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International Relations

Comparative Politics

# The role of Russia and the European Union in Central Asia

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## **I) Introduction**

Central Asia has been since ancient times a crossroad of civilizations able to be the transmitter of culture and technologies and it has been a crucial element of every empire that existed in Eurasia. It was part of the Iranian Achaemenid Empire, of the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great, of the Turks, of the Chinese and also of the Mongol Empire; all these ancient entities ruled parts of Central Asia in different periods of history. The Central Asian region was an essential element because it served as a transport hub of the Silk Road and it allowed each empire to extend its influence and to guarantee protection from the nomadic people of the steppes<sup>1</sup>.

The last great empire that was able to take control of such a crucial region was the tsarist Russia, which since the beginning of the 18Th century had exercised its influence and control over this region<sup>2</sup>. The type of government of Russia changed from Empire to union of socialist republics and lastly to a republic that was forced, by history, to retreat from such a strategic region. In each one of these mentioned eras, from Tsarist to Soviet Union to modern Russia, the Kremlin has always been able to be in control, even if just partially, of Central Asia but by adopting different strategies.

However, despite the predominant role of Russia in Central Asia in the last centuries, there have been various contenders for the control of the region in the past and even today. In the 19Th century, Russia had to compete with Great Britain during the so called “Great Game”; in the 20Th century, Central Asia was under the direct rule of the Soviet Union; but the power constellation has changed during the last thirty years and other great powers have tried to establish their influence in the region in various ways. Russia to be able to maintain its control in Central Asia has adopted various strategies depending on the circumstances and even in the last decades the used strategy in the region has drastically changed. For this reason, one of the primary purpose of this work will be to answer to fundamental questions regarding the strategies adopted by various players in the region:

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<sup>1</sup> LIU, Xinru (2010). *The Silk Road in World History*. New York, Oxford University Press, 168 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher I. (2009). *Empires of the Silk Road: a History of Central Asia*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 504 pp.

*“Which are the strategies of Russia and the EU towards the Central Asian region? Which of the adopted strategies have been more effective in the recent decades?”*

Nevertheless, this work will not be limited to the analysis of the strategies of modern Russia toward Central Asia but instead it will compare it with the strategy adopted by the European Union (EU). Both actors have relevant interests in the region but their approach is drastically different due to different resources, geographical position and mentality. The post-Cold War era has unbalanced the power structure of the region and has given the opportunity, for the better or for the worst, to other players to be involved in the region.

Since Central Asian republics gained their independence from the Soviet Union, they have had the opportunity to diversify their foreign policy and to adopt a multivector foreign policy; whether they cooperate with the former “ruler” or/and with the influential neighbor China, or with the USA or with the EU. Central Asian republics since the collapse of the Soviet Union have had the possibility to decide which Great Powers to follow depending on the possibilities and interests of the country.

A perfect example of multivector foreign policy has been Kazakhstan, even if the recent turmoil of the country has made it apparently more dependent on Russia. Despite its close ties with Russia, because of geographical and historical reasons, Kazakhstan has from its birth as an independent state been compelled to pursue a foreign policy characterized by constant re-balancing between traditional ties to Russia and the gravitational pull of the rising economic and strategic weight of China in Central Asia<sup>3</sup>. The government of Nazarbayev had tried to put its country as the bridge between East and West because of its unique position. This has been at the root of the regime’s construction of a multivector foreign policy that, in Nazarbayev’s words, seeks “mutually advantageous” and “good neighborly relations of confidence on the whole of the Eurasian continent.”<sup>4</sup>

However, despite Kazakhstan being the first country to pursue and name its foreign policy a “multivector” one it is not the only one that has taken this path. In fact,

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Clarke, National Security College, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University (09/04/2015). “Kazakhstan’s Multi-vector Foreign Policy: Diminishing Returns in an Era of Great Power “Pivots”?”. *The ASAN Forum*.

<sup>4</sup> Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan(09/02/2015). “Speech of the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev at the Lomonosov Moscow State University. Available at: <https://www.akorda.kz/>

all Central Asian countries have adopted, in their own version, a multivectoral foreign policy as an attempt to self-determination. Uzbekistan defined its foreign policy around the principle of *musqallik*, which aims for “a sort of genuine independence through legal, economic and cultural forms of non-dependency,”<sup>5</sup> with the future goal of becoming a “great state”<sup>6</sup>. Turkmenistan has decided to use a strictly neutral policy, that has the characteristic to not be involved in numerous regional organizations. Kyrgyzstan tries to keep good relations with Russia but at the same time seeks cooperation among its neighbors and outsiders of the region. Meanwhile, Tajikistan embraces an “open policy”, which gives the opportunity to the country to cooperate with any country involved in the region<sup>7</sup>.

Due to this more open foreign policies adopted by Central Asian countries, there has been a growing involvement of the institutions of the EU and of single member states of the EU in the region. As in the Russian situation, there has been a constant evolving of the EU’s strategy in respect to the region and it has evolved to be more effective in the region.

Within this work will be presented the involvement and interests of the Russian Federation and of the EU in Central Asia and it will describe how the strategies adopted in the region have evolved overtime. The description of these strategies will be essential because it will provide a full understanding of what have been the weaknesses of each approach to the region as a whole and it will help to create a more effective strategy to be adopted in Central Asia.

## **I.I) Relevance of the topic**

Central Asia is a region of key importance because of its geographical position and the richness in natural resources. The potential of this region is essential also in many points of views that will be examined later in this work. Furthermore, the region acquired relevance since the collapse of the USSR and the adoption of the multi-vector policy of

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<sup>5</sup> Bernardo da Silva Relva Teles Fazendeiro (2015). “Uzbekistan’s ‘Spirit’ of Self-Reliance and the Logic of Appropriateness: TAPOich and Interaction with Russia,” *Central Asian Survey* 34, no. 4: 487.

<sup>6</sup> Bernardo da Silva Relva Teles Fazendeiro (2015). “Keeping Face in the Public Sphere: Recognition, Discretion and Uzbekistan’s Relations with the United States and Germany, 1991–2006,” *Central Asian Survey* 34, no. 3: 344.

<sup>7</sup> Çağlar Kurç, (2018). “The puzzle: Multi-vector foreign policy and defense industrialization in Central Asia”. *Comparative Strategy*, 37:4, 316-330. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2018.1497352>

the countries of the region. This strategy adopted by the countries of Central Asia to external actors gave birth to a fervent competition within the region and it is for this reason that it is essential to analyze how the EU and Russia interact in the region. By analyzing how these two actors, with two extremely different histories in the region, try to interact with it there will be a more complete understanding of the region itself. A comparison of these two different approaches can provide a better understanding of the local politics of these countries in relation to external actors in general.

## **I.II) Literature review**

Many authors have covered the topic of Central Asia from various perspectives and all of them have played a major role in describing the region and in underlining the economic and geopolitical importance of this area of the world most of the time forgotten. Among the many that have described the geopolitical importance there is the famous work of H. J. Mackinder with his work “the geographical pivot of history” of 1904, in which he emphasized the geographical importance of this region for world domination. His theory, even if far away in time, it still played a major role in understanding the role of the region up to today. Furthermore, since this work discusses the strategies adopted by the Russian Federation and the European Union it will rely on several official documents describing the strategy of the involvement of both actors in the region.

Additionally, numerous Russian scholars and thinkers have described this region and the importance of it for the Russian foreign policy in relation to security issues but also as a rightful part of the Russian sphere of influence in world politics. To better understand the Russian Federation approach in the region it is essential to read and to analyze the work and theory of the former Russian foreign minister Primakov. Among the many authors that have described the region there is also Andrei Kazantsev, who has deeply described the major issues and mistakes made in the Russian strategy from the ‘90s to the 2000s. Furthermore, the work of Andrei Kazantsev has been essential in the adaptation of the Russian strategy in the region already since the early 2000s. To fully understand the Russian involvement in the region it is essential to deeply describe and analyze what has been the thought behind every decision of modern Russia. Taken from



this perspective, Russia does not appear to be so irrational as it is often described, but instead it becomes a much more rational actor on the world stage.

Another relevant author that has covered the topic from the Russian perspective is Alexei Malashenko, who has contributed in the development of an ad hoc strategy in central Asia since 2005, the basic element of his theories was the understanding that the Russian Federation was not able to sustain a beneficiary relation with all central Asian countries at the same time and thus he was one of the major thinker to push for a change of the Russian strategy in Central Asia and thus adopting a more flexible approach for each country of the region. Among the many other Russian authors that have covered this topic there is also the work of Ivan Safranchuk that will be essential to fully describe the recent Russian strategy in Central Asia. The works of these Russian prominent authors and the work of many others is the foundation of this research work for the description and the understanding of the Russian approach to the region.

Since this work has the purpose of providing specific suggestions to the European Union on how to interact in the most profitable and effective way with the countries of Central Asia, it will be based on the work of several prominent authors that have written about this region for the institution of the EU or even for the US government. Additionally, the documents of the EU institutions that describe the involvement in the region are an essential documentation that can effectively describe the dynamics behind the European practical interests in the region. This research work is based on the work of researchers that have worked for European institutions such as: Jos Boonstra, Marlene Laruelle, Andreas Marazis, Tika Tsertsvadze, Jacqueline Hale, Sébastien Peyrouse. All of them have played an essential role in describing the evolution of European involvement in this region. In particular, the work made by Jos Boonstra has played an essential role in underlining the mistakes made in the early attempts in trying to create a fruitful interaction with the countries of Central Asia. Another essential scholar in describing the region has been Katharina Hoffmann, whose work has given a better understanding of how to interact in such a diverse region.

Furthermore, to fully comprehend the Normative power exercise by the EU at the international arena is essential to analyze the work of Ian Manners and his description of a normative power in international relations. However, the work of Ian Manner would be incomplete if it is not analyzed also the work of Richard Rosecrance and other scholars,

who have been among the first ones to describe Europe as a normative power. The works of these authors and others that have collaborated in describing the EU interest in the region and its strategy are crucial elements to understand the region and to improve the effectiveness of the EU in the region.

Last but not least, the work of other scholars and researchers that have compared the strategies used in Central Asia, such as Shairbek Juraev, Mirzokhid Rakhimov and others have been extremely useful in developing this research.

### **I.III) Research question**

This work will focus on the strategies adopted by the EU and the Russian Federation in the region of Central Asia. It will analyze the initial approach of both entities in the early 90s, when the five Central Asian countries were established, and how they have evolved in the early 2000s until today. Both the EU and Russia had to adapt to a changing environment and had to face the reality of new countries that had yet to be consolidated within themselves. They both share several objectives in the region and they have been cooperating and competing for influence depending on the aims they wanted to achieve. However, the European Union is a newcomer in the region, despite having been one of the major investors in the area for the last 30 years, it presents the major issue of the geographical distance that has made it a less active player in the area.

Nonetheless, in recent years the economical and political interests of the EU have reached also the Central Asian's region but they have not been effective in creating a coherent strategy for the EU in this region. As a matter of fact, the strategy used by the EU to interact with the five Central Asian countries has changed and it is still evolving, still looking for its proper balance in the region.

In a broader sense, the major aim of my work will be to provide a description of which strategy is better to be used by any external actor in order to interact in the most effective way with the five Central Asian republics. In fact, the utmost important and broader research question of this work is:

*“What is the most suitable strategy for outside actors to interact with the countries of Central Asia in order to reach their goals?”*

In order to comprehend which should be the strategic direction to be adopted in this region, it is of essential importance to analyze the strategies used by two such different actors as the EU and the Russian Federation. Both actors have similar but competitive interest in the region, but they do not have the same experience in interacting within the local governments, on this aspect Russia has a deeper interaction with the people of Central Asia; as well, they do not have the same geographical distance, which plays a crucial role in the capacity to interact and influence the region. However, despite all these differences both actors interact within the region even if with different tools. To better analyze their different strategies it is of crucial relevance to understand which one are the interests of these actors in the region. Central Asian republics are so appealing because of several factors that will be later analyzed in depth, specifically this work will analyze the major aspects of interest for the EU and Russia in the region.

After analyzing the reasons that make this region of such a high interest, it is fundamental to describe and analyze what strategies have been adopted in respect to it. Thus to deeper understand what has been done so far by both players and how it affected the region. It is of use for this study to describe how the strategies adopted by the Russian Federation and by the European Union have evolved overtime to better address their respective objectives and to face the reality of these countries. In fact, the EU has changed some fundamental aspects of its strategy in the region by becoming more condescending on some issues within these five countries. The evolution itself is not a negative aspect but it shows how the EU is becoming more pragmatic in dealing with other regions.

#### **I.IV) Aim of the research**

This research has the aim to provide a better understanding of the politics of the countries of Central Asia in relation to external actors. Specifically, this work analyze and compare which approach or strategy is more effective in dealing with the local understanding of power and the local traditions. The reality of the politics of the region of Central Asia is extremely diverse and can not be summarized in any specific scheme. However, the experience of the Russian Federation and the one of the European Union can be used as an example of the complexity of local politics. This work will bring light to the politics of a region that is too often forgotten.

### **I.V) Task of the research**

This work has four primary tasks. The first one is to provide a full understanding of the reality of the region of Central Asia, by providing a description of the complexity of the security of the region and the current economic situations of the countries of the region. The second task is to describe the involvement of the Russian Federation within the region since the 90s and how the Russian approach has evolved until now. Thirdly, another task of this work is to provide a deep analysis of the European Union approach to the region and how it has changed and adapted over the decades to the reality of the politics of the Central Asian countries. Last but not least, the fourth task of this work is to compare the two different strategies and the two conceptual approaches in interacting with this region. In short, this work describes how both strategies have changed since the establishments of these countries and how they have become more similar over time.

### **I.VI) The methodology of the research - two strategies at comparison**

This thesis in order to describe how to better interact with the countries of Central Asia will adopt a diachronic comparison between the strategy used by the “newcomer” in the region, the European Union, and the strategy adopted by the former uncontested hegemon of the region, Russia. The diachronic approach to this topic will also help to understand why and how the strategies of both actors have evolved overtime to overcome the changing environment of the region. In addition, to fully describe both strategies in the region, this Thesis uses analytical descriptive methods and relies on collected data from international institutions and local governments.

This master thesis dissertation is divided into five chapters additionally to this introductory one. The first chapter is composed of four different sections that have the role to describe the region and to provide the foundation for this work. The first section of the chapter describes the major difference between the Russian approach and the European one in the region. The Russian approach is described as a “pragmatic” one because it focuses on hard core aspects of security and economical cooperation and interdependence with the countries of the region. Meanwhile, the European approach is described as a “normative” one, because it relies on its normative power and its capacity

to influence regions even when they are so distant from the core of the EU by simply introducing its norms as an universal standard.

The following sections of this chapter are a meticulous description of the region, at first from a macro perspective and then more in detail on some central aspects relevant for the region, such as security and economy. These sections have the use to describe the potentialities of this region but also the weakness of it. For these sections I relied on the data of the Human development index, of the Fragile State index and of the data of other international institutions that monitor the region. In addition, to better understand the reality that the region faces, I have conducted research on the ground and I have been able to interview local and foreign professors, diplomats and experts of the region.

The second chapter of this work focuses on the Russian interaction within the region and it provides a description of the evolution of the Russian strategy in Central Asia since the 90s. It gives an understanding of the relevance of the region for Russian policy-makers and how the relevance of the region has changed overtime. In fact, in the 90s the region had little importance and interest for Moscow, this period was characterized by an rapprochement to the West and specifically to Europe, which left little or no space for this region. Within the first section of this chapter is described in detail the “pragmatic” strategy adopted by the Russian Federation and how it affected the region. The following section provide an in depth description of the organization for cooperation developed by Russia to influence the region. At the end of this chapter, it is analyzed how the current strategy has played out in the current events.

The third chapter deals with the EU’s strategy within the region and it describes its major features. At first it analyzes the EU policies in Central Asia and how they have been a substitute to the brief American interaction in the region. It also describes the mistakes made by the EU in the region because of the continuation of the, often too idealistic, American policies that have often alienated the elites of the Central Asian countries. The first section of this chapter is dedicated to provide a comprehensive description of how the EU’s normative power has been used in influencing countries in its near abroad and beyond. In this section there are several examples that describe how the EU operates and it is able to influence the politics of other countries. Meanwhile, the second section provides a description of the initial strategic direction in the region of

2007 of the EU. The end of the chapter is composed by a brief description of the new direction of 2019 of the EU and a comparison with the previous one.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to analyze the common fields of interest and how the EU and the Russian Federation have cooperated in the region and whether or not a lasting cooperation could be achieved to the benefit of the countries of Central Asia. Within this chapter is also analyzed how the newly adopted strategy of 2019 of the EU is impacting the interest of Russia and whether it actually provides more room for cooperation for these two actors at least in this specific region.

The last section of this work is dedicated to the conclusions of this research and the outcome of the comparison made, it is an essential part that gives a full understanding of the prospect for cooperation and it better delineates which has been the most effective approach to the region so far.

## **Chapter 1 - The role of Central Asia in the modern world**

Many have prophesied the end of history when the Soviet Union collapsed but actually for the politics of Central Asia, that moment has not yet materialized and history has kept rolling as fast as usual. Instead, that historical instant has meant the beginning of a new chapter of the history of the region, as it gave the start to a fervent competition in Central Asia between local and external actors. The dissolution of the Union has brought many actors in Central Asia that have started interacting within the area for similar purposes but with extremely different strategies. The beginning of the 21st century represented a new stage of geopolitical transformation within the region. Many have argued, partially rightfully, that Central Asia has returned to the “Great Game” of the 19th century, with different players interacting within the region but with the same objective of the previous centuries. Time may change cultures and ideas, but people are, despite the era in which they are living, still deeply affected by material interests able to make history repeat itself in every corner of the world. Historically, Central Asia has been affected by the politics of great empires that have controlled it and used its central position as a strategic launching point to exercise influence on the rest of the world, or as a defending platform to discourage external invasion<sup>8</sup>.

The importance of the region has been well known since ancient times. Many empires tried to take control of the region because of the abundance of resources and because of the presence of a singular breed of horses considered to be so unique to be reserved only to emperors or kings<sup>9</sup>. The strategic location of the region has played an important role for developing trades across the entire Eurasia and even today, despite the technological development of the means of transportation and the discovery of new maritime routes, this region still holds an incredible potential for trading routes.

During the 19th century, the so-called “Great Game” between the British Empire and the Tzarist Russia over these lands is proof of the geopolitical importance that the region had back at that time. The today’s recur of the same competition between different actors is another attestation of the importance and potential that this region represents.

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<sup>8</sup>Sadriddin Rahimov and Mirzokhid Rakhimov, “Multilateral Relations in Central Asia: Status, Challenges, and Prospects,” in: Sunatillo Jonboboev, Mirzokhid Rakhimov and Reimund Seidelmann, eds., *Central Asia today: Countries, Neighbors, and the Region*, (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2014), 303-322, here 304-305.

<sup>9</sup>Morris Rossabi (1979). “The Tea and Horse Trade With inner Asia During the Ming”. *Journal of Asian History* Vol. 4, No. 2 , pp. 136-168 (33 pages).

“The Great Game” and “the New Great Game” simply demonstrate the importance that this region has meant in the past for “Great Powers”, and it still holds to the present day.

The geopolitical importance of the region has been underlined also by several scholars and the theories created in the previous centuries, that have shaped the understanding of the importance of the region even today. Among the most relevant one there is H.J. Mackinder, who has underlined the importance of the region with his work of 1904. As a matter of fact, he defined the region as the Heartland of Eurasia. As he wrote:

*“Who controls Eastern Europe rules the Heartland;  
Who controls the Heartland rules the World Island;  
and Who rules the World Island rules the World.”*<sup>10</sup>

Nowadays, Central Asia is considered to be an important region in the world for several factors. The first and most obvious one is the abundant presence of energy resource in the region and in the Caspian region; secondly, the geopolitical location being surrounded by powers such as Russia, China, India, and Iran; and, thirdly, it is of crucial importance to deal with the security of the surrounding area because of the issue of Afghanistan. As a consequence of such a strategic location, regional and global actors increasingly compete with each other in contemporary Central Asia, with the objective to satisfy geopolitical interests and control the significant reserves of mineral resources of the area. In this regard, one of the main challenges for providing regional security and stability in Central Asia is the maintenance of a geopolitical balance, especially between “Russia, the United States and the EU, as well as the creation of a multilevel system of partnerships with different countries and international organizations”<sup>11</sup>.

In addition, the competition within the region has increased because the multi-vector foreign policy adopted by the countries of Central Asia has allowed any state to interact within the region freely. In fact, all five countries of the region have identified their foreign policy priorities in the context of the complex geopolitical and geostrategic realities and thus they are interacting with any local and external actor that is keen to be present in the region. Nevertheless, the local governments are still able to maintain a neutral position for many major international issues. Despite the fact that Central Asian

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<sup>10</sup> H.J. Mackinder (1904). “The geographical pivot of history”. The Geographical Journal.

<sup>11</sup> Mirzokhid Rakhimov (2015). “Central Asia in the Context of Western and Russian Interests”. Dans L'Europe en Formation 2015/1 (n° 375), pages 140 to 154.



countries are open to cooperation, they try to be as neutral as possible by avoiding any excessive involvement in the world politics. The most unique example of neutrality so far has been Turkmenistan, which has been able over all these years to remain out of the major international organizations of the region. All countries of the region have been balancing all the major powers of the area and they have constantly, since their independence, expressed their interest in developing relations with Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and India<sup>12</sup>. No major global or regional power has been left out of the possibility to interact with the local governments but always at a limited level.

The collapse of the USSR has put the countries of the region into a very unfavorable position and they have to develop a strategy to adapt to this new environment. As it has been argued by Martha Brill Olcott, the countries of Central Asian were catapulted into independence without any means to be autonomous from the structure of the Soviet Union, for this reason that moment has been an extremely traumatic experience<sup>13</sup>. These states were lacking the “necessary fiscal, military, political, or economic framework to deal with this newly gained status of independence.”<sup>14</sup> The political and technical void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union was quickly filled by both Soviet informal networks and Central Asian clan politics, which even today are an essential part of internal politics for these countries. The elites that were able to obtain the control of the country in order to maintain it and entrench their position over the years had to restructure their economies and reap the benefits from Western assistance. Hence, the formulation for these countries of their foreign policy as “multi-vectorism” was mostly based on the interests of the ruling elites and the necessity to fill the void left by the collapse of the Union.

The possibility to interact with any regional or global power has given to the countries of Central Asia the capacity to more or less efficiently check and balance all the actors involved in the region. The system of check and balance developed in the region has created an environment where none of the external actors is in a dominant position

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<sup>12</sup>Alexander Cooley (2012). “Great Games, Local Rules: The new Great Power Contest in Central Asia”. Oxford Scholarship Online

<sup>13</sup>Martha Brill Olcott (1992). “Central Asia’s Catapult to Independence,” *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 3, 108–130.

<sup>14</sup>Pınar Akcalı (2005). “Nation-State Building in Central Asia: A Lost Cause?” in *Central Eurasia in Global Politics: Conflict, Security, and Development*, edited by Mehdi Parvizi Amineh and Henk Houweling, 2nd ed. (Leiden & Boston: Brill), 96.

that would allow it to shape the countries' fates. Nowadays, as Dashdorji Bayarkhuu noticed, "all Central Asian states are active subjects, as well as objects of international policy, and are perfectly capable of successfully shaping the interactions of the great powers and foreign institutions appropriate to their politics"<sup>15</sup>.

Multi-vector foreign policy has been used by the states of the region to acquire economical and military affiliations or partnerships by any international actor operating within it. Every state has used this behavior in its own distinctive version depending on its unique weaknesses and straight, natural resources, international interests, domestic structures, and security problems<sup>16</sup>. Mostly, Central Asian governments at the beginning tended to formulate their foreign policy behaviors in terms of prevailing norms and practices during the 1990s, mainly to acquire economic benefits from cooperating with Western countries and companies, while Russia was distracted and distanced from the region because of internal issues. For states, such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, that possessed natural resources, the most effective and fast way to acquire wealth was through cooperation with the West by selling their natural resources to the best buyer. As Anna Matveeva states, the "desire to cooperate with the West...was determined in large part by the need to secure financial assistance and investment in order to develop the natural resources"<sup>17</sup>.

The most preeminent example of multi-vectoral foreign policy in Central Asia is Kazakhstan, which despite its extremely long border with Russia has been able to interact freely with any major player of the region and abroad. As a matter of fact, Kazakhstan has in-depth cooperation with Western institutions such as NATO, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as good relations with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Kazakhstan has been the initiator of the multi-vector foreign policy, or at least it has been the first one to properly conceptualize it. All the countries of the region have adopted a form of multi-

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<sup>15</sup>Dashdorji Bayarkhuu (2004). "Special issue: Eurasia: An emerging geopolitical reality: forging an alliance between Asia and Europe", pp.53-76. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*.

<sup>16</sup> Jason E Strakes (March 2013). "Situating the 'Balanced Foreign Policy': The Role of System Structure in Azerbaijan's Multi-Vector Diplomacy," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1: 47.

<sup>17</sup>Anna Matveeva (1999). "Democratization, Legitimacy and Political Change in Central Asia," *International Affairs* 75, no. 1: 30.

vector foreign policy depending on their needs and their possibility to interact with external actors.

The optimal situation from a Central Asian perspective would be to create strong and mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral relations with all of the above-mentioned actors of the area. Most of the Central Asian republics have already established relations with these major powers and with different regional and international organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and some of them even with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)<sup>18</sup>. Though interests are diverse and partly contradictory, coordination in bilateral as well as multilateral formats on security, economic, and transport projects is crucial for the development and security of the region. At the same time, the strategic retreat of the USA from Afghanistan has created a void that is putting pressure on many countries of the region. The multi-vectoral approach adopted by the countries of the region since the American withdrawal has lost an essential element that is being replaced by other actors but yet not so effectively<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, this strategy adopted by the countries of the region does not stop on the mere interaction with major players of the area. Instead, each country of the region has tried to develop connections world-wide with any economy. In fact, Central Asian republics have shown their interest in developing mutually beneficial relations with different Asian countries, such as Japan, India, and the Republic of Korea. Despite some challenges, Central Asia's partnership with Asian countries and regional organizations could strengthen regional stability in the wider Asian context.

Over the last decades, it has become especially important the role played by Japan in the region. Since 1997, when the Japanese government formulated the "Silk Road" diplomacy concept, the relationships between Japan and Central Asian countries have steadily grown. Japan recognized the growing strategic importance of Central Asia in the context of international security and decided to play a more active role in Eurasia. Japan, nowadays, is one of the major providers of assistance for structural reforms in the region and its contribution plays a crucial role in developing the means of transportation and

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<sup>18</sup> Marcel de Hass (23/01/2017). "Relations of Central Asia with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization". *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*. Leiden University.

<sup>19</sup> Rachel Vanderhill, Sandra F Joireman, Roza Tulepbayeva(07/2020). "Between the bear and the dragon: multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers". *International Affairs*, Volume 96, Issue 4, Pages 975–993, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa061>

communication within the region. The major fields of interest for Japan consist of education, regional economic development, political reforms, as well as energy resources. An important instrument for cooperation is Japan's ODA (Official Development Assistance) program for major investments and social programs in Central Asia<sup>20</sup>.

As it has been argued so far, the use of a multi-vector policy by the countries of Central Asia gives the basis for a flexible strategy in their relations with competing international actors to acquire payoffs from economic and military affiliations or partnerships. Nevertheless, by taking a closer look at the region it appears obvious that the Russian Federation is still the dominant actor in the security and other key aspects of the region<sup>21</sup>. In fact, all countries of the region define Russia as a major foreign policy priority and recognize its interest in Central Asia. The historical ties and the geographical position of these countries make the interaction with Russia inevitable, even if, due to a number of objective and subjective factors, the relationship between Russia and the Central Asian republics has faced some difficulties in the last decades due to different positions on some key aspects. Especially for this reason, the Central Asia-Russia relationship has been based on quite pragmatic aspects<sup>22</sup>.

### **1.1) Strategies towards Central Asia: pragmatism versus normative power approaches**

History, geography and culture play a major role in the determination of the strategy adopted in different regions of interest and Central Asia is not an exception to this generic rule. The history of the five countries of the region, up until 1991, has been dominated by Russia. Additionally, the geography and culture put the Russian Federation into a very advantageous position in dealing with this region. Russia in its different form, at first as the tsarist empire, then as the Soviet Union and even today as the Russian Federation has always played a major role in the region. Despite the "civilized divorce"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mirzokhid Rakhimov (01/2014). "Central Asia and Japan bilateral and multilateral relations,". *Journal of Eurasian studies*. Pp. 79-80.

<sup>21</sup> Çağlar Kurç (06/02/2019). "The puzzle: Multi-vector foreign policy and defense industrialization in Central Asia". Center for Foreign Policy and Peace Research, İhsan Doğramacı Peace Foundation, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2018.1497352>

<sup>22</sup> Mohiaddin Mesbahi (1993). "Russian foreign policy and security in central Asia and the Caucasus". *Central Asian Survey*, 12:2, 181-215, DOI: [10.1080/02634939308400813](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939308400813)

<sup>23</sup> Burkov V.G., Mescheryakov K.E., Shamgunov R.G. (2016). *The Commonwealth of Independent States as a Way to*

of the socialist republics, the legacy of the Soviet soft and hard infrastructure that linked Russia to Central Asia proved to have a much longer life than the Union itself. In addition, the prominence of the Russian language used as a tool to share information throughout local media, as *lingua franca* for the movement of goods and people between Russia and Central Asia, has been another important factor that made Moscow remain the key external actor in the region<sup>24</sup>.

The Russian Federation has several interests within the region, which are deeply interconnected with the interests of the governments of the area. The over 70 years of Soviet rule has created an environment in which to guarantee stability and economic prosperity there is the need for an intense cooperation among all the players of the region. The core interests of Russia include several aspect such as: first of all there is the need to ensure stability in the region, as any instability may directly affect the territory of the Russian Federation because of its geographical proximity; second element of interest is the need to establish an economical cooperation and trading among the countries of the region with Russia; third element is related to the need to control the market and extraction of energy resource<sup>25</sup>.

In order to obtain its objective Russian use any tools at its disposal including Russian-oriented elites, cultural ties, media influence, and not least its economical and security influence in the region. Furthermore to these factors that characterize Russian interaction within the region, the strategy adopted can be defined as a “pragmatic” one. The Russian approach in the region does not rely on the Slavic identity of the population of the region, nor on any superior ideology but it relies merely on practical interests and its capacity to come to an understanding with the elites of the countries taken into consideration. As a matter of fact, another essential element that has made Russia so effective in this region is the will to interact with local elites and guarantee their ruling in their respective countries.

In contrast, the European Union is a newcomer in the region and its approach has been characterized by the intent to shape and transfer what has been learned by the European experience and its values in this region. In the last decades the EU has certainly

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a «Civilized Divorce». EURASIAN INTEGRATION: economics, law, politics. Pp. 63-70.

<sup>24</sup> Evdokimov A.E., Davydova T.A., Savkin D.A. (2020). Russian language in Central Asia: current status and prospects. Post-Soviet Issues. Pp. :373-388. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2020-7-3-373-388>

<sup>25</sup> Shairbek Juraev (2014). “Comparing the EU and Russia engagements in Central Asia”. Dans L'Europe en Formation (n° 374). Pp. 77 to 93.

become one of the major donors of the region but it was not able to develop relations with Central Asian states such in depth and intensity as hoped at the beginning of its interaction within the region<sup>26</sup>. That is why, this work will analyze why the initial European attempt has not been so effective and how it has changed over the years to adapt to the reality of these countries.

The EU cooperates and invests in several fields of interests in the region. The main ones are: natural and energy resources, border control for human and drugs trafficking, education, development of the infrastructure, human rights and development of civil society within the states of the region. The EU, as the Russian Federation, takes into consideration many practical aspects to bring stability and security to the region, but it also plays a major role in creating a society that would be more keen to accept western values. The EU because of its experience of integrating so many different economies and cultures within its borders is an incredible example for many developing areas in the world and it has been used as a guiding example in several fields also in Central Asia. A perfect example is the experience of the integration of the ASEAN's countries which have relied on what has been done previously by the EU<sup>27</sup>.

In Central Asia the EU has adopted, as in many other areas of the world including also east Europe, its "ability to define what passes as "normal" in world politics"<sup>28</sup> better known as "normative power" as the Danish political scientist Ian Manners defines it. In fact, the EU tries in various ways to exert influence on other international actors in terms of the values and rules of behaviors in the international arena and domestic policy<sup>29</sup>. Simply, the EU's major tool in world politics is its capacity to shape the international community's idea of "norm". However, the geographical distance and the differences in culture have made this essential tool of the EU less effective in this region.

Given these generic descriptions of the Russian "pragmatic" approach and the European "normative" approach in the region, let's analyze more deeply which are the major features of these two different strategies.

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<sup>26</sup> Alyson JK Bailes & Pál Dunay (2015). "The EU and the Neighbours of its Neighbours: Security Challenges and Strategic Roles," in *The European Union's Broader Neighbourhood*, ed. Sieglinde Gstöhl and Erwan Lannon.

<sup>27</sup> Plummer, Michael G.. (2006). "The ASEAN Economic Community and the European Experience". Asian Development Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/11540/1879>

<sup>28</sup> Manners, Ian (2002). "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction In Terms". *JCMS*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 235–258.

<sup>29</sup> Savorskaya, Ekaterina (01/12/2015). "The concept of the European Union's normative power". Lomonosov Moscow State University. DOI- 10.5922/2079-8555-2015-4-5

### **Main features of the Russian pragmatic approach in dealing in Central Asia:**

For Russian strategy in Central Asia is essential to understand if Moscow perceives the region as a block of homogeneous countries, which can be dealt with as a united block, or if there is the need of a specific strategy depending on the country taken into consideration. The region of Central Asia can be considered as a homogeneous block of countries which share part of Russian history, share infrastructure (especially for the transportation of oil and gas) and the same soviet experience that deeply shaped these countries. However, the 30 years of independence have made Central Asian countries more diverse to each other and not all of them are still keen to consider the Russian Federation as their major partner. For this reason, Russia had to adapt and had to interact with the countries of the region at two different levels by taking into consideration the region as a block with similar infrastructure and similar ties with Russia and as individual countries.

At a macro level, in dealing with the region as a whole, Moscow's major objective is to create a broader regional integration centered on Russia, by creating and developing the Eurasian Union. The approval of the "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in 2013" showed the active support of the Eurasian economic integration and enabled the Eurasian Union's vision to become a reality. Since then, this vision has been developing quickly thanks to the creation of the Custom Union first and then the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU), which came into effect on 1 January of 2015. The creation of the EEU has developed and improved the mechanisms and the legal and regulatory framework of the customs union and the common economic space; and by helping to strengthen the Eurasian Economic Commission as a common standing regulatory body of the customs union and the common economic space<sup>30</sup>. The EEU plays a central role in the strategy of Russia in Central Asia because it includes two Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The pragmatic approach of the Russian Federation within the region is visible as this intergovernmental organization does not have the purpose to replace the nation-states but as a mere tool of influence over the countries involved. As it has been argued by many scholars and analysts these kind of organizations serve "Moscow's desire to exert influence over participating countries by supporting the creation of new organizations or

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<sup>30</sup> Francisco J. Ruiz González (06/2013). "The Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation: a Comparative Study". Instituto Espanol de Estudios Estrategicos.

their reinforcement, thus assuming a leading role” and “when these organisations have a regional focus, Russia’s intent is to play a guiding role, becoming a sort of gravitational regional center”<sup>31</sup>.

Meanwhile, at a micro level, Russian main interests in the region are related to three essential aspects: energy, economy and security. On these three core fields of interest Russia interacts mostly on bilateral agreements given the incapacity to align all the countries of the region under its lead. In this regard, in dealing with its energy interests, Russia relies on the use of its major companies for the extraction and transportation of gas and oil in the region. In Kazakhstan the major Russian company operating is Lukoil, which heavily relies on the oil’s production within Kazakhstan<sup>32</sup>. In Uzbekistan the two largest Russian companies, Gazprom and Lukoil, are not only involved in gas purchases there, but develop their own production capacities as well. In Turkmenistan, Russia’s interests are restricted to the natural gas sector. ARETI International Group (ARETI IG) is the only Russian company directly participating in the development of Turkmen energy resources. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan investments by Russian energy companies are represented primarily by Gazprom which, through its affiliated structures, actually has a monopoly of the oil product markets of these countries.

With regards to the economical interests within the region, Russia has lost the status as the number one trading partner of the five Central Asian states, having been supplanted in that role by China<sup>33</sup>. Russia’s economic engagement with Central Asia encompasses sectors such as mining, construction, the military-industrial complex, telecommunications, transport, and agriculture. Russia’s main exports to Central Asian countries are primarily manufactured goods: namely, foods, machinery, textiles, and transportation equipment. The main products exported from Central Asia to Russia are still natural and agricultural raw materials, as well as chemicals. Additionally, it is important to mention the role of remittances that many countries in the region receive from workers in Russia.

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<sup>31</sup> GIUSTI, S., & PENKOVA, T. (2008). “From Ideology To Pragmatism: The New Course Of Russian Foreign Policy”. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 12(4), 14–53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505029>

<sup>32</sup> Sinitsina Irina (2012), “Economic cooperation between Russia and Central Asian countries: Trends and outlook”, University of Central Asia Bishkek, Working Paper No 5.

<sup>33</sup> Marcin Kaczmariski (19/08/2019). Open Forum “Russia-China Relations in Central Asia: Why Is There a Surprising Absence of Rivalry?”. University of Glasgow.



For the moment, Russia remains the most powerful security actor in the region. On the one hand, it has both the means to react to a crisis as we noticed in Kazakhstan with the quick intervention of ten thousand Russian troops being deployed in 24 hours, and an assumed responsibility to engage within the area. But at the same time, it also has a palpable reluctance to intervene and would only do so if Russian territory or key interests were at stake. That was seen during and after the 2010 Osh pogroms in Kyrgyzstan to which Russia failed to respond, as it did not view the violence as a direct threat to its interests<sup>34</sup>. While multilateral arrangements (CSTO, SCO) play their role in Moscow's eyes, and an important development in Russia's policy towards Central Asia, that bilateralism increasingly dominates in the security domain. With the key emphasis on bilateral ties with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two equally important pillars stand out: military cooperation and economic support/ leverage<sup>35</sup>.

Russia, when dealing in Central Asia, uses every tool at its disposal to influence the politics of the region and to push forward its interests in these three major core areas. However, in following its interests it does not deny the possibility to the countries of the region to independently interact with other players external to the region. Even if the region is recognized to be of crucial importance for the interest of Russia, it accepts the influence of external players in the region such as China, the EU and previously also the US. These external actors can be competitors but the Russian Federation recognized its weakness in stabilizing the region and the interaction of these actors gives Russia the opportunity to not have to invest too many resources to guarantee its stability. As long as the "interference" in the region does not harm the stability and the interests of Moscow, the Russian Federation prefers to cooperate in Central Asia. According to Andrei Kozyrev, being a "normal great power" means achieving Russian interests not through confrontation but through cooperation<sup>36</sup>. Russia, in this context, is mostly driven by a realistic or even cynical approach towards politics than an ideological or values driven approach. Russian strategy is merely focused on national interests and is not keen on confrontation within the region of Central Asia and can be rationalized as a "pragmatic" one.

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<sup>34</sup> Cohen, A., Mankoff, J., Stepanova, E., & Weitz, R. (2012). "The Future of Russia's Involvement in Central Asia". In Central Asia Policy Forum (Vol. 3, pp. 1-10).

<sup>35</sup> Craig Oliphant (10/2013). "Russia's role and interests in Central Asia". SAFERWORLD.

<sup>36</sup> Kozyrev, A. (1992). Russia: A Chance for Survival. Foreign Affairs, 71(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045121>

### **Main features of the EU normative approach in dealing in Central Asia:**

The European Union as the Russian Federation share some key fundamental interests in the region of Central Asia. The EU as Russia is mostly interested in the energy resources, economical cooperation and security and stability of the region. However, the ways these two actors interact in the region and the differences in how to achieve their goals are drastically divergent. In addition to these practical interests of the EU in the region there are other interests that are typical of the EU's culture and way to deal with other countries. As a matter of fact, the EU and its member states emphasize the need to create more stability within the region not simply by guaranteeing the stability of the regimes of the region but by creating a "peaceful, democratic and economically prosperous Central Asia". All the above mentioned goals of the EU foreign policy are interconnected and can not be detached by each other as they are described and this unity of all these factors shows the normative essence of the EU's foreign policy. The fact that the EU sees democracy, human rights and rule of law as of high importance towards achieving long-term stability and security is a perfect example of the normative essence of the EU's foreign strategy<sup>37</sup>. The norms and values promoted by the USA and the EU are tools of soft power able to shape the society deeply and to make the interaction within this region more easy and convenient for Western countries.

The document describing the strategy of the EU of 2007 underlined particular areas of engagements that would contribute to the strategic goal of "security and stability" in the region. These are the seven priority areas underlined in the document:

- “1. Human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratization,
2. Youth and education,
3. Promotion of economic development, trade and investment,
4. Strengthening energy and transport links,
5. Environmental sustainability and water,
6. Combating common threats and challenges, and
7. Inter-cultural dialogue.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Alexander Warkotsch (2011). "The EU and Central Asian geopolitics," in *The European Union and Central Asia*, ed. Alexander Warkotsch (London and New York: Routledge), 65.

<sup>38</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (Brussels, 31/05/2007). "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership".

An example of how values and ideals of the EU (and in general of the Western World) shape the relation with the countries of the region has been the response of the EU to the Andijan crackdown in 2005. The Uzbek military launched indiscriminate firing into the crowd of protesters<sup>39</sup>, in response the USA and the EU responded by demanding transparent international investigation, which were denied by the government of Uzbekistan. On the other hand, Russia and China politically reassured the Uzbek president. This situation led to a cooling down of the cooperation with Uzbekistan in dealing with the issues of the region.

Meanwhile, on a more practical point of view, one of the first key tools utilized by the EU to engage with the Central Asian states has been the bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCAs), EU assistance programs and other initiatives taken by the EU to support the states of Central Asia, yet these agreements were “modest” in their scope and they did not cover all the countries of the region<sup>40</sup>. It has been considered “modest” by many scholars and observers because of the lack of a specific direction and thus too scattered to be effective.

Additionally to these initial attempts to interact with the region, many European countries already were interacting in the region for several factors. The most predominant European member states interacting in the region are Germany and Italy, both countries have strong economic ties with Kazakhstan (and even culturally in the case of Germany, currently there are around 180.000 Germans Kazakhstani<sup>41</sup>) and to the other countries of the region. In fact, often the economic and political interests of the larger European states in Central Asia differ and diverge, which can create an ambiguous direction of the common European strategy in the region.

Furthermore, the war against terror and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 drew more European attention in the region. From that moment on the Central Asian states became important security partners for the international coalition, with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan hosting air bases that helped the US and its allies with airplane refueling as well as transportation of goods and troops to and from Afghanistan.

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<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Uzbekistan: Andijan Massacre Case Not ‘Closed,’” 13 May 2014. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/12/uzbekistan-andijan-massacre-case-not-closed>.

<sup>40</sup> Neil J. Melvin (2008). “Introduction,” in *Engaging Central Asia: The European Union’s New Strategy in the Heart of Eurasia*. Ed. Neil J. Melvin (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies): 2-3.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, A. J. (2005). The Germans of Germany and the Germans of Kazakhstan: A Eurasian Volk in the Twilight of Diaspora. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57(4), 625–634. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30043909>

However, since 2007, with the drafting of “the EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership”, the EU started having a more narrow strategy within the region. The document underlines the three reasons why the EU is interested in Central Asia: 1) the developments in Central Asia have impact on the EU interests, 2) Central Asia is moving closer to the EU after the latest round of enlargement and the launch of the ENP, and 3) Central Asia’s desire for energy export diversification matches the EU’s need to diversify its energy import<sup>42</sup>. For this reason the region of Central Asia can not be ignored by European policy makers and has to hold a certain level of importance in the EU’s foreign agenda.

Later on the EU developed a new strategy, more narrowed in 2019, which still presents several aspects of the previous document and, most importantly, it still relies on the normative approach of the EU but with a more practical vision of the region of Central Asia.

## **1.2) Description of the region**

Central Asia is a vast region extending from the banks of the Caspian Sea in the west to the desert borders of western China in the east; it stretches from the northern Kazakh steppes in the north bordering Russia to the mountains in the south bordering Iran and Afghanistan. In the Soviet period the region was identified as composed of four union republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; excluded Kazakhstan<sup>43</sup>. However, depending on the definition, the concept of Central Asia may drastically differ. In fact, the historical concept of “Great Central Asia” identifies the region including the above mentioned five former soviet republics in addition with: the Western China; southern Russia including southern Siberia; northern and northwestern Afghanistan; and north-eastern Iran.

The five largest ethnic groups in Central Asia are: the Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz. All those groups speak languages related to Turkish except for the Tajik, who speak a language related to Persian. Islam is the dominant religion, with most adherents belonging to the Sunni branch. As a result of the region’s historical

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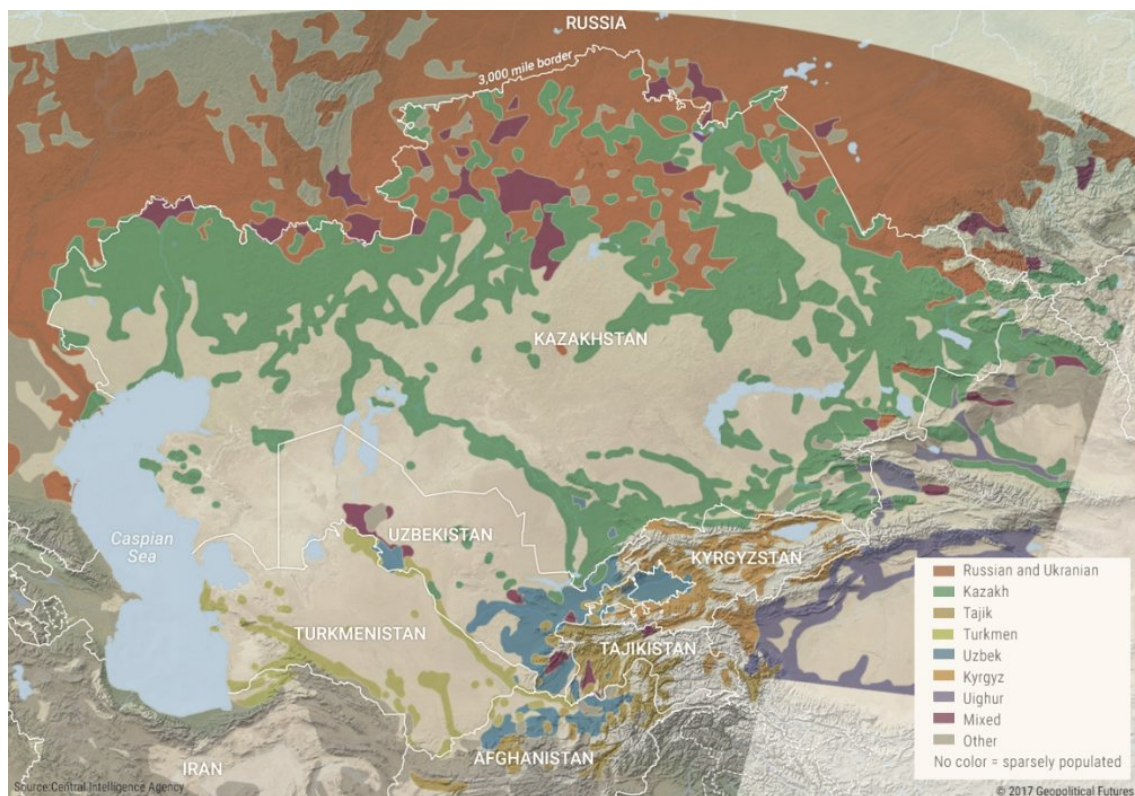
<sup>42</sup> European External Action Service (06/2009). “The European Union and Central Asia: the New Partnership in Action”.

<sup>43</sup> JONSON, Lena (2004). Vladimir Putin and Central Asia. London, I.B.Tauris, p.17.

incorporation into the Russian empire and then the Soviet Union, large numbers of Russians and Ukrainians give it a distinctive multiethnic character. Prior to the Russian domination in Central Asia, the inner borders of the region looked different. Kazakhstan

**Figure 1 – Ethnic division within Central Asia.**

was composed of Lesser, Middle and Upper Hordes. Turkistan encompassed the Khanates of Khiva and Kokand and Emirate of Bukhara. These territories later became



**Source - Raimondi, Pier Paolo (2019). “Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry - The External Powers’ Energy Interests in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan”. Working Paper, No. 006.2019. Provided in Cooperation with: Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM)**

soviet republics and consequently independent republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The geography of Central Asia also plays a major role in defining the region, its economy and the local politics. Central Asia’s landscape can be divided into the vast grassy steppes of Kazakhstan in the north and the Aral Sea drainage basin in the south. About 60 percent of the region consists of desert land, the principal deserts being the

Karakum, occupying most of Turkmenistan, and the Kyzylkum, covering much of western Uzbekistan. Most of the desert areas are unsuitable for agricultural use except along the margins of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river systems. Those two major rivers drain into the Aral Sea and provide most of the region's water resources, though northern Kazakhstan is drained by rivers flowing north into Russia. The scarcity of water is one of the major problems of the region and it has created tension between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in several situations<sup>44</sup>. On the east and south, Central Asia is bounded by the western Altai and other high mountain ranges extending into Iran, Afghanistan, and western China<sup>45</sup>. These mountain ranges provide a clear separation of the region to the bordering countries.

From a historical perspective of recent decades, the post-Soviet central Asian states, also known as the five "stans", emerged on the world map only in 1991. The transition literature considered them as transition countries moving from totalitarian regimes to democratic ones, and from centralized economy to market economy. However, the reality of these countries is much different, the political transition period seems to have been prolonged indeterminately and the hoped for change has still not arrived. Kazakhstan<sup>46</sup> (the largest economy) and Uzbekistan (the largest population) have still not reached a democratization despite the recent changes in both countries. Turkmenistan is an even more extreme example of how the path to transition has failed to be accomplished in the region. The extravagance of the authoritarian regime of Saparmyrat Niyazov has not been changed by his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and there is no much hope for any major change in the country with his son taking his position in 2022. Tajikistan experienced the most tragic form of power struggle in the region: the civil war in 1992-1997 left severe scars in the country with tens of thousands dead, a society deeply divided and the chances for a genuine political liberalization slim. Kyrgyzstan experienced two forceful overthrows of the ruling regimes (in 2005 and 2010), two large-scale inter-ethnic violent conflicts (in 1990 and 2010), and continues balancing between

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Russell (09/2018). "Water in Central Asia An increasingly scarce resource". European Parliamentary Research.

<sup>45</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Central Asia". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 28 Dec. 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia>.

<sup>46</sup> Akshay Kumar Singh & Deepti Srivastava (2019/20). "Kazakhstan at the Crossroads: Democratic Imperatives, Leadership and Exigency of Transition". *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*. Volume: 26/27.

political pluralism pushed by wealthy elites and ruling regimes' routine urge for stronger power, all in the context of nearly non-existent economy.

The region of Central Asia has several problems that need to be addressed in order to provide a stable environment for growth. Namely, the major problems within the region are related to unresolved conflicts between central Asian states, drug trafficking, water scarcity and extremist and terrorist groups operating within the region. In order to address these core issues the international community has pushed the 5 countries to create a deeper cooperation through the '90s by establishing several treaties, such as: "the Treaty on the Establishment of a Common Economic Space between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan, 10 January 1994; Treaty On the Establishment of a Common Economic Space between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan, 30 April 1994; Protocol On the Accession of the Republic of Tajikistan to the Treaty on the Establishment of a Common Economic Space between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan, 26 March 1998. Despite the attempts to unite these countries all of them remain strongly detached from one another<sup>47</sup>. However, room for cooperation is always possible and despite the numerous problems of the region, it still maintains a high level of potential for economic development.

### **1.3) Security challenges in Central Asia**

The region of Central Asia faces several security challenges related to internal and external factors. As it has been described in the previous section, Central Asian states lack bilateral and multilateral direct coordination in the region and this is the major element that makes the region more vulnerable to any sort of disorder or threat. As a matter of fact, the lack of cooperation and authoritarian rule in the region (exception made for Kyrgystan, which is quite democratic compare to its neighbors) puts political and economic stability at stake as it has been argued by several international and local scholars. Many of the threats of the region are in part caused by the countries of the region themselves. The absence of any effort toward improving social-economic circumstances, which would take away grounds for (Islamic) radicalization, can be directly attributed to

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<sup>47</sup> Rustam Burnashev(25/09/2015). "Security Challenges in Central Asia". Dans L'Europe en Formation 2015/1 (n° 375), pages 106 à 122.

the governments of the region. In addition, the borders, water and energy disputes are the result of the incapacity to find a compromise and create dialogue among the states of the region<sup>48</sup>. Meanwhile, the external threats for the region are composed by terrorists and drugs coming from Afghanistan. As long as there was an American presence in Afghanistan the situation has remained under the watch of the international community, but since the American's withdrawal the situation has become more risky for every state surrounding Afghanistan. The destabilizing factors coming from Afghanistan could be an element able to put at risk the stability of the countries of the region.

### **Regional border, ethnic and water disputes**

Border, water, and energy disputes frequently arise between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Relations are frequently heated. In October 2014, Kyrgyz President Atambayev said that his nation will sever connections with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well because the two countries were reportedly trying to hinder Kyrgyzstan's efforts to achieve energy and transportation infrastructure self-sufficiency in the near future. The president said that Uzbekistan's primary motivation for cutting off Kyrgyzstan's natural gas supply was to create unrest there back in 2014. The mistrust among these nations is the key factor in creating these type of disputes<sup>49</sup>.

This situation drastically improved in regard to Uzbekistan's interaction with its neighbors and with the international community when Mirziyoyev took charge of Uzbekistan following the death of Karimov in 2016. Tashkent has reestablished connections with its neighbors and has picked up discussions with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on a variety of topics, including the delineation of boundaries and the usage of water from shared rivers. A regional conversation that the leaders of the five Central Asian countries met for in 2018 and 2019 has also been revived by Uzbekistan<sup>50</sup>. Despite this change of direction of Uzbekistan, the region of Central Asia still remains highly unstable due to the remaining dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The basic idea of territorial and administrative division along national lines is foreign to Central Asia's history, which makes it difficult to resolve border disputes. Since

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<sup>48</sup> Marcel de Haas (2016). "Security Policy and Developments in Central Asia: Security Documents Compared with Security Challenges". *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29:2, 203-226, DOI: 10.1080/13518046.2016.1168123.

<sup>49</sup> U. Hashimova (02/10/2014). "Growing Uncertainty in Relations Between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan". EDM, 11/174.

<sup>50</sup> Yuriy Sarukhanyan (01/10/2020). "Reformed or Just Retouched? Uzbekistan's New Regime". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



the entire idea of "nationality" was only comprehended in terms of relative differences, these governments were not founded on an ethnic or national basis. As a result, hardly a single border between the CA nations or between them and Afghanistan is comparable to a European border. They are actually borders, with people from the same racial and religious backgrounds living on each side. Borders were formed arbitrarily, disregarding political and ethnic reality. As a result, Central Asia countries have a lot of contentious regions. The fact that there are several minor ethnic enclaves inside the bordering states, which are constantly vulnerable to pressure by being cut off from roads, water, or power, further complicates the border issues<sup>51</sup>.

Border conflicts especially involving Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are still frequently occurring as the recent events of January and March 2022 show it. In these events several civilians and military personnel were killed and wounded in the process<sup>52</sup>. Repeated border clashes have resulted in rock-throwing, shooting by border guards, roadblocks, cutoffs of water supplies, and the construction of fences on land that other parties claim is not theirs. Border conflicts frequently pose a danger to the stability of the CA situation and add still another burden to the regimes<sup>53</sup>. In order to prevent these disagreements from spiraling out of control, the CA governments are under pressure to attempt to achieve settlements. The lack of genuine dialogue between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over demarcating the borders of 971 Km, of which 471 Km remain disputable<sup>54</sup>.

Delimitation and delineation of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border areas have been a contentious subject for more than 20 years. There were several formal meetings between the two countries, and in 2000 the Tajik and Kyrgyz state commissions for delineation and delimitation of state boundaries began active work. The commission's members, however, were unable to reach consensus on the issue's normative and legal dimensions even in the early stages of their collaboration. The two countries' use of two distinct

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<sup>51</sup> I. Rotar (11/02/2014). "Conflicts Between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Potentially Undermine CSTO and Custom Union in Central Asia". EDM, 11/27. P. Goble, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Altynai Mambetova (14/03/2022). "How the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border conflict is putting pressure on media". Open Democracy.

<sup>53</sup> R. Muzalevsky(01/08/2014). "Border Disputes in the Fergana Valley Threaten to Undermine Regional Trade and Stability". EDM, 11/141.

<sup>54</sup> Azattyk Media (19/09/2017). "Razakov: Work on Demarcation Borders Continues". (<https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28625066.html>) [Russian: Работа по делимитации границ продолжается- Rabota po delimitatsii prodoljaetsya].

geopolitical atlases—Tajikistan used atlases from 1924 to 1939 and the Kyrgyz Republic used the one from 1958 to 1959—is the major issue<sup>55</sup>.

Another form of regional disputes that have characterized the previous decades had been that on water and energy. Specifically they were related to the CASA-1000 project and the construction of dams that could have reduced the stream of water coming from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The initial project and the lack of guarantees from the Tajik and Kyrgyz governments created several concerns in Tashkent on the water availability. In fact, Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan's initially failed to sign the two main United Nations conventions that regulate cross-boundary water resources<sup>56</sup>. However, after the change of “style”, as it has often been called, of the leadership of Tashkent the hostility against this project has disappeared and there has been more room for cooperation even on this field.

### **Extremism and terrorism**

The presence of paramilitary groupings within the countries of the region create major concern. Among the several groups operating within the region one of the most relevant is the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which operated in Tajikistan after 2015 and after an alleged attempted coup was eliminated by the ruling elite. The brutality of the elites of these countries is often the major reason for such an armed opposition.

Additionally, Extremist Islamist groups find followers among the citizens of the various CA nations and occasionally even among the highest echelons of the security services and the armed forces; their success in recruiting in this region comes from the values they advocate and by the poor condition of the majority of the population living within the region. Even within the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) many combatants and officers were originally from Central Asia's nations. In fact, according to the NGO International Crisis Group (ICG), just in 2015 between 2,000 and 4,000 citizens of Central Asian countries went to fight in ISIS's controlled territories which otherwise aided the cause of the extremist group<sup>57</sup>. On that occasion the ICG recommended the CA

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<sup>55</sup> Gulzana Kurmanalieva (2018). “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Endless Border Conflicts”. *L'Europe en Formation* 2018/1 (n°385), pages 121 to 130.

<sup>56</sup> U. Hashimova (05/06/2015). “Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Try to Mitigate Water Disputes”. EDM, 12/105.

<sup>57</sup> Yoanna Parazhchuk and Anna Klevtsova (21/01/2015). “Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia”. International Crisis Group (ICG). <http://rus.azattyq.org/content/icg-ugrozy-bezopasnosti-ig-centralnaya-azia/26805103.html>

governments to enhance security coordination, relax religious restrictions, and expand young people's access to the labor market.

Furthermore, in October 2015, the United Nations Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee issued a report on foreign militants in which was underlined the role played by this region in providing supporters and fighters. The report stressed the importance of the three major terrorist organizations from Central Asia in providing support to various terrorist organizations worldwide. The three major organizations operating in the area are: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and the Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan. These three organizations have links to Al-Qaeda but since the creation of ISIS they have played a greater role in supporting it too<sup>58</sup>. To further aggravate the current situation of the region, the instability in Afghanistan and the activities of the Taliban helps the spreading of extremist ideologies in the region. The country most affected by the Afghan's instability is Tajikistan, which has already experienced two coups in the recent year and it does not have the capacity to face this type of threat.

The most dangerous and numerous Extremist Islamist group in the region is the IMU, which has over 1,000 fighters. It operates in the north of Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The original primary goal of this group was to oppose the authoritarian regimes of the region but it has soon become an extremist organization which operates even in the Middle East and other parts of the world supporting other extremist organizations.

Terrorist organizations are easily able to attract supporters from this region because of the presence of weak spots in the political regimes of the region, due to their authoritarianism, and while also encountering ethnic and religious tension, a Muslim majority in the countries of the region, as well as poor economic circumstances. The populated Fergana Valley has been a particularly fruitful area for such recruitment to Syria<sup>59</sup>. Moreover, the governments of Central Asia by repressing any kind of relatively moderate opposition increased the devout hostility and supported the claim that extremism is just a last-resort political strategy when all other choices have been exhausted. Often, to escape criticism from the West for the repression of civil society, all

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<sup>58</sup> A. M. Dyner, A. Legieć and K. Rękawek (06/2015). "Ready to Go? ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia". PISM Policy Paper 19/121. pp. 1, 9–10.

<sup>59</sup> Ya. Trofimov (29/10/2015). "Syrian War Draws Central Asians". Wall Street Journal.

opposing groups are labeled as "Islamist". A vivid example of it has been in Tajikistan in recent years. Tajik President Rahmon labeled his former Deputy Minister of Defense Nazarzoda as an "Islamic State sympathizer" with the intent to justify the strong repression that later took place against the opposition<sup>60</sup>. All these above mentioned factors make the region an hot spot for recruiting terrorists and at high risk of terrorist activities.

### **Drug trafficking**

Central Asia shares a border of over 2,400 km with Afghanistan (the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan alone is close to 1,400 km), principally in mountainous areas. For this reason border security is crucial to oversee the drug trafficking passing through the region. However, the complexity of this task due to the geographical reality of the ground is even more exacerbated by the endemic corruption of these states that are supposed to monitor it. Estimates indicate that only three per cent of the stocks are seized by the customs services of Central Asian states. In fact, drug trafficking, which constitutes the shadow economy of Central Asia, generates more income than the country's legitimate industry and helps to support the ruling class in part. In fact, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan have been categorized by many observers and scholars as "quasi-drug states" because the drug trade is actively supported by a number of state representatives at every administrative level, including kolkhoze directors, regional administrators, and the highest-ranking state officials<sup>61</sup>.

The "northern route", from Afghanistan to neighboring States in Central Asia, the Russian Federation and other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, has been an essential route for drugs arriving to Europe and to Russia since the early 90s<sup>62</sup>. Illegal narcotics coming from Afghanistan are seen by the Kremlin as a fast escalating danger to Russia's national security. Since the Western invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the country's drugs output has expanded by approximately 10 times, drawing criticism from Moscow to the Western troops' failure to remove it. The main transit nation for drugs coming from Afghanistan to Russia and Eastern Europe is Tajikistan. Tajikistan has received assistance from Russia, the United States, the OSCE, and the UN to strengthen its border forces after the departure of Russian border soldiers in 2005.

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<sup>60</sup> E. Lemon(23/07/2015). "Tajikistan's Government Uses Recent Violence to Neutralize Opposition". EDM, 12/171.

<sup>61</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse (09/23/2009). "Drug-trafficking in Central Asia". Policy Brief. Institute for Security and Development Policy.

<sup>62</sup> UNODC World Drug Report 2016. Office on Drugs and Crime.

However, due to extensive corruption by Tajik government officials engaged in the drug trade and political reluctance, Dushanbe's border security capabilities have not been significantly increased. The United States provided Kyrgyzstan with two border posts in December 2014 to aid the country in its battle against drug trafficking. This allowed the Kyrgyz State Border Service to be more present in distant areas and increase their ability to stop illegal activity.

### **Afghanistan**

The new security risks that nations face in the twenty-first century generally have a direct international component. The dangers posed by non-governmental actors whose actions are regarded as having an international scope, as is the case with terrorism, religious fanaticism, and drug trafficking. For the countries of Central Asia, these risks are seen as mostly related to the state of Afghanistan, which is not regarded as being in the area. Hence, the main source of threats and challenges is located outside the region and it is seen to be an external danger.

Specifically, the latter two threats described (*'extremism and terrorism'* and *'drug trafficking'*) are directly related to Afghanistan and its instability which is able to harm the security of the entire region. With the USA and NATO having withdrawn from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Central Asian states have become increasingly nervous, since they are the ones that have to cope with terrorism (Taliban, al-Qaeda, and IS<sup>63</sup>) and narcotics from Afghanistan. As we have analyzed so far, the countries of the region already have a presence of sympathetic groups within its borders and having an unstable country like Afghanistan without any overview of the international community this makes the situation for these countries even more critical. Already in August 2015 the Katibat Imam Bukhari, an Uzbek-dominated terrorist battalion fighting with IS in Syria, swore allegiance to Mulla Akhtar Mansoor, the Afghan Taliban's newly designated commander who succeeded Mullah Omar, in August 2015. Former IMU militants who joined IS in 2014 make up the organization. Thus, there is a link between a terrorist organization from Central Asia that is helped the Islamic State in Syria and those who back the Taliban in Afghanistan. This reveals connections between jihadist terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

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<sup>63</sup> All organizations prohibited and categorized in Russia as terrorist

However, as we have seen so far, many of the issues related to Afghanistan are utilized as an excuse to suppress internal opposition or as a justification to increase spending in the security apparatus within these countries. Many scholars have described this situation as a '*security quasi-complex*', as a notional complex that is organized more by a concept than by a strong pattern of securitization or a regional security system. Countries that make up a quasi-complex claim that the greatest threats to national security come from outside the area, but in reality, these threats are domestic in character<sup>64</sup>.

In the absence of the international community, the only possibility for CA countries to face the threats coming from Afghanistan lies in cooperation and dealing with the internal issues of corruption. In these regards the Russian Federation and the European Union can play a major role in helping in giving a common direction in dealing with these major issues of the region.

#### **1.4) Economical opportunities in Central Asia**

The countries of the region present several political differences due to their recent history after the collapse of the USSR but undoubtedly, the political divide between the Central Asian governments is less obvious than the economic one. There are two states in the region that have abundant energy resources. Turkmenistan has the sixth-largest natural gas reserves<sup>65</sup>, while Kazakhstan is one of the top 15 nations in the world with respect to confirmed oil reserves<sup>66</sup>. Uzbekistan's gas reserves are less plentiful, but despite having very strict state control and minimal access to the global market, the nation has managed to maintain a somewhat balanced economy. The economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are mostly informal and heavily dependent on migrant remittances (primarily from Russia) and exports of a single item, namely gold and aluminum, respectively.

After gaining its independence, the region of Central Asia inherited oil and gas pipelines that were tailored to Moscow's requirements, requiring the three primary energy producers—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—to transit via Russia for their hydrocarbon exports. Beijing established itself as a significant energy player in Central

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<sup>64</sup> Brian Job (1992). "The Insecurity Dilemma: National, Regime, and State Securities in the Third World," in Brian Job (ed.).

<sup>65</sup> British Petroleum (2021). "Statistical Review of World Energy 2021".

<sup>66</sup> Kazmunaigaz. "Oil and gas sector". Available at: [http://www.kmgep.kz/eng/about\\_kazakhstan/oil\\_and\\_gas\\_sector](http://www.kmgep.kz/eng/about_kazakhstan/oil_and_gas_sector)

Asia even before the *Belt and Road Initiative* by constructing three gas pipelines from China to the area, the first of which started operating in 2009. These have significantly decreased reliance on Russian gas pipelines.

Another possibility to diversify the energy market of the region would be to connect the Southern Gas Corridor, which has been built between Azerbaijan and southeast Europe, with a trans-Caspian pipeline. By lowering reliance on Russia and diversifying gas supplies, such a pipeline would also benefit European interests. By defining the Caspian's status and granting littoral states the ability to build pipelines beneath their own territorial seas, the Caspian Sea Convention from August 2018 addressed certain legal obstacles<sup>67</sup>. It also granted neighbors the ability to protest on environmental grounds, such as Russia, which is unlikely to welcome competition from Turkmen gas on European markets. In any event, a greater challenge is that Turkmenistan can not finance such a large undertaking.

**Figure 2 - Gas pipelines in Central Asia, 2019.**



**Source - European Parliament “Connectivity in Central Asia Reconnecting the Silk Road”.**

The economies of the region have developed in a very diverse way as it is visible in Table 1 of the ‘Association for Comparative Economic Studies 2021’. Since 2000 the

<sup>67</sup> Ilgar Gurbanov (12/09/2018). “Caspian Convention Signing and the Implications for the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline”. Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 15 Issue: 127. The Jamestown Foundation – Global Research and Analysis.

changes in the standard of living of the people in Central Asia followed various patterns depending on the amount of real GDP per capita. Regarding their pre-independence period in 1991, it ranged from 86 percent in Kazakhstan to 36 percent in Tajikistan. After eleven years from the collapse of the USSR, Kazakhstan, a frontier economy in the area, reached its 1991 level. Meanwhile, the same happened in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan only in 2005 and 2007, respectively. By 2014, Kyrgyzstan had returned to its pre-independence actual production per person performance. For Tajikistan, however, just 92% of its 1991 level has been reached by 2018. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were, and still are, the poorest republics in the area after the collapse of the Soviet economy due to harsh beginning conditions and a lack of significant natural resources. This may have dictated their actual per capita production growth capability since 2000, which is quite small<sup>68</sup>.

The richest countries of the region are Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which performed better in the years 2014–18 and 2016–18 because their output per person at constant prices was twice as high before the Soviet Union's dissolution. Recently, Uzbekistan reached the same level as its neighbors to the north and east. The change of ‘style’ of the leadership of Uzbekistan proved to be effective also in this regard.

As a result of the initial economic disparities, the former Kazakh President Nazarbaev even proposed changing the name of the nation to Kazakh Yeli (Kazakh people), which he believed would help Kazakhstan stand out from other underdeveloped "stans" in the area, at least in the eyes of investors<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Yormirzoev, M. (2021). “Economic Growth and Productivity Performance in Central Asia”. *Comp Econ Stud.* <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41294-021-00156-1>

<sup>69</sup> Maria Tadeo (07/02/2014). “Drop the ‘stan:’ Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev mulls renaming the country to Kazak Yeli”. *Independent.* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/drop-the-stan-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-mulls-renaming-the-country-to-kazak-yeli-9115194.html>



**Table 1 – Growth in real GDP per capita, 2000-2018.**

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Kazakhstan	0.86	0.98	1.08	1.17	1.28	1.39	1.52	1.64	1.67
Kyrgyzstan	0.66	0.69	0.68	0.72	0.76	0.75	0.77	0.83	0.89
Tajikistan	0.36	0.38	0.42	0.46	0.49	0.52	0.54	0.57	0.61
Turkmenistan	0.69	0.71	0.71	0.72	0.75	0.84	0.92	1.01	1.15
Uzbekistan	0.84	0.86	0.88	0.91	0.97	1.02	1.09	1.17	1.26
Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Kazakhstan	1.65	1.74	1.84	1.90	1.99	2.04	2.04	2.03	2.09
Kyrgyzstan	0.90	0.89	0.93	0.91	0.99	1.01	1.03	1.05	1.08
Tajikistan	0.62	0.64	0.67	0.71	0.74	0.78	0.80	0.84	0.88
Turkmenistan	1.20	1.29	1.45	1.59	1.72	1.86	1.94	2.03	2.12
Uzbekistan	1.34	1.40	1.47	1.55	1.64	1.73	1.83	1.91	1.96
Country	2018								1991=100
Kazakhstan	2.14								
Kyrgyzstan	1.09								
Tajikistan	0.92								
Turkmenistan	2.22								
Uzbekistan	2.02								

**Source - Association for Comparative Economic Studies 2021.**

However, in regard to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both countries host the major resources of water of the region and for this reason both can play an essential role in the development of Central Asia. The creation of dams and the selling of the energy produced could be an essential element to revitalize their economy. For this reason Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan rely mostly on the production of hydroelectric energy.

For the entirety of the region it is essential to have a regional electrical grid in order to balance supply and demand, which in the past has been a major concern for the stability and economic growth of the region. During the spring and summer when water is released from hydroelectric dams to meet the irrigation needs of downstream agriculture during the growing season, the mountainous countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan generate more power but during winter they rely mostly on fossil fuels produced in the three remaining countries. To guarantee a stable supply of energy for all the countries of the region, having a regional electricity grid is vital.

Furthermore, Central Asian nations are interested in establishing grid connections with nations beyond the area. The Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000<sup>70</sup>), led by the World Bank, aims to build a power line from

<sup>70</sup> Chaterine Putz (08/02/2018). “CASA-1000 Creeps Toward Construction Bridging Central and South Asia”. The

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan so that they can increase export revenues by selling extra hydropower to Afghanistan and Pakistan (for instance, from Tajikistan's new Roghun Dam, which is expected to double the country's generating capacity)<sup>71</sup>.

In addition to having an abundance of energy resources, the area is thought to be strategically significant from a (geo)political standpoint. First off, its proximity to China makes the area intriguing for both Beijing and those who observe Beijing. Second, its position is crucial for international trade and if better developed could serve as an essential bridge between the East and the West. The EU is becoming more interested in working with Central Asia on matters related to energy. As a matter of fact, the European Union will have to deal with a rising reliance on outside energy sources in the ensuing decades because of the current situation<sup>72</sup>. The region presents several opportunities of investment and it is due to its rich reserve of natural resources and fossil fuels and it has a key position for trade in the region.

The economic development of the East in general has favored the growth of overland trade routes between Europe and Asia, many of which inexorably travel via Central Asia. Although shipping is the least expensive and thus the most popular mode of transportation for goods between the EU and China (trade in goods has increased by 87% over the past ten years<sup>73</sup>), there is a growing category of medium-value goods (such as electronic devices or auto parts) for which shipping is too slow and air freight is too expensive. All of this has increased curiosity about connection in Central Asia.

Aiming to revive old trade routes via Central Asia, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the Silk Road Economic Belt in September 2013 while visiting Kazakhstan. Since then, the project has grown to include more than 70 partner nations along six overland "belts" and one marine "road." Central Asia continues to play a significant role in the project since two of the six overland routes cross through the area<sup>74</sup>.

The New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor has so far had the greatest influence of these. In the past, the Trans-Siberian railroad was utilized to convey a small

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Diplomat.

<sup>71</sup> Farangis Najibullah (16/10/2018). "Tajikistan's Roghun Dam, Which For Years Generated Only Controversy, Begins Producing Electricity".

<sup>72</sup> Andrey A. Kazantsev (2010). "Russian policy in Central Asia in 1991-2010: a disappearing power?". EUI Working Papers RSCAS 59.

<sup>73</sup> European Commission (02/08/2022). "European Union, Trade in goods with China". Directorate-General for Trade. Available online: [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/country/details\\_china\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_china_en.pdf)

<sup>74</sup> Gisela Grieger (07/2016). "One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China's regional integration initiative". European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS).

amount of Chinese commodities that were shipped by train to Europe. Although trains started utilizing a far more direct route through Kazakhstan in 2011, it was not until 2015 that this alternative truly took off as infrastructure expenditures by China and transit nations reduced the travel time to less than two weeks, which is three times faster than by sea. Rail freight expenses of a few thousand dollars are negligible for a container of products, whose worth may reach hundreds of thousands of dollars, and are easily exceeded by the financial advantage of quicker delivery times. The number of these trains is increasing drastically; from 2017 to 2018, the number increased by 73%, reaching a total of more than 6 000 trains annually. Rail transit now accounts for more than 2% of commodities exchanged between the EU and China, up four times since 2007<sup>75</sup>.

Turkey and Iran are connected to western China via a second corridor. The specific path for this corridor has not yet been determined by China, although the new Inner Mongolia-Iran train link, which was opened in 2018, passes through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> Jonathan E. Hillman (03/06/2018). "The Rise of China-Europe Railways". Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

<sup>76</sup> Martin Russell (04/2019). "Connectivity in Central Asia Reconnecting the Silk Road". European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS).

**Figure 3 - Major international rail routes in Central Asia, 2019.**



**Source - European Parliament “Connectivity in Central Asia Reconnecting the Silk Road”.**

The major negative aspect of the economy of the region is the growing instability due to Afghanistan and the lack of a framework of cooperation among the countries of the region. Despite the attempts made by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the region remains highly divided and countries of the region are often unable to come to an understanding. The new leadership of Uzbekistan is playing a major role in trying to create a more positive environment in the region but it will require time and foreign investments to make the region more attractive in other realms, not related to the mere extraction of fossil fuels and natural resources.

### **1.5) Conclusion – A forgotten region with high potential?**

The nations of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan make up the Central Asian (CA) region. Due to its geographic position and wealth in natural resources, the region has drawn the attention of the major players in its proximity, such as China and Russia, but also of other actors that do not share any borders with the countries of the region, such as the EU and the US. Additionally, the region

presents an extremely diverse population in ethnicity and wealth and thus it makes the region extremely difficult to interact with because each country requires different approaches. A strategy that applies to Kazakhstan, which is the richest country of the region, can not be replicated in a country like Tajikistan. In fact, this chapter has briefly analyzed how the EU and the Russian Federation interact in the region and what are the major characteristics of their strategies depending on their history and mindsets.

The Central Asian region presents many opportunities but as well several challenges that pose, at times, an existential threat to the stability of these countries and the economic growth of the region as a whole. The major threats in the region can be categorized in three macro categories: 1) *Regional border, ethnic and water disputes*, which comprise of the many disputes between the countries of the region; 2) *Extremism and terrorism* and 3) *drug trafficking*. In addition, the instability in Afghanistan is of major concern for the proximity to the region, it could be said that the majority of the above mentioned threats are *de facto* originated in Afghanistan and its instability.

However, the region has a lot of potential and thanks to cooperation in recent years among the countries of the region it has been possible to improve the overall economic situation. The abundance in natural resources and key geography location make the region rich with opportunities but only at the condition of mutual cooperation.

## **Chapter 2 - The evolution of the Russian strategy in Central Asia since the 90s**

The Russian historical legacy in Central Asia is rather extensive. The majority of Central Asia was a part of the Russian empire beginning in the nineteenth century, and even earlier for certain of Kazakhstan's northern regions. More than 70 years of Soviet administration helped to further solidify Moscow's dominance, and that influence is still felt today through a variety of channels, including elites with links to Russia, cultural linkages, media sway, and not least in the fields of economics and security<sup>77</sup>. In terms of migration, there are still slightly under 7 million Russians and approximately 500,000 Ukrainians living in Central Asia and in the last year these numbers have been growing exponentially. Of the estimated 11.6 million migrant workers in Russia, more than 2.5 million are believed to originate from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan)<sup>78</sup>. Russia and the Central Asian republics, which have been dubbed the "world's greatest migration corridor," are now mutually dependent on migration as the former depends on an imported labor force and the latter on the flow of remittances.

Furthermore, the region's geostrategic importance is crucial, and when combined with its enormous hydrocarbon deposits, this means it continues to pique the interest of many outside parties. Russia still remains the most significant external power in Central Asia, primarily due to I) its high-level political relationships, II) its security cooperation in the region, III) arguably, its range of investment projects in these countries, and IV) a cultural and linguistic influence that still remains an important factor.

Russia's attitude to central Asia during the past 30 years can be broken down into four phases: in the first phase, which ran from the end of the USSR to the middle of the 1990s, Moscow lacked a clear strategy for dealing with Central Asia or even the other former Soviet states. Ideological, political, economic, and even cultural factors contributed to the lack of attention and interest in Central Asia. The second phase, in the second half of the 1990s, signaled a change and was founded on the principles of the

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<sup>77</sup> Jonson L (1998). "Russia and Central Asia: a new web of relations". Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA).

<sup>78</sup> The International Organisation for Migration. "Migration Data Portal". July 2022. Available at: [https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock\\_abs\\_&t=2020&cm49=643](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock_abs_&t=2020&cm49=643)

"*Primakov doctrine*", which tried to reclaim Russia's position as a center of power in its own neighborhood, with varying degrees of success.

The third phase is connected to President Vladimir Putin's election in 2000 and the focus placed on expanding Russia's participation in Central Asia on all fronts, particularly after 9/11<sup>79</sup>. The renewed degree of cooperation had a special security component that was both unique to the 9/11 context and reflective of the primary lens through which Moscow has historically regarded the region as a whole. But in the economic sphere, that shift in gear was evident, if with a delayed impact, in how commerce between Russia and Central Asia quadrupled between 2003 and 2007, from 7 billion US\$ to 21 billion US\$, with the petroleum industry accounting for a third of this increase. The declared trade volume between the two countries in 2011 was \$27.3 billion. However, Russia since the early 2000s has been positioned behind other players engaged in the region, such as China<sup>80</sup>.

Russian foreign policy adopted a fresh approach when Putin took office. The desire to impose conceptual and organizational order across all domains had emerged as a defining aspect of Russian foreign policy during Putin's first year in office. The National Security Concept (10 January 2000), the Military Doctrine (21 April 2000), and the Foreign Policy Concept (28 June 2000) are three significant doctrinal texts that defined Russian foreign and security policy of the early 2000s. The latest text underlined as a top priority the need to strengthen the Russian ties with post-Soviet nations. This aspect was considered crucial in the context of ensuring national security, particularly when it comes to combating global terrorism and extremism<sup>81</sup>. As a matter of fact, the third phase was characterized by prioritizing economic ties with the New Independent States, the Concept also addressed the issue of the Caspian Sea's sectoral partition.

Meanwhile, the fourth phase is considered starting from the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU) in 2015 until the current period. The creation of the Custom Union (CU) within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), followed by the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU), has since helped the improvement of Russian influence within the region. The Eurasian Economic

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<sup>79</sup> Laruelle M (2009). "Russia in Central Asia: Old history, new challenges". Europe Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM).

<sup>80</sup> Nixey J (2012), "The long goodbye: Waning Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia", RIIA.

<sup>81</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of Russian Federation, 28 June 2000.

Commission has become a shared standing regulatory authority of the customs union and the common economic space, the founding of the EEU has improved and enhanced the processes and the legal and regulatory framework of the common economic space. Due to the inclusion of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, two Central Asian nations, the EEU is a key component in Russia's Central Asian policy.

In general, the fourth stage in Russian policy toward Central Asia has been characterized by the intent to create a closer connections with a smaller set of countries, with a focus on Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, mostly in the economic and security sectors and using soft power techniques as well (Russian language, cultural influence including via the media, etc). This phase has been referred to by Alexander Cooley and Marlene Laruelle as a "more concentrated logic of hierarchy,"<sup>82</sup>.

Undoubtedly, at this moment, the five countries of Central Asia are seen differently by Russia, and the diverging domestic realities in these nations are properly acknowledged. For instance, Kazakhstan is seen as a crucial partner. Kazakhstan is one of the Post-Soviet nations that has continuously sided with Russia. Tajikistan, which has received significant Russian funding, is now a prime candidate for membership in the EEU despite the fact that Tajikistan contributions to the EEU will take time to materialize, given its modest economy. From a Russian standpoint, economic assistance should be utilized more to achieve greater security cooperation. This has become increasingly clear over the last decade. Since late 2012, Moscow has wiped off substantial sums of debt from each country of the region, which were each related to deals for Russian military bases and facilities.

Meanwhile, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are perceived as being challenging to govern because of their autonomy in respect to Russia. Uzbekistan's exit from the CSTO in June 2012 appears to have been a key trigger. With its debt and promises of gas exports, Turkmenistan has been more reliant on China since 2010<sup>83</sup>. Despite the numerous problems and conflicts that plague both sets of ties with their northern neighbor, Tashkent and Ashgabat also receive considerable attention from Moscow. However, expectations in these relationships must naturally be lower than with other countries in the area<sup>84</sup>. It

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<sup>82</sup> Cooley A, Laruelle M, (2013). "The changing logic of Russian strategy in Central Asia". PONARS Eurasia Policy Menu No 260.

<sup>83</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, Jos Boonstra and Marlène Laruelle (05/2012). Working paper 11: Security and development approaches to Central Asia The EU compared to China and Russia. EUCAM.

<sup>84</sup> "Russia's interests in Central Asia" (2013). Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), No 10.



should be highlighted, however, that the exact scope of Russia's bilateral connections with each of the Central Asian nations is likewise largely hidden from view and challenging to completely comprehend.

However, the evolving situation in Ukraine will play an essential role in shaping a new phase of the Russian strategy in Central Asia, the need to adapt to the changing international environment will force the Russian Federation to reconsider its strategy in the region. If relations are primarily based on power, Russia will be unable to sustain its influence in the region. Given the rising autonomy of these countries in relation to Russia, Central Asian nations will eventually voice their diverse aspirations. However, this requirement does not entail any hostility toward Russia. Moscow will have to concede that the aforementioned nations have interests apart from Russia. In order to preserve its influence over Central Asia, Russia will ultimately need to provide these nations with additional resources and possibilities in the economic and social spheres<sup>85</sup>. As a result, Russia cannot continue to dominate the area only through power relationships.

## **2.1) Russia in the region – a pragmatic strategy**

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia lost its interest and capacity to interact in the region of Central Asia significantly. The lack of tools at the disposal of Moscow and optimistic vision of Russia-West relations made Russian policy makers inactive in strengthening Russian influence in the region. However, already in the mid-90s the ‘*Primakov doctrine*’ gave the opportunity to Russia to position itself as an autonomous actor in world politics. The ‘*Primakov doctrine*’ asserts that Russia has to reject a unipolar world governed by a single global center of power (the United States). Instead, Russian foreign policy should work toward a multipolar world governed by a coalition of major powers, including the United States, China, and India. This idea holds that Russia should not strive to compete with the United States on its own, but instead should work with other major powers to restrain Washington and establish itself as a vital player with a vote and a veto, whose approval is required to resolve any major international conflict. By the *doctrine*, an unipolar world is considered to be intrinsically unstable, while

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<sup>85</sup> Özge Eletek (14/05/2021). “Russia’s New Central Asia Strategy”. Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Study.

multipolarity would offer checks and balances on the hegemon's unilateral and arbitrary use of power.

Primakov's appointment as foreign minister in 1996 signaled a significant change in Russian foreign policy from the one of the beginning of the 90s, in which Russia was mostly accommodating any decision and direction of the West in world politics. Primakov's period in office executed a significant deviation from the previous trajectory, as Lavrov, Primakov's successor as foreign minister, stated in October 2014: "Russia left the path of our Western partners . . . and embarked on a track of its own."<sup>86</sup> Since then, Russia has maintained its position, as was shown when Primakov, in protest of NATO's bombing of Serbia in March 1999, ordered his pilot to fly back to Moscow while still in the air on his way to Washington.

The '*Primakov doctrine*' is based on three major pillars:

- I. Russia should strive for a multipolar world governed by a coalition of powerful nations that can balance out American unilateralism;
- II. Russia should maintain its supremacy in the post-Soviet space and take the lead on regional integration;
- III. Russia must fight the expansion of NATO.

Depending on Russian capabilities, Moscow's commitment to the *Primakov doctrine* has changed over time. During the NATO intervention in Serbia, Primakov had few alternatives because Russia's economy was still suffering from the 1998 financial crisis and its foreign policy capabilities had been undermined by a decade of unrest. As a result, he decided simply not to follow the direction given by the U.S. in dealing with the turmoil in Serbia. However, as Russia's economy improved and its arsenal of foreign policy tools grew, Russian officials' alternatives also did so, ushering in a steady shift from passive to a more active stand in dealing with international issues<sup>87</sup>. The moment of change in the Russian position from passive to active occurred during the first Vladimir Putin's presidency (2000–2008).

The desire to reintegrate the Post-Soviet space around Russia has become a major foreign policy priority because the Russian political class wanted to compensate for the

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<sup>86</sup> Gurganus, J., & Rumer, E. (2019). Back to the Future. In *Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspectives* (pp. 1–3). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20991.3>

<sup>87</sup> Eugene Rumer (06/2019). "The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action". The return of global Russia. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

substantial loss of regional influence that occurred in the 1990s. In Central Asia the essential aspect of Russian strategy in this first active period focused on 5 major points:

1. Making Russian foreign policy more organized; specifying Russia's aims and interests in Central Asia; focusing resources in important directions;
2. Creating initiatives for pro-Russian integration; addressing ineffective CIS-based cooperation;
3. Outlining the terms of collaboration between Russia and other significant extra-regional powers in Central Asia (particularly with the US, China, and EU);
4. Ensuring regional security to help stabilize the situation in Russia, particularly in light of the expansion of terrorism, Islamic extremism, and the drug trade;
5. Maintaining Russian control over the pipelines that transport oil and gas out of the Caspian Sea region<sup>88</sup>.

The reintegration of the region of Central Asia under Russian influence has been possible since the abrupt Russian exit of the region at the start of the 1990s had resulted in horrible turmoil, which other significant international players' participation in the region had not been able to make up for. Despite the growing interest of several external actors, none of them decided to fully commit to stabilizing the region. All external actors in this period simply tried to create an interaction with the local governments, but the remoteness and geographical isolation of the region, as well cultural differences made any type of attempt to influence the region ineffective. The natural hegemon in the region, despite its absence, remained the Russian Federation. It is not a coincidence that many Central Asian countries did not desire the complete disappearance of the Soviet's structure in the region. As a matter of fact, important political and academic elites in the USA and Europe underlined their understanding of the need for cooperation with Russia to resolve significant regional concerns<sup>89</sup>.

At the end of the century, in 1999, a string of terrorist attacks took place in the Uzbek capital Tashkent. Furthermore, in that period the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), commanded by Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, emerged as the dominant extremist group in the area. The ultimate goal of this group was to unite all of the Central

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<sup>88</sup> Andrei Kazantsev (2008). Russian policy in Central Asia and Caspian sea region. *Europe-Asia studies*. Vol. 20. No 6. August. P. 1073 - 1088.

<sup>89</sup> Sherman W. Garnett, Alexander Rahr, Koji Watanabe (2000). "The New Central Asia: In Search of Stability". Task Force Report, No. 54. The Trilateral Commission.

Asian countries under an Islamic emirate. In Autumn of 1999 IMU fighters attacked Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, spreading more violence and instability within the region. This situation, at that time, could have provoked Islamic revolutions in Central Asian nations and even in some Islamic districts of Russia. Additionally, due to their fragile statehood and high levels of alienation between the governments and populations the risk of a snowballing effect was extremely realistic. In the same period, Russia faced risks that were comparable to those in Central Asia. Terrorists and religious radicals from all over Russia were harbored in the *de facto* autonomous Chechen republic in the North Caucasus. Not to forget also the terrorist attack that happened in Moscow<sup>90</sup>.

For this reason already in 1999, Russia was needed to bring back stability in the region<sup>91</sup>. The uncertainty whether or not Russia was able to deal with the crisis in the region vanished immediately after the show of strength of Russian capabilities during the Second Chechen War (or as it is referred to by official Russian documents as the “Second Anti-Terrorist Operation”) in September 1999. The determination in fighting extremists of the Russian government reassured the Central Asian political elites that Russia could actively use force also in Central Asia in case of a new crisis. The existence of common threats (terrorist attacks and invasions of Islamic militants) increased mutual understanding between political elites of Russia and Central Asian New Independent States and it gave the proper foundations for a lasting cooperation in dealing with this crucial issues in the region and in Russia.

Additionally, in 2003 –2005 the post-Soviet space experienced a series of ‘*colour revolutions*’. This new pattern of political development was provoked by the ‘*Rose revolution*’ in Georgia (November 2003), the ‘*Orange revolution*’ in Ukraine (November-December 2004) and the ‘*Tulip revolution*’ in Kyrgyzstan (March-April 2005). All these movements have been perceived by the Russian elites as orchestrated by the West to destabilize the region of the Post-Soviet space. As a reaction, the cooperative stand of the Russian Federation slowly vanished away. As a secondary reaction the post-Soviet political elites in every post-Soviet nation, including those in Central Asia, were terrified of losing control because of potential ‘*colour revolutions*’ in their individual nations. In

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<sup>90</sup> Zeyno Baran S. Frederick Starr Svante E. Cornell (07/2006). “Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU”. SILK ROAD PAPER.

<sup>91</sup> Strobe Talbott (21/07/1997). “A Farewell to Flashman: American Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia” Report.

this circumstance, officials in Central Asia grew to view strong relations with Russia as a protection against ‘*colour revolutions*’ and instability<sup>92</sup>.

However, the engagement of the US in fighting the Taliban in the region provoked a severe worsening of the Russian political influence. The lack of a strict control over the region was proven by the attempt of Uzbekistan to play the role of an alternative to Russia regional leadership, and it pushed through a decision to reform the Central Asian Economic Community with the unsaid aim to eliminate the need of Russia as a security provider. The new restructuring in 2001–2002 was intended to highlight the growing political and military cooperation in Central Asia. This was seen as an obstacle to Russia's position in the area. As a result, military organizations like the joint Central Asian battalion, which was founded in 1996 with US assistance, would now be in charge of ensuring regional security.

Unfortunately, soon after, in 2005, when the withdrawal of Russian border guards from the Tajik-Afghan border was completed the drug trafficking along the route Afghanistan-Tajikistan-Russia-Western Europe intensified and once again the stability of the region was put at risk. This event once again showed the need of a strong country like Russia to be involved in the region.

Russia effectively used its military capabilities to put itself as the major security provider in the region and by doing so was able to align the majority of Central Asian countries. This has been used as a base to create organizations and bilateral agreements with the aim to reestablish Russian control over the region. Russia in dealing with these issues has shown to be extremely pragmatic because it was able to establish a common group with the local elites and at the same time enforce its superiority in the realm of security. Furthermore, local elites understood that a high integration with the West could spark movements of dissents within the countries and in this regard a deeper integration with Russia could simply mean more stability for their regimes. For these reasons Russia was able to align Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The reality of the region has given the opportunity to Russia to assert its presence even if it lacked the economical capacity to support the local economies of these countries.

In this regard, Russian economic policy relied mostly on the control of fossil fuel extraction and transportation. In the early 2000, Russian domination in the sphere of

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<sup>92</sup> Fatima Kukeyeva (2006). “Color Revolutions in the Central Asia and the US Position”. Taiwan International Studies Quarterly. Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 81-96.

energy was asserted by the blocking of the construction of the gas and oil trans-Caspian pipeline, which was designed to transport gas from Turkmenistan and oil from Kazakhstan to European markets. However, the lack of a complex economic influence outside of the energy sphere made Russian influence more unstable and it gave the opportunity to external actors to infiltrate the region with ease. Additionally, China over this period was able to become a new important participant in the market of oil and gas in the region and it was able to become an important investor able to invest in needed infrastructure<sup>93</sup>.

## **2.2) Organizations for cooperation as a tool of integration**

Since the fall of the USSR in 1991 the newly independent states have made several attempts to build some multilateral format(s) that would satisfy their pressing demands for economic development, political collaboration, and security guarantees. The uncertainty that ruled all Post-Soviet space, but in particular the region of Central Asia, in the 1990s is what led to the coexistence of multilateral organizations that varied from one another in terms of their distinct geographic locations, roles, and levels of collaboration. It reflects the transitory nature of the current stage of post-Soviet international relations on the one hand, and facilitated the accomplishment of the transition in a smoother way.

The first multinational format of such kind in the Post-Soviet space has been the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was proclaimed in December 1991, while the Charter adopted in 1992 and entered into force in 1993, with the major aim to integrate the region once again. In the early part of the 1990s, analogies with the integration in Western Europe were frequently made, which led to an inaccurate understanding of the situation in the post-Soviet region and a completely different correlation of centrifugal and centripetal forces. When the CIS was created, the previous economic complex was disintegrated. However, the EU has never been able to achieve the level of economic, customs, and security integration that the CIS states had at the beginning of the 1990s. The CIS was able to maintain an unified labor market and a socio-

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<sup>93</sup> Alexander Gabuev (2016). Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: “One Belt One Road” and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*.

cultural entity that after 30 years still remain at some level. Due to cultural and linguistic factors, the social fabric is frequently kept together despite national government politics<sup>94</sup>.

Initially, the CIS structure was not able to develop effective collaboration but in 1992 the Collective Security Treaty (CST) was signed in Tashkent by the CIS nations to advance deeper collaboration in the area of shared security and to establish greater cooperation in achieving these goals. The treaty came into effect in April 1994. In this way, the 1991-established CIS, which was unable to foster genuine integration and collaboration, evolved over the years into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which effectively become a functional regional organization that provided the legal framework for peacekeeping operations in the post-Soviet space.

Six countries make up the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO): Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It was established to develop a system of collective security across the post-Soviet regions of Europe and Asia through discussions on all significant topics relating to global security that may be detrimental to their interests. Threats to their security, as well as to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of one or more members or to international security, were coordinated through the use of consultations (Art2)<sup>95</sup>. The Collective Security Council (CSC), comprised of heads of state and the supreme commander of the CIS United Armed Forces, was established by the Treaty's signatory nations. In the case of an attack to one or more member states it will be view as an attack on all of them and all members will provide to the victim of the aggression with all necessary assistance, including military support, and will do so in complete compliance with their obligations under the right to collective defense and Article 51 of the U.N. Charter (Art 4). This indicates the Treaty's intention to establish a military-political bloc. In fact, Art. 1 mandates that the member nations shall refrain from participating in activities against any other member state and shall not enlist in military alliances or groupings of states. In the first five years of its existence, the Treaty lost a number of its members due to its inefficiency (particularly in the Caucasus war settlement and the failure to establish an effective security system). Russia and other members were therefore made aware that the structure should be more efficient

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<sup>94</sup> Shakleina T., Baykov A. (eds.) (2014). "Megatrends. Major Pathways of Global Development". (Megatrendy. Osnovnye traektorii jevoljucii mirovogo porjadka v XXI veke). 2nd ed. Moscow: Aspect Press Ltd. Pp. 373–393.

<sup>95</sup> A. Kniazev (2001). "Afganskiy konflikt i radikal'nyi islam v Tsentral'noy Azii. Sbornik do- kumentov i materialov". pp. 25-28.

and for this reason, at the CSC summit in May 2000, it was agreed to divide the Post-Soviet Space into three CST regional security regions (European, Caucasian, and Central Asian), as they were already indicated in 1995 Collective Security Concept of the CST members. The decision to establish a collective security force system was made some time later at the CSC meeting in Bishkek in 2000. In May 2001, in Erevan, it was decided to establish Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CRDF) specifically for Central Asia, which would consist of Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik battalions. Additionally, two regional groups of forces protect the CSTO members from external aggression: in the Caucasus (Russia-Armenia regional force) and European (Russia-Belarus regional force) sectors and to attach air forces to the CRDF.

Overtime the CIS lost its role of integrating but it still served as an umbrella body while the new organizations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU or EAEU) took up the role of integration. Nevertheless, the CIS was used in several occasions as the base for new agreements and cooperation. As in the early 1990s in Abkhazia and Tajikistan all required immediate peacekeeping intervention to stop widespread slaughter. As a result, the Russian units stationed there during the Soviet period, after the creation of bilateral agreements, eventually became CIS peacekeeping forces<sup>96</sup>. Art 11 of the CIS Charter adopted on 22 January, 1993 says: “Member states ... shall support security in the Commonwealth, including with the assistance of groups of military observers and collective forces for maintaining peace.” Art 12 of the same document envisages “peacekeeping operations and the use, where necessary, of the Armed Forces in accordance with the procedure for exercising the right to individual or collective defenses according to Art 51 of the U.N. Charter.”

Since 1999, to counter the steadily expanding Western influence in the region of Central Asia, the Russian leadership has been promoting stronger relations inside the CIS, particularly in the area of collective security. The withdrawal of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan from the Collective Security Treaty (CST), which deemed it insufficiently effective, was one factor that led to Moscow's new approach<sup>97</sup>. The prospect of radical extremism spreading from Afghanistan and Tajikistan to their neighbors, as

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<sup>96</sup> K. Kurova. “Rol’ Rossii i SNG v uregulirovanii voennykh konfliktov v Zakavkazie”. Institute of International Relations at Warsaw University. Available at <http://www.mpa.ru/files/sb1/3.doc>

<sup>97</sup> S. Minasian (2003). “CIS: Building a Collective Security System”. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (19), p. 133.



well as subsequent developments in Central Asia, such as the terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan, sparked much tighter collaboration between Russia and the CST members. The collective security policy in Central Asia entered a new phase as a result.

The Russian Federation was forced to adopt more constructive policies in Central Asia and thus adapted to the different needs of the countries of the region. As a result of this change of direction, the Russian Federation left Turkmenistan to its own devices and started forging modest economic ties with it. At the same time, it decided to develop a deeper cooperation with Kazakhstan, which was made easier because of the Russian minority in the country and the geographical position of Kazakhstan itself. Moscow was compelled to improve ties with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, its other two vital allies in the area, as a result of Uzbekistan's apparent determination to follow an independent foreign policy. After assisting Tajikistan's legitimate government during the Civil War, Moscow took the lead in ensuring the 1997 peace accord and then it continued to guarantee the stabilization of the nation. The Russian 201st motorized infantry division, which had been stationed in the republic as a member of the CIS peacekeeping troops during the Civil War, had an additional 10 years of stay thanks to the 1999 agreement. It was decided that it will become a Russian military facility after that time. Additionally, Russia raised its military assistance to Bishkek to \$1 million in response to the Batken events in the summers of 1999 and 2000<sup>98</sup>, and it also stepped up in providing bilateral counter-terrorism assistance. The coordinated anti-terrorist campaign revitalized Moscow and Tashkent's strategic ties, which had been put on hold after Uzbekistan departed the CST<sup>99</sup>.

Specifically in 2002, the 6 member states of the Collective Security Treaty decided to transform it into a military alliance called Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Through granting CSTO members the ability to purchase Russian weaponry at domestic rates as well as by educating military personnel and experts in Russian military educational facilities, by doing so Russia boosted integration in the area of collective security. The majority of the CSTO budget has been carried by Moscow. In this way, since 1999, cooperation in the area of collective security has taken on concrete

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<sup>98</sup> Bruce Pannier (24/09/2019). "The Summer Of 1999 And The IMU In Kyrgyzstan". Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty

<sup>99</sup> Zakir Chotaev (2006). "The Multilateral Structures and Legal Foundations of Russia's Security Policy in Central Asia". Central Asia and the Caucasus No. 4(40).

forms that are backed by actual actions and cooperation among the CST members. The CIS air defenses put in place in 1995 fall under the same category.

Another important organization in the region in the field of security and cooperation is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was founded in April 1996 when an Agreement on Strengthening Confidence in the Military Sphere in the Border Area was signed in Shanghai (China). The SCO today is composed of 9 members (China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran ) and it works as a base for dialogue among the member states in dealing with several issues of the region. It is an essential platform for China and Russia to cooperate in Central Asia and it has become more relevant due to the withdrawal of the American forces from Afghanistan and the instability of the latter.

Meanwhile, in the sphere of integrating the region to the former ruler, Russia relies mostly on the EEU and its role in establishing a common market and direction for the entire block. The EEU was founded by agreements made by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia in May 2014 that came into effect on January 1st, 2015. The admission of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia took effect in January and August of 2015, respectively. Its economic program calls for the elimination of non-tariff barriers, the development of markets for common utilities, and the standardization of regulations in areas including transportation, public procurement, and financial services<sup>100</sup>.

The steady development of security and economic cooperation demonstrates the significant potential for regionalization in Central Asia. Any significant adjustments to the development patterns in Central Asia are still unattainable due to differences between Russia and China on the SCO's possibilities and their separate roles. In response to China's economic growth, Russia advocates for further economic integration solely inside the EEU, while China declines to advance security cooperation and pursues its own international policy objectives. The global financial crisis of 2009–2010 has presented significant challenges for the former Soviet countries. It can only be said that Russia's attempts to seize the opportunity and increase its influence in the area, including the EEU, have been partially successful.

As a matter of fact, the Western sanction to Russia instantly affected the nations nearby. Currency devaluation, rising energy costs, and the large number of migrant

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<sup>100</sup> Dragneva, R. and K. Wolczuk (2017). "The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power". Chatham House Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

workers returning home have all shown how heavily dependent the new independent republics are on Russia's economic health and dynamism. However, it turned out that the crucial cooperation with Russia did not preclude alternative possibilities for Eurasian integration. Instead, escalating international tensions have sparked a debate within the countries of Central Asia over whether it is appropriate to advance the EEU, particularly in light of the potential threat to state sovereignty<sup>101</sup>.

In conclusion, all these formats are essential for Moscow's interests and goals in the region. Thanks to its geographical position, history and military might the Russia Federation has been able over the years to create these organizations that nowadays are inseparable from the reality of the countries involved.

### **2.3) The current Russian focus and major aspects of today's strategy**

Russia still holds a considerable impact in Central Asia, and that influence is only going to increase. There are three primary objectives for Russian foreign policy in Central Asia. Promoting security and military-technical cooperation is the foremost (from the modernization of the armed forces of the states of the region to the construction of military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). The second is supporting hydropower and oil and gas energy projects. The third is improving the Eurasian Economic Union's (EEU) structures for integration, of which Tajikistan is a potential member while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are full member states.

The major aspects that draw attention to the region from the Russian perspective include: the apparent instability of borders (often arbitrarily drawn between the republics during the Soviet era), centuries-old territorial disputes, interethnic (or inter-clan) conflicts both between and within the new independent states, and an Afghanistan that has a history of instability next door, pose a threat to the stability of the region. The formation of a "vacuum of influence" and the porousness of borders might strengthen fundamentalist and criminal organizations, endangering Russia's security<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>101</sup> Andrei Kazantsev, Svetlana Medvedeva, Ivan Safranchuk (03/25/2021). "Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia". *Journal of Eurasian Studies*.

<sup>102</sup> Leonid Gusev (03/10/2019). "The Importance of Central Asia for Russia's Foreign Policy". *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*.

Besides hazards, there are also possibilities. In order to build relationships with local business leaders and get specific economic benefits, Russia can create and advance cooperative economic ventures with the Central Asian countries. Organizations like the EEU, founded in 2014, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), founded in 2002, are engaged in Central Asia. Both organizations, in which Russia plays a key role, involve a sizable portion of the Central Asian nations. Additionally, Russia exercises a substantial amount of "soft power" in Central Asia. The region has a huge following for Russian movies, TV shows, and theater productions. Many Central Asian governments view Russia as a political role model and a legislative innovator; frequently, Central Asian nations implement legislation that is exactly like that of Russia, for instance, in the battle against extremism and terrorism.

In several fields, collaboration with Kazakhstan is now growing. In addition to Central Asia, Kazakhstan is an important ally of Russia in the entire post-Soviet region. At the same time, Kazakhstan is Moscow's only active partner in integration processes that does not receive significant subsidies and economic assistance from the Russian Federation, such as in the EEU, because of the enormous economic potential of Kazakhstan (in 2015, Kazakhstan exceeded even Russia in terms of per capita GDP). Between the two nations, there are large energy projects. Russia and Kazakhstan are working more closely together across borders and within regions, which makes sense considering that they share the world's longest land border. Their collaboration in the fields of agriculture, atomic energy, and space is also growing.

Furthermore, the intervention of CSTO peacekeeping force (with the majority of the contingent being Russian) in Kazakhstan, during the disorders of January, showed the capacity and the will of the Russian Federation to play a key role even in the internal politics of the country. This event also demonstrated that Moscow needed to make sure Kazakhstan continued to be a crucial ally ready to support its plans for the post-Soviet region's economic integration as well as security. Russia was not willing to watch as a favorable political government fell and a lawful president lost his or her position<sup>103</sup>.

With regard to Uzbekistan, a significant improvement in ties was made following Shavkat Mirziyoyev's election as president. Given that ties with Uzbekistan haven't always been cordial, this is noteworthy from the perspective of Moscow's interests. To

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<sup>103</sup> Temur Umarov (28/01/2022). "Will Russia's Intervention in Kazakhstan Come at a Price?". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Russia's chagrin, Uzbekistan has quit the CSTO twice: once in 1999 and again in 2005 and 2012, although it has never intended to rejoin. In 2008, Tashkent also ceased to be a member of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC)<sup>104</sup>. However, in April 2017 during Mirziyoyev's visit to Moscow, the two nations inked a set of agreements to implement trade contracts worth \$3.8 billion and substantial investment projects worth \$12 billion. Important Russian businesses including Gazprom, Rosteh, and Vnesheconombank are among those that have signed contracts with Uzbekistan<sup>105</sup>. Military preparations for significant joint exercises and the restart of Uzbek officers' training in Russia show how gradually Uzbekistan and Russia's sides have begun to align militarily.

Russia is Kyrgyzstan's main commercial and economic partner, and the two countries work together in the gas industry. By discussing plans for gas pipes to the country's southern areas, Gazprom is assisting towards the gasification of Kyrgyzstan. Along with providing Kyrgyzstan with gas, Russia has been providing gasoline at a discount for many years, which is an example of interstate economic support. Furthermore, far only Russia has provided assistance to Kyrgyzstan in the form of supplies of weapons and ammunition with the major aim to eliminate Islamist extremists. Russia aids its CA neighbors in the fight against terrorist organizations by assisting them to strengthen border control, by providing support for local special services, and by utilizing the CSTO Rapid Reaction Forces. This is done in light of the spillover of terrorism and radicalism from CA to its own territory, as well as to maintain or even increase its political clout in these CA countries<sup>106</sup>.

As for Turkmenistan, energy is at the heart of Russia and Turkmenistan's collaboration, particularly in the sector of gas, in which both nations are abundant. In addition, according to government statistics, Russia exports metals and their derivatives to Turkmenistan, as well as machinery, automobiles, food, and raw agricultural commodities, and imports chemical, textile, fuel, and energy goods from Turkmenistan. The educational sectors of both nations are actively cooperative. A combined Turkmen-Russian comprehensive school named after Pushkin is operational in Ashgabat in

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<sup>104</sup> Aleksey Asiryan (21/08/2019). "New Faces, Old Patterns in Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy". The Diplomat.

<sup>105</sup> Рустем Фаляхов (05/04/2017). "Узбекистан не спешит в Евразийский союз".

<sup>106</sup> A. M. Dynier, A. Legieć and K. Rękawek (13/01/2015). Op. cit.; J. Paraszczuk 'In Implicit Criticism Of West, Russia's FM Calls for 'More Serious' Fight Against IS', RFE/RL.

compliance with the Agreement between the governments of Turkmenistan and the Russian Federation. The school also educates the children of staff members of the CIS nations' diplomatic missions in Ashgabat, as well as fifty percent Russians and fifty percent Turkmen. The institution issues Russian-style diplomas to its graduates, many of whom are eligible for preferential admission to Russian colleges.

Regarding Tajikistan, Russia has firmly assumed top place in recent years in terms of the volumes of bilateral trade and investment cooperation with this nation. In exchange for obtaining cotton, fruits, and vegetables, Russia exports oil products, timber, ferrous metals, machinery, and technological goods. Between the two nations, military-technical cooperation is actively growing, particularly in the area of military education. Over 600 Tajik nationals, including officers, are now engaged in training programs administered by the Russian Ministry of Defense. Over a thousand experts are annually educated for the Tajikistan army at the 201st Russian military camp. Cooperation in science is also growing. An intergovernmental agreement concerning the establishment and operations of the Pamir-Chakaltaya International Research Center was signed by Russia and Tajikistan in 2008. The scientific foundation was rebuilt, and the global astrophysical experiment in the study of high-energy cosmic rays has continued ever since. According to Tajikistan's Minister of Education Nuriddin Said, over 24,000 Tajik people attend higher and secondary educational institutions in Russia. Russian-Tajik ties in the area of education are generally developing in a way that reflects the broader trend toward more economic and political cooperation<sup>107</sup>.

Russia to fulfill its interests in the region is using every tool at its disposal and it has been able to remain in firm control over the region and the political elites that rule the countries of it.

## **2.4) Conclusion – Russia, the security provider of Central Asia**

The Russian Federation has a long historical legacy in Central Asia. Already since the Tsarist time, Russia exercised direct or indirect control over the entire region and after 70 years of Soviet administration the influence of Russia has deeply shaped the reality of the region today.

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<sup>107</sup> Liz Arnanz, Stephen Blank, Maxine David, Ruth Deyermond, Lance Davies, Tracey German, David Lewis & Rachel S. Salzman (07/2015). Russia in the World. Comillas Journal of International Relations.

However, after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation has lost its full control of the region. Its lack of interest in the region in the early 90s has created an extremely different reality and it has forced the Russian policy-makers to reshape its approach to the region as a whole. Firstly, the basis for the new strategy adopted in Central Asia has been the '*Primakov doctrine*', which has deeply shaped Russian foreign policies in general and especially in relation to the West. Subsequently, the come into President office of Vladimir Putin has made Russia more assertive and active in the region, with the major aim to reestablish the control in such a crucial region for Russian interests.

Today's Russia uses all tools at its disposal to remain in a primary position in interacting with the countries of the region, including elites with links to Russia, cultural linkages, media sway, and not least in the fields of economics and security. The most important feature of the Russia approach is its image as the major security and stability provider for the weaker countries of the region. Furthermore, the creation of organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union's (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), has been a major attempt by the Russian Federation to create cooperation and to faster integration with the countries of the region.

Through this chapter, the Russian strategy has been described as '*pragmatic*' because it does not rely on any specific ideology, as it did during the soviet era but instead it use already existing links between the former soviet republics and Moscow. Russia uses a combination of hard power, soft power and organizations to achieve the goals of its agenda in the region.

### **Chapter 3 - EU's strategy in Central Asia**

More than any other actor, Europe has a complex personality, but one that is not without its share of paradoxes. The European Union is a complex organization with three main governing bodies: the Commission, Council, and Parliament. It also has a number of representatives, including the Council President, the member nation that is currently in the chair, the President of the Commission, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who serves on both the Commission and the Council. Additionally, Europe is represented through its member nations, some of which are more active and noticeable than the EU in Central Asia. It is also important to mention that the EU participates in international organizations, particularly those connected to the UN (the EU, for example, supports the BOMCA project, even if the UNDP implements it), and through external donors. Last but not least, non-state entities and private players, whether businesses or civil society, also represent the European perspective.

The European Union was handling a full agenda at the start of the 1990s, including the reunification of Germany, the implementation of the Schengen accord, the conflicts in Yugoslavia, the preparation of the Central European nations for membership, and the development of new ties with Moscow. Central Asia was not prioritized in any manner in this situation<sup>108</sup>. But despite its pressing issues, already in the early 90s, the EU and individual European governments developed contacts with all the Central Asian nations, and they participated in discussion and collaboration on topics including migration, development of aids, and methods to support stability in war-torn Afghanistan and Tajikistan.<sup>109</sup> In Almaty, Kazakhstan, in 1994, the first delegation of the EU Commission to Central Asia was established. The EU implemented self-serving policies toward Central Asia, and the area was openly ranked lower in significance for the EU than South-East Europe, the Balkans, Ukraine, and other "nearer" neighbors to Europe. This was true both verbally and factually. In fact, it wasn't until the Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia was adopted that EU policy towards Central Asia started to pick up steam<sup>110</sup>.

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<sup>108</sup> A. Warkotsch (Abing-don: Routledge, 2011). "The European Union and Central Asia".

<sup>109</sup> S. N. Macfarlane (1999). "Western Engagement in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia". Royal Institute of International Affairs.

<sup>110</sup> K. Hoffmann (2010). "The EU in Central Asia: Successful Good Governance Promotion?". *Third World Q.* 87–103.



In the 90s the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) has served as the EU's primary tool in its policy toward the CIS area. In 1995/96, the EU signed PCAs with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. These agreements went into effect in 1999 after being ratified by all EU member states and the European Parliament. Due to the protracted delay in the PCA, the bilateral trade ties between the EU and Tajikistan were based on an interim agreement on trade and trade-related issues. Finally, it was approved in 2010 after being signed in 2004. Only in 2009 did the EU ratify the 1998 PCA between Turkmenistan and the EU.

Additionally, the EU's General System of Preferences benefits all five of Central Asia's nations (GSP). These agreements serve the interests of both parties in commercial relations but do not provide any possibility of EU membership. The Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program, which was established in 1992 and has since supported the implementation of economic reforms and the establishment and maintenance of political ties between the partner countries, was another significant tool of EU policy in the region. However, issues within the EU surfaced due to the lack of a cohesive approach to the area and the divergent political and economic interests of the major European states in Central Asia. This is connected to the internal quirks of European politics as well as the overall geopolitical context, particularly how the EU interacts with the US and Russia. Despite disagreements among the member states, the region remains a major concern in terms of security. In fact, issues of regional security, the war against terrorism, and the war on drugs have traditionally been the main topics of discussion between Central Asia and Europe. The majority of the illegal narcotics from Afghanistan are consumed in the EU.

Furthermore, one of the earliest initiatives to identify shared interests and prospective areas for collaboration as well as to provide a comprehensive strategy with regard to the region as a whole was the EU's Central Asia Strategy, which was published in 2007<sup>111</sup>. This document aimed to balance EU material interests (such as energy security) with its promotion of democracy and human rights in the area. This strategy

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<sup>111</sup> N. Winn & S. Gänzle (2017). "Die Globale Strategie für die Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik der Europäischen Union – Zentralasien und der Südkaukasus: vom normativen Ansatz zum prinzipiengeleiteten Pragmatismus" ["The EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy, Central Asia and the South Caucasus: From the Pursuit of Values to 'Principled Pragmatism'"], 40(4) *Integration* 308–318.

served as a key tool in initiatives like the EU Rule of Law initiative and the Human Rights Dialogue to that aim.

At some level, the European Union's 2007 Central Asia Strategy was modeled after the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership, which was the ENP's offspring for the neighbors in Eastern Europe<sup>112</sup>. The Central Asia Strategy and the Eastern Partnership both had a multilateral preamble supporting "region-building" among the five Central Asian nations, but in reality, they were founded on rigid bilateralism. Additionally, they agreed on a number of goals and priorities for the partnership, including the improvement of energy security. As a result, it may be interpreted as "the continuation of an internal process of institutionalization" supported by bureaucratic dynamics inside the European Commission (the primary author of the policy script), as well as a legacy of enlargement-tested policies to be applied to the nearby area<sup>113</sup>.

This new European involvement in the region was welcomed by the Central Asian republics because it represented new opportunities for their economies and it gave the chance to these countries to diversify their foreign policy. However, these initial attempts of the EU to interact with the governments and civil societies of the region proved to be ineffective because of the lack of a clear direction and it has often been criticized to be not pragmatic enough within its objectives. In fact, the range of issue areas covered by the EU's strategy document and the development aid was, and still is, impressive. At the same time, many analysts took this breadth of priorities to be the weakness of the Strategy. A good example are the considerations of Jos Boonstra, who argued that the EU's policy was overstretched, as it wanted "to do a lot with insufficient resources"<sup>114</sup>. For this reason in 2019, the European interests and priorities have been reestablished with several differences that showed how the EU, despite its unique history, still relies on practical aspects in dealing with countries such as the ones of the region of Central Asia.

In general, the EU's primary concerns in the region are the security of energy supplies (potential gas imports from Turkmenistan and oil from Kazakhstan), the stability of the area, and mitigating harmful spillover effects from Afghanistan. The authoritarian

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<sup>112</sup> F. Fenton (2015). "State of Play: EU, Central Asia and ENP, in *The Neighbours of the European Union's Neighbours*", 171 (S. Gstöhl & E. Lanon eds, Routledge 2015).

<sup>113</sup> S. Lavenex (2004). "EU External Governance in 'Wider Europe'". 11(4) *J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y* 680–700, 685.

<sup>114</sup> Jos Boonstra (01/2011). "The EU's Interests in Central Asia: Integrating Energy, Security and Values into Coherent Policy". Working Paper N°9, EDC 2020: 18.

character of the Central Asian governments makes it difficult for the EU to simultaneously emphasize democratic norms and practical economic aspects. In fact, these goals have opposing logic in reality. The EU has lowered its pressure on Turkmenistan in respecting human rights as a result of its aim to diversify gas export routes and lessen its reliance on Russia. Some complaints of the country's human rights and rule of law have been disregarded because of its ability to participate in the Southern Corridor, even at a modest 10 billion cubic meters per year.

Last but not least the EU has found itself somewhat paralyzed by security concerns related to the situation in Afghanistan. This is all the more odd in light of the fact that the domestic stability of the Central Asian republics depends in part on a stable Afghanistan. Furthermore, due to the corrupt nature of the Central Asian ruling elites, the EU's development investment is often dispersed across the region and often it ends up to have little impact. When taken as a whole, the EU's goals attempt to connect energy, security, moral principles, and interests in growth are the primary ones.

### **3.1) The normative power of the EU**

Already since the early 1970s there have been discussions among scholars regarding the Normative Power of Europe. One of the main supporters of this theory, that Europe hold Normative power in the international arena, was at that time François Duchêne, who claimed that Europe had a distinct sort of force in international affairs, depending on political and economic methods rather than military ones. Later on, in 2002 Manners' furthered Duchêne's idea of Europe as a civilian power with his paper on the Normative Power Europe (NPE)<sup>115</sup>. According to Manner, the EU "has been, is, and always will be a normative authority in international affairs," this is caused by the unique political systems of Europe after and during the cold war. In fact, the EU is built on a normative foundation that predisposes it to engage in a normative manner in international affairs. Manners described normative power as "the ability to determine what passes as '*normal*' in international politics". The Union, according to Manners, has progressively created a normative framework based on a set of ideals that it seeks to advance through

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<sup>115</sup> Duchêne, F. (1973). "The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence". In M. Kohnstamm and W. Hager (eds) *A Nation Writ Large? Foreign Policy Problems Before the European Community* (London: Macmillan), 1– 21.

its foreign actions. He listed five of these fundamental principles: democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, rule of law and peace<sup>116</sup>.

According to Manners, the capacity to determine what passes for ‘*normal*’ in international politics is, ultimately, the greatest power of all. On the one hand, a key tenet of the literature is that NPE is about the strength of ideas without a specific connection to tangible resources. In fact, Manners claims that normative power should be about normative justification rather than the use of material incentives. On the other hand, as emphasized by Lisbeth Aggestam, there is the possibility that in actuality, normative authority is commonly combined with pecuniary incentives and/or physical coercion<sup>117</sup>. In fact, this might, unintentionally, give NPE a more realistic basis the more it is connected to the concept of ‘*carrot and stick*’.

It is often argued that the NPE has more to do with internal than external policy and more to do with the creation of the EU's self-image than with the projection of specific norms to the global arena<sup>118</sup>. It is generally established in the literature on political legitimacy that moral self-justification is significant to the majority of players in international politics. However, in the case of the EU there are several reasons to believe that its normative power has been used in a more practical way to defend its economic interests.

To better understand the scope of the normative power of the EU let's take into consideration the use of it in the context of labor standards and environmental standards. As a matter of fact, what we refer to as labor standards in a globalized economy are not upheld, Europe, which already has extremely high labor standards, might suffer from a race to the bottom. If environmental standards within the same global economy are weaker than those in Europe, Europe will inevitably be at a competitive disadvantage and will thus be obligated to advocate for their harmonization on a worldwide scale. Furthermore, if other nations do not adhere to European norms, European industry may be moved to low-wage nations. The only other option would be to establish a tax system for goods coming from places with low environmental standards or low labor

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<sup>116</sup> Manners, I. (2008). “The Normative Ethics of the European Union”. *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 1, pp. 45– 60.

<sup>117</sup> Aggestam, L. (2009). “The World in Our Mind: Normative Power in a Multi-Polar World”. In A. Gerrits (ed.) *Normative Power Europe in a Changing World: A Discussion* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations), 25– 37.

<sup>118</sup> Diez, T. and Pace, M. (2011). “Normative Power Europe and Conflict Transformation”. In R. Whitman (ed.) *Normative Power Europe: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), 210– 226.

standards<sup>119</sup>. These straightforward illustrations make it easier to comprehend why, in a world that is becoming less and less dependent on Europe, the EU must act to defend its own social choices. Broadening the purview of European normativity in a context that is not always inclined to such a perspective can be an extremely useful method to defend Europe's preferences in the global arena.

In the case of the EU, a normative power is not just one that creates norms. It is an actor that struggles to translate its standards into international rules that are acceptable for those who receive them (norm-takers), either because they see a direct and immediate benefit (like membership in the European Union or access to its markets), because they see norms as a way of adopting a discipline that they cannot for whatever reason impose on themselves, or because they believe that by adhering to those norms, norm-takers will also participate in their implementation.

Since everyone constantly perceives the world through the lens of their own history, the distinctiveness of the European model and its universal character must necessarily go together. For this reason the EU has a natural tendency to expand the norm-based governance it experiences within its own boundaries to the rest of the globe<sup>120</sup>. Europe implicitly assumes that global governance increases norms and that this type of governance via norms is the most appropriate political model for an interdependent world since it contributes to power equality.

Additionally, in order to overcome two major challenges, Europe is fundamentally driven to impose standards on the global system. The first is to avoid putting Europe at a comparative disadvantage by preventing global rules from being less stringent than those in Europe. The second is that it lacks the physical authority to force norms on oppositional actors. In order to further its own interests, Europe requires the assistance of the international system. In fact, the EU cannot act like a superpower that arbitrates among the various components of its strategy. It is compelled to impose its rules on the global system piecemeal and use norms to appease power politics. Therefore, compared to security or diplomatic concerns, Europe is considerably more effective on matters involving global public goods, such as the environment, international justice, and sustainable development.

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<sup>119</sup> Ismer, R. and Neuhoff, K. (2004). "Border Tax Adjustments: a Feasible way to Address Non Participation in Emission Trading! DEA Working Paper Series, Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

<sup>120</sup> Laidi, Z. and Lamy, P. (2002). "A European Approach to Global Governance".

However, despite the EU being a power without any coercive authority to non-European players, it has a lot of economic and commercial clout. Through this, Europe was able to persuade Moscow to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in exchange for the country's admission to the WTO. Due to the size of the European market and the increasing importance of environmental, health, and sustainable development standards, the economic partners of the EU are compelled to comply with these standards. In such disciplines, European standards are rising to the greatest levels in the world, making Europe the region that sets standards globally.

In the interaction with external countries, the EU has three options:

1. it can be more proactive in its demands that norms it promotes to be respected,
2. it can bend the rules of the norms it formally prescribes,
3. or it can engage in a more or less subdued conflict with its partners.

The first case applied to countries that posed similar back-groups and could be integrated within the EU “while maintaining the momentum of European integration”<sup>121</sup>. Whenever it encounters circumstances where the spread of norms can no longer be taken for granted, it would spell out, clarify, or toughen the norms that it exports. However, this strategy worked fairly well with countries that can actually aspire to become part of the EU.

When the EU can no longer promise to provide a reward as significant as admission, replicating this pattern becomes difficult. This issue is addressed across its whole neighborhood policy, known as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which does not provide the same benefits of an admission but puts the norm-taker into the position to strictly follow the direction given by the EU. The ENP is essentially a fairly traditional kind of semi-periphery control that tries to create a positive feedback loop between democracy, development, and good governance without endangering the security and stability of Europe. In essence, it is a *milieu goal policy* in action. Thus, Europe practices geopolitics using rules.

Europe asks that its trading partners abide by its restrictions with regard to technical norms and standards, industrial policy, intellectual property, rules of origin, taxes, public procurement, etc. in exchange for more access to its market. To put it another way, Europe is attempting to get bilateral acceptance for standards that it is unable to

<sup>121</sup> Emerson, M., Aydin, S., De Clerck-Sachsse, J., Noutcheva, G. (2006) ‘Just what is this ‘Absorption Capacity’ of the European Union’, CEPS Policy Brief, 113, September.

enforce on a global level. However, when shifting from the economic sphere to more sensitive areas such as those pertaining to good governance or human rights the EU uses a double standard.

In fact, in the second case, the interaction with partners is still based on the logic of *'carrot and stick'* but the EU is more willing to bend the norms imposed especially on good governance or human rights. When it comes to human rights, the EU is considerably more intrusive with potential members who are European countries like Moldavia or Ukraine than it is with Arab nations<sup>122</sup>, or in general Muslim nations such as the one of Central Asia.

In general, when dealing with authoritarian political regimes incentives might be seen as either potential punishments the European Union would impose on defiant nations or, conversely, as prizes it would provide in exchange for adherence to certain standards. As a matter of fact, the third case is composed by countries that do not support the norms imposed by the EU and thus the EU imposes its economical punishments.

The second case of interaction of the EU is the one taken into consideration when dealing also with countries of Central Asia. However, at the beginning of the EU's interaction in the region it was not the case and for this reason the initial strategy has been changed in order to be more able to fit within the reality of the region of Central Asia.

### **3.2) EU's involvement in the region and the strategic direction of 2007**

In the first decade of the region's post-Soviet independence, the EU expanded to become the region's top contributor, providing aid of over €944 million between 1991 and 2002. This total hides the contradiction that, although being the most generous contributor to Central Asia, the EU played a relatively little role in development, especially when compared to other donors like the US, the UN, and Asian and Muslim development organizations. The Committee of the EU in the document of 2007 addressed the importance of the region by stating that "Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together"<sup>123</sup> and by enumerated all the potential of the region.

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<sup>122</sup> Bosse, G. (2007). "Values in the EU's Neighbourhood Policy: Political Rhetoric or Reflections of a Coherent Policy?". *European Political Economic Review*: 38–62.

<sup>123</sup> The Permanent Representatives Committee (31/05/2007). "The EU and Central Asian: Strategy for a New Partnership.

Nevertheless, despite recognizing the importance of the region, the document lacked a deep understanding of the region to effectively deal with it. In fact, evaluations of the effectiveness of the EU's support programs revealed a lack of consistency and variable results. One of the issues was the scope of the goals and initiatives, which had a negative impact on project delivery timeliness, efficacy, and follow-up.

Another barrier was that, among other reasons, the lack of adequate administrative and technical ability in the Central Asian republics made change there more gradual than in the majority of other post-Soviet nations. Importantly, this demonstrated that the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) lacked the necessary tools to address the challenges that the Central Asian republics were facing, concerns that extended beyond transitional issues. To address this issue the EU increasingly augmented its emphasis on reducing poverty in the area, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The EU determined in the middle of the 2000s that aid for Central Asian nations should be given through a financial mechanism intended for developing nations rather than post-Soviet nations. Consequently, the five nations have benefited from the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) since 2007.

Additionally, the "Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia" was formed in 2007 during the German EU Council Presidency with the aim of fostering connections and reviving collaboration with Central Asia. The initiative's goal indicated a noticeable shift in European perspectives to look beyond Europe's eastern boundaries. The EU pursued a more balanced dual track of bilateral and regional cooperation under the Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the 2007–2013 period, using a regional approach for issues affecting or revolving around all five countries, such as water resource management, transportation infrastructure, and anti-drug trafficking initiatives, while using a bilateral, tailored approach for specific national issues<sup>124</sup>.

As it has been underlined in the previous chapters the EU approach in the region in 2007 was mostly based on the introduction of values and ideas within the region with the practical aim to get access to the energy market of the region. The 2007 EU strategy statement highlighted certain areas of involvement that would support the strategic objective of "security and stability" in the region. The document's seven priority areas were highlighted as follows:

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<sup>124</sup> Fabienne Bossuyt (2019). "The EU's and China's development assistance towards Central Asia: low versus contested impact". Eurasian Geography and Economics.



- “1. Human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratization,
2. Youth and education,
3. Promotion of economic development, trade and investment,
4. Strengthening energy and transport links,
5. Environmental sustainability and water,
6. Combating common threats and challenges, and
7. Inter-cultural dialogue.” (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 31/05/2007)

When the plan was adopted in 2007, it was hailed as one of the first efforts to identify shared goals, possible areas of collaboration, and to present a holistic position toward the region as a whole. It aimed to balance regional efforts to advance human rights and democracy with practical interests of the EU in terms of energy security. This strategy was well-documented in initiatives like the "EU Rule of Law initiative" and "Human Rights Dialogue" as essential tools for accomplishing that goal. The EU's Central Asia Strategy 2007 followed the Eastern Partnership, the ENP's progeny for the neighbors of East Europe. Despite having a multilateral preamble supporting "region-building" among the five nations of Central Asia, the Eastern Partnership and the Central Asia Strategy are, in fact, based on rigid bilateralism.

They agree on a number of goals and priorities for policy established for the partnership, such as the improvement of energy security. As a result, it may be considered a legacy of recently expanded rules that were implemented nearby. Interestingly, although it lacked specific pledges and goals, Kassenova noted that "it was not a strategy in the conventional sense of the word, yet it served the purpose of signaling the EU's special interest" in the region<sup>125</sup>. The abundance of top priorities covered by the document can be probably connected to the disagreement over how to handle Central Asia among the EU's member states. While some EU member states, like the Scandinavians and the British, preferred a focus on good governance and human rights as well as specific concerns relating to corruption in the public sector, others, like France, Germany, and Italy, have emphasized economic, security, and energy interests. With the governments in the area, the EU undertook organized political talks, human rights dialogues,

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<sup>125</sup> Kassenova, N. (2016). "The EU strategy for Central Asia: Imperatives and opportunities for change. A view from Kazakhstan". Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

educational initiatives, energy and transport initiatives, initiatives for the rule of law, and other relevant programs.

In fact, the top priorities of the European strategy within the region were extremely wide and often described as idealistic. Many observers and scholars underlined that the breadth of topics the EU's policy plan and development aid address is astonishing. At the same time, a lot of commentators believed that the Strategy's weakness lay in its diversity of aims. Boonstra claimed that because the EU aspired "to achieve a lot with few resources," its program was overly ambitious. To make matters worse energy and security, the EU's top priorities in this region, should be much more and better interwoven with the region's values, proposal for streamlining EU strategy in Central Asia. Similar evaluations of the EU's engagement are made by activists in Central Asia, who point out "too little resources to too many locations" and "setting unachievable aims."

The EU's efforts in Central Asia to strike a balance between moral principles and practical objectives has also been criticized frequently by international and European observers. Clearly, the EU and the USA are the main forces advancing certain standards in the area through their policies, notably in relation to democracy, human rights, transparency, and other issues. The topic of how to properly balance standards and interests is frequently brought up, nevertheless, given that the autocratic and immensely corrupt Central Asian governing regimes have persisted. Hoffmann argues, for instance, that the goal to sustain "stable, long-term ties with the nations in the area... tends to overshadow value-based considerations of the European policy on Central Asia" since energy and security concerns dominate the EU's interests in Central Asia<sup>126</sup>.

However, the European strategy in the region evolved drastically between 2014 and 2019 and it has become more practical and more result oriented. As a matter of fact, the EU has attempted to make its bilateral assistance under the 2014 multi-annual program more differentiated and more result oriented - in accordance with the countries needs - by concentrating on an even smaller number of policy sectors, in response to mixed evaluations of its assistance to the region. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS) (2014)<sup>127</sup>, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan would only get bilateral assistance in one priority area between 2014 and 2020, whereas the two biggest

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<sup>126</sup> Katharina Hoffmann (2010). "The EU in Central Asia: successful good governance promotion?". Third World Quarterly. DOI: 10.1080/01436590903557397

<sup>127</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS) – official website available at - <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/>

beneficiaries Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan received help in three. Rule of law and health are important areas for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, respectively, in addition to education and rural development. For Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, respectively, the emphasis is on education and rural development.

### **3.3) The change of direction of 2019.**

The EU through indirect externalization or direct conditionality is able to force external actors to apply its rules and norms. The most significant elements that force non-member states to adopt the modes and regulations of EU governance are EU market dominance and supranational regulation. The EU's ability to "Europeanize" an external state from the outside is significantly diminished if there isn't a regularized connection between the two parties. As it happened with the region of Central Asia, the EU was simply too far away to be able to effectively "Europeanize" the local politics of this region<sup>128</sup>. On the contrary the region closer to the EU were deeply affected by the European normative power.

Specifically, the 2007 EU Central Asia Strategy failed to "Europeanize" the internal politics of Central Asian republics that are still resistant to Western human rights, common policy frameworks, and the promotion of democracy. Instead, the EU has concentrated on models of external governance based on the practical self-promotion of EU material (primarily economic) interests and the defense of European homeland security with regard to issues like borders, migration, and counter-terrorism.

The physical isolation of Central Asia has prevented the EU from vigorously pursuing its normative policies, leading it to instead embrace pragmatic strategies based on economic and geopolitical objectives. In light of the EUGS 2016 and the EU Central Asia Strategy 2019, new realism pragmatism and interests are more frequently the foundation of EU Central Asia policy. This change of posture of the EU is extremely visible in the latter document of 2019.

The document of 2019 put an emphasis on promoting resilience, prosperity, and improved working relationships between the major stakeholders. The new policy represents an effort to re-balance the bilateral relationship between the EU, its member

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<sup>128</sup> Schimmelfennig, F. (2012). "EU external governance and Europeanization beyond the EU". In *The Oxford Handbook of Governance*, ed. D. Levi-Faur, 656–69. Oxford: OUP.

states, and the five Central Asian republics. The strategy also urges the EU and Central Asia to prioritize regional cooperation in light of various policy concerns for important stakeholders. The Joint Communication's primary goal is to establish a stronger, contemporary, and non-exclusive relationship with the nations of Central Asia so that the area grows as a sustainable, more resilient, wealthy, and tightly integrated economic and political environment. The document major priorities are:

1. "The promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law;
2. the cooperation on border management, migration and mobility as well as addressing commons security challenges;
3. environmental, climate and water resilience underneath the aim of the over-arching goal of resilience;
4. partnership for economic reform;
5. intra- and inter-regional trade and investment facilitation;
6. sustainable connectivity as well as;
7. youth, education, innovation and culture become part of the prosperity objective;
8. partnership with civil societies and parliaments as well as;
9. cooperation for high impact (at a more global level) and;
10. raising the overall profile of partnership eventually inform the objective of working better together."<sup>129</sup>

It is notable that there is a significant degree of consistency in terms of what has been designated by the European Union as being of vital significance, even though the number of important priorities has varied between the two documents. The fact that priorities like "democracy promotion" are still on the table, albeit they ostensibly appear to be secondary to the resilience concept, will be advantageous to both the EU and in particular to the Central Asian states, and even more significant. Speaking about "democracy promotion" as opposed to "democratization" has a different meaning in terms of the goals that are pursued. It's interesting to note that the Council conclusions dissociate this goal from the broader regional strategy by "reiterate[ing] that the scope of the EU's relations is linked to the readiness of individual Central Asian countries to undertake reforms and strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as to modernize and diversify the economy, including by

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<sup>129</sup> Council of the European Union (2019). Council conclusion on the new EU strategy for Central Asia. Brussels, 17 June 2019 (OR. en) 10221/19 COEST 139.

supporting the private sector, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, in a free market economy” (Council of the European Union (2019)). This implies that the democratic reforms' scope is decided by the Central Asian nations themselves.

The new approach emphasizes the relationship's non-exclusive nature, which is important in light of the Ukraine issue. As members of the Eurasian Economic Union, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan must take this into consideration in all future economic agreements, including the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs), which are intended to replace the PCAs that have been in place for the past 20 years. Currently, the EU has an EPCA with Kazakhstan, and talks are ongoing with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Tajikistan has also shown interest in participating in EPCA negotiations<sup>130</sup>.

The commitment to balancing bilateral and regional approaches is emphasized in both documents, the Council Conclusions and the Joint Communication of 2019, the ultimate goal being that the EU will seek to deepen its engagement with those Central Asian countries willing and able to intensify relations. Even yet, the Joint Communication goes into great depth when identifying the specific actions that may help to forge closer relations between the nations of Central Asia. However, this is still a difficult effort in an area with low levels of intra-regional commerce, which in 2018 hovered around 5% of the region's overall trade. Therefore, the notion of Central Asia as a region still exists but it is not yet fulfilled up to its maximum potential.

The Joint Communication emphasizes the importance of local reality many times. First, it does so by comparing its work to that of other organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), which both have field operations. This demonstrates the EU's increased willingness to broaden its perspective when it comes to regional foreign ties. The Communication also discusses civic societies and the function of parliaments as reformers, which is possibly even more significant. The EU will strive to include Central Asian employers' and workers groups in discourse on topics such as the investment climate, education, employability (including women and girls), and labor market reform.

Comparing the EU Central Asia Strategies from 2007 and 2019 is essential because it shows that there has been a long-standing understanding of the need to balance

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<sup>130</sup> Neil Winn & Stefan Gänzle (2022). “Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy Vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience, Geopolitics”. DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2022.2042260

bilateralism, multilateralism, and bi-regionalism in terms of the relationship between the EU and Central Asia. Three major conclusions of European external governance were highlighted. 1) The democratization of the EU's "wider neighborhood" and other fundamental normative ideals have been placed in the context of other goals and the shifting geopolitical landscape. However, it has not necessarily completely vanished from the foreign policy agenda of the EU. 2) At the global, regional, and local levels of the relationship between the EU and Central Asia, there is a heightened understanding of non-exclusivity. 3) Local actors are seen as possible partners who may strengthen the connection, such as those from other international organizations, civic society, and parliaments<sup>131</sup>. In that regard, there is a heightened "knowledge" of the relationship's locale. With the inauguration of an EU mission to Turkmenistan the Union will also ultimately be able to be more present at the "local" level, too.

**Table 2 - Comparing key priorities in EU Central Asia 'Strategies' of 2007 and 2019.**

European Council 2007	European Commission 2019
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Human rights, rule of law, good governance, and democratisation;</li> <li>(2) Youth and education;</li> <li>(3) Economic development, trade and investment;</li> <li>(4) Energy and transport;</li> <li>(5) Environmental sustainability and water;</li> <li>(6) Combating common threats and challenges;</li> <li>(7) Intercultural dialogue</li> </ul> <p>(see Council of the EU 2007, 7–17).</p>	<p><b>Resilience</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law;</li> <li>(2) the cooperation on border management, migration and mobility as well as addressing commons security challenges;</li> <li>(3) environmental, climate and water resilience.</li> </ul> <p><b>Prosperity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(4) partnership for economic reform;</li> <li>(5) intra- and inter-regional trade and investment facilitation;</li> <li>(6) sustainable connectivity;</li> <li>(7) youth, education, innovation, and culture.</li> </ul> <p><b>Working better together</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(8) partnership with civil societies and parliaments;</li> <li>(9) cooperation for high impact (at a more global level);</li> <li>(10) raising the overall profile of partnership</li> </ul> <p>(see European Commission 2019, 2–16).</p>

**Source - Neil Winn & Stefan Gänzle (2022). "Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy Vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience, Geopolitics".**

The EU looks to be aiming for new markets that are dominated by rising major powers like China, India, and the BRICS, while also building a practical strategy for managing larger challenges of global security. Therefore, the EU prioritizes internal and border security based on a practical, case-by-case interaction with foreign parties around Europe. Instead of solely presenting the EU position from the "inside-out," EU policy toward Central Asia increasingly takes non-European perspectives into account.

<sup>131</sup> Dzhuraev, E., and N. Muratalieva (2020). "The EU strategy on Central Asia: To the successful implementation of the new strategy". Policy Paper. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Additionally, in light of the fact that geography will always dictate geopolitics in Central Asia. As it was shown by the Russian intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 is evidence of the geopolitical factors' enduring significance in Central Asian affairs. The recently revised EU foreign policy towards the region is pragmatically following Chinese and Russian strategy in the area. The comparison of contemporary EU foreign policy measures with earlier ones further reveals that the EU is emphasizing state resilience in Central Asia rather than democratization. This is shown in the EU's approach to Central Asia during the Covid-19 outbreak, which has been pragmatic and supportive of efforts to strengthen the region's nations' resilience. Additionally, the EU has started to increase its interaction with other regional players. The EU is essentially normalizing its foreign policy in order to frugally advance its objectives in Central Asia.

### **3.4) Conclusion – The newcomer, the EU**

The European Union, in comparison to the Russian Federation, does not have a long history with the region of Central Asia, but since the independence of the countries of the region happened in 1991, it was prompt to interact with the newly established countries. Since its first attempts to interact with the Central Asian nations the EU has drastically changed its approach and it has adapted to the reality of the region.

In the 90s, the EU approach was a mere repetition of what has been done in the East part of Europe and it lacked the resources and a specific direction in doing so, the assumption that what was done in the Western part of Europe could be replicated soon faced the harsh reality. However, in 2007 there was the first actual attempt to create a specific strategy toward the nations of Central Asia, but because of the contradictory interests of the member states of the EU even this attempt did not achieve the goals set.

The normative approach of the EU in foreign affairs has been a major characteristic of the Union, but because of the distance and because of the different political culture between these two regions it was not as effective as it was in Eastern Europe. For this reason the extremely normative approach of the EU over time has adapted to the real politics of Central Asia and has become more pragmatic with its demands to these nations.

The 2019's document describing the strategy to CA does not have anymore the unrealistic goal to create fervent democracies in the region but instead it focuses more on the practical aspects of the relation between the EU and this region.



## Chapter 4 - The EU and Russia: Competitors or Partners in Central Asia?

The European Union and the Russian Federation share many interests in the region of Central Asia. Despite the EU and Russia's very different types and levels of participation in Central Asia, there is a substantial overlap in the themes and issues that both actors focus on in this area. As it has been analyzed in the previous chapters, both actors have interests related to three major fields: '*security*', '*energy*' and '*stability and norms*'.

Regional security is a top priority for every actor involved in the region of Central Asia, the instability of this region can easily spark other issues and illegal trafficking all over Eurasia. For this reason, despite its geographical distance, along with stability, the European Union emphasized '*security*' as its top strategic objective in Central Asia. Since the Central Asia strategy was adopted in 2007, the importance of security has also grown in relation to other challenges (especially energy). Meanwhile, even though the Russian Federation has not drafted any specific document related to the security of the region. Several think tanks, such as the Russian International Affairs Council and others, have underlined over the years the practical importance of guaranteeing the security of this region. The proximity of the Russian territory to this region and the demographic interlink between the people of Central Asia and the Russian one make the security of the region a top priority.

In addition, there is some consensus on the topics that are crucial for Central Asia's security among both Russia and the EU. In fact, the EU and Russia both emphasize the need of combating the drug traffic that comes from Afghanistan and travels via Central Asia to Russia and then on to Europe. A significant effort from the EU in this direction is the Central Asia Drug Action Program 6 (CADAP 6)<sup>132</sup>, which is now being carried out by the German International Development Agency (GIZ). Russian engagement frequently takes the form of state-level collaboration between the Russian Federal Drug Control Service (abbreviated FSKN in Russian)<sup>133</sup> and its equivalents, mainly in Kyrgyzstan and

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<sup>132</sup> Central Asia Drug Action Programme –Phase 6 (CADAP 6) – official website available at - <https://cadap-eu.org/en/about.html>

<sup>133</sup> Russian Federal Drug Control Service – official website available at - <http://archive.government.ru/eng/power/114/#>

Tajikistan. Furthermore, the Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA)<sup>134</sup>, a significant EU initiative that attempts to "facilitate lawful commerce and transit" and reduce "illegal movement of goods and people," may be perceived as being closer to "hard security" measures, which shows the commitment of the EU even in the field of security despite its lack of hard power.

The field of '*energy*' has also been a major priority for both the EU and for Russia. It included a number of different elements, such as the involvement of EU or Russian businesses in oil exploration and production in Kazakhstan or the support with the development of hydro-power in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Obviously the major element of contrast between the EU and Russia in the region is connected to the use and control of pipelines. Rich oil and gas deposits may be found in Central Asia, and both the EU and Russia are interested in growing their participation in the production and acquisition of these resources. Due to the legacy of the Soviet pipeline system, Russia has had a monopoly on the export of energy resources from Central Asia for the majority of the previous 30 years. Despite this monopoly Russian influence in this field has diminished because of the direct link between Turkmenistan's gas resources and China. However, Russia still deeply controls the transfer of gas and oil from the region to Europe<sup>135</sup>.

Last but not least, the EU and Russian policies, such as conflict prevention, governance, corruption, and so on are very much interrelated, and could be seen through the notions of '*stability and norms*'. The word '*stability*' appears often in both European and Russian publications. The strategic objective of the EU's Central Asia Strategy is specifically defined as '*security and stability*'. According to the Russian foreign policy concept the primary task, in Central Asia and the Caucasus, is the prevention of destabilization of the situation due to threats such as terrorism, extremism, drug-trafficking stemming from Afghanistan. The same rhetoric is also used by the regimes of the region to justify the oppression of opposition and the domestic political narratives, as an opposite to turbulence and conflicts<sup>136</sup>.

However, after a deeper analysis it is obvious that the understanding of the concept of '*stability and norms*' is extremely different for both actors. It is clear that the EU and

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<sup>134</sup> Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA) – official website available at - <https://www.bomca-eu.org/>

<sup>135</sup> Pier Paolo Raimondi (03/2019). Working Paper: "Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry - The External Powers' Energy Interests in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan". Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei.

<sup>136</sup> Morena Skalamera (11/2017). Survival - Russia's Lasting Influence in Central Asia.

Russia may have different ideas about how stability is attained. According to the EU policy, establishing a peaceful, democratic, and economically flourishing Central Asia is a related aim. This statement highlights the normative aspect of EU foreign policy, which places a high value on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in order to achieve long-term stability and security. This normative approach is obviously absent from Russia, and if it exists, it opposes the political norms and values supported by the US and the EU while strengthening the region's authoritarian governments. The different understanding of how to achieve stability was prevalent especially in the early approaches of the EU to the region, but since 2019 this strict understanding has slowly shifted to a more practical way to deal in the region.

As it has been analyzed so far, the strategy and modalities of interacting in Central Asia have deeply changed over the last two decades and both actors have learned how to adapt to the reality of the regimes of Central Asia and how to better cooperate with the local governments. Nevertheless, the question related to the possible cooperation of these two major actors in the region in Central Asia is still open. Despite the conflict in Ukraine the practical understanding of the importance of the region still remains a major aspect to take into consideration. The issues related to the development of trades and the need to guarantee security and stability in the region are understood by all actors. There are fields of competition between the EU and Russia but there is still enough space for cooperation if the major priority remains the one to guarantee the practical security of the region and the flourishing of economic development.

#### **4.1) Opportunity for cooperation**

The EU and Russia, as we have already underlined, share three major goals in their strategy in the region of Central Asia, specifically in the realm of security, energy and stability of the region. However, the only two of these three factors that could be effectively used to create collaboration are the one related to the field of security and stability. In both aspects, and especially in the field of security, Russia has a quasi-monopoly in the region of Central Asia and thus the EU has to rely on it even if it may not approve the modalities. In these fields the EU shares, at a practical level, the same goals of Russia and thus it should aim to cooperate to its own benefit. In this field Brussels

can not replace the role of Moscow and thus it is obliged to intervene in the region only at a moderate level.

Meanwhile, the aspect related to energy can be the most destructive one in their relationship, because if the countries of Central Asia decided to reorient their energy towards the EU, China and Turkey markets instead of cooperating with Russia that would partially isolate Russia from the energy market of the region and this option can not be accepted voluntarily by Moscow. The Russian Federation relies on the control of Central Asian gas and oil through its pipelines, if it loses this tool at its disposal to exercise its control over the region it would be severely harmed in its interest. However, even in this aspect, Europeans and Russians are complementary and cooperation instead of competition would be more desirable. The technologies that the West could provide to Russia would make the extraction of any natural gas or oil reserves more easy and cheap but with the current situation and the tightening of diplomatic relations among these two actors it seems unrealistic to see it in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile the opportunity to cooperate with the local governments in the region still remains and should be incentivized. The multi-vectoral policies adopted in the last decades by the Central Asian governments have proven to be effective in balancing the influence of any foreign actor in the region. Additionally, the multi-vectoral policies have proven to be able to allow any actors willing to invest in the region to have profitable relationships and investments in the region.

Over the years the investments made by the international community have provoked many positive aspects in the region and the international pressure has been able to ease the ethical tensions among several nations. The importance of the region shows that it is a part of the world that can not be left behind. If that happens we may see much more insecurity all over Eurasia and it would be a negative effect for any actor at the international stage.

However, geopolitics may play an extremely negative role in this region because of the high dependency of some countries over Russia but nevertheless they still have the opportunity to seek assistance, whenever it is needed, to any other major player of the region. The tensions between the West and Russia already had devastating effects over the region, mostly on the most vulnerable countries of Central Asia, namely Tajikistan

and Kyrgyzstan, which both rely heavily on the remittances coming from Russia and on the stability of the Russian economy.

#### **4.2) The prospects of the new strategy of the EU in relation to Russia**

The EU has the potential to play a significant role in the region, but it must be aware of the consequences for the Russian Federation, which once ruled Central Asia. The combined examination of the EU's and Russia's policies towards Central Asia has revealed that despite their different approaches, the EU and Russia share many of the same goals. Both external powers must contend with Central Asian leaders whose options for foreign policy are broadening, in part because of China's escalating involvement in the region. The Central Asian nations are not inert pieces in a local "Great Game." Instead, they are active agents who are looking out for their own self-interest. They seek to gain from the "competition" between foreign forces in the region while striving to mitigate the unfavorable effects of their policies, all within the confines of their respective countries' capacities, which vary extremely as it has been analyzed.

One of the major aspects of contrast between the Russian and the European approach in the region has been the value given to the respect of human rights as a foreign policy principle. In fact, in the relation between the Russian Federation with Western nations the idea of upholding human rights has grown to be a major point of controversy. The idea that human rights and fundamental freedoms are matters of direct and legitimate concern to other nations and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the state concerned was accepted by Russia as recently as 2010, but it has since developed an allergy to criticism from Western nations regarding the human rights situation in Russia or in Russia's partner nations. Despite being less outspoken than Russia in their opposition to international "meddling" in human rights issues, Central Asian states generally share its views, highlighting the importance of stability, the diversity of civilizations, or the need to suppress civil unrest and religious extremism for the sake of national security<sup>137</sup>.

By adopting a wide concept of security and a long-term view on human rights and democratization, the EU attempted to resolve the conflict between security and human rights. Compared to conventional conceptions, the EU's inclusive notion of

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<sup>137</sup> Point 6 of the OSCE Astana Commemorative Declaration towards a Security Community: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/6/74985.pdf>.

security encompasses more dangers and a larger range of actors. According to the EU, security is a mix of human security (democracy, human rights, and development), regime efficacy, and global stability<sup>138</sup>. This inclusive definition poses certain challenges since, as is commonly remarked, its implementation necessitates fundamental political shifts that invariably lead to conflict. However, the difference of the European rhetoric related to this issue has changed since 2019, which makes believe that it will be easier and practical for the interaction between European actors and Central Asian governments. Additionally, even if security and human rights have been the issues around which Western presence in Central Asia revolves, the latter has been less urgent for the EU than for the United States. For this reason the possibility to cooperate despite not respecting the European standard of human rights could be a positive aspect able to create more understanding on how to operate in the region.

Second remark to be made regarding specifically the field of security is that the role play by Russia, even today, as security provider is essential also in function of Bruxelles's goal of maintaining security in the region. Even if the approach in the field of security is drastically different from the European one, the role played by Moscow is essential not only for the Russian interest by also for the European one in the region.

Third element is the use, extraction and transportation of natural resources in the region, especially gas and oil. In this regard the EU and Russia have been able to maintain a quite stable relationship in the region but after the latter events connected to the conflict in Ukraine, it is difficult to imagine a possible scenario in which the EU and the Russian Federation could cooperate even in such a remote region. Geopolitics will shape the relation between these two actors even in Central Asia. The need for energy security of the EU is facing strong opposition from Russia especially because the creation of pipelines connecting the rich resources of the region of Central Asia directly to Europe would cut off the already existing Russian pipelines and thus heavily harming Moscow's interests at a global scale<sup>139</sup>.

The new European strategy in relation to Central Asia provides a more practical way to interact in the region and a better understanding of it, which can show how the EU

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<sup>138</sup> Edward Lemon (2018). "Critical approaches to security in Central Asia: An introduction". *Central Asian Survey*, 37 (1), pp. 1–12.

<sup>139</sup> Gerrits, A.W.M.; Klijn, H. (2022). "Central Asia under Brussels's and Moscow's Eyes: Prospects and Realities". Leiden University.

has been able to adjust its strategy and evolved as an external actor in relation to such a unique region. However, the rough reality is that to fully be able to use the riches of the region is essential to come to any form of understanding with Moscow but at this moment it does not look feasible because of the mutual mistrust.

Cooperation among the nations of the region and the EU as other external actors will remain as a major goal for the majority of the regimes of Central Asia. The opportunity given by the multi-vectoral strategies are undeniable and this strategy has given the chance to local governments to maneuver effectively in international politics despite the strong pressure from the outside. So far this approach remains the most profitable and effective for the nations of Central Asia.

#### **4.3) Conclusion – EU and Russia in comparison**

The EU and the Russian Federation have an extremely different history in interacting with the region of Central Asia, but despite it, the crucial interests in the region are comparable and often share the same vision for the region. The need to guarantee economic growth and stability in the region is essential for both actors and in these fields there can be cooperation. However, the initial approach to the region of the EU has often alienated the elites of the Central Asian countries as well as Russia but the change of direction of the EU of 2019 is an extremely positive aspect that made believe that a deeper cooperation, even with Russia, could be possible.

The EU since the creation of the new strategy for Central Asia has adopted several features of the Russian approach in the region, especially in relation to the local elites that do not perceive the EU as an existential threat to their ruling. Nevertheless, the recent conflict in Ukraine does not provide a solid ground for cooperation between the EU and the Russian Federation even in such a remote region as Central Asia. Surely both actors will remain active in the region but it remains of high doubt the possibility for them to create a lasting cooperation in dealing with the issues of the region.

## **Conclusion**

In Central Asia, the EU and Russia play quite different roles. The first is a complex organization with several decision-making centers and global engagements, with Central Asia not being a top focus. The EU agenda demonstrates a strong commitment to a number of principles, including the upholding of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Despite being a significant contributor of development assistance, it is thought to have a very low level of visibility in the area. Russia, on the other hand, has a pretty straightforward objective in its dealings with Central Asia but is not well recognized for offering development assistance to its fellow former Soviet countries. The political allegiance of the ruling regimes of Central Asia to Moscow is the main topic on its agenda. This endeavor is rather simple because of Moscow's powerful clout over smaller Central Asian republics (such as immigration for example). Through media, extensive human migration (mostly labor migrants, but also students and businesspeople), military presence and regular political interactions, Russia is strongly present in the region.

Russia's connections to Central Asia go back to its time as a Soviet and imperial power. Thirty years ago, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia first concentrated mainly on organizations and nations in the West. Only recently Moscow has started down a more specific "Eurasian" path that entails stepping up economic and security cooperation with Central Asian nations as a result of the gradual deterioration of relations between Russia and the West and the emergence of animosities regarding democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and security issues. However, the recent events that affected the region such as the emergence of China, the abrupt withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan, and the seeming increasing desire for regional cohesion among Central Asian nations are all altering Russia's viewpoints and thus we will see several changes in the Russian strategy in this region.

Both actors have a different history in interacting in the region of Central Asia but in certain areas, such as the significance of combating drug trafficking and controlling dangers from extremism that may originate in Afghanistan, Moscow and Brussels are on the same page. Even though there is no evidence of their working together or even having a shared understanding of how to handle those problems, it is crucial that they have shared



priorities since this might eventually result in more collaboration even if it is not a certain effect given the current situation in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, significant variances exist in the regard of the extraction and transportation of natural resources in the region. In fact, Russia and the EU hold polar opposite views on how gas and oil should be transported to Europe. Specifically, an important issue is how the Turkmen gas should enter Europe: through Russia or straight through Turkey or Azerbaijan. However, the issue does not appear to be a source of imminent conflict between Brussels and Moscow given the rise of China as the primary consumer of Central Asian energy, declining Russian interest in the gas of Turkmenistan, and complex problems for the EU's intentions to build any significant gas pipeline connecting the region to the European market.

Furthermore, another element of distress between the EU and Russia is connected to the normative power of the EU in the post soviet space in general and in Central Asia. In fact, Russian policymakers are concerned about the EU's commitment to promoting significant political norms and values in its neighborhood. The disparities between Russian and European views on Maidan in Ukraine are instructive, and it is evident that Russia is well aware of the odor of '*colour revolutions*' in Central Asia. The EU's regional and bilateral agreements, including the Human Rights Dialogue, offer some crucial and distinctive mechanisms to promote principles and standards. However, the EU maintains a far lower profile when it comes to making political judgments in this region, handing this responsibility off to the USA and the OSCE (on elections monitoring, for instance). As Andrea Schmitz noted Central Asia is a region with authoritarian laws and is characterized by "traditional ideas of sovereignty" and "nineteenth century geopolitical patterns," both of which foretell very little influence from EU initiatives<sup>140</sup>.

For this reason instead of solely presenting the EU position from the "inside-out," EU policy toward Central Asia increasingly takes non-European opinions into account. This has been shown by the latter document describing the EU strategy in Central Asia of 2019. In light of the fact that topography will always dictate geopolitics in Central Asia, the recently revised EU foreign policy towards the region of 2019 is pragmatically following Chinese and Russian strategy in the area. In fact, the Russian intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 is evidence of the geopolitical factors' enduring significance

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<sup>140</sup> Andrea Schmitz (2011). "The Central Asia Strategy: an exercise in EU foreign policy". in *The European Union and Central Asia*, ed. Alexander Warkotsch (London and New York: Routledge), 18.

in Central Asian affairs. The comparison of contemporary EU foreign policy measures with earlier ones further reveals that the EU is emphasizing state resilience in Central Asia rather than democratization. This was visible already in the EU's pragmatic and supportive stance toward initiatives to increase the region's nations' resilience during the Covid-19 epidemic in Central Asia. The EU has also begun to contact other regional players more often. To efficiently achieve its goals in Central Asia, the EU is effectively modernizing its foreign policy.

With a focus on European energy security, the protection of European security interests, as well as the projection of human security, human rights, and associated values into the Neighbourhood, the EU's "comprehensive approach" to peace-building, security-sector reform, and stabilization should be pursued. Reflexive multilateralism that has been updated by the EU is also a suitable policy tool for the EU to advance its crucial interests in Central Asia at a time when China and Russia are growing in the area. The EU's dealings with Central Asia over the past 25 years has shown that a pragmatic engagement is the most effective way to jointly pursue each party's interests and principles. The European normative power has not been effective in Central Asia and the European policymakers have understood it and adapted to the reality of the region. Because geography continues to influence geopolitics in the region, the revised EU strategy towards Central Asia (Council of the European Union 2019) is inadvertently following Chinese and Russian policy in the region. The interests of the EU's Member States, "principled pragmatism," and resilience based on an outside-in view of international relations are increasingly guiding the EU's strategy toward Central Asia.

Thus, it may be said that the EU and Russia do not have a serious conflict in Central Asia over issues that are important to either of them, while yet respecting the differences in espoused norms/values and methods. The recent adaptation of the European approach in the region may play even a more positive aspect in this regard. Looking ahead, it seems certain that the EU will not be able to significantly change the scope and character of its participation in Central Asia in the next few years. Depending on the country in power, it may become more or less interested in the region, but politically and geographically speaking, Central Asia is a long distance away. The Russian government's ambitions to forge a Eurasian Union mirror the parameters of its vision of its Central Asian agenda. It will probably continue to work to keep Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and

Kazakhstan under its economic and political sway, but more pressing concerns for Moscow appear to be seizing the next opportunity to reclaim its relevance and influence in Uzbekistan and fending off the expanding Chinese economic influence. However, over time, it's possible that Central Asia's internal developments will be what significantly alters how the area interacts with its outside partners but for this moment the region remains with an extremely fragile economy.

The region as a whole has a lot of economical potential despite the fragile nature of the Central Asian economies. As a result of the reliance of the economies of the region on the export of basic commodities like cotton, gas, and oil, they are particularly vulnerable to changes in world prices. These unfavorable economic events can be amplified by economic stagnation or slower growth in China and Russia (remittances and investments, respectively). However, as it has been shown by the recent change of rhetoric and attitude by the new government of Uzbekistan, more cooperation among the countries of the region can unlock many opportunities for growth. Only time will show us what future will face the people and governments of Central Asia.

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## Synthesis

This study focuses on the Central Asian region, which has been a key component of every empire that has existed in Eurasia and has long been a crossroads of civilizations capable of transmitting culture and technology. It belonged to the Iranian Achaemenid Empire, the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great, the Turks, the Chinese, and the Mongol Empire, all of which formerly dominated various regions of Central Asia. The Silk Road's transit center in Central Asia was a crucial component because it allowed each kingdom to expand its power and ensure safety against the steppe's nomadic peoples.

The tsarist Russia, which had been exerting its influence and authority over this region since the beginning of the 18th century, was the last major empire to be able to seize control of such a significant area. Russia's form of government evolved from an empire to a federation of socialist republics and finally to a republic that was compelled by history to withdraw from such a crucial area. However, despite the unpredictability of history, the Kremlin has always been able to rule Central Asia, even if only partially, throughout each of the aforementioned periods—the Tsarist, Soviet, and modern—but only by using various tactics and by adapting to the reality of the time.

Nevertheless, despite Russia's historical dominance in Central Asia, there have historically and even currently been a number of rivals for the region's control. The so-called "Great Game" in the 19th century pitted Russia against Great Britain, while later the Soviet Union was able to rule Central Asia without any opposition only in the 20th century. However, in the past thirty years, other major countries have made different efforts to expand their influence in the region. Depending on the situation, Russia has used a variety of methods to be able to keep its grip over Central Asia, and even in the previous few decades, the region's deployed strategy has seen a significant shift. This makes answering the following essential issues about the various actors' tactics in the region a key goal of this work:

*“Which are the strategies of Russia and the EU towards the Central Asian region? Which of the adopted strategies have been more effective in the recent decades?”*

This thesis does not just analyze modern Russia's Central Asian initiatives; rather, it compares them with the ones taken by the European Union (EU) in regard to this region.

Both players have legitimate reasons for being involved in the region, but since they have very different resources, locations, and mindsets, they handle their strategy quite differently. Specifically, the EU is a newcomer in the region because it started interacting within only after the collapse of the USSR. In fact, the post-Cold War era has imbalanced the regional power structure and allowed other actors the chance to get active in the area, for better or worse.

As a matter of fact, this thesis compares the strategies utilized by the "newcomer" to the region, the European Union, with the former undisputed hegemon of the region, the Russian Federation, in order to explain how to interact with the countries of Central Asia more effectively. The diachronic approach to this subject will also aid in understanding why and how both actors' methods have changed through time in response to the region's changing environment. This thesis employs analytical descriptive approaches and depends on data gathered from local governments and international agencies in order to thoroughly characterize both tactics in the region.

It is essential to understand the strategies adopted in the region because since the Central Asian republics gained their independence from the Soviet Union, they have had the chance to broaden their foreign policy and embrace a so called '*multivector*' foreign policy, whether they work with the former "ruler" or/and with the powerful neighbor China, or with the USA or with the EU. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries have had the freedom to choose which Great Powers to follow based on their own needs and interests.

Furthermore, because of the great independence of the countries of Central Asia in deciding their foreign policy, the **first chapter** of this work is dedicated to describing, not only the fundamental differences between the Russian and the European approaches, but especially the reality of the region. In fact, the first chapter focuses on the description of the positive and negative aspects of the region in general and how the countries of Central Asia have faced them.

In this regard, Kazakhstan is a perfect example of '*multivector*' foreign policy, despite the fact that its recent disorders of January 2022 have seemingly increased its dependence on Russia. Kazakhstan has been forced to pursue a foreign policy that is characterized by constant rebalancing between traditional ties to Russia and the gravitational pull of the growing economic and strategic weight of China in Central Asia

since its inception as an independent state, despite its close ties to Russia for geographical and historical reasons. Because of its unique location, Kazakhstan had no choice but to adapt to the factual reality to have to balance between rising powers.

Kazakhstan was the first nation to adopt and call its foreign policy '*multivector*', but it is not the only one to have done so afterward. In reality, as a kind of self-determination, every Central Asian nation has implemented a '*multivector*' foreign policy to be able to not fall prey to any power involved in the region. Uzbekistan did so by developing a foreign policy based on a type of true independence via legal, economic, and cultural forms of non-dependency. Turkmenistan has chosen to follow a rigorous neutral policy, which has the feature of not participating in several regional organizations. While attempting to maintain excellent ties with Russia, China and also the West there is Kyrgyzstan, which openly interacts with every entity involved in the region. Tajikistan adheres to an "open policy" that allows it to collaborate with any nation active in the region.

Since the essence of the politics of the region is based in balancing the power of external actors in the region, the comparison of two extremely different actor in the region, such as the EU and the Russian Federation and their roles played in Central Asia, is essential because it guarantee a better understanding of the real nature of the region. Respectively, the first actor is a complicated organization with several centers for decision-making and international interactions, with Central Asia not being its primary area of interest. The EU agenda reveals a steadfast dedication to a number of values, such as the maintaining of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Despite making a sizable contribution to development aid, it is believed to have virtually little exposure in the region. On the other hand, Russia's goal in relations with Central Asia is very clear-cut, although it is not widely known for providing aid to other former Soviet states. The key item on its agenda is the political loyalty of the Central Asian governing regimes to Moscow. Because of Moscow's considerable influence over the more vulnerable Central Asian republics, this task is rather straightforward. Russia has a significant influence in the area through the media, considerable human migration (primarily labor migrants, but also students and businesses), military presence, and frequent political exchanges.

In view of the importance of the Russian Federation in the region, the **second chapter** of this work is dedicated to describing and analyzing the strategies adopted by Russia since the early 90s. Additionally, in this work is clearly described how the evolution of the Russian approach in the region has evolved.

Russian ties to Central Asia date back to its days as an imperial and Soviet superpower. When the Soviet Union fell apart thirty years ago, Russia first focused exclusively on nations and organizations in the West. As a result of the gradual deterioration of relations between Russia and the West and the emergence of enmities regarding democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and security issues, Moscow has only recently begun down a more specific "Eurasian" path that entails stepping up economic and security cooperation with Central Asian nations. The emergence of China, the sudden withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan, and the apparent rise in regional cohesion among Central Asian nations, among other recent events that have had an impact on the region, have all changed Russia's viewpoints, and as a result, Russian strategy is constantly reshaping.

The decision of the strategy used in various areas of interest is heavily influenced by history, geography, and culture, and Central Asia is no exception to this general rule. Russia has directly influenced the history of the five nations in the region up until 1991. The geography and culture also provide the Russian Federation a significant edge in dealing with this area. Russia has always had a significant impact on the region, whether it was initially as the tsarist empire, then as the Soviet Union, or even now as the Russian Federation. The Soviet soft and material infrastructure that connected Russia to Central Asia proved to have a considerably longer life than the Union itself, notwithstanding the "civilized divorce" of the socialist countries. Another significant aspect that has helped Moscow in maintaining its position as the region's primary external player is the prevalence of the Russian language in local media and as a means of communication for the flow of people and products between Russia and Central Asia.

The Russian Federation has a number of regional interests that are closely related to those of the local governments. More than 70 years of Soviet control have produced a situation where there is a need for close coordination among all the regional stakeholders in order to assure stability and economic growth. The Russian Federation's core interests cover a wide range of topics, including: first and foremost, the need to maintain regional



stability because any unrest there could have a direct impact on Russian Federation territory due to its proximity; second, the need to foster economic ties and trade between the region's nations and Russia; and third, the need to control the market and extraction of energy resource.

Russia uses all of the resources at its disposal, such as elites who support Russia, cultural linkages, media clout, and not to mention its regional economic and security power, to achieve its objectives. With addition to these characteristics of Russian contact in the region, the strategy used can be described as "pragmatic". In fact, the Russian strategy in the region is based only on practical considerations and Russia's ability to communicate effectively with the ruling classes of the nations under consideration, not on the region's Slavic population's identity or any superior ideology (as it was in the Soviet period). In reality, Russia's willingness to work with regional elites and ensure their control of their various nations is another crucial factor in the country's success in this area.

Meanwhile the **third chapter** is dedicated to how the EU institutions and individual EU member states are increasingly involved in this region as a result of the open foreign policies that Central Asian nations have chosen. The EU's approach to the region has continuously changed, as it happened to the Russian one too, they both had done so in order to become more successful in interacting with the local governments.

Some fundamentally important interests in Central Asia are shared by the Russian Federation and the European Union. The EU and Russia are primarily concerned in the region's security and stability, economic cooperation, and energy resources. However, there are significant disparities in how these two players engage in the area and how they choose to accomplish their respective objectives. As above mentioned, along with these practical interests, the EU also has additional interests in the area that are emblematic of its culture and approach to international relations. Instead of focusing just on guaranteeing the stability of local governments, the EU and its member states emphasize the need to promote a "peaceful, democratic, and economically prosperous Central Asia" in order to improve stability in the area. The normative core of the EU's foreign policy is demonstrated by the interconnection of all the aforementioned goals of the EU's foreign policy and how they are inextricably linked. The fact that the EU sees democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as being of fundamental value for building long-term stability

and security serves as a good example of the normative core of the EU's foreign policy. The norms and values that the USA and the EU are promoting are soft power instruments that have the capacity to deeply influence society and make it easier and more comfortable for Western nations to cooperate in this area.

On the contrary of Russia, the European Union is a newcomer to the region, and its strategy has been distinguished by its desire to impart the lessons learnt from the European experience and its ideals. The EU has undoubtedly emerged as one of the region's biggest benefactors in recent years, but it has not been able to establish the kind of intense and in-depth ties with Central Asian nations that were first anticipated. Because of this, this work examines why the first European attempt to adapt to the realities of these nations was ineffective and how it altered over time.

The EU works together and makes investments in a number of regionally relevant topics. Natural and energy resources, border security against human and drug trafficking, education, infrastructure development, respect for human rights, and the growth of civil society among the member nations of the area are the primary ones. The EU, like the Russian Federation, considers many pragmatic factors to provide peace and security to the area, but it also has a significant impact on making a population more receptive to western principles.

As in many other parts of the world, including east Europe, the EU has used its "capacity to determine what passes as "normal" in international politics," or "normative power," as described by the Danish political scientist Ian Manners. The EU makes several attempts to exert influence over other international players with regard to domestic policy, international norms, and values. The ability of the EU to influence the "norm" held by the international community is simply its most important instrument in world affairs. However, this crucial instrument of the EU is less successful in this region due to distance and cultural differences. For this reason the initial document drafted in 2007, which gave high priority to the protection of human right and the democratization of the region, has been recently updated in 2019 with similar priorities but with a different importance to the aspects related to human rights and democratization.

The necessity to balance bilateralism, multilateralism, and biregionalism in terms of the relationship between the EU and Central Asia has long been recognized, as seen by comparing the EU Central Asia Strategies from 2007 and 2019. Three key findings of

European foreign policy were emphasized. 1) The democratization of the EU's "wider neighborhood" and other fundamental normative ideals have been placed in the context of other goals and the shifting geopolitical landscape. However, it has not necessarily completely vanished from the foreign policy agenda of the EU but at this moment is drastically diminished in importance. 2) There is a greater awareness of non-exclusivity at the international, regional, and local levels of interactions between the EU and Central Asia. 3) Local players, such as those from other international organizations, civil society, and parliaments, are considered as potential partners who might reinforce the links with the EU. In that regard, there is a heightened "knowledge" of the relationship's locale.

The chapter analyzing the EU's strategy in Central Asia underlined the role of the previous experience in the creation of the current, more practical, strategy of 2019. In fact, the current strategy of the EU is more practical and does not deprive the EU to interact with countries that do not fully share its main values and it does not rely excessively on its normative power but instead on its economical attractiveness.

Meanwhile, the **fourth chapter** examines the areas of overlap between the EU and the Russian Federation, their regional collaboration, and whether or not long-term cooperation may be established to the advantage of the Central Asian nations. This chapter also examines how the EU's recently approved 2019 strategy will affect Russia's interests and whether there will be greater opportunities for collaboration between these two players, at least in this particular region.

While Moscow and Brussels have different histories when it comes to their interactions in the region of Central Asia, they do agree on some key issues, such as the need of fighting drug trafficking and containing the threat of terrorism that have its roots in Afghanistan. It is vital that they have common priorities because, given the present state of affairs in Ukraine, even if there is little indication of them cooperating or even knowing how to manage those concerns, it may ultimately lead to increased collaboration. The issues connected to the security of the region affect directly or indirectly the entire Russia and the EU. As a matter of fact, the major importer of the drugs produce in Afghanistan is the EU and the big Muslim minority within Russia can be an element of instability if the extremist groups located in Central Asia are not dealt properly.

In the meanwhile, there are considerable differences with regard to the extraction and transportation of natural resources in the area. In actuality, Russia and the EU have

diametrically opposed ideas about how to get gas and oil to Europe. The specific question of whether Turkmen gas should enter Europe via Russia, Turkey, or Azerbaijan directly is crucial. Given that China is now Central Asia's top energy consumer, Russian interest in Turkmenistan's gas is declining, and there are complicated issues with the EU's plans to build any sizable gas pipeline connecting the region to the European market, the issue does not, however, appear to be a source of impending conflict between Brussels and Moscow.

Another source of tension between the EU and Russia is related to the EU's normative influence in Central Asia and in the broader post-Soviet space. In reality, the EU's commitment to advancing important political norms and principles in its area worries Russian authorities. It is fascinating to see the differences between Russian and European perspectives on the Maidan protests in Ukraine, and it is clear that Russia is fully aware of the stench of Central Asian "colour revolutions." The Human Rights Dialogue is one of the important and unique platforms offered by the EU's regional and bilateral agreements to advance values and standards. But the EU keeps a far lower profile when it comes to making political judgments in this region, handing this responsibility off to the USA and the OSCE (on elections monitoring, for instance). Central Asia is a region with typical authoritarian rulers and is distinguished by traditional concepts of sovereignty and nineteenth-century geopolitical patterns, for this reason the EU does not focus more than mere rhetoric on topics that would make the relationship with the local governments unmanageable in this specific region.

In conclusion, the region even today holds an essential role in international politics. The region of Central Asia is an hot-spot for many security issues originated from Afghanistan, such as terrorist groups and drug trafficking and for this reason is a major concern in the field of security for the entire international community. The rich resources of natural resources, especially the gas and oil, make the region of extreme interest not just for actors seeking for these resources, such as China and the EU, but also for other major producers like Russia. Last but not least element that makes this region of extreme importance is the economical potential that this region posses.

However, the growing tension between the West and Russia could play an extremely dangerous role in destabilizing furthermore an exceptionally unstable region. If the conflict damages Russia too much, the region could find itself facing several

security issues without the usual Russia's support in dealing with them. Additionally, many economies of the region, if not all, will be severely damaged. A region like Central Asia should be regarded as a key region for international cooperation because as history showed us already, the instability in such a remote region of the world does not remain unnoticed and it will eventually affect the entire globe. Central Asia should be a region of the world where the entire international community is willing to put aside its interests with the aim of avoiding destruction and instability.