both along the East-West line and in the North-South direction. The first route is lobbied by China. It is aimed at creating a transport infrastructure capable of delivering goods from China to European markets by land route (through the countries of Central Asia and, above all, Kazakhstan). The second route connects Russia and Iran through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which enables the countries of the region and Russia to use the opening market of Iran and enter the Persian Gulf region.

For Russia, Central Asia is an important transit region and a market for cheap labor. Moreover, the presence of an open and one of the world's longest land borders between Russia and Kazakhstan forces Russia to bear the costs of ensuring security in this region. Thus, Russia has a number of unique advantages in Central Asia in comparison with other international actors. First, Russia and the countries of the region have a common historical past, which is perceived ambiguously by the political elites of Central Asia. Secondly, in many cities of Central Asia, the Russian language is still widely spoken and its popularity is growing among schoolchildren and their parents. Thirdly, the population of the CSTO countries of Central Asia perceives Russia as a guarantor of security and stability. Fourthly, Russia is positioned as a region of emigration for a significant part of the active population of Central Asia (not only for the purpose of earning, but also for education).

“Analysts have long considered Russia the main security player in Central Asia. It still has military installations in three of the five countries in the region: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,” says Edward Lemon, Research Assistant Professor at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. The expert emphasizes that the nature of the remaining Russian influence is not only military: it is mainly associated with the intelligence services: “Over the past three decades, Russian weapons have accounted for approximately two-thirds of arms imports in the region, including 90% of arms imports by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which, of course, made armed the forces of these countries are dependent on the Russian military-industrial complex, Russian military doctrine, and Russian training methods. All of the region's security services emerged from the Soviet KGB, and these ties have remained very strong, contributing to such events as transnational repression of migrant dissidents from Central Asia hiding in Russia, or vice versa. This diverse set of security and intelligence ties remains relatively strong” [104].

However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has affected the Kremlin’s ties in Central Asia. It undermined them financially. Russia still remains the main external security partner of the Central Asian countries, but now this is already being called into question. The decline in influence is also evidenced by the practical incapacity of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), created back in 1992. The world has repeatedly witnessed violence and quite serious border conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, especially in April 2021 and September 2022. And the CSTO did not intervene. The only significant intervention it has undertaken occurred during the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan [105].

Three years of war in Ukraine, sanctions and isolation have shaken Russia's position. The Central Asian countries are distanced from the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and do not participate in it directly. However, the region is exposed to its influence due to close political, financial and trade ties with the parties to the conflict. Some of the influence was direct, for example, the volume and structure of foreign trade with the Russian Federation changed. Other factors, such as the rise in energy prices, had an impact through the mechanisms of global markets.

The key economic events caused by the war include the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation, the departure of foreign companies from Russia, the migration of Russian citizens and enterprises, changes in supply and demand in the energy, mineral and food markets, changes in trade routes, etc.

Large-scale sanctions against the Russian Federation, aimed at the state, enterprises and individuals, have manifested themselves in a record number of diplomatic, trade and financial restrictions. In addition to the tangible effects on Russia itself, the sanctions have a significant impact on the Central Asian countries. First of all, the Central Asian countries are forced to comply with restrictions on trade with the Russian Federation, where sanctions mostly affect military and dual-use goods, for example, various technologies or components for military vehicles and equipment. Failure to comply with international restrictions threatens the Central Asian countries with secondary sanctions. Several companies from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have already fallen under secondary sanctions or have been put on various "black lists" on suspicion of "supporting the Russian military-industrial complex."

It may seem that Moscow has completely lost its position in Central Asia, and Beijing has become the dominant external force there. Adding credibility to such views are statements by Chinese leaders about support for the territorial integrity of the countries of Central Asia, numerous high-level visits, record levels of Chinese trade and investment in the region, as well as the pompous first China-Central Asia summit held in May 2023, followed by in March 2024, the formation of the secretariat of this mechanism followed.

However, in reality the situation is different. First of all, because for five countries squeezed in the depths of the Eurasian continent without access to the sea - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - it is not profitable for one influential neighbor to simply push out another. Therefore, they all strive to diversify ties with the outside world. Both Russia and China are important to them, often as a tandem of major powers that have built pragmatic interaction with each other. And the situation has not been changed even by the fact that one of these countries is now in direct confrontation with the West, and the other is actively preparing for a similar conflict [106].

In Central Asia, the EU's ability to exercise external governance is limited by geographic and political distance. With shared borders, historical ties, and language, Russian and Chinese geopolitics have an advantageous starting point. Russia is a key regional power in Central Asia and its influence is based on the Eurasian Economic Union and historically close political ties. China's influence is mainly exercised through its aid, trade and development regimes with Central Asian states [107]. In Central Asia, the states of the region are diverse and often take a cue from Russia in defining their political and security regimes [108]. The rise of hydrocarbons in the geopolitics of Russia's foreign policy has affected the region. More recently, new geopolitical alliances around renewable energy have been formed between Kazakhstan and Russia [109], which have been strengthened by Russian intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 [110]. Kyrgyzstan is a member state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization and maintains ties with both China and Russia. The recent political turmoil in the country has placed EU initiatives on education, sustainable development and youth in context and underscored that the EU is doing valuable work in the social and economic arena [111]. Despite recent reforms, authoritarian politics prevail in Kazakhstan, it has found markets for its energy in China and Russia, which remains its key interlocutor, but the EU has less influence in the country [112]. Tajikistan is also an authoritarian state, oriented mainly towards Russia. Aside from a few infrastructure programs, EU policy towards the country has been at arm's length [113].

However, the EU considers itself the exporter of its own definitions of the rule of law, human rights and labor standards, which are inherent in its own founding laws and practices [114]. While the idea of ​​EU normative power has been successful in and around the Union, the geographic remoteness of Central Asia has meant that the EU has not pursued its normative policies vigorously but instead adopted a pragmatic policy based on economic and geopolitical interests [115]. As a result, EU policy towards the region is not sufficiently focused and remains largely reactive [116]. Indeed, “the ambiguity underlying such strategic positions has led some to suggest that the EU’s preoccupation with its normative power is simply a distraction from the confrontation with” the resulting European provincialization in international politics [117]. The half-hearted engagement of the EU with Central Asia confirms that it is not a player in the region, leaving room for Chinese and Russian geopolitics. Perhaps their Hobbesian approaches are more suited to the authoritarian leaders of the Central Asian states than the EU's rules-based, tie-in terms [118]. In this sense, the transaction costs of the Central Asian states for interaction with China are relatively lower, as well as the level of regulation and transparency in decision-making. Thus, it can be argued that the EU has neither the will nor the ability to challenge Chinese economic hegemony in Central Asia.

The truly conspicuous failure to link EU demands for reform in the Central Asian states with any meaningful Europeanization dynamics indicates that the EU is far from conceptualizing (let alone affirming) the role of its normative power both in the region and […] more generally “outside of Europe” [116]. This is partly due to the different interests of EU member states in Central Asia and how different EU member states interact with Chinese policy in the region. 17 Central Eastern and South Eastern European states have been participating in a multilateral framework of cooperation with China since 2012, “which has shown significant potential for building a strong pro-China lobby in the EU” [118]. Moreover, Pacheco Pardo points out that the reliance of some EU member states on Beijing's 17+1 cooperation framework undermines the prospects for EU external governance in Central Asia [119]. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this structure was not very productive and was weakened by the withdrawal of Lithuania in 2021 [120].

EU policy in Central Asia was increasingly based on new realistic pragmatism/interests emerging from the EU Global Strategy 2016 and the EU Strategy for Central Asia 2019. Moreover, the EU seeks to balance its interests and the security interests of other great powers in Central Asia with its internal values ​​by projecting these values ​​outward [121]. The EU has relative influence in the governance of security in the region, but is not fully involved in determining the geopolitical conditions of the Central Asian Regional Security Complex, which is largely defined by Russia, China, and the Central Asian states [92]. There are limits to EU external governance as a means of influencing developments in Central Asia, and the Union plays only a marginal role in the region [122]. More generally, the EU is trying to gain economic advantage in Central Asia by expanding economic and political ties in the region. But EU efforts lag behind China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, which are the new Great Games in Central Asia [123 ].

In June 2019, the EU adopted a new EU Strategy for Central Asia, updating the original 2007 EU Strategy. It sets out its strategic interests in the region and proposes to build a stronger and more non-exclusive partnership with the Central Asian states to ensure that the region develops as a more resilient, prosperous and cooperative economic and political space. The EU strategy also provides guidance on the preparation of EU assistance programmes for the period 2021-2027.

 The negotiations on the new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) with the Central Asian states have also served as a powerful tool for creating a more modern and diversified partnership, going beyond the “trade and aid” agenda, and for promoting cooperation and regulatory convergence in areas that are important for the reform processes taking place in the region.

However, in January 2024, members of the European Parliament have adopted a resolution on reviewing the EU strategy towards Central Asia. German MEP Karsten Lucke called this a very important signal for them. According to him, “finding new paths to new partnerships is more than important in new geopolitical environment.” Russia's isolation as a result of the war against Ukraine, the EU's future enlargement in Eastern Europe and China's growing influence in Central Asia require a complete rethinking of the EU's strategy and its active presence in the region as an alternative to the established autocratic players there, Lucke believes.

Despite the EU's geopolitical interests in Central Asia, the current strategy for Central Asia which was adopted in 2019, hopelessly outdated. Today, the region is affected by new factors, such as Russia's war against Ukraine, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, and China's tough foreign policy, as well as internal tensions within the countries themselves. The region's young and dynamic populations must be given the opportunity to actively participate in shaping the future of their countries. Therefore, parliamentarians ask the EU to strengthen its support for civil society in the region, as well as to intensify consultations on the development of reform roadmaps in order to pave the way for visa facilitation agreements with Central Asian countries [96].

Three years of Russia's war against Ukraine have not only shaken Russia’s position in Central Asia, but also brought the European Union and Central Asia closer together than ever before. This is set to culminate in the first formal summit of the EU and the five Central Asian countries, scheduled for April 2025. The venue for the historic event is Uzbekistan, famous for its UNESCO World Heritage sites.

The plans were officially announced in Brussels at the closing of the EU Investment Forum for Central Asia, another sign of the unprecedented rapprochement between the two regions. The forum's senior participants agreed on nothing less than the creation of a modern analogue of the Great Silk Road, bypassing Russia - the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor. Moreover, they set themselves the goal of making the route from the east coast of China to, for example, Poland, traversable for freight and passengers in less than 15 days [104].

**1.3. Comparative analysis of the EU Strategies in Central Asia of 2007 and 2019: evaluation of effectiveness of Strategies**

The 2007 strategy envisaged cooperation in a wide range of areas: from regional, environmental and energy cooperation to cooperation in the fields of security, human rights and the rule of law. It was adopted for a period of ten years, but was replaced by another programme only after 12 years. The success of the first phase of regional cooperation was uneven. More successful was the establishment of a formal framework for dialogue and cooperation.

These include annual EU-Central Asian ministerial meetings, which have become a platform for regular coordination of cooperation and clarification of its parameters, and the permanent EU-Central Asia Dialogue on Human Rights, a forum for raising and discussing human rights issues in the region. The EU's efforts to assist Central Asian countries in improving their border management systems have also been quite successful.

However, in such essential areas as the rule of law and human rights, the expansion of regional cooperation between Central Asian states and EU-Central Asian cooperation in the field of energy, significant progress has not yet been achieved.

Given the versatility of the document under consideration and a rather wide range of goals and objectives within each of its areas, it is difficult to measure the main results of its implementation by assessing the level of implementation of the relevant measures. Most likely, it is appropriate to single out the following key moments here, which caused a serious political effect in the process of EU-CA relations and set the dynamics for their further progressive development.

First, the relationship with this region in a multilateral format was placed by the EU on a fairly solid systemic basis. As an interstate association, the EU in the framework of its foreign policy gives preference to interregional cooperation. Central Asia in this regard is presented as one of the priority partners, despite the lack of direct geographical proximity.

Secondly, the EU not only launched a fairly active political dialogue with Central Asia, but also institutionalized it through regular ministerial meetings and a High-Level Political and Security Dialogue with the participation of representatives of the leadership of the foreign ministries of the participating parties.

Thirdly, the implementation of the strategy influenced the intensity of a number of programs and initiatives implemented by the European Commission and individual EU member states in Central Asia and aimed at solving various issues of the region's development.

Fourthly, the political dialogue and multifaceted interaction between the EU and CA contributed to the gradual rapprochement and expansion of cooperation between the Central Asian countries themselves. In turn, due to this, the level of political subjectivity of Central Asia increased [80].

"Considering Central Asia as a region of strategic importance, the EU has committed itself to establishing strong, durable and stable relations with the five countries of Central Asia," the conclusions of the Council on the previous Strategy of June 22, 2015 said. With this definition of the "strategic" direction of the EU in Central Asia, the European Council took stock of eight years and then launched new plans to continue the strategic course [35].

The results of the first EU strategy in Central Asia should be interpreted as ambiguous. Such a key goal as democratization and improvement of the quality of public administration remained unrealized; projects to combat corruption and drug trafficking ended in failure. In general, over the past ten years, the image of the European Union that has been formed in Central Asia is far from absolutely positive.

The main shortcoming of the EU strategy lies in the too high degree of abstraction with the obvious lack of effective tools and the low interest of the Central Asian states in active interaction. Analyzing the policy of the countries of Central Asia in the European direction, we can conclude that some of the joint educational or legal programs have been launched only in order to receive material assistance. As a result, despite the attractiveness of the European strategy for the countries of Central Asia, it was not possible to fully implement it.

The failures of the EU in the implementation of cooperation programs in Central Asia could not affect the level of interest in the region. The most promising area of European interest in Central Asia is energy. In 2014, due to the global trend associated with the fall in world prices for hydrocarbons, competition between the main European suppliers - Russia, Norway and Algeria - increased many times over. In addition, under these circumstances, a new promising player appeared in Europe - the United States [124].

Although the implementation of the Strategy cannot be called successful, it would be wrong to say that it has failed either. It is characterized by political and interdepartmental consultations and funding of EU projects. Brussels is the main donor for development assistance, having allocated about €2 billion to the region from 2007 to 2020. The flagships of EU activity in the region are BOMCA and CADAP, which have received more than €70 million in funding since their launch. Another key area is cooperation in the field of education. The EU allocated €115 million to ERASMUS+ programs from 2014 to 2020.

Later, the Council of the European Union in its conclusions confirmed the need for further cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. It was said that this cooperation "should be focused on promoting the sovereignty and viability of the the Joint Communication of 15 May 2019 to the European Parliament and the Council of the EU entitled "EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for Deepening Cooperation", submitted by the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini for approval, the New EU Strategy for Central Asia is presented. It is a guiding document for the implementation of key areas of cooperation with the region [125].

The partial success of the 2007 Strategy in some areas was obviously due to factors beyond Brussels' control. They lay in the area of policy and relations between the Central Asian states, and were also connected with the influence of extra-regional players such as Russia and, later, China. The United States, whose actions traditionally complement EU policy around the world, also played a significant role. However, throughout the period under review, the United States' priority was its efforts in Afghanistan, which began to wane by the mid-2010s.

Building on previous work, the new EU Strategy for Central Asia reflects a critical rethinking of what work needs to be strengthened, what needs to be changed and what needs to be inherited from the previous document. The Strategy is an ambitious framework document that brings together 10 major areas of cooperation, divided into three blocks; the “cross-cutting priority” for all areas is to promote regional cooperation in Central Asia. The radical, yet realistic, formulations of the Strategy point to new important developments, the broader context and the comparative advantages of the partnership with the EU, and define a positively balanced framework for cooperation.

The main similarities and differences between the old and new strategies are shown in the table below. As can be seen from the table, most of the significant areas and themes of EU cooperation with Central Asia have migrated into the new Strategy. The most noticeable differences are obviously in the wording, balance and tone of the two texts. There have undoubtedly been changes in and around the region: some new issues have come to the fore, while others have lost their relevance as such, and the differences between the two strategies reflect these changes. A number of new terms used in the Strategy point to the changed context and dynamics in which the new Strategy has been developed. An important theme is “connectivity”: this is an area in which the EU would like to establish clearer rules in Central Asia. Another difference is the emphasis on an inclusive approach to cooperation. Inclusiveness implies that cooperation is open to all countries in the region, to extra-regional countries for whom it is relevant, and to other, non-state actors. Thus, the EU states express their readiness to join forces with all those interested in their cooperation with the Central Asian states. In addition to this approach, the Strategy emphasizes the concept of “synergy” and specifies what is needed to enhance synergy: “working better together”. The third theme is resilience, which is also mentioned in other new EU strategic documents. This refers to resilience to various old and new risks that the world in general and Central Asia in particular are facing. As noted in the table, despite all these nuances in the wording, the Strategy is a solid analytical document.

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of EU Strategies towards Central Asia**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Similarities  | Differences |
| Strategy of 2007 | Strategy of 2019  |
| 1. Areas of cooperation:

– Human rights– Democratization– Education– Economic development– Energy and transport– Ecology and water management– Regional security– Intercultural dialogue1. The influence of external factors on the implementation of the Strategy
 | 1. The strategy was primarily prepared by EU and was dropped to work to Central Asian states.
2. The Strategy has more of a descriptive character: General description of the means of implementing the Strategy
3. Afghanistan is a priority in terms of threats to regional security
4. The structure is more general and comprehensive.
5. The budget was included in the strategy with a breakdown (70% of funds were allocated to bilateral projects and 30% to promote regional cooperation)
6. The Strategy points out the cooperation only in the framework EU-Central Asia.
 | 1. Central Asian states’ experts took part in the formation of the strategy.
2. The Strategy has analytical nature: Specific initiatives in each subsection
3. Strategy takes into Consideration of new threats to security (cybersecurity, etc.), including ISIS
4. The structure is more detailed and specific.
5. A larger budget with no indication of detail; priority areas for funding will be determined additionally.
6. The EU state expresses its readiness to take measures with all those who are interested in their state with the Central Asian states.
 |
| Source: author’s own compilation based on literature review |

The EU Strategy of 2007 and 2019 have different views: a) greater consideration of the diverse and dynamic developments in the relations between the five Central Asian countries and b) recognition of the existence and importance of other external partners and projects present in the region. These two factors can be seen as significant obstacles to the successful implementation of the 2007 EU Strategy in the region. The new Strategy reflects a full awareness of these factors, reflecting both considerations in the proposed themes of cooperation.

The region itself shows both risks of volatility and signs of further cooperation. For EU–Central Asia relations, since the adoption of the EU's current Central Asia strategy, the seismic shift in the geopolitical landscape has presented not only challenges but also opportunities for increased cooperation in foreign policy and areas such as energy, raw materials and connectivity.

Although largely peaceful, the region faces threats to its stability. Within countries, tensions between growing discontent over inequality and the cost of living are a destabilising factor, as illustrated in the 'Bloody January' events in Kazakhstan in 2022 and the rise of popularism in Kyrgyzstan. Poverty and lack of employment prospects may also make some populations vulnerable to more extremist forms of Islam, increasing the risk of terrorism. From this perspective, the return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is a source of instability for the region as a whole, but particularly for neighbouring Tajikistan. In recent years, tensions over regional autonomy have led to protests and violent crackdowns in Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan region and Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Oblast. Potential sources of conflict between the Central Asian countries include resource scarcity and climate change. Climate risk profiles for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan show that the region is projected to experience temperature rises significantly above the global average. The impacts are likely to include more frequent droughts, as well as land degradation and reduced water security, posing major threats particularly to the lives and livelihoods of the poorest and most marginalised communities. Cross-border water cooperation is re-emerging as a key constraint on Central Asia's future development. In 2021, a long-standing border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reignited over the issue of irrigation, leading to violent clashes that recurred in 2022. Against this backdrop, the fact that Central Asian leaders are holding annual consultative meetings is seen with cautious optimism as a sign of pragmatic cooperation.

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and its increased nationalistic narratives have weakened Russia’s standing in the region and have encouraged Central Asia to pursue cooperation with other actors, and that these actors have stepped up their cooperation with Central Asia. The EU now has the opportunity to expand its ties with Central Asia and play a more prominent role in the region.

However, we cannot say that the Strategy of 2019 absolutely failed or there was only positive impact.

Until 2022, the EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meetings (at the level of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the foreign ministers of individual countries) were the main forum of political dialogue between the EU and the Central Asian states. The economic and trade agreements that these countries concluded with the EU were not expanded, which largely stemmed from their failure to make any progress on democratization. It was not until 2020 that the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kazakhstan come into force, and this is the EU’s only such agreement in this part of the world to date. The Central Asian states were insignificant trading partners for the EU. The EU’s member states markets are the main export destination for Kazakhstan (largely due to oil sales), but this country was down in 29th place in the ranking of the EU’s trade partners in 2022.



**Chart 1. The value of the EU’s and Central Asian countries’ exports/imports in 2022-23 [106].**

Economic issues, which are strongly linked to energy, climate/environmental and transport cooperation, feature prominently in the Joint Roadmap. At present, they can be regarded as the most important aspects of mutual relations, and may also be considered as the forward-oriented ‘vehicles’ of EU-Central Asia cooperation. The ties in these areas are those which have been strengthened the most. In November 2022, the EU launched two flagship initiatives for Central Asia as part of the Global Gateway: the Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate and the Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity.

In another important step, in late January 2024 the EU committed to provide €10 billion using various financial instruments to develop the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR, the so-called Middle Corridor), which connects Europe to China via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus or Turkey, bypassing Russia [8]. In November 2022, the EU signed an agreement with Kazakhstan on a strategic partnership in the area of critical raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen; more recently, in April 2024, it reached a similar agreement with Uzbekistan in the field of critical raw materials. These steps have been part of the EU’s efforts to implement its Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials, which was adopted in 2020.

On the other hand, in the energy dimension, even though the region has expanded its cooperation with the EU, the entrenched interests of Russia and China have not been directly affected. For example, projects have not been launched that would permanently bind the EU to Central Asia, such as gas exports from Turkmen deposits via the Caspian Sea to Europe. Moreover, during this period, Russia has strengthened its gas relations with Uzbekistan as a consumer and with Kazakhstan as a transit state under an agreement from June 2023.

The intensification of political dialogue includes steps to raise the profile of this relationship and consolidate it at the highest level. The best example of this is the ‘high-level meetings’ with the participation of President of the European Council Charles Michel and the Central Asian leaders. The first such meeting took place on 27 October 2022 in Astana, followed by another gathering on 2 June 2023 in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan. The first EU-Central Asia Summit was scheduled to take place in Uzbekistan in 2024.

The two sides aim to strengthen their economic ties by consolidating the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum (which has existed since 2021 and was last held in May 2023) and by expanding their trade and political agreements. The EU concluded negotiations on the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kyrgyzstan in July 2019 and with Uzbekistan three years later; however, it has failed to ratify either of them. It launched talks on the EPCA with Tajikistan in February 2023.

Cooperation is being pursued under the Global Gateway strategy in the areas of: energy, climate/the environment and transport. The impetus for developing these ties came from the first EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference that was held in Samarkand in November 2022. At the European Commission’s request, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development also produced a study entitled ‘Sustainable transport connections between Europe and Central Asia‘, which was published in June 2023. The aforementioned inaugural Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity took place in January 2024.

In the area of security, the EU’s longest-running programmes for Central Asia (launched in 2003), the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the Central Asian Drug Action Programme (CADAP), form the basis for further cooperation. These two initiatives relate to border protection and measures to counter drug trafficking. The EU has also made it possible to provide the Central Asian states with expertise on hybrid threats and to include them in training conducted by the European Security and Defence College (ESDC).

The EU considers the development of the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum (which has functioned since 2019) to have played a significant role in the improvement of people-to-people relations and mobility, alongside its own training and education programmes, Horizon Europe and Erasmus+. The EU has announced that it will expand its educational and scholarship opportunities for independent researchers from the region as well as its training for Central Asian diplomats.

So, it is evident that there were a number of initiatives and working programs conducted in Central Asia. In addition, the level and the number of EU-CA meetings has increased, which says about the significance of cooperation for both regions.

However, to our minds, it is unlikely that relations with the EU will become a priority for Central Asia. Therefore, it is even more unlikely that Central Asia will emerge as a significant focus of the EU’s foreign policy. Contacts between the two sides will still be based on energy, trade and transport as the main areas of cooperation. Nevertheless, as these ties continue to deepen, the EU’s importance for Central Asia will grow due to the associated benefits for the region’s modernisation and economy.

**2 EU STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA AS A MAIN TOOL OF COOPERATION**

**2.1. Main instruments for the implementation of the Strategy**

Due to the absence of the EU in the field of "hard" security, its negotiating power should be sought mainly in the economic sphere, especially in trade and investment. While the total value of trade between the EU and Central Asia has declined significantly since the early 2010s, mutual trade is still significant, albeit unbalanced (due to its central-periphery nature) and highly variable by country. The EU is Central Asia's most important trading partner, although the numbers are highly inflated due to the high volume of trade with Kazakhstan. With a total trade value of €26.94 billion in 2020, the EU is ahead of Russia and China. It ranks first in exports from Central Asia and third in imports. In 2020, EU imports from Central Asia amounted to 13.22 billion euros, while exports to the region reached 9.13 billion euros. Nearly 95% of all imports are commodities (mainly mineral products) and 90.2% of exports are manufactured goods [126].

As was stated above, the first comprehensive EU policy document on post-Soviet Central Asia, the EU and Central Asia: A New Partnership Strategy was adopted in 2007. Despite some statements that the strategy should take into account the individual needs and characteristics of each country, it should be emphasized that the strategy has intensified mutual relations between Central Asia and the EU, as well as the institutional presence of the EU in the region, mainly in terms of political and diplomatic dialogue.

It is worth noting that the EU is forming its multilateral policy towards Central Asia through strategic documents; but we cannot name these documents typical strategies [127]. EU gives key strategic priorities and detailed objectives, but in typical strategic documents the objectives are measurable, realistic, achievable and time bound; thus, their implementation within the predetermined period is considered realistic.

According to the developers of the Strategy, the mutual relations of the Central Asian states, as well as the level of their cooperation with the EU, especially in recent years, have reached a qualitatively new level. In this regard, the main message of the new EU policy document was to use the opportunities arising from this positive development.

In their new 2019 EU policy document on Central Asia, in contrast to their 2007 Strategy, there is a noticeable refusal to form any specific thematic platforms. This is due to the desire to give the document maximum flexibility, as well as to keep it relevant for a long time.

As a priority goal in Central Asia, the European Union defines "Partnership for sustainability" (resilience), which provides for "increasing the ability of the Central Asian states to overcome various internal and external challenges, as well as successfully implement reforms " [1].

This chapter focuses on main EU programs and initiatives in the framework of EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2019. No doubt that through these programs and initiatives, the EU strategy was implemented. Moreover, the chapter describes main fields of cooperation and current state.

The first area for EU cooperation with the Central Asian states is security and the joint fight against the threats of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism. The situation in this area in the period from 2007 to 2017 also changed significantly. The main center of instability has shifted from Afghanistan to Syria, where a protracted military and political crisis has created a favorable environment for the spread of extremist ideologies and the emergence of new terrorist organizations. The European Union and Central Asia are under direct terrorist threat, as both regions lead in terms of population migration to join groups such as the Islamic State. That is, an important task of the EU in the region is to maintain its stability and prevent the transformation of Central Asia into a new hotbed of terrorist activity [128]. In this regard, it is important to note two main EU security programs in Central Asia: BOMCA and CADAP.

Cross-border cooperation has been and remains a key element of BOMCA's program activities. It promotes regional peace and security, regional trade facilitation, regional economic development and drug control throughout the region. The main achievement of the BOMCA Program in this regard, according to European experts, can be considered the agreement of the Government of Kazakhstan to double the number of Kyrgyz border guards undergoing training at the Border Academy of the National Security committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Border guards from Tajikistan are also being trained in Kazakhstan. Several cross-border workshops were held jointly with Kyrgyzstan.

The ninth phase of the BOMCA covered the period 2015-2020 with a total budget of EUR 6.6 million and aimed at strengthening the capacity of border management agencies in Central Asia: border, customs, migration, veterinary and phytosanitary services, as well as relevant higher education institutions and training centers.

Based on the concept of integrated border management, the program completed 223 individual activities involving over 3,300 civil servants from Central Asian beneficiary agencies. These activities were implemented through soft adaptation measures such as capacity building and awareness raising (professional knowledge, functional skills and specific practices), updating the regulatory framework (legal, strategic, technical, procedural, organizational, methodological and others), strengthening cooperation and information exchange at different levels (intra-agency, inter-agency and international).

 Since 2001, the European Union has launched a Central Asia Drug Action Program (CADAP) as part of the Central Asia Drug Action Plans. The priority tasks of this project are: improving the work of control services at major airports in the region; strengthening cooperation between law enforcement agencies of the Central Asian countries in the fight against drug trafficking; creation of a unified information network to coordinate their work. CADAP has systematically invested in drug policy development in Central Asia over the past 20 years. Sharing experiences and implementing international standards in the work of national partners has strengthened capacities not only in drug policy, but also in data collection and analysis, drug use prevention and treatment of people with drug use disorders. The programme has also supported the establishment of regional alliances and networks of Central Asian professionals and strengthened their cooperation with relevant EU agencies.

Moreover, it is obvious that, a special factor in the soft power of the European Union is the fact that it is an important trading partner for the countries of the region and actively promotes cooperation in trade and investment [74]. The EU is actively promoting its policy to attract CA states through various investment agreements. No doubt that the CA countries themselves are becoming increasingly interested in the entry of European investors, mainly European TNCs, and in the introduction of European technological solutions and standards into their economies [74].

The Strategy also addresses issues of cooperation in the energy sector. It is noted that the EU remains committed to expanding the Southern Energy Corridor in Central Asia and further promoting multilateral energy initiatives. At the same time, the EU is ready to support the development of renewable energy and energy efficiency in Central Asia; is ready to offer its experience and know-how to promote the adoption of high standards of safety, security and ecology in all modes of transport and to promote links along the "transport corridor" Europe - the Caucasus - Central Asia. At the same time, the focus of energy and transport cooperation with Central Asia is on synergy with the relevant initiatives of the European Neighborhood Policy. In view of the growing differences in the economic development of countries in the region, the Council calls on the EU Commission to give its proposals for the effective implementation of the Strategy in accordance with the needs of countries in a renewed partnership.

The main tool for the practical implementation of the Strategy is the relevant regional and bilateral grant programs (DCI, Development Cooperation Instrument), funded within the framework of 7-year EU budget cycles.

 It should be noted that the CA states are the third largest recipient of EU assistance after the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (30.5 billion euros) and the group of European partnership countries (15.4 billion euros), which also makes the EU one of the major donors of international aid in the region.

About a third of the funds allocated for Central Asia (454.2 million euros) are provided for the implementation of regional projects with the simultaneous participation of two or more Central Asian countries. The remaining two-thirds are distributed among bilateral projects with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Previously, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were excluded from bilateral aid programs because they were reclassified as upper-middle-income countries.

In addition to the DCI grant mechanism, support is provided in the form of loans from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank, which have already invested about 11 billion euros in the region. The third option is a "mixing" of grant aid and borrowed funds. The relevant EU Investment Facility for Central Asia (IFCA) has universal application and can be used to reduce the amount of capital that partner countries must raise for a project in Central Asia. In the period from 2010 to 2016, in a similar “mixed” format, the Central Asian states received more than 1 billion euros, of which 143 million euros were grant assistance (25 projects), and 970 million euros were loans [78].

The key component in the implementation of the new strategy should be the development of the economic potential of the region, which implies the priority and implementation of programs aimed at improving the investment climate, ensuring sustainable growth of the economies of the Central Asian states, developing human capital and providing employment for the population.

Another important area of cooperation within the framework of the implementation of the Strategy could be the involvement of the Central Asian countries in the European Green Deal, launched in December 2019 at the initiative of the EU, in accordance with which the European Union undertakes to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

According to European functionaries, through fundamental transformations of economic systems and society through the development of a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy, by 2050, thanks to compensatory measures, a balance will be achieved between emissions and absorption of greenhouse gases. At the same time, the natural capital of the EU will be protected and enhanced, and economic growth will not depend solely on the use of resources. At the same time, it is noted that Europe will not be able to cope with this task alone; close cooperation with international partners is required. In this regard, the EU recognizes the growth potential available in the CA countries and states that it understands the significant problems that they face in working to increase the level of sustainability of their economies [79].

At the beginning of 2021, the European Union launched a new environmental program on climate, environment and security in the Green Central Asia region, initiated by Germany [80]. On May 6, 2021, the first meeting of the working group on the issues of the Action Plan being established for the implementation of this initiative was held. At the same time, the project is open to the participation of international stakeholders.

After the adoption of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia in June 2019, the European Commission's Directorate General for Development and International Cooperation (GD DEVCO) began developing specific thematic EU development programs for Central Asia for the next European 7-year budget cycle 2021-2027.

Due to the fact that GD DEVCO is working to revise its approaches to project financing, it is expected that Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan will again be able to participate in bilateral projects within the new cycle. At the same time, GD DEVCO plans to significantly increase the total share of regional projects.

A new area of ​​cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the implementation of the Team Europe program in Central Asia aimed at combating the pandemic. The assistance aims to mitigate the immediate and long-term health and socioeconomic challenges caused by the pandemic.

In July 2020, the EU launched a €3 million comprehensive regional Solidarity Program to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in Central Asia, with a focus on Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The program will provide support to mitigate the effects of the pandemic outbreak and implement measures to ensure the long-term resilience of national health systems. The European Investment Bank has also mobilized a significant package of loans for the region related to the response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

As the current EU strategy for Central Asia states, “its strategic geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, its share of the EU’s energy imports and the market potential of seventy million inhabitants, as well as the EU’s interest in regional security, have made Central Asia an increasingly important partner for the EU.” [6] In light of the Ukrainian crisis, relations between the Central Asian countries and the EU could be significantly strengthened by the launch of two new projects of the Global Gateway initiative (the Team Europe Water, Energy and Climate Initiative and the Team Europe Digital Connectivity Initiative). [7]

Currently, the most important item on the EU agenda is overcoming the energy crisis caused by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: the EU continues to search for alternative energy suppliers. In this regard, Central Asia stands out both in terms of its rich resources (oil, gas, uranium, other essential minerals) and in terms of a safe, short and low-cost route that passes through the Middle Corridor. [9]

In this regard, a large-scale project “Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia” (SECCA), the budget of which is 6.8 million euros was launched. [10] The main objective of the SECCA project is to support the transition to sustainable energy systems by using the region’s potential in the field of solar, wind and hydropower in accordance with EU best practices.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that EU increased its engagement in the region and promotes cooperation at the political and economic levels. There have been increased high-level contacts between the EU and Central Asia, including the 18th EU-Central Asia Foreign Ministers’ meeting, held on 17 November 2022 in Samarkand, which focused on finding solutions to common challenges. The latest meeting between Central Asian leaders and the President of the European Council Charles Michel was held in June 2023 in Cholpon-Ata. Addressing the summit, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said Kazakhstan is ready to increase exports to the EU on 175 non-primary commodity items worth $2.3 billion in such areas as engineering, iron and steel production, and the food industry.

Among the latest visits was that of Vice President of the European Commission Margaritis Schinas. He began his Central Asian tour on January 15 in Kazakhstan 2024, which he deemed a “key actor in the region’s positive evolution.”

Moreover, among the crucial meetings between EU and Central Asia, we can note EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference, held on 18 November 2022, the second EU-Central Asia Economic Forum, held from 18 to 19 May 2023, the fourth EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, held on 10 March 2023, and the seventh EU-Central Asia High-Level Conference on Environment and Water Resources, held from 23 to 24 February 2023, the 19th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting held on 23 October 2023.

**2.2. Factors of Central Asia integration under the new EU Strategy**

Central Asia, which includes the post-Soviet countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, is a region with common ethnic, historical, religious and cultural roots. It is no coincidence that after declaring their independence in the early 1990s, the countries of Central Asia voiced their interest in the idea of ​​a regional community. In January 1994, an agreement was signed in Tashkent on the establishment of the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which was soon joined by Kyrgyzstan. The countries have started developing and implementing projects aimed at deepening economic integration in Central Asia. In the very first years, the leaders of the countries signed a number of fundamental documents clearly emphasizing their vision that the region is unified, namely Central Asian.

It should be noted the ambitiousness of the initiatives that have taken place in the new history of Central Asia. Under the Central Asian, the Intergovernmental Council, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Council of Defense Ministers, as well as the peacekeeping battalion - Tsentrazbat were established. In addition, the Central Asian Bank for Cooperation and Development was established with an initial capital of $9 million [1]. The parties even talked about plans to create a Central Asian Parliament. In April 1995, in Bishkek, the prime ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed a 5-year economic integration plan. In December 1997, in Astana, the presidents of the countries signed a protocol on the formation of an international consortium for energy, water resources, food, minerals and raw materials. In 1998, the ministers of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan discussed the main issues of water allocation, the environment, migration policy and economic development. Tajikistan joined the group in 1998 - after which the countries signed an agreement on the creation of a hydropower consortium and agreed on common principles for creating a single market. Paying attention to the dynamics of leadership meetings, some researchers noted that Central Asia was able to develop supranational coordinating structures that were more effective than the CIS mechanisms [2]. It should be emphasized that due to the proclaimed neutrality of Turkmenistan, the country did not join the initiatives, however, President S. Niyazov also spoke about the need to create a Confederation of five Central Asian republics in the mid-90s [3].

 Despite a positive start, integration proved to be unattainable in subsequent years. As a result of friction between the countries, after the ambitious Central Asian Union, the cooperation was renamed the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC), and then the Central Asian Cooperation Organization CACO (December 2001). On the initiative of Uzbekistan, in May 2004 Russia was invited to the CACO. There is an opinion that Russia was called upon to become a mediator in protracted disputes between the countries themselves, which at that time turned out to be weaker than their own integration initiatives [4]. Further, the CACO merged with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and ceased to exist.

It should be noted that only a couple of years will pass, and in 2007 the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, will again try to come up with the idea of a Central Asian Union, which would include all 5 states of the region, between which there should be free movement of goods, services, capital and people [5]. Since the idea did not find a response, the Central Asia project became almost a utopia, and attempts to revive it ceased.

The question must be asked, how constructive is the denial of the unity of the region, if its place in the world of the 21st century depends on its economic integration? It was economic cooperation, and then the integration of Europe, that allowed the latter to rise from the ashes of war and be reborn as a world center of power. The geostrategic position of Central Asia deprives it of its access to the seas, the availability of valuable natural resources is not eternal, and the location in the heart of Eurasia in itself dictates the unification of the region in order not to remain on the periphery of world development. The founder of neofunctionalism, the leading theory of European integration, Ernst Haas, studied the issue of applying European experience outside [6]. Central Asia has certain characteristics that make it similar to Europe before integration. The latter means that if the parties are interested, it can be the very unique region where the European experience can be successfully adapted.

The advantage of Central Asia is that the mutual interest in resolving conflict problems, as well as the still existing economic ties between countries, i.e. interdependence, create more favorable conditions for integration, in contrast to war-torn Europe.

Secondly, as in pre-integration of Europe, Central Asia has vital sectors and lack of resources on which the functioning of economies depends. In Europe of the last century, the production of steel and coal had to become accountable to a regional coordinating center in order to reduce tension between France and Germany, the engines of European integration. Having solved the problem of coal and steel, Europe began to integrate in the transport sector, then in trade, in agriculture, and so on. The concept of "spillover" ("spread" or "flow") E. Haas says that success in the integration of one sector of the economy inevitably leads to success in another sector. In Central Asia, water use and energy supply are the stumbling blocks, and this has been the focus of regional cooperation initiatives. Thus, if the countries of the region manage to mutually recognize that water is a common resource and resolve the problems of water use, they will automatically be able to agree on energy supply. If they integrate the transport sector, then this will force them to cooperate in trade and customs policy, etc.

Thirdly, the similarity is the presence of external threats, both real and perceived. This includes not only the geopolitical rivalry of powers and their interest in dominating this energy-rich region, but also transnational threats. Like Europe rallying against communism, Central Asians are united in their perception of threats such as drug trafficking, terrorism, and the ideology that fuels them. It was the security sphere that became the key one, where the will of the countries was united. Analysts argue that during the CAEC, an agreement on the joint fight against terrorism, political and religious extremism, transnational organized crime and security issues was a significant result [8]. One can also add to this the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia, one of the significant achievements of regional cooperation to this day.

Fourth, nationalism often ran counter to countries' aspirations for integration. Certain aspects of the theories of European integration have found their confirmation here as well. Thus, for example, the initially positive aspirations of countries were hampered by friction between countries that did not want to give up their independence ambitions. It is worth recalling the work of Leon Lindberg, another representative of neo-functionalism, who wrote about the paradox that progress in integration can lead to the opposite result, since integration generates “stress” for states [9]. Lindbergh stressed that "stress" can, at its worst, lead to the opposite process, namely a spill-back state. Thus, he drew attention to some misfires in the European project since the 1960s, when, despite the agreement on the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1958, i.e. the existence of a supranational mechanism, European countries still preferred to solve coal problems on a bilateral basis. In addition, there was a situation where, despite talk of unity, EU members also introduced non-tariff barriers to protect their economies from competition. This process was embodied in Central Asia: for example, in 2000, Kazakhstan unilaterally left the tariff and non-tariff regulation of trade in Central Asia [10]. In turn, the policy of Uzbekistan in relation to currency regulation also acted as a serious obstacle to integration.

Fifth, the formation of Europe went along with the debate between supporters of a single region and Eurosceptics. Many called the idea of ​​a united Europe a utopia and an unattainable goal. Nevertheless, Europe was also built under the influence of Eurosceptics. Due to the strong position of Europessimists in the UK, the country decided to leave the European Union by 2018 as a result of a 2016 referendum [11]. However, since the UK initially had an uneasy relationship with the EU, its exit does not mean the end of the European project. A similar situation with regard to the idea of ​​integration is observed in Central Asia, where pessimism about a single community prevails. Skepticism is, in principle, justified, and continued debate is welcome, because the task here is to find the best solution for Central Asia and its development in the world after 2017.

The benefits for the parties at many levels speak in favor of the integration of Central Asia. A certain similarity of the prerequisites in the history of the integration of the two regions gives reason to think about how the region should build a strategy for close regional cooperation in the future. As in Europe before integration, the region has a common ideological heritage, different levels of development of countries, external threats, as well as the need for cooperation on controversial issues. In Central Asia, there is still no major external funding, without which the integration of Europe would not have taken place (remember the Marshall Plan for Europe). However, it is important that the need for regional cooperation is emphasized by the EU itself, which carries out its policy in the region mainly on a bilateral basis, but also pays attention to regional projects. As a global economic and political player, Europe is already a conduit for its experience with the region.

In 2007, it is time for a more active EU policy in the region. In December 2006, German Foreign Minister F. Steinmeier stated that despite close historical ties with Russia and China, Central Asia should remain free from any of the monopolies [13]. As early as June 22, 2007, the EU adopted a Partnership Strategy for Central Asia. Thus, the EU has demonstrated its plan for rapprochement with the region and moving away from building relations only on the basis of bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the Central Asian republics.

One of the main objectives of the EU policy in the region is its development. A regional strategy for assistance to Central Asia for 2007-2013 is adopted. In 2015, in its conclusions, the Council of Europe noted favorable conditions for further EU policy in the region due to the increase in the package for bilateral and interregional EU cooperation with Central Asia for the period 2014-2020. We are talking about 1.068 billion euros, namely, a 56% increase in the contribution compared to the volume of the program for 2007-2013 [14]. In the same document, the red line is the expediency of promoting regional initiatives in Central Asia.

In what areas can Europe contribute to integration mechanisms in Central Asia? In the documents of the Council of Europe, special attention is paid to the development of transport, which is one of the barriers to the integration of the countries of Central Asia. Thus, paragraph 15 states: “In the fields of energy and transport, cooperation between the EU and Central Asia should give priority to the integration of Central Asia among themselves and in international markets”, and further “The EU will continue to expand the Southern Energy Corridor to Central Asia and promote multilateral initiatives in energy” [15]. It is also noted here that the EU is ready to offer its experience and know-how technologies in order to facilitate the connecting chains along the Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia transport corridor [16].

The strategy is aimed at building a solid foundation for effective trade relations. Thus, the EU supports the private sector in Central Asia - within the framework of the CAIP - Central Asia Invest Program, which aims to reduce poverty by increasing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The program works at two levels: at the level of Central Asian intermediary organizations (ie chambers of commerce, business associations) and at the political level to improve the business climate [17]. These and other programs show that Europe is pursuing a normative role in Central Asia along with pragmatic interests. The task of the EU, according to researchers, is to promote a new regulatory and institutional framework to create a better business and investment climate in this part of the world [18]. That is why Europe focuses on democratization and respect for human rights as important conditions for promoting economic diversification and liberalization. In response, Central Asia is also trying to liberalize certain sectors of the economy, with varying degrees of success. Despite all the contradictions in the policies of the countries of the region, the main agenda is always the development and growth of economic indicators, including the human development index. In this regard, Europe acts as a kind of value orientation for the peoples of Central Asia, which is also important for future relations between the regions.

Interregional cooperation on security issues also deserves special attention. Through certain programs, the EU promotes cooperation between countries. For example, the BOMCA project - Border Management Program in Central Asia - is the largest regional program fully sponsored by the EU. Approximately 33 million US dollars were allocated for this program alone between 2003 and 2014 [19]. The main goal is to reduce the supply of narcotic substances from Afghanistan passing through the so-called "northern route". Another program is CADAP - Central Asia Drug Action Program, which focuses on reducing the demand for opiates and other drugs. The task of protecting the borders, as well as combating the transnational threat of drug trafficking, requires the coordination of all Central Asian structures, thus these two EU projects are already contributing to establishing a dialogue at the regional level.

It is also important that European diplomats also promote cooperation between countries on controversial regional issues, including water use. The EU has held many forums on this topic between the parties, and it is known that the former Special Representative for Central Asia, Pierre Morel, spent a lot of effort and time helping Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to come to a mutually satisfactory solution [20]. At the request of Tajikistan, Morel also notified Dushanbe of Brussels' readiness to sponsor the construction of small hydropower plants worth $60 million [21].

Europe is also sponsoring education initiatives (EUEI - EU Education Initiative) in order to raise the standards of education and training in the education sector in the region, as well as to establish research and academic dialogue. Of particular note is the presence of CAREN (Central Asia Research and Education Network), designed to exchange ideas, which, as emphasized, should contribute to a regular political dialogue between the parties [22].

The continuation and deepening of this cooperation depends on the Central Asian countries. Countries can put forward their own initiatives, the sponsorship of which by the EU will contribute to closer regional cooperation [23]. Here it is worth paying attention to the changes that took place in Uzbekistan at the end of 2016. In the key country of the region, without whose participation regional integration is impossible, a wind of change has blown, albeit still very lightly.

With the departure of the first president, Islam Karimov, a new leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, came to power in Uzbekistan. In Tashkent, they are now talking more openly about the dialogue between the executive branch and the people, the accountability of the authorities to the people, and the necessary liberalization. Uzbekistan is signaling its intention to improve relations with its neighbors, which has been reinforced by actions: Tashkent has initiated regional contacts at the government level.

In Europe, this was noticed, in March 2017, a dialogue was resumed with the EBRD, relations with which had been cool since 2003. Importantly, on the eve of the visit to Uzbekistan, the president of the bank, S. Chakraborty, said that he sees several areas for cooperation, including regional interconnections (connectivity) and integration [24].

It is important that the first state visits of President Sh. Mirziyoyev were trips to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. As a result of the business forum in Astana, 75 contracts were signed for an amount exceeding 1 billion US dollars [25]. It is also noted that the work done to open borders, mutual transport and trade has led to the fact that mutual trade between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan has grown by 30% over the past 5 months [26].

These changes make it possible to talk about the possibility of resuming discussions about regional integration. At the moment, intra-regional trade in Central Asia is very modest. Officially, it is only 6% of the total regional trade turnover. However, there are opinions of observers that the figure may differ from the real state of affairs, because there is informal trade and exchange of goods due to the entrepreneurial spirit of the people of the region [27]. The only thing holding back transnational trade is the artificial barriers created by certain circles of the region's elites.

If the new leadership of Uzbekistan has enough political will and resources to strengthen cooperation and remove barriers to regional trade, underdeveloped transport networks will remain a major stumbling block to integration. Here cooperation with Europe can be especially useful and promising. The integration of transport networks would increase trade in the region and increase the attractiveness of Central Asia as a Eurasian transport bridge, as well as a promising new market, which would be in the interests of the EU as well as China. The single market will also contribute to the competitiveness of enterprises as well as the diversification of economies. The opening of internal borders, and the strengthening of external borders from the southern front, will also affect the formation of a powerful market for tourism and services. Again, here we can draw on the experience of Europe, which opened internal borders and took measures to strengthen external borders, while creating the Schengen Information System (Schengen Information System), aimed at providing immigration police with immediate information about the history of potential visitors.

Peter Burian, European Union Special Representative for Central Asia, highlighted the progress of regional development in Central Asia and expressed a resolution to expand the potential of economic cooperation during a press briefing on June 8 in the Kazakh capital.

Burian noted the positive dynamics of regional development over the past six years, during which Central Asia has been able to become a more cohesive region with common goals and viable mechanisms for internal cooperation. According to him, the EU is ready to act as a reliable partner in the process of sustainable modernization of Central Asia and the implementation of reforms that help the region to diversify its opportunities [86].

However. “the thought of national identity through the prism of “national history” largely slows down the integration process,” notes Erkin Baidarov, leading researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies named after. R.B. Suleimenov of the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The issue of forming a regional identity for Central Asia regained its relevance at the end of December 2022 on the sidelines of the Central Asian Media Forum in Astana, when official representatives of Kyrgyzstan (Suyunbek Kasmambetov) simultaneously spoke about the need to “feel not only part of your country, but also of the general region of Central Asia.” , Secretary of State of the Kyrgyz Republic) and Uzbekistan (Eldor Aripov, ISMR under the President of Uzbekistan), once again showing the relevance of this kind of discussions both in the academic and socio-political spheres of the countries of the region.

The countries of Central Asia, together representing a kind of “vagina gentium” (“cradle of nations”), at the present stage of their development, in addition to creating and strengthening their national institutions, are more engaged in the formation of their national identity, which has acquired the path of reinterpretation of history.

Thus, the idea of national identity through the prism of “national history” that is “sitting” in the consciousness of the Central Asian society (primarily its political elite) largely slows down the integration process. The process of forming national symbols is in full swing, around which a universal ideology is built, where the “first violin” is played by the heads of Central Asian states, who, due to certain circumstances, are not aware of the detrimental nature of such “deconstructions” for the future development of the region [87].

The European Union is interested in promoting the formation of Central Asia as an international region in the form of a regional integration association and establishing interregional cooperation with it in the future in various fields.

In this regard, Kazakhstan is seen by the European Union as an uncontested leader, a regional power capable and willing to become not only a kind of locomotive of integration processes in the region, but also a “bridge” between the European Union and Central Asia on the basis of its declared Eurasian identity and readiness to accept the norms and values of the European Union. It was Kazakhstan that was the first to conclude a bilateral agreement with the European Union on enhanced partnership and cooperation in December 2015, having achieved undoubted progress in the harmonization of norms. A second such agreement was signed with Kyrgyzstan in July 2019, and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been negotiating a similar agreement with the EU since November 2018.

The annual summit of heads of state and government of Central Asia has become an informal institution promoting integration processes in the region. The first such summit took place in the capital of Kazakhstan in March 2018. The second, lasting five days, took place in November 2019 in the capital of Uzbekistan and coincided with an EU-sponsored and organized two-day conference in the Kazakh capital Nur-Sultan on the topic “Strengthening integration and ensuring prosperity in Central Asia.” EU Ambassador to Kazakhstan Sven-Olof Carlsson explained the incident as a “happy coincidence”

 However, the heads of state of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan arrived in Tashkent after participating in a meeting of the CSTO Collective Security Council in the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek, on November 28.

Of course, the establishment of such an informal consultative forum is in the interests of the European Union. This not only complements its multilateral cooperation with the countries of the region (the European Union is an active supporter of the principle of multilateralism in world politics), but also helps to strengthen trust and mutual understanding between the Central Asian republics regarding the discussion of regional challenges and threats, the search for answers to them, including with the participation of with EU support. For example, the shortage of water resources - this problem has more than once become a source of territorial disputes and conflicts in the region, environmental protection, border control, countering terrorist activities, transnational organized crime and drug trafficking, economic and social development, etc.

The problems and prospects of intraregional economic cooperation are of particular importance: today, trade in goods between the economies of the region has extremely small volumes (according to experts, no more than 5%). Paradoxically, there is still no direct air connection between the Central Asian capitals: such travel by plane can only be done through the international airport of Turkish Istanbul. It is possible that in the future it is possible to create a regional economic integration project with the participation of Afghanistan. A trilateral cooperation program between Kazakhstan, the European Union and Afghanistan is already being implemented. Thus, the European Union is co-financing the training of peaceful professions in universities in Kazakhstan for young people, including women, from Afghanistan [88].

There is a risk that other external players, primarily China, will benefit from the European Union’s efforts to promote integration processes in Central Asia. Moreover, to the Central Asian political elites his actions in the region seem simpler and more understandable. There is a well-known joke by Peter Burian, Special Representative of the European Commission for Central Asia: “China comes (to Central Asia - I.P.) with an offer that no one can refuse, while the EU comes with an offer that no one can understand" [89].

For the long term, the European Union is aimed at an economic, political and cultural presence in the region, aiming to achieve, albeit not quickly, but consistently, the readiness of Central Asian societies to accept in a positive way the principles and values of the EU, primarily in such promising areas for the European Union as business activities and support of small and medium-sized businesses, use of water resources, environmental protection, education, science, culture, border control and counting on corresponding economic returns.

**2.3. EU – CA cooperation in a security and energy context**

An important role in the strategy falls on the security aspect: the European Union has taken on the role of coordinator of programs aimed at combating drugs, cross-border crime and strengthening border control in Central Asia. At the same time, special attention was paid to the threat of Islamic radicalism, the task of strengthening law enforcement agencies and reforming the security system in the countries of the region was emphasized.

The first institutional foundations for the EU security strategy in Central Asia were laid during the meeting of the EU Council of Ministers (April 2001). The outcome of the meeting was the adoption of an action plan for Central Asia in the fight against the spread of drugs, which was a priority in cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. The signing of such international agreements as the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and the Vienna Document 1999 is also an example of security cooperation [90].

In the text of the strategy of the European Union 2007-2013, a number of tasks are put forward in the context of strengthening security in the states of the region, in particular:

* creating conditions that ensure border security
* combating regional crime, especially in the international drug trade.
* promoting cooperation in the field of combating illegal migration, drug trafficking, organized crime

The thesis “…the EU will provide enhanced support in the fight against corruption, drug and human trafficking, illegal arms trade with Afghanistan and organized crime in Central Asia” became decisive. The EU will expand cooperation with the countries of Central Asia in the fight against international terrorism…” [91]. In the direction of security, the EU made the main emphasis on ensuring the security of the state borders of the Central Asian countries as an important condition for countering transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, illegal migration, human trafficking, etc.

Moreover, the interest of the EU lies in security and stability, as well as commitment to human rights and the rule of law in the countries of Central Asia, because:

• strategic, political and economic development, as well as the growing number of inter-regional problems in Central Asia directly or indirectly affect the interests of the EU;

• with the enlargement of the EU, the inclusion of the South Caucasus region in the European Neighborhood Policy and the Joint Action Initiative in the Black Sea Region, Central Asia and the EU are getting closer to each other;

• Central Asia's substantial energy resources and the region's goal of diversifying trading partners and supply routes contribute to meeting the EU's energy security and supply needs.

The EU is confident that strengthening the commitment of the countries of Central Asia to international law, the rule of law, human rights and democratic values, as well as a market economy, will contribute to security and stability in Central Asia, making the countries of this region become reliable partners of the EU and share common interests and goals [92].

The EU is determined to deepen cooperation with the countries of Central Asia in the field of border control, migration and mobility and in addressing common security issues. In doing so, it plans a comprehensive approach through appropriate cooperation that addresses the root causes of instability, including poverty, social exclusion, marginalization, limited political participation, weak institutions, corruption and unsustainable use of natural resources. The main areas of security cooperation are:

1. Climate change and environmental degradation, which implies the intention of the EU to bring together issues of ecology, climate and security in the framework of political dialogue with the countries of the region. There will also be an emphasis on conflict prevention and disaster risk reduction.
2. Countering terrorism and violent extremism, including the establishment of the position of an EU expert on security and counter-terrorism and its regional competence in Central Asia, the exchange of best practices in preventing relevant threats, conducting research on the factors that cause them, prevention measures and combating propaganda. At the same time, as part of the implementation of relevant activities, the EU is focused on interaction with civil society institutions with a constant focus on respect for human rights, ensuring the rule of law and gender mainstreaming.
3. Modern integrated border management covering Afghanistan, including the fight against organized cross-border crime, smuggling of migrants, human trafficking, drug trafficking and use.
4. Improving management in the field of migration and mobility with a focus on issues of illegal migration. This includes cooperation on border security, extradition of irregular migrants, reintegration of returnees, as well as addressing the root causes of irregular migration through the promotion of vocational training, decent conditions and skilled work in countries of origin, support for legal migration channels, the establishment of effective legislation and systems in assistance to victims of human trafficking and persons in need of international protection. In this regard, the EU is ready to assist the countries of Central Asia in developing their national migration policies and establishing cooperation at the regional level.
5. Promoting an open, free and secure cyberspace and strengthening cyber defenses.
6. Non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ensuring nuclear security. This, in particular, involves making maximum use of the resources of the Centers of Excellence Initiative to Minimize the Risks Associated with Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Materials (CBRN CoE)

It is important to note here the seventh meeting of the EU-CA High-Level Political and Security Dialogue, held online on October 20, 2020. It was attended by the Secretary General of the European External Affairs Service Helga Schmidt, vice ministers and other representatives of the foreign ministries of the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan. The meeting participants discussed the issues of sustainable development of the region, cooperation in the field of rational joint management of transboundary water resources, solving environmental problems and climate change, as well as the main directions of the EU program activities in Central Asia. As a result of the meeting, it was agreed to focus the efforts of the foreign ministries on the implementation of the priorities of the new EU regional strategy. (232)

The meeting participants discussed the issues of sustainable development of the region, cooperation in the field of rational joint management of transboundary water resources, solving environmental problems and climate change, as well as the main directions of the EU program activities in Central Asia. As a result of the meeting, it was agreed to focus the efforts of the foreign ministries on the implementation of the priorities of the new EU regional strategy.

It is important to note, that the main instruments for implementing EU security policy are the BOMCA and CADAP programs, implemented since 2003.

In September, 2020 the European Union-funded Border Management Program (BOMCA) in Central Asia announced the completion of its 9th phase, which covered a five-year thematic work in support of the institutional development of border management authorities, the management of mixed migration flows and the facilitation of trade regimes at the borders of Central Asia. The ninth phase of the BOMCA Program covered the period 2015-2020. with a total budget of 6.6 million euros and was aimed at strengthening the capacity of the border management authorities of Central Asia: border, customs, migration, veterinary and phytosanitary services, as well as relevant institutions of higher education and training centers.

Based on the concept of integrated border management, the program has completed 223 separate activities involving more than 3,300 civil servants from beneficiary Central Asian agencies. These activities were implemented through soft adaptation measures such as capacity building and awareness raising (professional knowledge, functional skills and specific practices), updating the regulatory framework (legal, strategic, technical, procedural, organizational, methodological and others), strengthening cooperation and information exchange at different levels (intradepartmental, interdepartmental and international). The exchange of know-how and best practices both from the EU member states and among the CA countries was one of the founding principles of the project. In addition, the countries of the region received assistance in the form of equipment for video surveillance and control at border crossing points and modern technologies for educational institutions, totaling more than 500,000 euros [94].

BOMCA is a leading program funded by the European Union and implemented by a consortium of European Union partners and the International Center for Migration Policy Development. The consortium of partners is led by the State Border Guard of the Republic of Latvia. The tenth phase, with a total budget of 21.65 million euros, is the largest initiative in the region. The program started on April 1, 2021, its implementation period is 54 months.

The main goal of the BOMCA program is to increase security and stability in the region by promoting sustainable economic development through integrated border management. Thematically, BOMCA 10 covers four components: institutional development, institutional development of border agencies, capacity building in the field of disclosure of violations, trade facilitation and improvement of cross-border cooperation. Geographically, the project covers all five countries of Central Asia. The current phase, building on the achievements and results of previous activities, will continue to support cross-border cooperation and improve the living conditions of people living in the border regions of Central Asia, and will also facilitate legal trade flows across borders.

It is important to note the third meeting of the National Steering Group that was held in Turkmenistan on October 9, 2024. This event allowed to assess the progress of the project implementation in the third year and also contributed to the definition of the strategy for the final stage. The event noted that since the beginning of the 10th phase of the BOMCA Program, more than 90 events have been held in four thematic areas, covering 847 representatives of Turkmenistan. This work led to the development of 45 documents, handed over to beneficiaries for further study and application.

As we remember, the second meeting of the National Steering Group was held in Kazakhstan in 2023.

It is worth noting that since the beginning of the 10th phase, BOMCA has carried out 218 activities in Central Asian countries within the framework of 4 project components aimed at institutional development of border control agencies, increasing capacity in the field of crime detection, facilitating legitimate trade flows across borders and improving cross-border cooperation.

In November 2023, a series of celebratory events dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the European Union’s flagship programmes for border management in Central Asia (BOMCA) and Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) concluded in Uzbekistan.

H.E. Charlotte Adrian, EU Ambassador to Uzbekistan stresses out a key role of these two initiatives in strengthening cooperation, stability and development in the regions over the past two decades. Moreover, she believes that these EU-funded programmes serve as an important tool for advancing reforms and regional cooperation in Central Asia.

The Central Asia Drug Action Program (CADAP) is a European Union initiative to support the development of effective drug demand reduction policies in Central Asia.

Since its launch in 2003, the CADAP program has supported the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in various phases to implement strategies and measures to reduce demand for drugs, promote prevention initiatives, and improve the treatment of drug users in public institutions in the region.

The sixth phase of the CADAP program (CADAP 6) was focused on further strengthening the five beneficiary countries' national drug demand reduction policies towards a vision that emphasizes an evidence-based and balanced public health approach. CADAP has implemented several regional and national initiatives with the official participation and support of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan within the political framework of the EU Action Plan on Drug Control in Central Asia 2014-2019 and in line with the EU Drug Control Strategy for 2015–2020.

Under the EU-Central Asia Action Plan on Drugs 2014-2020 and with the support of CADAP 6, Central Asian countries have begun to adapt the methodologies of the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction, such as joint mission assessment, information maps, national drug information systems action plans, summaries of country situations and preparation of national reports on a general basis.

Through the implementation of CADAP 6, a comprehensive set of aspects of health-oriented drug policy has been covered in the region. As a result, a system of regular monitoring of the drug situation is being created through the national observatory centers on drugs and evidence-based approaches to prevention are being introduced; therefore, public awareness of drug abuse and prevention of drug abuse have increased through prevention programs and school campaigns. In addition, modern methods of treatment and rehabilitation of drug dependence are discussed, which are already used in some countries and are being considered in others [95].

The official opening of the 7th phase of the Central Asia Drug Prevention Program (CADAP) took place in Bishkek in March 2022. Furthermore, according to the head of the program Ernest Robello, in accordance with the strategy of the European Union for the fight against drugs for 2021-2025 and the Joint Statement “EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for Closer Cooperation” CADAP 7 represents a continuation of the EU’s long-term engagement with CA partners to further strengthen their national plans for drug demand reduction and continue cooperation in the development of a comprehensive and balanced drug policy.

“The overall goal of the 42-month CADAP 7 program is to help reduce drug use and its associated risks and harms. The CADAP program supports the governments of the Central Asian countries in developing a comprehensive and evidence-based drug policy and improving access to quality drug demand reduction services for vulnerable populations, taking into account gender aspects and respect for human rights,” he said.

In addition, Robello indicated that the program's five main areas of activity are aimed at achieving the following key results:

- wider implementation of the evidence-based approach and the inclusion of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in national and regional drug policy;

- strengthening the national information system to obtain objective, reliable, gender-sensitive, evidence-based information on the drug situation, based on EU best practices and international standards;

- improvement of evidence-based prevention programs both in terms of their development and implementation, including with a special focus on youth, women and vulnerable groups of the population;

- expanding and improving medical and social responses to drug use by consolidating best practices and better services for drug users;

- improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the program by introducing a systematic approach based on gender and human rights in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of targeted activities.

The program is funded by the EU for a total of 6.8 million euros [96].

In addition to the above mentioned programs, the European Union takes part in the implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia. This initiative is aimed at eliminating the conditions conducive to terrorist activities, strengthening the capacity to prevent and suppress terrorist activities at the national and regional levels. The initiative was announced at public events in Brussels, Belgium in June 2010 and in New York, United States in September 2010. The first expert meeting on Components I and VI of the Strategy was held in Bratislava (2010), the second expert meeting on Component II of the Strategy was held in Dushanbe (March 2011), the third expert meeting on Component III of the Strategy was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan (2011), the final ministerial meeting was held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan (2011) [97].

From 2008 to 2010 The EU and Interpol together with CARICC (Central Asian Regional Information Coordination Center) implemented the project "EU-Interpol: Interpol support in Central Asia". The program was aimed at strengthening the capacity of CARICC law enforcement agencies for regional and international cooperation, more effective fight against domestic and international crime. Within the framework of the project, more than 50 points of the countries of Central Asia were connected to the I-24/7 global communication system to get direct access to secure databases and the Interpol network [98].

 It is well-known that, Central Asian region is an opportunity for the countries of the European Union to diversify the sources of energy supplies. At the same time, a joint solution to the problem of providing energy resources opens up new broad opportunities for developing cooperation that will contribute to the economic growth of the Central Asian region. It is predicted that "in the next 10-15 years, the Central Asian region, along with the main suppliers of world energy supply (the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region), will be of decisive strategic importance in the supply of stable energy sources in the world" [102]. Three of the five Central Asian states have significant energy reserves. “Kazakhstan's resources are the largest, in terms of oil reserves it is among the top ten countries in the world, and in terms of gas reserves it is among the top fifteen. Turkmenistan has large unexplored gas reserves; Uzbekistan is also a significant gas producer” [103].

In 2012, the EU revised its 2007 Strategy for Central Asia, updating the project, which could become an important part of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), which was already on its way to connect gas fields in Azerbaijan with European consumers [104]. The Trans-Caspian gas pipeline was the subject of an intergovernmental agreement between Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and the EU. The connection of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan would provide a reliable gas supply to Europe and the possibility of scaling the SCG in the future. With those conversations on the table, in November 2011, Russia successfully completed the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, bypassing the Baltic states and Ukraine. In addition, Russian Gazprom was in the process of obtaining the consent of several transit countries. to build the ambitious South Stream gas pipeline across the Black Sea. Although South Stream was put on hold after Russia's clashes with Ukraine in 2014, Moscow remained a major gas supplier to Europe, exporting about 243 billion cubic meters in 2018 [105].

The attempts by the European Commission to revive the conversation about the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline have become part of the geopolitical debate about the role of Russia in the post-Soviet space [106]. At that time, Turkmenistan was selling its gas through land pipelines to Russia and China. But its gas was comparatively cheap: Russia bought it at a rather low price of $110 per thousand cubic meters, while its European consumers paid up to $500 per thousand cubic meters; China has taken Turkmen gas as payment for its investment in field development [107]. Therefore, the prospect of delivering gas to European consumers via a more direct route was seen as convenient for Turkmenistan. At the same time, a successful deal with the EU would be a diplomatic coup for Turkmenistan, a country with a dismal record of human rights, civil and political rights. For EU institutions, negotiations on the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline have become a bargaining tool against Russia, mobilized as a direct consequence of its aggression against Ukraine. Russia has also been one of the main obstacles to the construction of an underwater pipeline across the Caspian, given the unsettled legal status of the sea. However, as talks over Ukraine improved, talk of a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline faded, demonstrating yet again that the talks depended on other, more important diplomatic variables.

As follows from the literature review, by 2014 the supplier diversification strategy had failed, but the EU's energy dependence had worsened. The latest data for 2018 show that since 2000 several EU-27 countries have increased their energy dependence. Overall, in 2018, the EU imported 58% of its energy consumption. Two-thirds of imports are crude oil, followed by 24% gas and 8% solid fossil fuels. The only country in Central Asia in the list of the most significant energy suppliers in the EU is Kazakhstan with a share of 7.2%, far behind Russia (29.8%), but on a par with Iraq (8.7%), Saudi Arabia (7.4% ) and Norway (7.2%) [108]. Before oil prices and output plummeted due to the Russian-Saudi trade spat and the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2019 Kazakhstan’s largest oil fields produced 650,000 bpd at Tengiz, 400,000 bpd at Kashagan and 234 000 bpd from Karachaganak. At the same time, in March 2020, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium reached a record level of oil transportation in the amount of 1.65 million barrels per day [109]. Kazakhstan's annual oil production of about 90 million tons, if fully sold to EU countries, would satisfy only about 17% of total EU consumption.

Accordingly, the Commission's understanding of the meaning of "ensuring the security of energy supplies in the Union" has changed [110]. Although initially interpreted as seeking alternative reliable suppliers of oil, gas, and fossil fuels, it then included the diversification of energy sources through the development of renewable alternatives. From 2021, the Commission and Parliament are strongly focused on reducing carbon emissions, which translates into investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency. This rethinking of their role is projected towards a greener future, but as the rise in gas prices in autumn 2021 shows, it does not eliminate the direct dependence of many member states on supplies from Russia [111].

The EU paid more attention to energy issues and the export of hydrocarbon resources from the countries of Central Asia. Its 2007 strategy identified a direct route for delivering gas from Central Asia to Europe as one of the EU's national interests [112]. In 2008, the EU Special Representative's mandate was expanded to "contribute to the articulation of energy security aspects" [113]. The European Union has made significant efforts to achieve its goal of direct gas supplies from Central Asia.

In the absence of an effective multilateral format for interaction in the energy sector and due to strained relations between the states of Central Asia [114], the EU had no choice but to rely on bilateral Memorandums of Understanding. Kazakhstan signed this document in 2006, followed by Turkmenistan in 2008 and Uzbekistan in 2011.

In 2011, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso visited Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to persuade their leaders to supply gas to Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor, “a springboard for increasing Europe's energy security” [115]. The total cost of the Southern Gas Corridor The Gas Corridor was estimated at 40 billion euros [116].

Until 2011, Nabucco (later renamed Nabucco West) was a trunk pipeline project and enjoyed EU support: “The EU planned to increase its political influence in Azerbaijan and expand its energy cooperation with Turkmenistan to access Turkmen hydrocarbons. However, it failed to implement the Nabucco project and the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline as its integral part. It turned out that hydrocarbon resources are not as large as expected”[ 117].

As soon as the implementation of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project began, the European Commission declared that it fully supported both projects. Approved by the European Commission in 2016, the project was completed in 2020.

However, there was no result achieved: these projects were implemented for political and security reasons; The EU wanted to limit Russia's presence in the European energy market and ignored its advantages - lower prices and easily accessible pipeline systems [118].

The European Union (EU) launched a new project “Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia” (SECCA) for 2022-2026 during a roundtable discussion at the EU-Central Asia Conference “Global Gateway for Sustainable Development” on 17 November 2022. With a total budget of €6.8 million, the SECCA project aims to promote a more sustainable energy mix in the Central Asian region in line with EU best practices. In particular, the project aims to strengthen national policies for the transition to a sustainable energy system and increase investment, capacity and awareness in the field of renewable energy sources (RES) and energy efficiency (EE) in the region [Eeas.europa.eu, 2022].

SECCA will complement 15 EU regional initiatives in the fields of environment, biodiversity, climate change, disaster risk reduction, water and sustainable energy, as well as 20 EU bilateral cooperation projects with Central Asian countries.

While the EU shares its good practices in the field of renewable energy, the Central Asian countries will try to overcome their shortcomings in the field of renewable energy and develop them with the help of the EU. For example, journalists from Central Asian countries – winners of the European Union Regional Journalism Competitions 2020 and 2022 – took part in a week-long study tour to the Netherlands “Renewable Energy – Modern Solutions”. The study tour was organised jointly by two EU projects – “European Union – Central Asia: Water, Environment and Climate Change Cooperation (WECOOP)” and SECCA – with the aim of learning from the European and Dutch experiences in implementing new policies in the field of renewable energy, wind power, bioenergy and green hydrogen, introducing new green technologies, as well as developing climate-adaptive cities and sustainable construction [Wecoop.eu, 2022]. Moreover, 8 journalists from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan took part in the study tour and visited the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate, the Groen Wind Park and the Province House in Flevoland, the GIGA storage company, the Green Village in Delft, the Port of Rotterdam, the SolarEis project in Apeldoorn and AEB, a waste-to-energy company in Amsterdam.

It is worth recalling that in May 2022, the EU adopted a new plan, “REPowerEU”, to transition to “green” technologies and increase energy production from renewable sources [Commission.europa.eu,]. The Netherlands, along with other EU countries, is taking steps to increase sustainable energy production and find smarter ways to use and save energy. The government plans to create a €35 billion Climate and Transition Fund to help install the necessary energy infrastructure. According to Oliver Wyman (2022), the Netherlands is leading the energy transition in Europe, and according to Energy Monitor (2022), the Netherlands is at the forefront of the hydrogen race in Europe thanks to the highest subsidies.

The WECOOP project (third phase from October 2019 to April 2023) aims to improve environment, climate change and water policies in Central Asia through convergence with EU standards, as well as promoting green investments in relevant economic sectors to help achieve measurable reductions in human-induced pollution, including carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions. The project’s activities include support to the EU-CA Platform for Environment and Water Cooperation and its Working Group on Environment and Climate Change, as well as the international dimension of the EU Green Deal in Central Asia to facilitate climate action.

It is also important to note the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference on 17-18 November 2022 in Samarkand. It was the first constructive meeting since the EU Global Gateway Strategy adopted on 1 December 2021 and marked the intensification of the Union's policy towards the region, demonstrating the growing importance of Central Asia for the EU. The conference was accompanied by the launch of a number of EU initiatives covering areas such as energy, climate change, water and digital connectivity.

Another item on the agenda is transport corridors. Given the congestion of the Northern Corridor due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it can be said that strategies for a much more efficient use of the Middle Corridor are important for the EU. Undoubtedly, such a viability of the Middle Corridor also meets the interests of the states in the region, which are eager to attract foreign investment. Strengthening transport links will mean deepening economic relations. This means that the EU's contribution to the development of the region will increase even more, since European investments and markets are essential for the well-being and development of the Central Asian economies.

**3. THE ROLE OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES IN THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN POLICY TOWARDS THE REGION**

 **3.1. Kazakhstan’s role in EU policy for Central Asia**

Since independence, Kazakhstan began to actively interact in the economic sphere with the countries of the European Union. Astana's interests were and are in attracting European capital to improve the economy and solve social and environmental problems based on the experience of the EU, as well as in expanding trade and economic ties.

Kazakhstan was the first of the Central Asian countries in February 1993 to establish diplomatic relations with the European Union. Here, in November 1994, the first Delegation of the European Union in the region was opened.

The dynamics of Kazakh-European relations is clearly demonstrated by the number of contacts at the highest level between the leadership of Kazakhstan and the European Union. Thus, the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev made nine visits to Brussels (4 official visits in 1993, 2000, 2002, 2010 and 5 working visits in 2006, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018).

On November 25-26, 2021, the first official visit of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev to Brussels took place, during which meetings were held with the President of the European Council Ch. Michel and the President of the European Commission U. von der Leyen.

The parties noted the importance of strengthening multifaceted cooperation within the framework of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and the EU Strategy for Central Asia, and discussed in detail issues related to the post-pandemic economic recovery, green energy, climate change and the development of the transport sector. At the same time, the need to find new niches for cooperation in the framework of the European Green Deal, which covers a wide range of issues, including energy, transport, digitalization and agriculture, was noted.

Along with this, the development of transit and transport communications has been designated as one of the priority areas of bilateral cooperation.

The EU views Central Asia as a strategic and important regional partner. At the same time, the temporary deployment of the UN Mission in Afghanistan in Kazakhstan and the creation of an international humanitarian hub in Almaty allows Kazakhstan to play a particularly important role in strengthening regional security in coordination with the EU.

Kazakhstan, in turn, was visited twice by the Presidents of the European Council (H. Van Rompuy in 2010 and D. Tusk in 2019) and once by the President of the European Commission (J.M. Barroso in 2013).

Currently, such major European energy companies as Total, Agip, ENI, Shell, British Gas, British Petroleum operate in Kazakhstan. Over time, if the economic presence of these companies in the Kazakh economy expands (which is already very large), there will be a general strengthening of the EU's position in the country and in the Central Asian region as a whole.

One of the main European companies that has been operating in the Kazakhstani oil and gas market for many years is the Italian concern ENI. ENI, together with the British company British Gas, is involved in the production of oil, gas and condensate at Karachaganak. In accordance with the production sharing agreement, the development of this field will be carried out by a consortium of four companies (ENI, British Gas, Texaco and Russian LUKOIL) for 40 years. ENI's activity in the Kazakhstani market shows an example of active (and quite flexible - up to cooperation with Russian companies) penetration into the traditionally Russian sphere of influence.

In 2008, Kazakhstan came up with a new foreign policy initiative, which had no analogue before. Specialists of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, on behalf of the Head of State, developed the State Program of the Republic of Kazakhstan "The Way to Europe", which consisted of 10 priorities for the development of the main areas of cooperation with the European Union.

A set of measures was envisaged to develop cooperation with the European Union in the field of technological and energy cooperation, in the field of transport, in the field of technical regulation and metrology, to develop trade and economic relations, cooperation in the development of small and medium-sized businesses, cooperation in the field of quality of life, in humanitarian measurement. It was also supposed to improve the Kazakh institutional and legal framework using the positive European experience. Along with this, it was planned to create conditions for the successful chairmanship of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the OSCE in 2010 [119].

Thanks, among other things, to the clearly formulated tasks and directions of the state program "The Path to Europe", Kazakhstan received the trust of the world community and began to chair the OSCE with a solid baggage of developments in all three dimensions of this organization: political-military, economic and environmental, as well as human (human rights, democracy, election monitoring).

The experience of successful chairmanship in such an authoritative international structure contributed to the consolidation of confidence in Kazakhstan and formed a precedent for promoting the interests of Central Asia at such a level, which, in turn, was successfully applied on the scale of membership in the UN Security Council in 2017-2018.

The question of the need for a new Agreement with the European Union was raised by the Kazakh side at almost all bilateral meetings. The negotiations held in Brussels in December 2006 between the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev and the President of the European Commission J.Barroso, who spoke about the growing intensity of Kazakh-European cooperation and the need for further development of its potential.

The issue of preparing a new agreement acquired particular urgency with the start of the implementation of the previously mentioned State Program "The Path to Europe", thanks to which Kazakhstan identified for itself the most priority areas of interaction with the European Union.

At the end of 2008, specialists from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan began work on the preparation of the Concept of this document. During this period, appropriate consultations were held in a number of foreign ministries of states that had different levels of cooperation with the EU (Russia, Ukraine and Israel). At the beginning of 2009, the Concept of the new agreement was prepared and submitted to all foreign policy departments of the EU countries, as well as to the European Commission. The Concept includes the main provisions of the state program of the Republic of Kazakhstan "Path to Europe", designed for 2009-2011, as well as the Strategy for a new partnership of the European Union with the countries of Central Asia for 2007-2013. It was no coincidence, since both of these documents, as the head of the EU Delegation to Kazakhstan N. Justen noted at the time, had “significant points of contact”.

In November 2009, a Joint Political Statement was adopted to initiate the development of a new Agreement. Since October 2011, 8 rounds of official negotiations and about 40 videoconferences have been held. During the working visit of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev to Brussels on October 9, 2014, a Joint Statement was signed on the completion of the negotiation process on the Agreement [120].

On December 21, 2015 in Astana, the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the Republic of Kazakhstan, on the one hand, and the European Union and its Member States, on the other hand, was signed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan E. Idrisov and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and security policy of F. Mogherini [120]. The Agreement entered into full force on March 1, 2020 after its ratification by the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as by all Member States of the European Union and the European Parliament.

This document covers the widest range of issues and contains 9 sections (287 articles in total), 7 annexes (to the chapters on services, public procurement, intellectual property, trade section) and the Protocol on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Affairs.

The agreement, which has entered into force, marks an important milestone in the EU-Kazakhstan relationship, which has a history spanning nearly three decades. Josep Borrell highlights "since Kazakhstan became the first country in Central Asia to sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union, the breadth and depth of our relations have grown significantly."

One of the key sections of the Agreement is the “Trade and Entrepreneurship” section, which takes into account the obligations of Kazakhstan both within the framework of membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and within the framework of membership in the Eurasian Economic Union.

There is no doubt that the new Agreement is a framework document. However, at the same time, it covers all areas of cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the European Union, creating a legal basis for in-depth cooperation on a wide range of issues based on reciprocity and respect for the national interests of the parties.

Unlike the Association Agreements signed by the European Union with countries aiming to join the EU (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia), the new Agreement does not contain obligations for political association and economic integration with the European Union, as well as obligations for deep political and economic reforms.

In addition, the document does not provide for preferential treatment in trade with the EU, but establishes the most favored nation and national treatment in full compliance with the obligations of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the World Trade Organization.

Thus, the new Agreement does not create economic risks for other foreign trade partners of Kazakhstan. The document once again reaffirms the commitment to comply with general principles - respect for democratic principles, the rule of law and human rights, and its commitment to the principles of a free market economy.

In particular, the readiness of Kazakhstan and the EU was expressed to promote international and regional peace and stability, economic development and promotion of sustainable development. The parties agreed to cooperate on the principles of dialogue, mutual trust and respect, equal partnership and mutual benefit.

In October 2014, the President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev published an article in the American magazine The Wall Street Journal, where he touched upon Kazakhstan's relations with the EU. In it, in particular, he pointed out that “Kazakhstan borders on Russia and China, but the EU is our largest trading partner, more than half of foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan comes from EU countries. Kazakhstani companies are increasingly investing in Europe.” He noted that “Kazakhstan is also diversifying its economy and has adopted a new green policy”. In order to attract and explore the best models and solutions in this area, Kazakhstan is holding the EXPO-2017 exhibition and hopes that European companies will be among its key participants”. In connection with the conflict in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia, N. Nazarbayev specifically pointed out that “we can hope to overcome global problems precisely through dialogue and cooperation, and not through the escalation of sanctions that will not work, but will disrupt economic growth on a larger scale”. Thus, official Astana is positioning itself in the conflict between Russia and the EU as a potential peacemaker, which was manifested in a number of mediation initiatives between Moscow and the West.

In the first half of November 2015, the President of Kazakhstan paid a visit to the UK. 24 agreements were signed for a total of $3.8 billion. The agreements provide for cooperation in the fields of energy, ecology, education, space activities, innovation, finance, investment, improvement of civil service and civil aviation. The press service of the President of Kazakhstan indicated that “the parties also agreed on mutual cooperation in the oil and gas industry, geology, and subsoil use”. It was especially noted that the British confirmed their participation in the upcoming international exhibition Astana Expo-2017. As a result of the negotiations, it was decided that the UK would render all possible assistance to Kazakhstan not only in the creation, but also in the development of the Astana International Financial Center. In addition, the parties reached an understanding on the establishment of the Investment Headquarters.

The European Union continues to be the number one trade and investment partner for Kazakhstan. The EU accounts for about half of Kazakhstan's foreign trade and accumulated foreign investment. Kazakhstan is the largest trade and economic partner of the united Europe in Central Asia.

Trade turnover between Kazakhstan and the EU for 2020 amounted to 23.7 billion US dollars, which is 23% lower than in the same period of the previous year (31.4 billion US dollars). However, this is explained by the general trend of the decline in international trade against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic [122].

The main export goods from Kazakhstan to the EU countries are: crude oil and oil products, natural gas, uranium, copper and copper cathodes, hydrogen, inert gases and other non-metals, ferroalloys, flax seeds, titanium and titanium products. The main imports to the Republic of Kazakhstan from the EU countries are medicines, computers, fittings for pipelines, components made of ferrous metals, dishwashers, equipment for filling and sealing containers, packaging of goods, vaccines, blood serum, blood, car bodies.

In general, in 2020, 17 billion US dollars of foreign direct investment (FDI) were attracted to the Republic of Kazakhstan, where the share of the EU was 47%. FDI inflows from the European Union for 2020 amounted to 8 billion US dollars. The main investor countries are the Netherlands ($5.1 billion), Belgium ($791 million), France ($693.5 million), Luxembourg ($323.5 million) and Germany ($265.2 million) [123].

Since 2005, US$160 billion in FDI has been attracted from EU countries, which is 53% of the total capital attracted (US$301.5 billion).

The first meeting of the Economic Forum "EU-Central Asia Partnership for Prosperity Dialogue" was held on December 7, 2020 in a virtual format. The event was attended by EC Vice-Presidents V. Dombrovskis and M. Shefcovic, First Deputy Prime Minister of Tajikistan, Deputy Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan, Minister of Trade and Integration of Kazakhstan, Deputy Prime Minister - Minister of Investment and Foreign Trade of Uzbekistan, EU Special Representative for Central Asia P. Burian, EIB Vice-President T. Czervinska, as well as representatives of the government circles of the Central Asian countries and heads of foreign organizations.

During the Forum, the current state and prospects for further strengthening multilateral cooperation in trade, economic, investment, transport and logistics areas were discussed, as well as measures taken by governments of countries aimed at mitigating the economic consequences associated with the pandemic [124].

It should be noted that Kazakhstan is also actively promoting cooperation in the field of modernization of the Central Asian states, development of market potential and diversification of economies, creation of a favorable investment climate. Particular attention is paid to the issues of promoting the development of small and medium-sized businesses. The most optimal in this context is the implementation of training programs, trainings to improve skills for representatives of SMEs of the Central Asian states (“capacity building”).

It is important to emphasize that Kazakhstan on an ongoing basis makes proposals to improve the EU Strategy for Central Asia, which are reflected both in the adopted documents of the European Union and in the practical plane of interaction.

A good example of successful cooperation within the framework of the implementation of Kazakhstani initiatives is the program for training Afghan students in higher educational institutions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the concept of which was proposed by the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2017. The program is designed to train at least 40 students from Afghanistan in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Its duration is 6 years (4 years - bachelor's degree, 2 years - master's degree). The main project manager is UNDP with the support of UN Women, and the sponsor is the European Union. The program budget at the initial stage was 2 million euros. It is planned that the majority of students will study in Kazakhstan, since the Kazakh side initiated this project and has the appropriate base for this. In Kazakhstan, training is provided in the following specialties: applied statistics, agriculture and mining, in Uzbekistan - agriculture. The first group of 30 Afghan women who will receive education in Kazakhstan under this project arrived in Almaty in October 2019 [125].

The bilateral dialogue on environment and climate change takes place within the framework of the Subcommittee on Energy, Transport, Environment and Climate Change, in accordance with the SRPF.

In December 2019, the European Commission launched the European Green Deal, a roadmap to ensure the resilience of the EU economy, turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities in all policy areas and guaranteeing a just transition for all.

In 2013, Kazakhstan began the transition to a green economy. This decision was motivated by the need to manage more natural resources. As part of its National Strategy for the Transition to a Green Economy, Kazakhstan has achieved positive developments, for example, in terms of waste management, in May 2018, the IGTIC Green Technology Center was opened in Nur-Sultan.

The EU is actively looking for opportunities to support Kazakhstan's national program for the transition to a green economy.

The EU supports Kazakhstan's efforts to improve water security and the climate. Investments and activities are being supported that will improve water use efficiency and climate change resilience in the Kazakh part of the Aral Sea Basin and restore the critical ecosystem around the North Aral Sea. This should have a positive impact on the environment outside the project area.

One of the latest bilateral projects between the EU and Kazakhstan to support Kazakhstan's transition to a green economy was successfully completed in 2018. Kazakhstan may also be supported by the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) program funded under the partnership instrument [126].

The EU has provided high-level political support and substantial financial support for the establishment of a Low Enriched Uranium Bank (LEUB) in Kazakhstan, owned and controlled by the International Atomic Energy Agency, but managed by the Government of Kazakhstan in accordance with RoK legislation, IAEA safety standards and guidance. The Bank is intended to provide countries implementing programs for the peaceful use of nuclear energy with a guaranteed supply of LEUB in the event that it cannot be obtained on the commercial market or otherwise.

The EU and Kazakhstan are partners in the Energy Charter. Kazakhstan was also a beneficiary of the EU4Energy technical assistance program on the creation of competitive energy markets, the development of renewable energy sources and their efficient use [127].

In general, the support of the European Union has been important for the development of Kazakhstan since the country's independence in 1991. During this time, the EU has funded more than 350 projects worth €180 million, focusing on:

* strengthening the capacity of regional and local authorities.
* support for justice sector reforms.
* increasing the capacity of the public sector to carry out social and economic reforms.

Moreover, Kazakhstan benefits from several regional programs:

* EU-Central Asia Rule of Law Programme.
* Program "Central Asia Invest".
* Program for the Promotion of International Trade in Central Asia.
* SWITCH Asia.

The development of cooperation is also being facilitated by regional programs funded by the EU:

* EU-Central Asia Policy Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change (WECOOP).
* Central Asian Water and Energy Program (CAWEP).
* Financial Resilience and Accelerated Disaster Risk Reduction Program. (From assistance to a new partnership [128].

The EU supports ongoing legal reforms in Kazakhstan and the promotion of human rights by offering experience and know-how, in particular through financial and technical cooperation and specific projects funded under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

With a budget of €1 million a year, the EU is funding various projects in Kazakhstan that focus on promoting a pluralistic political system while strengthening the role of civil society.

Kazakhstan also benefits from a number of tools and programs:

* An instrument of cooperation in the field of nuclear safety, contributing to the provision of a high level of nuclear safety, radiation protection and the application of effective and efficient safeguards for nuclear materials in third countries;
* A tool that promotes stability and peace, targeting crisis response, crisis preparedness and conflict prevention: Central Asia Border Management Program (BOMCA) and Central Asia Counter Narcotics Action Program (CADAP).

The Erasmus+ program aimed at supporting the mobility of students and teachers, as well as capacity building projects. For the period 2014-2020, the EU allocates 454.2 million euros for the implementation of regional cooperation projects in Central Asia, including 115 million euros for the Erasmus + program. As part of the Erasmus + program, more than 2,000 short-term scholarships have already been awarded for Kazakhstani students and teaching staff for study and internships in Europe, and almost 1,000 scholarships for European students to study in Kazakhstan. In addition, 137 Kazakh undergraduates received scholarships for a joint master's program in Europe.

In 2019, in response to a proposal from the Government of Kazakhstan, the EU launched a €2 million program implemented by UNDP in collaboration with UN Women to support the economic empowerment of Afghan women through education and training in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This project aims to build resilience and support the social and economic empowerment of Afghan women through education and training in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This first tripartite cooperation program between the EU, Afghanistan and Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) expands the scope of development cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan.

The EU and its member states have mobilized €134 million for the countries of Central Asia. In July 2020, the EU launched the €3 million Solidarity Program for Response to the COVID-19 Crisis in Central Asia, with a focus on Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

The program, implemented by the World Health Organization, will provide support for two years to mitigate the impact of the current outbreak of the pandemic and contribute to the long-term resilience of national health systems [128].

**3.2. Dynamics of partnership between the EU and the countries of Central Asia at the present stage**

Another key area of ​​EU cooperation with the Central Asian states is assistance in the humanitarian and social sphere, related, among other things, to the promotion of the EU's "soft power" in the region.

In November 2014, EU High Commissioner for Foreign Policy K. Ashton was on a visit to Central Asia. During it, it was confirmed that cooperation in the "Central Asia - EU" format in the humanitarian and social areas will continue to develop.

On October 9, 2014, Head of the Cooperation Section of the Delegation of the European Union to Kyrgyzstan J.S. Madsen said that the European Union allocates to the countries of Central Asia from 2014 to 2020. 1 billion euros for the implementation of various projects in the field of the rule of law, the development of education, the development of rural regions, etc. The funds will be allocated on a bilateral basis to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, can receive assistance through regional cooperation, which will also receive part of the declared funds.

The previous seven-year period of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia from 2006 to 2013 was designated the amount of 750 million euros. From 1991 to 2004 EU financial assistance to the countries of the Central Asian region amounted to 1.132 billion euros. The funds were used to ensure food security in the form of humanitarian assistance, to fight poverty, support education and the creation of civil society.

J. S. Madsen's speech gives an idea of how this assistance will be distributed among specific programs, using the example of Kyrgyzstan: it will receive 194 million euros directly, and it will additionally receive about a quarter of 1 billion euros from regional programs. There are three key areas to which funds will be allocated - the rule of law, education and integrated rural development [105].

Interaction between Western European countries and other states of Central Asia is also developing. Much attention is paid to cooperation with Turkmenistan in the energy sector. Back in 1997, during a visit to Germany by former President of Turkmenistan S. Niyazov and his meetings with representatives of business circles, German business leaders expressed their interest in investing in Turkmenistan's gas projects, in particular, in the construction of export pipelines. However, at that time, the political situation in neighboring Afghanistan (the Afghan route already seemed the most promising at that time) was at least uncertain, and German business took a wait-and-see attitude. After the change in the situation in Afghanistan, in July 2002, a large group of German businessmen arrived in Ashgabat, headed by the Commissioner of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany for Foreign Trade, State Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology A. Gerlach. President S. Niyazov invited German companies to participate in the construction of the Caspian gas pipeline, and representatives of the German side analyzed the possibilities of their participation in other promising projects in the gas industry [6].

German companies participated in the reconstruction of the Turkmenbashi complex of oil refineries, which plays a strategic role in the country's economy. The long-standing "special relationship" that links the leadership of Turkmenistan with Deutshe Bank is also well known. It should be noted that after the death of Niyazov and the coming to power of G. Berdimuhamedov, the contacts of German businessmen with the authorities of Turkmenistan have significantly strengthened. In November 2008, during the visit of the new Turkmen president to Germany, the energy theme was the main one. As Minister of Economics and Technology of Germany M. Gloss noted, the results of the first stage of the international audit of the group of Turkmen oil and gas fields South Iolotan - Osman and Yashlar provide guarantees to potential investors and make the Turkmen market very attractive for Western companies.

In April 2009, the government of Turkmenistan signed a long-term memorandum with the German company RWE as a shareholder in the Nabucco gas pipeline project. It was assumed that Turkmen resources could be connected to this transnational communication through the Caspian through the construction of an underwater pipeline to the coast of Azerbaijan. These issues continued to be discussed later, at the Turkmen-German energy symposium in Berlin in 2011, at the Day of the German Economy in Turkmenistan in 2012. As is known, there was no progress on the issue of building a trans-Caspian gas pipeline. At present, Germany is represented in Turkmenistan in the oil and gas industry, the textile industry, healthcare, transport and communications, and the agro-industrial sector. 62 German companies work here, which have implemented such projects as the construction of lubricating oil and paraffin production units, a diesel fuel purification unit from water at an oil refinery in the city of Turkmenbashi, and the construction of a compressor station in Korpej. Cooperation has been established with German companies to provide the healthcare sector of Turkmenistan with the latest types of medical equipment and train specialists.

Italians are also preparing to enter the Turkmen market in the foreseeable future. During the meeting, which took place back in November 2009 in Rome, the former Italian Prime Minister S. Berlusconi and the former President of Turkmenistan G. Berdimuhamedov signed four major cooperation agreements, including in the energy sector, including an agreement on the joint gas production of ENI and state concern "Turkmengaz". A number of new agreements in continuation of the above were concluded in early May 2015 during the visit of President Berdimuhamedov to Italy.

One of the significant moments in the relations of Turkmenistan with the EU can be called the accreditation in February 2020 of the Ambassador of the European Union. Prior to this, European interests in Ashgabat were represented by the head of the EU Contact Office in Turkmenistan. The full-scale Delegation of the European Union in Ashgabat was opened only in the summer of 2019.

Thus, based on the decision of Brussels to change the presence in Turkmenistan to a full-fledged representation and appointment of an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Ashgabat, one can expect an intensification of cooperation between Turkmenistan and the EU, including in the implementation of the project for the supply of Turkmen gas to Europe [147].

Since 2007, the activities of the OSCE Center in Turkmenistan, which previously had only monitoring functions, have expanded.

However, even despite the fact that the European Union has to a certain extent entrenched itself in the Turkmen economy, the scale of European influence on the country is still insignificant. The level of trade relations between the EU and Turkmenistan remains at a rather low level. European exports to the country have almost halved from 1.16 billion euros in 2016 to 571 million in 2019. A similar trend is observed with Turkmen exports to the EU, which decreased from 637 million euros in 2016 to 377.2 million euros in 2019. At the same time, in 2018 it showed the lowest historical value, amounting to only 218 million euros [123].

It should be noted that of all the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan receives the smallest amount of assistance from the EU. This is due both to the rather closed nature of society and the impossibility of carrying out the activities of foreign non-governmental organizations in the country, and to the relatively high level of official per capita income. It is noteworthy that under the assistance program for 2014-2020, the EU provided assistance to Turkmenistan only in the field of education, and then only until 2017.

The weakness of the economic presence of the European Union in Turkmenistan is also due to the fact that European business here is still limited mainly to participation in projects on the Caspian shelf. Given the absence of any prospects for large-scale oil production, European companies are highly likely to leave the shelf. Moreover, in the conditions of low world oil prices, its production in deep water areas is likely to become unprofitable.

European-Turkmen interaction is also complicated by the ongoing disagreements on human rights issues in Turkmenistan, as well as, to a certain extent, a specific external course: formally neutral, but essentially isolationist. And although this course was especially typical for the period of S. Niyazov's rule (1991-2006), during the presidency of G. Berdimuhamedov (since 2007), there were no cardinal changes in the foreign policy of Turkmenistan.

We consider D. Alexandrov's opinion regarding the disputability of V. Paramonov's, A. Strokov's and Z. Abduganieva's convictions that changes in the political system of Turkmenistan are among the achievements of the EU in Central Asia not groundless. Thus, the work of this group of authors notes “a shift from a de facto totalitarian regime under President S. Niyazov to a milder authoritarianism with formal elements of a democratic state” [148].

From the recent events, we should note the meeting on May 4, 2022. Turkmen leader Serdar Berdimuhamedov met with the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Teri Hakala. The parties informed each other of their interest in further expanding the established effective cooperation. In this context, mutual readiness to search for better forms and new vectors of interaction, as well as its intensification in the field of politics, economics, the cultural and humanitarian sector and ecology, was noted.

Berdimuhamedov stressed that the development of mutually beneficial ties with the European community has been and remains one of the main aspects of the state's foreign policy aimed at strengthening international partnerships for the benefit of common interests. Along with this, he expressed confidence that the current visit of Hakala will contribute to the further development of relations between Turkmenistan and the EU, as well as give a new impetus to the expansion of the dialogue.

The interlocutors focused on the projects implemented in the state together with the Union in the field of legislation, education, development of information and communication technologies, agro-industrial complex and water management, assistance in the implementation of international conventions on ensuring nature protection, climate change and others.

Uzbekistan, having a huge geopolitical importance, plays a somewhat smaller role than Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in terms of European economic interests. Germany began economic cooperation with Uzbekistan back in 1992. To date, relations between the two states are regulated by more than 100 treaties and agreements on interstate, intergovernmental and interdepartmental levels. Since 1994, intergovernmental agreements “On financial and technical cooperation” have been concluded between the Republic of Uzbekistan and Germany on an annual basis, indicating a list of joint projects planned for implementation by both parties within the framework of German state concessional loans and grants. Germany participates in more than 50 projects implemented in Uzbekistan on the terms of export financing. Total cost of these projects is almost 1 billion US dollars. In 2014, the trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Germany increased by 10% compared to 2013, reaching 461.2 million euros.

An important role in the development of relations between Uzbekistan and the EU was played by the visit of President I. Karimov to Brussels on January 24, 2011. During it, a Memorandum of Cooperation in the energy sector, a Memorandum on the implementation of financial and technical cooperation projects and an Agreement on the establishment of the EU Delegation in Uzbekistan were signed. Head of the European Commission J.M. Barroso welcomed the signing of these documents, saying that the new memorandums open up great prospects for cooperation between the EU and Uzbekistan in the field of energy, in the modernization of the fuel and energy complex, in the implementation of energy-saving technologies and the development of transport, communication and transit corridors between regions [6].

Uzbekistan takes an active part in the events held within the framework of the interregional dialogue between the EU and Central Asia at the level of foreign ministers. In this regard, on May 18, 2015, a delegation of Uzbekistan headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Kamilov visited Brussels to participate in the regular meeting of the EU Cooperation Council - the Republic of Uzbekistan. A Memorandum was signed on the establishment and functioning in Tashkent of the Regional Secretariat of Centers of Excellence for Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Materials for Central Asia.

On February 9, 1995, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the Kyrgyz Republic and the European Union was signed in Brussels (entered into force on June 1, 1999). The content and text of these agreements are quite similar, so this document can be called a model. Priority in cooperation was given to the economic direction. However, the document also provides for the provision of an appropriate framework for the political dialogue of the parties, the promotion of sustainable development, the strengthening of political and economic freedoms, the support of Kyrgyzstan's efforts to strengthen democracy, the provision of a basis for social and cultural cooperation, and the promotion of activities of mutual interest [120].

After the entry into force of this Agreement in the early 2000s, interaction began to develop by connecting other areas of cooperation - issues of regional security, energy and water resources, as well as human rights issues.

Within the framework of the basic document, as well as other sectoral agreements, the European Union provided assistance to Kyrgyzstan in a wide range of areas: ecology, development of democratic institutions, human rights, socio-economic, humanitarian and educational reforms, border security, combating drug trafficking, ensuring food security.

After the “Tulip Revolution” of 2005, Kyrgyzstan was considered by Europe for a long time as an “island of democracy” in Central Asia.

By developing contacts with the EU, the leadership of Kyrgyzstan hoped to give its foreign policy a more balanced character, balancing the expanding influence of Russia and the declining presence of the United States.

It should be noted that the European Union has become one of the main donors of Kyrgyzstan in the field of sustainable development and reforms. Between 2014 and 2020, the EU provided the country with €174 million in development grants. Assistance focused primarily on three main areas and measures to support them: integrated rural development, education and the rule of law. More than 70% of EU bilateral assistance to Kyrgyzstan is provided in the form of budgetary support - the funds are transferred to the state budget, and the Kyrgyz authorities are responsible for implementing reforms in accordance with the criteria agreed between the parties [122].

It is noteworthy that since 2016, the trade turnover between the EU and Kyrgyzstan has been showing stable growth. If in 2015 it was 320.5 million euros, then in 2018 it reached 917.3 million euros, and in 2019 - 1.15 billion euros.

It should also be noted here that Kyrgyzstan is one of the two Central Asian countries (along with Kazakhstan) with which the European Union has a trade deficit. The dynamics of this deficit was outlined in 2018. While in 2017, exports from the EU to Kyrgyzstan exceeded imports from Kyrgyzstan to the EU by 127 million euros, in 2018 they began to yield to imports by 347.5 million euros, and in 2019 - by 486 million euros [123].

At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to the continuing raw orientation of Kyrgyz exports, which mainly consists of precious metals and gold, agricultural products (raw cotton, tobacco, vegetables, beans, mushrooms and fruits), vehicles and their parts, engines, equipment , waste of ferrous and non-ferrous metals. In turn, machines (industrial equipment, mechanical devices, electrical machines and components), vehicles and their parts, optical instruments and instruments, pharmaceuticals, various food products, mineral oils (lubricants), paper, cardboard and products from them [124].

In November 2017, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy F. Mogherini visited Bishkek, who stated that the European Union is ready to start negotiations on a new agreement on in-depth partnership and cooperation with the Kyrgyz Republic in the near future. She also noted that “in recent years, significant work has been carried out in Kyrgyzstan to improve the electoral process and increase the transparency of elections, which is a good example not only for the republic, but for the entire region of Central Asia” [125].

Earlier, on October 9, 2017, the Council of the European Union approved a mandate to negotiate a draft new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Kyrgyzstan. This agreement, which includes eight sections and covers almost all areas of interaction, should become a new framework document aimed at strengthening Kyrgyz-European relations in all areas of cooperation. The first round of negotiations on the new project took place in Brussels on December 19, 2017 [126].

In total, five negotiating rounds were held (in December 2017, in March, April, June and October 2018). The negotiations were held within the framework of three joint thematic negotiating groups: 1) common goals, issues of political dialogue and reforms, justice and freedom, human rights and security; 2) trade and investment; 3) sectoral issues, economic and sustainable development, current realities and future prospects [126].

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During his visit to Brussels on April 11, 2018, the President of Kyrgyzstan S. Jeenbekov noted that the country attaches priority to cooperation with the European Union and moreover, Kyrgyzstan considers the EU as an important partner for sustainable development. He welcomed the launch of negotiations on a new Enhanced Partnership Agreement and praised the assistance provided by the EU aimed at strengthening the principles of democracy and the socio-economic development of the country. In turn, the HR/VP F.Mogherini stated that “the EU fully supports the initiatives of Kyrgyzstan, and will continue to assist in the implementation of the priority areas for the development of the country voiced by the President of Kyrgyzstan” [127].

On July 6, 2019, during the visit of F. Mogherini to Kyrgyzstan, the initialing of the new Agreement on Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and the European Union took place. In addition, a Financial Agreement was signed on the education program in the amount of 35.76 million euros for 2019-2021, aimed at supporting the Government of Kyrgyzstan in implementing structural reforms in the education sector [130].

Thus, the process of agreeing on a new basic agreement between Kyrgyzstan and the EU took a little more than a year and a half, which can be called a record time for such a document. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that the text of the agreement itself and the negotiation model used during its discussion were, in fact, borrowed from a similar negotiation process between the EU and Kazakhstan.

Initially, it was assumed that the Agreement would be signed before the end of 2019, but in December the head of the EU Delegation announced that the procedure was postponed until next year, and the spokesman for the Delegation explained that the draft was being studied for consistency with the international obligations of both parties [131].

However, the Agreement was not signed in 2020 either, which is due, on the one hand, to objective technical reasons caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and, on the other hand, to the political crisis in Kyrgyzstan that began in October 2020, which resulted in another change of power in the country.

 On October 15, 2020, the head of European diplomacy J. Borrell made a statement according to which "the European Union has taken note of the resignation of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic S. Jeenbekov after the recent invalidation of the results of the parliamentary elections." The extreme importance of “that the powers and duties of the President are exercised within the legal framework of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic in compliance with the international obligations of the state, including in the areas of the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms,” was emphasized. It is noted that “the transfer of presidential powers by the Speaker of the Jogorku Kenesh to Prime Minister S. Zhaparov raises serious questions, since the Kyrgyz Republic is a parliamentary democracy in which the separation of powers must be respected and maintained” [132].

Commenting on the results of the presidential elections held on January 10, 2021, the European Union noted that, according to the preliminary findings and conclusions of the OSCE/ODIHR International Election Observation Mission, there were unequal conditions for candidates, the use of administrative resources and violations of campaigning procedures. The EU also called for parliamentary elections to be held in the country as soon as possible [133].

In addition, referring to the opinion of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and the OSCE/ODIHR, the European Union, in its statement of March 19, 2021, drew attention to their conclusions, according to which “certain provisions of the draft new Constitution threaten the necessary balance of the branches of government, as well as the protection of personal freedoms having essential for democracy and the rule of law”, emphasizing “serious shortcomings in the procedure for the development and adoption of the draft of the new Basic Law submitted to the referendum” [134].

Thus, the European Union has probably decided to postpone the signing of the new Agreement until the final normalization of the situation and assessment of the situation in Kyrgyzstan, which should develop after the constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections.

The bilateral agenda of EU-Kyrgyzstan relations consists of political issues related to the development of democracy, human rights and the rule of law; economic issues related to the expansion of trade; and bilateral assistance programs in these areas.

Kyrgyzstan is an active participant in the implementation of the EU regional projects for Central Asia. Priority for the country are such areas as education, BOMCA and CADAP projects, as well as the development of the rule of law [135].

In 2014-2020, the EU provided €450 million for regional cooperation projects in Central Asia, including €115 million for the Erasmus+ program aimed at enhancing student and faculty mobility and supporting vital people-to-people contacts. However, not all programs work effectively, corruption and bureaucracy are cited as the reasons.

For thirty years of cooperation, a range of problems has been identified, the urgent solution of which will contribute to the growth of positive dynamics in relations between the EU and Kyrgyzstan.

Periodic tension in relations also raises the issue of problems in the field of building a civil society and observance of human rights in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the unstable political situation in the country as a whole.

 The new EU Strategy for Central Asia is important for Kyrgyzstan, as it moves its relations with the EU from the “recipient-donor country” plane to a completely different level, where all Central Asian states are considered as EU partners.

Thus, it is very important for Kyrgyzstan to use all available potential to establish long-term and promising cooperation with the European Union.

On the whole, only the deepening of democratization processes and the preservation of political stability in Kyrgyzstan can become the guarantor of successful cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and the European Union and receiving further assistance from the EU.

Tajikistan plays the least role in Central Asia for the European Union, both due to its remoteness from the main trade routes, and due to the lack of significant reserves of mineral energy resources in the country.

On the other hand, the European Union also does not take first place among the foreign policy priorities of Tajikistan. In the Concept of its foreign policy, adopted in 2015, cooperation with the EU is mentioned only after listing such partners as Russia, the Central Asian states and other CIS countries, China, Afghanistan, Iran and the United States.

The President of Tajikistan E. Rahmon paid an official visit to the headquarters of the European Union four times (in February 2009 in Brussels, in June 2011 in Strasbourg, in April 2013 and December 2015 in Brussels). During the first visit, which took place on February 9-11, 2009, an Agreement on Cooperation between the European Investment Bank and the Republic of Tajikistan was signed. On November 29, 2012, within the framework of business visit to Central Asia, Tajikistan was visited by the EU HR / VP K.Ashton [138].

In May 2019, as part of his tour of the countries of Central Asia, Dushanbe was visited for the first time by the President of the European Council D. Tusk. As one of the reasons for his visit, he noted the importance of Tajikistan in maintaining the security of the entire region. Having also visited the Tajik-Afghan border, D. Tusk noted that he was impressed by how much Tajikistan is doing to protect it, saying that he would seriously increase his assistance under the Border Management Program in Central Asia [139].

The legal basis for bilateral relations between the EU and Tajikistan is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed on October 11, 2004 and entered into force on January 1, 2010. Thus, Tajikistan became the last country in the region to sign such an agreement with the European Union. At the same time, almost immediately after its entry into force, the European Union opened its full-fledged diplomatic representation in Brussels (the second full-fledged representation in the region).

The signing of the Agreement was a significant event confirming that Tajikistan has made progress in overcoming its internal problems and reflects the recognition of the European Union in the desire of the republic to cooperate in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, as well as international humanitarian assistance in support of Afghanistan [141].

Tajikistan is also a beneficiary country of the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), through which the EU grants developing countries preferential access to its market by reducing tariffs on their products when they enter the EU market. Currently, Tajikistan and the EU are negotiating the accession of the country to the “European Union Program for Special Promotion of Sustainable Development (GSP+)”. [142]

The foreign trade turnover of the Republic of Tajikistan with the countries of the European Community is mainly focused on raw materials. In the structure of Tajik exports, the share of industrial raw materials and agricultural crops, cotton and aluminum is high. The EU, in turn, exports mechanical equipment, cars and pharmaceuticals to Tajikistan.

At the same time, the trade turnover of Tajikistan with the European Union is the lowest among the countries of Central Asia. In 2019, it amounted to 217.4 million euros, which is 3 million less than in 2018 (220.6 million euros), but 3 million euros more than in 2017 (214.1 million euros). Despite the fact that the bilateral trade turnover has been quite stable over the past three years, this clearly shows the need for comprehensive work to expand Tajik exports to the EU.

The EU's bilateral development assistance to Tajikistan has increased from about 20 million euros per year in the early 2000s to about 33 million euros per year today.

 In 2014-2020 financial assistance was mainly directed to raising the level of education, health care and the development of rural regions. Thus, 70 million euros were allocated for education reform, which includes improving the quality and relevance of general secondary and vocational education and training in order to better prepare school graduates for work.

 57.2 million euros were allocated for the development of healthcare by strengthening the management and management system in the healthcare sector, increasing the quantity, quality and accessibility of medical services.

Rural development, which aims to ensure the development of rural communities through inclusive capital formation while promoting the sustainable use and management of natural resources and ecosystems, and building resilience to extreme climate conditions, was funded with €100 million. As noted by the EU itself in its reference materials on cooperation with Tajikistan, “the main interest of the EU in Central Asia is to support long-term stability and promote gradual economic and political reforms to ensure the prosperity of the region in order to increase the involvement of Afghanistan in these processes” [144].

At the regional level, the EU also provides support in the areas of energy, environment, socio-economic development, education, border management (especially with Afghanistan), drug trafficking and crime. Tajikistan also receives thematic support on migration and asylum through the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, as well as financial support through global initiatives such as the Global Education Partnership and the Nuclear Safety Cooperation Instrument.

In addition, the European Union has developed a number of lending and investment programs, the implementation of which began in Tajikistan several years ago. The country received its first loan from the EIB in 2011, and in the same year the EU and Tajikistan signed a Financing Agreement for the Human Development Support Program in health, social protection and public financial management.

The EU also helped Tajikistan's accession to the WTO, which gave the country the opportunity to integrate into the world economy and is expected to give impetus to the development of its trade and investment ties with Europe.

Another promising area, in which the European Union is beginning to show interest in recent years, is its participation in hydropower projects.

Thus, in mid-2019, the European Union allocated 20 million euros to Tajikistan for the construction of the Sebzor hydroelectric power station in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. It is noted that by providing electricity, the European Union will help develop the area and improve the well-being of vulnerable segments of the population of Tajikistan. The design capacity of the hydroelectric power plant is 10 megawatts with the generation of 60 million kW/h of electricity [145].

In addition, according to the Head of the EU Delegation to Tajikistan, M. Yosefson, another HPP in which the EU is considering investing is Kairakkum, which is twice the size of Sebzor. Discussions are currently underway with the European Investment Bank on the financial aspects of a possible reconstruction of this hydroelectric power plant. At the same time, the agreement was actually signed and is now at the stage of studying the environmental impact, which must be carried out before the start of repair work [146].

**3.3. Barriers and problems of the EU strategy implementation in Central Asia**

When the first EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2007 came to the end, the European Council endorsed its further development in its previous form. As EU ministers concluded, the strategy “has proven its worth and relevance”. Among the achievements, the Council highlighted the expansion of the EU diplomatic presence in the regions since 2007 and the response to the crisis in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. It also noted that the previous objectives of the strategy: the protection of human rights, the establishment of the rule of law, democracy and a healthy governance structure; education and youth work; economic development, trade and investment; cooperation in the energy and transport sectors; environmental protection and rational use of water; сountering global security threats – remain relevant. In addition, issues related to Afghanistan have come to the fore. EU ministers noted the need to set clearer objectives for the strategy and formulate a long list of priorities.

 Undoubtedly, the initial stage of the Strategy implementation has become a prerequisite for the European Union. However, a closer look at the results achieved over the past five years raises more than just technical questions. The EU’s modest achievements in Central Asia raise questions, in particular, about the objectives and political methods of the EU’s work in the countries. Despite the existence of a strategy and the positive assessment that the EU has given to its own work, Europe remains a minor player in Central Asia and does not use its full potential. A closer look at EU policy in Central Asia since 2007 suggests that the EU Strategy has not achieved its stated objectives. The EU has certainly strengthened its presence. European institutions have developed a better understanding of the region’s specifics, European diplomatic missions have been expanded, and the EU has launched a number of assistance programmes. But all these EU efforts do not add up to a coherent strategy. Five years after the launch of the EU Strategy, the EU’s presence in the region is still low-key and vulnerable. The EU lacks a clear understanding of its geopolitical interests and relative competitive advantages.

With the adoption of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2019, both regions were waiting for more accurate and detailed document. As we have mentioned above, the first strategy lack of accuracy and had a general nature. The new strategy outlined its strategic interests in the region and proposed to build a stronger and more non-exclusive partnership with the Central Asian states so that the region develops as a more resilient, prosperous and cooperative economic and political space.

However, since the adoption of the latest Strategy, the world has faced two major crises, which did not leave EU-CA cooperation apart. Moreover internal events both in Central Asian and European regions had a huge effect on Strategy implementation, which finally led to the revision of the latest strategy.

The very first crisis is obviously Covid-19 pandemic. It is well-known, that stagnation came along with Covid-19. The pandemic has also exacerbated the accumulated problems of economic development in individual regions, including the European and Central Asia regions, including insufficient industrial cooperation between countries, exclusion from production chains, barriers to the movement of capital, services, goods and labor.

The United Nations has said that the shock wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has hit developing countries' economies much harder than the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, as the fallout from the coronavirus has hit these countries hard in the form of capital outflows, higher borrowing costs, currency depreciations and loss of export earnings due to the collapse of commodity prices [32].

2020 was a difficult year for the Central Asian states in all respects, as the coronavirus pandemic led to a slowdown in development. Kyrgyzstan experienced the largest drop in GDP - at 8.6%, followed by Kazakhstan - 2.6% [30]. Such a significant drop in GDP in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan was facilitated by quarantine measures, expressed in the restriction of business activity due to the introduction of lockdowns. In Kyrgyzstan, the GDP level was much lower due to the fact that the country's economy is import-dependent and undiversified, and a significant part of the country's GDP is provided by the service sector, which was effectively suspended in the spring-summer period of 2020. The pandemic and the subsequent restrictions also hit the tourism industry of Kyrgyzstan hard [19, p. 10]. Kyrgyzstan is still experiencing the consequences of Covid restrictions; the country's economy has not yet reached the pre-pandemic 2019 level. Although in the last months of 2021, there has been positive growth in the country's GDP [7].

It is also important to note the EU’s assistance during this period. The EU has mobilized €123 million for the region hit hard by COVID-19 through its Team Europe pandemic response initiative. The assistance aims to mitigate the immediate and long-term health, social and economic challenges caused by the pandemic.

In July 2020, the EU launched a comprehensive €3 million COVID-19 Solidarity Response Programme for the Central Asian region, focusing on Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The programme provides support to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and contributes to the long-term resilience of national health systems.

The European Investment Bank (EIB) has also mobilized a significant COVID lending package for the region.

Moreover, in 2021 the EU supported Central Asian countries through the COVAX programme, delivering vaccines to the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Another world crisis that has shaken the EU-CA cooperation was Ukrainian crisis. There is no doubt that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has changed the European Union’s approach to Central Asia. Over the last two years, it has become more important for the EU to maintain this region’s stability and harness its potential in energy and transportation. During this period, both sides have developed a model of regular political contacts at the highest level, updated their strategy for cooperation and launched new economic projects. These moves have been reinforced by complementary steps of the EU’s individual member states, mainly Germany and France. EU-Central Asia relations have been deepening despite the EU’s consistent criticism of the authoritarian nature of Central Asian governments.

These closer relations have presented the Central Asian states with an opportunity to avoid marginalisation in the wake of the war in Ukraine. They have perceived this as an attractive initiative in economic terms and, to some extent, in political terms, as a way of strengthening the region. Cooperation with the EU has complemented, but not replaced or undermined, Central Asia’s strong ties with Russia and China. These two countries have made it clear that they want to maintain their dominance over this region, but so far they have not made any clearly hostile moves against the EU’s cooperation projects and have even recognised some aspects of these projects as beneficial to themselves.

Under the current conditions, there is scope for the EU and the Central Asian states to further deepen their cooperation. This will depend on international developments, including the outcome of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the level of determination of the EU and the regional countries, and on Russia’s and China’s decisions on whether to maintain their restrained attitude. These plans have been reflected in intensive political dialogue (including visits by high-ranking EU politicians), in efforts to find optimal forms of cooperation and in the launches of new projects. Over time, it has become an important goal for the EU to convince the Central Asian states to comply with its sanctions regime against Russia, as Central Asia is a convenient channel for circumventing these restrictions. The EU has also been working with these countries to develop transport initiatives bypassing Russia.

Almost two years of work on a new approach to the region culminated in October 2023 when the Council of the European Union adopted the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia, which envisages enhanced cooperation in five key areas.

In fact, it is an update to the 2019 strategy that reflects the interests of both sides. Before it was drafted, the EU and Central Asia had raised their political dialogue to a higher level. Notably, they held two unprecedented ‘high-level meetings’ with the participation of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and most of the region’s leaders.

Economic issues, which are strongly linked to energy, climate/environmental and transport cooperation, feature prominently in the Joint Roadmap. At present, they can be regarded as the most important aspects of mutual relations, and may also be considered as the forward-oriented ‘vehicles’ of EU-Central Asia cooperation. The ties in these areas are those which have been strengthened the most. In November 2022, the EU launched two flagship initiatives for Central Asia as part of the Global Gateway: the Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate and the Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity.

In another important step, in late January 2024 the EU committed to provide €10 billion using various financial instruments to develop the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR, the so-called Middle Corridor), which connects Europe to China via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus or Turkey, bypassing Russia.

In November 2022, the EU signed an agreement with Kazakhstan on a strategic partnership in the area of critical raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen; more recently, in April 2024, it reached a similar agreement with Uzbekistan in the field of critical raw materials. These steps have been part of the EU’s efforts to implement its Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials, which was adopted in 2020.

Thus, based on the above, the following SWOT analysis can be presented for the implementation of the EU strategy in Central Asia, as well as the development of bilateral relations in general:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Strengths (S):** * A broad and multifaceted range of priority areas of cooperation;
* Common interests of both regions;
* Focus on promoting liberal values in the Central Asian region;
* Frequent ministerial and head of states meetings, summits;
* Regular events to promote human rights and good governance in the countries of the region;
* Promoting the development and deepening of integration processes;
* EU initiatives and programmes in various fields (security, energy, education etc) ;
* Developed trade relations.
 | **Weaknesses (W):*** The complexity of implementing the Strategy, partly due to its comprehensive nature;
* Insufficiently broad scale and coverage of the projects and programs being implemented;
* Limited funding;
* Lack of operational mechanisms to ensure security and stabilize the situation in the region;
* Different historical background and other factors, which could be seen as a barrier for successful implementation of the strategy;
* Internal and external factors, leading to problems of the strategy implementation.
 |
| **Opportunities (O):** * Strengthening the role of the EU as an actor in international relations;
* EU may use Ukrainian crisis as an opportunity to strengthen its ties in Central Asia;
* Favorable conditions for deepening intraregional integration in Central Asia;
* EU participation in regional integration associations;
* Successful development of democratization processes in the region;
* Successful initiatives and programmes in the region.
* Economic growth in Central Asia;
 | **Threats (T):** * Presence and competition of strong actors in the region;
* Interstate contradictions between countries in the region;
* Limited funding;
* Lack of a unified approach among EU member states;
* Contradictions between EU member states;
* Insufficient activity, particularly in the energy sector
 |
| Source: author’s own compilation based on literature review |

To sum up the analyses, both EU strategies played a vital role in formation and development of EU-CA regional cooperation. We agree that there are a number of successfully implemented initiatives and programmes. Moreover, the ministerial meeting, summits and cooperation itself between two regions improved. However, due to the presence of other dominating international actors in Central Asia and due to lack of operational mechanisms and insufficiently broad scale and coverage of the projects and programs being implemented, the strategy faced numerous barriers for its implementation.

**CONCLUSION**

Having analyzed the cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, we can claim that EU Strategy of 2019 for Central Asia is considered as an integral part of EU’s foreign policy in Central Asian region. No doubt, that EU continues to be one of the world's leading players and a benchmark for global stability and development. In this regard, the strengthening of its geopolitical position and influence on the Central Asian region through the intensification of economic, political and institutional interaction should be considered in a positive way. Moreover, the Strategy is an essential instrument which fosters the cooperation between two regions.

The research is structured around nine precise tasks and main goal, which have been successfully achieved. Furthermore, the study attempts to accomplish its main goal: to analyze the factors of cohesion in the EU-Central Asia cooperation under the framework of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia (2019), focusing on how these factors contribute to the strengthening and deepening of relations between the EU and the Central Asian states. Within this goal, it can be noted that the European Union is making increasing efforts to strengthen its strategic autonomy in key areas of development – from the sustainability of the energy system and the security of external borders to support for high-tech production. Against the backdrop of growing international instability and increasing challenges in the global economy, raising the level of relations with Central Asia to a strategic partnership is becoming an important part of Brussels’ foreign policy. This is a way to strengthen its presence in the region, a step towards diversifying trade routes, and a tool for increasing its own energy sustainability.

Moreover, having analyzed the evolution and transformation of EU’s foreign policy in Central Asia during the thirty four year period, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of the strategic priorities of the EU in Central Asia, the role of regional cooperation, and the factors that determine the effectiveness and sustainability of partnership in the context of geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics.

Within the goal of the research, the following tasks were achieved:

* the theoretical foundations of the foreign policy of the European Union were compared and the key trends in the contemporary foreign policy of the European Union were analyzed;
* the process of diversification of the EU foreign policy approaches to Central Asia was examined;
* a comparative analysis of the EU strategies in Central Asia and the main results of their implementation (including intermediate stages) was conducted. The research focused on successes and fails of the previous Strategy (2007) and the differences between both strategies.
* the process of implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2019 including Covid period till 2024 was examined. The Covid period brought significant changes to global politics. Thus, the research focuses on cooperation between the regions during Covid and post-covid periods.
* factors of Central Asia cohesion under the new EU Strategy for Central Asia were analyzed and a SWOT-analysis of the Strategy was conducted. Undoubtedly, the Strategy brought the region together. Frequent meetings of Central Asian leaders, increased bilateral and multilateral interactions, increased attention to domestic politics in Central Asia, and attempts to diversify partnership networks indicate the growing importance of Central Asia. Moreover, we believe that the EU is a unique example of successful integration and EU’s role in Central Asian integration is crucial. As a successful model of regional integration, the European Union can offer the CA countries many proven mechanisms (legal, economic, and others) for their regional convergence. The most important priority of the EU - promoting the deepening of regional cooperation is fully correlated with the goals and objectives of the Central Asian states in this direction. In this context, one cannot fail to note the EU's constant search for a balance between regional and bilateral interaction formats.
* By conducting SWOT-analysis, the study also identified the strong and weak points, opportunities and threats of the latest Strategy.
* the influence of internal and external factors in the process of implementation of the Strategy was examined. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine shook the established world order and became one of the largest military conflicts in Europe since World War II. The coalition of the so-called “collective West”, sanctions against Russia, the energy crisis in Europe and the revision of the world order all affected the development of Eurasia. Central Asia, which has the longest land borders with Russia and is intertwined with deep economic and political ties, reconsidered its place in balancing the anti-Russian and anti-Chinese axis with the interests of the West, using the principles of multi-vector diplomacy. The research examines how Central Asia took advantage of the geopolitical and geo-economic changes in 2022 and how these events changed the vectors of foreign strategy of the Central Asian countries.
* the contribution of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states to the formation and development of European foreign policy in relation to the region was determined.
* major problems and barriers during the implementation of strategy in Central Asia were identified.
* a recommendatory base for increasing the effectiveness of cooperation between the European Union and the Central Asian region for the future strategical documents was developed.

Jointly, these tasks formed a holistic framework that addressed various aspects of understanding the EU’s role and influence on regional cooperation in Central Asia. The research filled knowledge gaps, clarified perceptions and provided a comprehensive assessment of the EU’s engagement in the region.

The study highlights the growing cohesion among the Central Asian countries and EU’s significant role in regional integration. Overall, the fundamental geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges to the development trajectories of Central Asian states have contributed to a dynamic modification of Central Asian strategies. Above all, the threat of political and economic consequences of Russian aggression and the looming global recession have accelerated regional economic cooperation and strengthened the new unity of Central Asia. Other regional players have reconsidered the strategic importance of Central Asia in balancing Eurasian affairs in the midst of the current geopolitical transformation. Central Asia has used the risks and opportunities to accelerate the diversification of its transit potential by implementing a multi-vector policy.

We believe, that along with common objective interests and established ties in the Central Asian countries, there are also significant differences in various areas. Central Asia has an integration potential, but rapprochement should take place in stages, drastically change the established system, without prior preparation is fraught with dangerous consequences. The process of progressive movement towards unification should go through in stages. First of all, it is necessary to establish a format of multilateral cooperation, after which it is possible to move on to regional integration.

Possessing an impressive resource potential and a unique geographical position for creating transport corridors to European markets, Central Asia is still important for Europe's energy supply. In addition, it is important to understand that the states of Central Asia, which are members of the OSCE, are positioned in the European Union as an integral part of the European space. This is confirmed by the willingness of the Central Asian countries to cooperate with the EU in bilateral, regional and global formats.

We believe that the program documents adopted by the European Union in relation to the region have not always been perfect. But, despite certain shortcomings in the development and implementation of joint projects, European policy towards the Central Asian states can be called consistent and structured. Approaches to cooperation between the European Union and Central Asia are being transformed not only from the European side, but also from the countries of the region, which is confirmed in the national program documents of the latter. In the course of preparing and implementing EU strategies in the region, each of them adapts the European vector of its foreign policy activity to modern reality.

Summing up the results of a comprehensive review of the evolution of the development of EU policy and strategy in Central Asia, it can be stated that over the thirty four years of interaction, the region was not a problem and did not require constant attention and diversion of EU resources, as was the case, for example, in other areas of the post-Soviet space. This allowed the European side to develop a practical approach to interaction with the countries of the region, focusing on long-term strategic planning.

The thirty-four year period of cooperation between the EU and the Central Asian states, with some of which have already signed or are at the stage of preparation of a new type of agreement, opening up broad opportunities for bilateral cooperation, certainly contributed to their political and economic development. The diplomatic representation of the EU in the region has increased, assistance has been expanded and cooperation mechanisms have been introduced. In this vein, a new stage of political liberalization and diversification of the economy with a focus on industrial innovative development can be noted in Kazakhstan.

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

 **The conclusions drawn allow us to formulate a number of practical recommendations.**

 In order to widely and effectively use the opportunities of the CA-EU interregional cooperation format and taking into account the logical ending of EU Strategy of 2019, following things are necessary:

1. Active participation of all states of the CA region in the process of defining the topics and developing new regional programs of the EU;
2. Conducting an in-depth analysis of their needs in relations with the EU, which should not be limited only by the desire to obtain funding, exchange of experience, internships, etc.;
3. Prioritization of cooperation fields. It is important to make priority fields for both regions to identify key areas of cooperation and focus on them, rather than getting scattered.
4. Creation of cultural focus groups, before adopting new strategies or documents. These focus groups will take into account cultural and historical factors and barriers in implementation process.
5. Creation of an appropriate online portal for virtual institutionalization of EU-CA cooperation.

In addition, it is important to hold regular consultations between the parties on the status and prospects of regional programs in order to coordinate the measures taken and avoid their duplication. The development of criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of such programs within the framework of the document and their further use would make it possible to identify and correct shortcomings already in the process of work.

It is expedient to expand in each CA state a “pool” of analysts/think tanks on cooperation with the European Union from among representatives of civil society, research circles, etc., that is, independent experts.

The Central Asian states need to demonstrate openness to dialogue with the European Union and its partners, actively using, among other things, the opportunities of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia.

Moreover, it also seems promising:

– to organize a CA-EU-PRC dialogue on interconnectivity, taking into account the possible interface between the Chinese Belt and Road project and the EU Strategy on interconnectivity;

To achieve the above goals, among other things, it is important to inform the Europeans in a timely manner about the priority areas of national infrastructure projects of the countries of the region.

Of particular importance, in particular for Kazakhstan, is the sphere of science, technology and innovation. It seems expedient to strengthen the joint work of interested state bodies, departments and research organizations to develop evidence-based specific proposals for the development of cooperation with the EU in these areas.

It is necessary to use the significant potential of the European education system in the applied plane: create and ensure the functioning of European educational institutions in the region (schools, universities), increase the number of EU educational grants; strengthen the work between EU research institutions and the countries of the region. One of the priorities is to create an electronic platform for distance learning, continuous (lifelong), as well as e-learning.

It is necessary to develop and highlight in a separate area of EU-CA cooperation the empowerment of women, including the promotion of women's entrepreneurship in the region.

In order to strengthen the political and socio-economic interaction between the EU and Central Asia, it is also advisable:

- raise the level of interregional dialogue (from the ministerial format) to the CA-EU Summit;

- use on a regular basis new sectoral platforms for interregional interaction - the CA-EU Civil Forum and the CA-EU Economic Forum;

- to develop the Dialogue within the framework of the CA-EU ministerial meetings, Kazakhstan-EU Cooperation Committee in the political configuration, as well as the meetings of the CA-EU High-Level Dialogue on Politics and Security;

- to develop inter-parliamentary cooperation, as well as to establish a dialogue between the National Center for Human Rights of the Republic of Kazakhstan with European structures dealing with human rights issues.

It seems important to focus the attention of the EU on solving the main intra-regional problem - the rational use of transboundary water resources, where mutually exclusive approaches between upstream countries (water energy) and downstream countries (irrigation of agricultural lands) collide. Breakthrough projects are needed for the construction of new modern hydroelectric power plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, taking into account the interests of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as the introduction of digitalization and automation of processes in this area.

Promising is the establishment of an effective dialogue with the EU on the implementation of the "European Green Deal" and the intensification of cooperation with European financial institutions on "green" initiatives. This is of particular importance in the context of the so-called carbon tax planned to be introduced by the EU from 2023, which will also affect Kazakhstani exports (mainly hydrocarbons) to Europe.

At the same time, taking into account the EU's efforts to diversify external sources of raw materials, Kazakhstan and the countries of the region have the opportunity to increase exports of industrial and other types of products to the EU (for Kazakhstan, for example, mining and metallurgical products). In this regard, it is necessary to intensify efforts to remove barriers to access to the European market, including those arising from the application of sanitary and veterinary measures.

In addition, it is important to establish sustainable cooperation with the EU, including through investments, for the development of high-tech industries and energy efficiency in the Central Asian states. This goal is fully correlated with the goals of achieving carbon neutrality by Kazakhstan by 2060. For these purposes, it is necessary to ensure:

– a clear understanding of the business climate and business conditions in the Central Asian countries, the creation of favorable conditions for investors (also potential employers) at the legislative level;

- effective coordination of actions of state bodies, departments and business circles involved in determining the business conditions in the countries of the region.

Significant is the work to raise awareness in Central Asia about the activities of the EU in the region and, conversely, the EU should contribute to the formation of a positive image and investment attractiveness of the region in Europe. In general, the states of the region need to join forces in promoting the brand "Central Asia" in the world space and in the European Union, in particular.

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