



ENC ANALYSIS

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EU-Central Asian Interactions¹

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All the articles in the special issue can be found here:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ccas20/current>

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About the authors



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Research Agency.

Introduction

This rich volume – ten articles written by researchers from across Eurasia and internationally – resulted from the research project ‘Contested Global Governance, Transformed Global Governors? International Organisations and “Weak” States’ (GLOBALCONTEST), hosted at the University of Paris 13 (France) in 2016-2019, and a series of events co-organized by the GLOBALCONTEST project team and the European Neighbourhood Council in Brussels in July 2019.

From limited interactions in the early 1990s, the EU and Central Asia now consider each other to be increasingly important. This international collection of contributors analyses multiple levels of mutual interactions, and how they have transformed since Central Asia independence to the contemporary. It shows why and in what ways exactly the EU and Central Asia matter to each other – and also why researchers should pay more attention to their interactions. Central Asia falls under the broader external relations and security agenda of the EU, and over years it provided a testing ground for many EU policies, including the priority ones of region-building and resilience promotion. Looking at the EU, in turn, informs as to how Central Asian actors interact with external partners of the region, and how they influence national policy agendas and consequently everyday life – bringing new approaches, insights and evidence also to the wide field of EU studies.

This ENC Analysis summarizes the main findings and presents special issue contributions.

Perceptions

The articles in this issue investigate perceptions that the EU and Central Asia hold of each other, looking at how they interpret each other’s intentions and actions. To account for perceptions, we need to recognize a temporal evolution and account for the multiplicity of actors on both sides.

On the EU side, we see a clear differentiation of perceptions over time, which has to do with the expansion of EU learning infrastructure, development of new interests, and also with a changing situation in Central Asia. In the early 1990s, when the EU started engaging with newly independent Central Asian states, initially as an extension of its cooperation projects with Russia, the EU had very little

knowledge about this region and perceived it as distant and potentially dangerous. This last perception became even stronger later in the 1990s, in the face of intra and inter-state conflicts in Central Asia, such as border clashes resulting from border disputes, and the Tajik civil war 1992-1997. In 2001, following the beginning of the war on terror and the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, neighboring Central Asia, this region gained more attention from the EU and became the West's ally. At the same time, the EU continued seeing Central Asia with suspicion, a perception which was only aggravated in the mid-2010s, when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant began recruitment of a few thousand fighters. Another, more recent view that the EU holds of Central Asia reflects the EU's antagonistic relations with Russia, and increasingly also China – two states which have significant political, security and economic ties with Central Asian countries. One EU perception that remains constant over years is that it sees Central Asia as a region, which draws on the EU's own experience and reflects its general fondness for region-building. Moreover, the EU has also tried to reshape the Central Asian region, by linking it to Afghanistan.

Perceptions of the EU in Central Asia have also evolved over time, as the newly independent countries in the region have been gradually expanding their foreign relations. With the EU allocating more aid to Central Asia, this organization started being seen as a generous donor. However, Central Asian policymakers tend to be critical about the EU imposing its own priorities and visions, particularly when it comes to the EU democracy promotion agenda, rather than paying attention to views of local actors. This happens despite the new EU approach to the region, visible for example in the EU's 2019 Strategy for Central Asia, which discursively stresses dialogue and seeks to put all parties on the same diplomatic footing. In turn, among the general population in the region, the EU is associated with high quality of life. However, individualization of societies and normative liberalization, particularly when it comes to rights of sexual minorities, tend to be seen more skeptically.

Interests

Besides perceptions, the collection also explores a complex interplay of normative and financial interests in EU-Central Asian interactions, stressing the need to differentiate between multiple actors involved on both sides.

For example, the European External Action Service, which is a proto-foreign and defense ministry of the EU, advocates for more engagement with the region,

whereas the European Parliament tends to be more skeptical about strengthening ties with countries with a poor human rights record. In turn, looking at energy interests on the EU side we see the European Commission's interest in extracting hydrocarbons and minerals oil, from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as transnational companies linked to EU member states that are de facto the main players in this field.

In Central Asia, the interests in interacting with the EU are perhaps more straightforward, given that the financial aspect seems to be driving the governments' engagement with this organization. For aid-dependent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this is largely about receiving international assistance, and in the case of the other three resource-endowed countries trade agreements are also at stake. Also identified are actors interested in the normative agenda of the EU and its support for human rights and rule of law in the region. These are professionalized civil society organizations, functioning as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that in many cases are simultaneously founded and/or funded by the EU. This shows that normative and financial interests should not be necessarily seen as antagonistic, but they are often entangled.

Equally shared interests by the EU and Central Asian actors emerge over fields that include security and stability, albeit they are interpreted differently. The EU has for long seen Central Asia as a buffer zone between unstable Afghanistan and other parts of Eurasia. This is why many of EU-funded projects in this region focused on strengthening border management and control, as well as hampering drug trade from Afghanistan through Central Asia, towards Europe. For the EU, the ultimate aim of these interventions was thus to secure Europe from potential threats. This priority became even more important after the Taliban's takeover in the summer 2021. Central Asian governments are also concerned about stability, which they however interpret through the prism of national sovereignty and non-interference. We thus see the marrying of two distinct logics under a broader security umbrella.

Practices

The special issue' articles also analyse practices of interaction, pointing to the EU and Central Asia's unique rationales and modes of behavior in the international arena. Three specific types of practices are explored: practices of mutual learning; practices of macro-, meso- and micro-level cooperation between the EU and Central Asia; and, methodologically, practices of researching the EU.

Practices of cooperation unfold at different levels. At the macro-level, the EU competes in Central Asia for influence against other actors, and most notably Russia and China. On the one hand, the famous EU narrative about its soft power attractiveness (through, for instance, high standards of education and liberal values) is not without challenges in the region. Both Russia and China advance similar narratives, stressing that values which they protect (e.g., concerning stability and non-interference) are shared and opportunities that they offer are aspired to by many in Central Asia. Competition, thus, seems to span the value-framed terrain, just like the fields of security and economy. On the other hand, while the EU declares that it approaches Central Asia ‘not for geopolitical interests and games’, in practice its behavior is largely geopolitical, which signals an important tension that is recognized by Central Asian partners.

At the meso-level, EU interactions with national governments in Central Asia reveal another ambiguity. The EU positions itself simultaneously as a partner and a donor – two roles which imply different types of interactions. As a partner, the EU strives for balanced relations with its Central Asian counterparts, and it signals a willingness to listen to them and treat them as equals. In this equalized ideal type of relationship, interests and values of Central Asian governments are as valid as the EU’s. However, the EU as a donor retains an upper hand towards aid recipients. This implies an asymmetric relation, where Central Asian states find themselves in a subordinated position. Being aid recipients, they need to remain accountable to donors – whose interests and values matter more than their own. Consequently, despite the rhetoric of partnership, we witness a continuous Eurocentric, somewhat neo-colonial, actorness in the EU’s interactions with Central Asia.

This directly translates into practices of cooperation at the micro-level, where the EU is unsure how to engage with local actors who do not share the EU’s values. For example, while in recent years the EU actively promoted resilience, namely the internal ability of countries to bounce back against external shocks, it continues to do so by offering external, EU-modelled solutions to internal problems. The EU thus continues interacting with and funding professionalized NGOs, while bypassing important local actors, such as the mahalla. This is because the mahalla, a neighbourhood unit, is structured along age and gender hierarchies which contrast with the EU’s emphasis on the values of equality. However, the mahalla de facto functions as a resilience-builder on the ground – and thus could potentially constitute a suitable partner for EU resilience-related efforts. As this example shows, EU norms, interests and practices both inform and limit each other.

Central Asian actors, on their part, through everyday interactions with the EU partners become aware of these complexities within the EU and learn to navigate them to their benefit.

Special issue contributions

EU–Central Asian interactions: perceptions, interests, and practices

Rick Fawn, Karolina Kluczewska & Oleg Korneev

By shifting the study of EU–Central Asian relations from its fixed category of black-boxing both the EU and Central Asia, this article advances the case for the approach of examining multi-level and multi-actor interactions that identify the dynamic processes of reciprocal action and meaning-making that characterize mutual cooperation. It distinguishes perceptions, interests and practices, pointing to the rationales and modes of behavior of multiple EU and Central Asian actors. The article also advances five reasons why EU studies should take more interest in Central Asia, given that the EU's larger external relations and security agenda extends to this region. Similarly, it shows that Central Asian studies can benefit from the analysis of the region's interactions with external actors, including the EU, given that external actors contribute to reshaping national policy agendas and influence everyday life.

The EU's Central Asia policy: no chance for change?

Shairbek Dzhuraev

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the EU's policy in Central Asia has been its continuity. Although the EU has recently revised its strategy for the region, Brussels' priorities saw little change both thematically and in terms of approach. This article argues that two mutually reinforcing factors help explain the continuity of the EU's Central Asia policy. First, the sui generis nature of the EU means the decision-making system is both complex and decentralized. The multitude of veto actors serves to make the status quo more realistic. Furthermore, the EU leadership is immune from the incentives and pressures of domestic political competition, an essential factor in the foreign policymaking of national leaders. The compounding factor is Central Asia's peripherality for Brussels. The region is distant geographically and marginal economically. As a result, continuing existing

approaches and commitments remains the least costly and most feasible policy option.

Learning in, about and from the field? Symbolic functions of EU knowledge production on Central Asia

Oleg Korneev and Karolina Kluczevska

Examining the EU's engagement with Central Asia since the early 1990s, we see an increased commitment to context sensitivity. Arguably, in order to design 'better' interventions, the EU needs to know more about this region. This article explores three means of EU learning: in the field – through EU officials' first-hand experience of working at EU Delegations in Central Asia; about the field – through programmed channels of external expert knowledge, and in particular think tanks; and from the field – during institutionalized consultations with multiple local actors, such as academics, journalists and nongovernmental organizations. It is argued that despite this complex learning infrastructure, EU knowledge production on Central Asia has a predominantly performative character. Rather than leading to changes in its relations with Central Asia, new knowledge produced by the EU aims at legitimizing this organization's pre-existing frameworks of engagement and practices of interactions with the region, and substantiating existing policy priorities.

'Not here for geopolitical interests or games': the EU's 2019 strategy and the regional and interregional competition for Central Asia

Rick Fawn

The EU's 2019 New Strategy for Central Asia and joint meetings with Central Asia's five foreign ministers established standards and expectations for mutual relations. Throughout those initiatives and proclamations, the EU stresses its un-geopolitical essence and behaviour, including the statement that affords the article's title. The article identifies five issue areas that demonstrate that, despite declarations otherwise, the EU reasons and acts geopolitically in this contested region: (1) the promotion of Central Asian regionalism; (2) the inclusion of Central Asia in formations beneficial to the EU; (3) selectively in economic and functionalist cooperation; (4) democracy, human rights and civil society promotion; and (5) international education cooperation. The EU identifies its comparative advantage

through cost-benefit analyses and seeks to enhance its attractiveness by offering its allies to Central Asia, while excluding other, present actors. That the EU is often outmanoeuvred does not diminish this subtle yet discernible geopolitical conduct.

The interplay of narratives on regionness, regionhood and regionality: European Union and Central Asia

Selbi Hanova

This paper identifies the interplay between narratives on Central Asia as a region. It compares EU narratives with those of the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. By doing so, it investigates the manifestations of narratives, stories and narrators who continue to construct and convey certain discourses about the region, comparing EU discourse and that of the local political elites in Central Asia, respectively. By looking at official discourse conveyed by the presidents of the countries and in key foreign policy documents, the interplay of narratives as dialogues between narrators is analysed, thus expanding into ideational analysis, an emerging trend in the literature on post-Soviet Central Asia.

The EU and China: how do they fit in Central Asia?

Svetlana Krivokhizh & Elena Soboleva

Since the collapse of the USSR, the EU and China have launched a range of leadership initiatives in Central Asia. Focusing on non-traditional security, connectivity and water management cooperation, this paper contributes to the special issue by highlighting the evolution of the EU's goals and practices in Central Asia, contrasting them with China's leadership strategy, and discussing implications for states in the region. The EU and China have diverging approaches to Central Asia due to differences in foreign policy goals and domestic politics. Nevertheless, as of now there seems to be no rivalry between their projects, as neither claims sole leadership nor builds formal institutions with exclusive membership. The presence of two very different leaders is beneficial for Central Asian states as it has allowed them to draw more material resources, generate new ideas, diversify partners and balance external influence.

Opportunity and threat perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Zhanibek Arynov

In Central Asia the EU positions itself as a benign and gentle actor with no geopolitical intentions. But is this self prescribed image of a ‘force for good’ shared by Central Asians? To answer this question, the article scrutinizes whether the EU is perceived as posing a threat to or offering an opportunity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Theoretically it is argued that the EU cannot unilaterally claim a certain role in the region; rather, perceptions held by Central Asians partly determine what kind of actor the EU can be and what kind of policies it can successfully implement. The article finds that opportunity/threat perceptions are highly issue specific. Depending on a particular issue area, the EU’s image may change from that of an opportunity to a threat, or vice versa. Yet, the opportunity aspect visibly prevails in both countries, which can be regarded as the EU’s comparative advantage vis-à-vis other actors in the region.

European Union, civil society and local ownership in Kyrgyzstan: analysing patterns of adaptation, reinterpretation and contestation in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE)

Chiara Pierobon

In the last decade, a growing body of literature has investigated the promotion of good governance, rule of law, democracy and human rights in Central Asia through funding from the EU. Most of this research has taken an EU-centric approach and is concerned with the supply side of external democratization. As a result, little is known about how EU projects are implemented on the ground and what EU-funded civil society organizations consider to be their priorities. This article investigates the agency of such organizations in Kyrgyzstan by focusing on their contribution to one particular EU instrument: the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), and its programme: Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism (STRIVE). The findings offer new insights into the processes of adaptation, reinterpretation and contestation through which EU-funded organizations exercise ownership while engaging in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE).

The EU and European transnational companies in Central Asia: relocating agency in the energy sector

Gian Marco Moisé & Paolo Sorbello

This article argues that in the contentious energy market of Central Asia transnational corporations (TNCs) and local governments are the real forces at play. While the EU has repeatedly shown interest in the region, scarce profitability of the economic ventures and lack of control over the actual investors have resulted in a loss of interest. Deconstructing the EU energy security strategy towards Central Asia, this article reflects how TNCs formally based in Europe have used the ‘Shield of Nationality’ as protection from the blows of resource-rich governments, while remaining driven by capital accumulation. A case study of the Italian oil and gas company ENI in Kazakhstan highlights how the mediation of home governments between corporations and local administrations depends on its relationship with the TNC. The article suggests that future research of the energy sector should consider the role of TNCs and their ambiguous relationship with their ‘home countries’.

Communal self-governance as an alternative to neoliberal governance: proposing a post development approach to EU resilience-building in Central Asia

Fabienne Bossuyt & Nazima Davletova

In the EU’s new Strategy for Central Asia, which was launched in May 2019, boosting the resilience of Central Asian societies is singled out as a key priority. Drawing on post development thinking, this article argues that if the EU is serious about promoting resilience to empower ‘the local’ and contribute towards a truly sustainable future for the societies of Central Asian countries, then the EU will need to embrace a de-centred, post-neoliberal approach to resilience. This implies that the EU would have to accept ‘the other’ – in this case, the Central Asian societies – for what they are and advocate home-grown self organization based on a deep understanding of the local meaning of good life and local knowledge about the available resources. Empirical illustrations to substantiate this claim are drawn from a concrete case, namely the mahalla in Uzbekistan.