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# THE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S (EU) SPECIAL STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA (2007–2013)

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## Abstract

The article examines the European Union's approach to Central Asia from 2007 to 2013, highlighting key objectives and initiatives designed to strengthen cooperation between the EU and nations in the region. This strategy encompasses a diverse range of issues, including economic growth, governance, energy security, educational development, and regional collaboration. The overarching goals of the strategy include:

**Economic Development:** The strategy emphasizes the importance of economic partnerships, trade, and investment in promoting growth and integration of the region into the global economy.

**Governance and Anti-Corruption:** The European Union supports governance and anti-corruption reforms that are essential for sustainable development.

**Energy Security:** Given the significant energy resources in Central Asia, measures have been taken to diversify energy sources and increase the EU's energy independence.

**Education:** Educational programs and initiatives aim to improve skills of the population and develop human capital in the region.

**Regional Cooperation:** The EU actively promotes regional cooperation among Central Asian countries to contribute to peace and stability in the region. The article emphasizes the flexibility and adaptability of the EU's approach to the challenges and changing circumstances in the region. This demonstrates the European Union's commitment to playing a proactive role in promoting positive development in Central Asia and creating the conditions for long-term collaboration and shared prosperity.

**Keywords** European Union (EU), Central Asian countries, strategic partnership, economic development, governance, anti-corruption measures, energy security, energy diversification, education, human capital development, regional cooperation, sustainable development.

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Central Asia has been a strategically significant region linking Europe and Asia. Following their independence, the five Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – underwent comprehensive political and economic transitions. This transition included establishing sovereign states, developing political institutions, and

shifting from planned economies to market-based systems. The common goal of achieving stability and prosperity through cooperation brought the Central Asian countries closer to the European Union as partners. Central Asia's significance lies in its immense economic potential and strategic location at the intersection of trade routes and areas of geopolitical interest. Recently, the

proximity of Central Asia to Afghanistan, which has been torn by war, has attracted increased attention from the European Union (EU), the United States (US), and other countries. These countries are exploring the potential role those Central Asian countries can play in contributing to stability in the region. One of the main goals of the EU is to enhance its involvement and presence in the region, as the importance of Central Asian states on the global stage increases and the region serves as an essential economic bridge between Europe and China. The Silk Road region holds immense and untapped economic potential, and cooperation between the EU and Central Asia is crucial for regional stability and security. The EU is the second-largest trading partner of Central Asia and provides financial support for cooperation projects aiming to modernize and reform the region. By working together, the EU and Central Asian countries can contribute to creating a more stable, secure, and prosperous future for all.[1] The Central Asian countries possess significant potential for economic growth. In order to support this development, the European Union has allocated more than €1.068 billion for the implementation of its strategic plan for the region over the period 2014–2020. This represents an increase of 56% compared to the previous plan.[2]

#### **LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODS**

The European Union (EU) has a significant presence in the Central Asian region and plays an important role. Its primary objectives are to enhance economic cooperation, foster political stability, and promote development in these nations. The EU accomplishes these aims through various channels, including trade, investment, financial support, energy collaboration, and training initiatives. Promoting economic cooperation is a top priority of the European Union's (EU) strategy for Central Asia. This involves increasing trade and investment with the countries of Central Asia as well as investing in regional infrastructure and energy projects. In addition, the EU provides financial assistance and training opportunities for local leaders and civil society organizations to support political stability in the region. In addition to its economic goals, the EU also seeks to contribute to conflict resolution,

democratic reform, and stability in Central Asia. The EU recognizes that stability and prosperity in Central Asia are essential for its own interests, as the region serves as a gateway between Europe and Asia and has significant resources in the areas of energy and transportation. Energy security is a crucial concern for the EU, which aims to diversify its energy sources to reduce dependence on traditional suppliers. Unrest in the region has the potential to impact European security and the EU is working to maintain stability through efforts to combat terrorism and extremism. The EU strives to promote sustainable development in Central Asia by investing in education, infrastructure, economic growth, and upholding human rights and democratic principles. This approach aims to create a more stable and prosperous region that can contribute to the overall stability of Europe. As the global landscape becomes more diverse, it is important for the EU to strengthen its position in Central Asia to balance the influence of other major powers. This includes Russia and China, both of which have significant influence in the region. A comprehensive and multifaceted strategy is needed to achieve these goals. The EU's strategy should focus on fostering cooperation, peace, and stability within the region while also promoting economic growth and development. This will require collaboration with governments, businesses, and civil society in Central Asia. Since 2007, the European Union has been working on a political strategy to strengthen cooperation with countries in Central Asia.[3] This has led to a closer bilateral relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries in various sectors. Both parties reaffirmed their commitment to continuing cooperation. Given the region's new security challenges, security is now a priority in the EU's relations with these countries. Education, rule of law, energy, transportation, environmental protection, water resource management, and trade are among the areas where cooperation takes place.

Specific strategies of the European Union for Central Asia have been discussed in the literature. Notable works on this subject include Boonstra and Marlene Laruelle 2018 study, "The EU's Approach to Central Asia: Balancing Interests and Addressing

Gaps." This study examines the EU's approach to the region, highlighting the challenges of balancing conflicting interests and addressing gaps in resources.[4] 2. Laruelle, Marlene, and Sebastien Peyrouse, "The European Union and Central Asia: Energy Integration and Security Promotion" (2012) – This work examines the role of the EU in ensuring energy security and promoting common security objectives in Central Asia. 3. Kashapova, Gulnara, "Strategy of the European Union in the Caspian Region" (2016) – In this study, the author analyzes the EU's strategy in the Caspian area and assesses its impact on regional stability. 4. Korotkov, Sergey, "European Union-Central Asia Partnership: Realistic Interests" (2021) – This analysis examines the partnership between the EU and Central Asian countries and discusses its strategic importance.

## **RESULTS**

The European Union's (EU) strategy for Central Asia from 2007 to 2013 aimed to strengthen cooperation and partnership between the EU and the Central Asian countries. The strategy had three primary objectives:

1. Supporting sustainable economic development  
The EU sought to promote economic growth through investment, trade, and transport connectivity.
2. Improving governance and addressing corruption: The focus was on supporting governance reform and anti-corruption efforts, which are essential for achieving sustainable development.
3. Energy cooperation: Given Central Asia's significant energy resources, the aim was to diversify energy sources and enhance energy security.

Additionally, the strategy included a commitment to supporting education and human capital development through exchange programs and initiatives. - Promotion of regional cooperation: The European Union promotes regional cooperation among Central Asian countries with a view to strengthening stability and security, as part of its wider effort to support positive developments in the region and to enhance ties with Central Asia.

This strategy continues to be adapted in response to evolving circumstances.

## **DISCUSSION**

The security situation in the region remains a significant concern. Efforts to stabilize Afghanistan face numerous challenges, as the withdrawal of allied troops raises concerns about the potential for jihadist infiltration and the destabilization of neighboring states.[5] Reports suggest that Islamic State activities have expanded in Afghanistan, with individuals from Central Asia joining the group's ranks in Iraq and Syria, presenting a threat to regional stability and a potential source of terrorism if these combatants return.[6] Combating organized crime and illicit drug trafficking remains a top priority for law enforcement officials. However, certain countries, such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are facing an additional challenge as a result of economic downturns that has led to the return of workers from Russia. This return could potentially lead to a reduction in remittances and an increase in radicalization among these individuals if they are unable to find employment in their native countries.

Disputes over water resource management have the potential to escalate into conflicts between countries in the region. However, there is also a possibility for significant collaboration if an agreement can be reached regarding the nuclear issue with Iran. The situation in Afghanistan can be stabilized through the implementation of existing infrastructure projects, such as railway and road connections, as well as energy links with neighboring countries. These measures are crucial for the economic development of the country.

Security is essential for economic prosperity, and ongoing discussions between EU representatives and leaders from Central Asia aim to address this issue. The European Union will continue to pursue its efforts to address issues related to border management and drug control through the BOMCA (Border Management and Control in Central Asia) initiative. This initiative involves both institutional reforms and capacity-building measures to combat drug trafficking, which are essential components of effective border control strategies.[7] The

European Union has allocated 8.79 million Euros for the project, which is scheduled to last for a period of 36 months.[8]

Education is a critical area of cooperation between Central Asian countries, and perhaps the most significant one. Central Asian nations require skilled workers to maintain their competitiveness and attract foreign investment. However, the current education systems in these countries are not able to provide the necessary skills for a significant portion of the younger generation. As a result, many young people are seeking to pursue their studies abroad, which is financially unaffordable for many. Therefore, it is essential to reform the education system, including higher and vocational education, in order to ensure access to quality education for all.[9] The purpose of the Central Asian Education Platform is to foster educational cooperation and reform within the region. This platform aims to harmonize education systems and enhance student mobility on an international scale. It seeks to align the education system with the demands of the international labor market, implement quality management, and set high standards.

An essential aspect of this endeavor is its focus on young people, given that the majority of Central Asian residents are under 25 years of age. This demographic group represents a significant potential for individual nations and the region as a whole. It is imperative to ensure that these young individuals receive a high-quality education that prepares them for the global labor market. The EU-Central Asia Educational Initiative was launched to improve higher education systems and modernize institutions and educational processes in Central Asia. The initiative aims to equalize qualifications in the region and promote international cooperation in education. It also provides training programs for government officials and scholarships for students studying in Europe.[10] The initiative also seeks to increase financing for education in Central Asia and support the modernization of universities in the region through educational programs from the European Union.

These programs help Central Asian universities expand their networks and gain international

experience, which contributes to the sustainable economic development of the region.

On June 25-26, 2015, a meeting of education ministers from Central Asian countries was held in the European Union to ensure cooperation at the highest political level and provide support for the initiative.[11]

Energy and Economy: The Central Asian republics strive to maintain their independence, establish a legal identity, and pursue an independent energy policy in cooperation with external actors. The region faces challenges related to water and energy, particularly among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. These countries use political arguments to defend their positions and seek commercial benefits. This aligns with China's strategic interests in the region.

China, with its significant demand for gas, oil, and other raw materials, competes with other countries, including Europe and Russia, for these resources. What distinguishes the EU's approach to Central Asia from that of other external actors is its consistency, thoroughness, and patience. Despite global energy conflicts, Europe continues to view Central Asia as an opportunity due to its abundant natural resources for various projects. Currently, significant projects are underway to establish a network of transportation and energy corridors, such as the Western China-Western Europe initiative, the North-South project, Nord Stream, and South Stream. In spite of the scarcity of energy resources, the European Union has been hesitating on decisions regarding how to transport these resources. Meanwhile, the development of cross-continental trade has the potential to directly benefit the EU, particularly its trade with China. Although the sea route from China to Europe can take between 20 and 40 days, a railway route through Central Asia, from Lianyungang to Rotterdam, could, according to estimates from the Asian Development Bank, significantly decrease delivery times for goods to just 11 days.[12] This so-called "Second Eurasian Transcontinental Bridge" has the potential to provide a direct and cost-effective route for transportation between China and Europe via Central Asia.

Cooperation in the areas of the rule of law and

education forms the foundation for long-term commitments to strengthen civil society and promote human rights. This cooperation also serves as a means for the European Union (EU) to communicate on sensitive issues, through annual human rights dialogues with partner countries. These dialogues provide a forum for constructive discussions. In this document, the European Union (EU) reiterates its firm belief that the primary area for assistance is to assist each of the five Central Asian republics in eliminating poverty, improving living standards, providing education, and creating employment opportunities for people in the region.

The EU will assist these countries in completing their political and economic transformations, thereby consolidating democratic values. Even if this minor adjustment to priorities reflects a desire to adopt a new strategy in which promoting democracy is closely aligned with economic development, the EU remains dedicated to supporting Central Asian endeavors to achieve these objectives.

Strengthening the rule of law continues to be an essential component of cooperation aimed at safeguarding citizens' rights and enhancing business environments in Central Asia. In collaboration with France, Germany is working to ensure the implementation of EU-led initiatives to strengthen the rule of law in the region. Twenty years have elapsed since the EU adopted the Central Asia Strategy in 2007. During this period, both the EU and Central Asian countries have made significant strides, focusing on areas such as trade, energy security, stability, and sustainable development. The new strategies emphasize the importance of creating an attractive investment climate.

The European Union also places special emphasis on strengthening bilateral relations between its member states, with the aim of promoting cooperation in various sectors. This includes efforts to enhance security, economic growth, and social welfare in Central Asian nations.

**Sustainable Development:** The European Union has entered into partnership and cooperation agreements with all five countries of Central Asia.[13] In addition, it is worth noting that

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which has influenced their future trade strategies. The European Union (EU) is the second-largest trading partner for these countries after China, although trade with them accounts for only 1% of the EU's foreign trade. This indicates there is significant potential for growth in these relations.[14]

In the energy sector, transport infrastructure in Central Asia is an important concern. The region contains vast oil and gas reserves, but exports to Europe are limited due to Russian control over pipelines heading west. The EU supports the development of a southern route to diversify supplies, and the Trans-Caspian pipeline connecting Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan is a crucial component of this plan. Should the project stall, another option would be to transport Turkmen gas through Iran, depending on the political and economic relations between countries.

**Ecology:** The European Union works closely with countries in Central Asia to manage water resources and promote environmental sustainability in light of climate change, assisting the region's nations in addressing complex environmental challenges.

In the mid-2000s, concerns about the environment were not widely acknowledged among Central Asian citizens. Indeed, some individuals laughed at those who raised concerns about melting glaciers, poor air and water quality, and inadequate waste management. Statements regarding climate change were greeted with skepticism, as the prevailing view was that nothing serious would occur for at least the next century or two.

Today, Central Asia confronts significant environmental challenges due to the direct impacts of climate change. This is because the countries in the region are mountainous, with glaciers playing a significant role in their economies and water being a crucial resource for sustainable development. In 2009, the European Union-Central Asia Platform for Environmental Protection and Water Resources was formed with the aim of promoting cooperation between the EU and Central Asian states in priority areas such as environmental management,

sustainable production, climate change adaptation, and water conservation. This platform seeks to facilitate collaboration among stakeholders in the region in order to address challenges related to water, climate, and the environment. Through this collaboration, countries in Central Asia will be able to develop more effective strategies for managing their water resources and adapting to climate change. The EU-Central Asia Environmental Dialogue is a forum that seeks to promote environmental sustainability and water management in the Central Asian region. It encourages cooperation among countries in the area to address climate change and reduce the effects of natural disasters. The dialogue also aims to introduce environmentally friendly technologies that will contribute to a more sustainable future for the region.

The European Union (EU) is dedicated to protecting the environment in Central Asia and has financed several environmental initiatives. One such initiative is the WECOP project, which is the third phase of EU-Central Asian cooperation on water, environment, and climate change. This project aims to enhance cooperation between Central Asian nations and the EU to address these challenges. The aim of the project is to foster regional cooperation and engage partner countries in deeper collaboration with the European Union (EU) in the areas of environmental protection, climate change, and water resource management. Nevertheless, there are obstacles that impede the achievement of these objectives, including corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and difficulties in the business environment. The EU is actively tackling these challenges by supporting reforms to strengthen institutional frameworks and enhance transparency, which contributes to improving the business atmosphere in Central Asia.

I would describe the EU's approach to Central Asia as one of liberal pragmatism. The EU favors a liberal approach to engaging the region, utilizing "soft" tools such as development assistance programs to support systemic reforms and modernization efforts in each Central Asian nation. The approach of Central Asian countries towards the European Union can be described as a form of

pragmatic cooperation. This means that, to some extent, the promotion of European interests in the region is accompanied by pragmatism and a certain degree of calculation.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the article highlights that the European Union's strategy for Central Asia during this period was aimed at strengthening multilateral relations and supporting sustainable development in the region. Based on the principles of mutual respect and partnership, the EU has significantly contributed to the economic and social development of Central Asian countries through economic initiatives, which have contributed to their integration into the global economy and provided new opportunities for trade and investment.

Improved governance and the fight against corruption have increased transparency and efficiency in government structures, attracting additional foreign investment. Energy cooperation has been a key component of the strategy to diversify energy sources and reduce reliance on a single provider. The development of human capital through education and exchange programs has improved the skills of the population and strengthened cultural ties. Regional cooperation and support for peace and stability continue to be a priority for the European Union, contributing to the creation of a favorable environment for continued growth and development. The overall strategy of the EU towards Central Asia (2007-2013) constitutes an integrated approach to regional cooperation that could serve as the basis for future initiatives and closer ties between the EU and the Central Asian states.

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