

## EUROPEAN UNION'S «SOFT POWER» IN CENTRAL ASIA: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS (2019-2025)

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Дата поступления рукописи в редакцию: 30/12/2025

Доработано: 17/02/2026

Принято: 17/02/2026

DOI: 10.52123/1994-2370-2026-1688

УДК 327.3

МРНТИ 11.25.47

**Abstract.** This article examines the features of the transformation of the geopolitical situation in the Central Asian region, which has led to competition among global actors. Following the collapse of the USSR, the European Union has pursued an active policy in the region and has become the largest trade and investment partner of Central Asia. The EU's official strategy towards Central Asia was adopted in 2019. However, geopolitical developments after 2022 have effectively led to a re-prioritization of this strategy. In the rapidly and significantly changing geopolitical environment after 2022, particularly with the Ukraine War, the EU has taken new steps to increase its influence in Central Asia. Globally, countries strive to protect their interests, establish and maintain relations with other countries, and gain the trust of the international community; beyond this, soft power relies on the ability to shape the choices of others. In this context, the article will address the key parameters of the EU's soft power policy in Central Asia between 2019-2025 and will evaluate the EU's soft power potential in the region, as well as the limitations it faces in utilizing this potential, by highlighting tools such as culture, education, investment, humanitarian aid, and technical cooperation.

**Keywords:** European Union, Central Asia, soft power, geopolitics, energy diversification

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақалада ықпалды жаһандық акторлардың бәсекелестігінен туындаған Орталық Азия аймағындағы геосаяси жағдайдың өзгеруінің ерекшеліктері қарастырылады. КСРО ыдырағаннан кейін Еуропалық Одақ аймақта белсенді саясат жүргізе бастады және Орталық Азияның ірі сауда және инвестициялық серіктесіне айналды. ЕО-ның Орталық Азияға арналған ресми стратегиясы 2019 жылы қабылданды. Алайда 2022 жылдан кейінгі геосаяси оқиғалар іс жүзінде бұл стратегияның қайта басымдылығына әкелді. 2022 жылдан кейін айтарлықтай тез өзгеретін геосаяси жағдайда, әсіресе Украинадағы соғысқа байланысты ЕО Орталық Азиядағы ықпалын арттыру үшін жаңа қадамдар жасады. Жаһандық ауқымда мемлекеттер өз мүдделерін қорғауға, басқа елдермен қарым-қатынас орнатуға және оны сақтауға, халықаралық қауымдастықтың сеніміне ие болуға ұмтылады; сонымен қатар, «жұмсақ күш» саясаты басқалардың таңдауын қалыптастыру қабілетіне сүйенеді. Осы тұрғыда мақалада 2019-2025 жылдар аралығындағы ЕО-ның Орталық Азиядағы «жұмсақ күші» саясатының негізгі параметрлері қарастырылады және ЕО-ның аймақтағы «жұмсақ күші» әлеуетіне баға беріледі, сондай-ақ мәдениет, білім, инвестиция, гуманитарлық көмек және техникалық ынтымақтастық салаларына ерекше назар аударылады.

Кілт сөздер: Еуропалық Одақ, Орталық Азия, «жұмсақ күш», геосаясат, энергияны әртарапандыру.

**Аннотация.** В данной статье рассматриваются особенности трансформации геополитической ситуации в регионе Центральной Азии, которые обусловлены конкуренцией влиятельных глобальных акторов. После распада СССР Европейский Союз стал проводить активную политику в регионе и стал крупнейшим торговым и инвестиционным партнером Центральной Азии. Официальная стратегия ЕС в отношении Центральной Азии была принята в 2019 году. Однако геополитические события после 2022 года фактически привели к изменению приоритетов этой стратегии. В быстро и значительно меняющейся геополитической среде после 2022 года, особенно в связи с войной на Украине, ЕС предпринял новые шаги по увеличению своего влияния в Центральной Азии. В глобальном масштабе страны стремятся защитить свои интересы, установить и поддерживать отношения с другими странами, завоевать доверие международного сообщества; помимо этого, мягкая сила опирается на способность формировать выбор других. В этом контексте в статье будут рассмотрены ключевые параметры политики «мягкой силы» ЕС в Центральной Азии в период 2019-2025 годов и оценен потенциал «мягкой силы» ЕС в регионе, а также ограничения, с которыми он сталкивается при использовании этого потенциала, выделяя такие инструменты, как культура, образование, инвестиции, гуманитарная помощь и техническое сотрудничество.

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**Ключевые слова:** Европейский Союз, Центральная Азия, «мягкая сила», геополитика, энергетическая диверсификация.

## Introduction

At the present stage, the relevance of “soft power” is due to the changing geopolitical landscape. The 21st century as a whole is characterized by growing competition between such giants as China, the United States and the European Union, since the war in Ukraine and the reorientation of Eurasian trade and logistics routes have significantly changed the balance of interests of external players in Central Asia. The region has taken on new importance for the EU, which seeks to strengthen its presence through the development of the Middle Corridor, support for green energy projects, and the expansion of educational initiatives. Serious geopolitical risks taking place in the context of the transformation of international relations are, of course, reflected in the foreign policy of the countries of Central Asia.

Thus, a dual situation arises. On the one hand, the EU is increasing economic investment and offering countries in the region projects aimed at sustainable development and integration into global supply chains. On the other hand, the classic channels of “soft power” – cultural diplomacy, educational programs, promotion of human rights and the rule of law – remain fragmented and do not generate comparable political effect.

After 2022, security in European politics has acquired a new object: the sanctions track is institutionalized and linked to the regional security agenda. As a result, the image of the EU in Central Asia is formed as an equation with several variables: an economic investor and donor of modernization, a regulator of the sanctions regime, but only to a limited extent a source of normative influence.

In general, the concept of the European Union’s “soft power” in Central Asia has traditionally been based on the promotion of normative values-democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable development-through diplomacy, educational programs, technical assistance, and economic cooperation. However, a critical analysis shows that the effectiveness of this model in the region remains limited. First, the EU’s normative approach often clashes with the institutional and political realities of Central Asian states, where regime stability, economic development, and sovereignty are prioritized over liberal reforms. Second, the EU’s soft power competes with the more pragmatic and resource-backed strategies of other actors, primarily China and Russia, which offer infrastructure projects, loans, and security cooperation without political conditionalities, making their proposals more attractive to local elites.

Moreover, the EU’s soft power in Central Asia is constrained by the structural limitations of its own foreign policy, including fragmentation among EU institutions and member states, limited financial resources, and low public visibility in the region. European influence is often perceived as normative and idealistic, insufficiently supported by tangible economic and infrastructure projects, which reduces its transformative potential. In this sense, the EU’s soft power in Central Asia is largely symbolic and discursive, while real geopolitical and economic dynamics in the region are shaped to a greater extent by the “hard” instruments of other external actors.

## Methods and methodology

The study is based on a qualitative approach combining content and discourse analysis. This choice is due to the fact that the purpose of the work is not to calculate quantitative indicators, but to reconstruct the meanings, images, and priorities that form the strategic and media representation of the European Union in Central Asia.

Firstly, a content analysis of key EU strategic documents was carried out – the 2019 Central Asia Strategy, the Global Gateway initiative, the 2023 Road Map and the materials of the 2025 Samarkand Summit. This analysis allowed us to trace the evolution of EU priorities and identify a shift in emphasis from normative rhetoric to economic, infrastructural, and regulatory objectives. Secondly, a discourse analysis of materials from leading Central Asian media for 2019–2025 was carried out (tengrinews.kz, kun.uz, akipress.org, asiaplustj.info). Publications are classified by thematic context (economy, energy, transport, rule of law, sanctions, education, etc.), which made it possible to reconstruct the media image of the EU and identify differences in national contexts. This combination of methods provides a comprehensive understanding of both the potential and limitations of EU soft power in Central Asia.

### Literature review

Research on the EU's soft power has traditionally focused on its special status as a normative actor capable of promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights across assembly boundaries (Manners, 2002). The introduction of the concept of “principled pragmatism” in 2016 (European External Action Service, 2016) institutionalized the tension between the EU's value discourse and its pragmatic foreign policy practice. If the first half of the term emphasizes the normative nature of the EU's foreign policy strategy, the second denotes the need to combine values with flexibility and pragmatic calculation. As a result, the EU appears as an actor whose international identity is characterized by contradictions and ambivalence (Spaiser, 2018); at the same time, a number of studies emphasize that the uncertainty of its principles can be seen not only as a manifestation of weakness, but as a factor allowing the EU to adapt to crises and have a transformative influence on its partners (Yorulmaz, Yilmaz, 2020).

In such conditions, soft power has the value of a means of attraction and takes on the character of a protective instrument: Central Asia turns out to be not an object of attraction, but a space where the EU seeks to prevent the spread of instability to its own borders (Ahrens, 2018). Despite the fact that the EU is the largest development donor and actively implements projects in the fields of education, ecology, and infrastructure, its soft power in the region remains limited in comparison with that of Russia and China (A. Nogayeva, 2020). Research emphasizes that regional elites perceive the EU primarily as a source of technical and financial support, rather than as a guide for political or axiological transformation (Peyrouse, 2023).

Studies of Kazakhstan emphasize that the perception of the EU among young people in the region is largely mediated by symbolic images. In surveys, the EU appears primarily as a metaphor for economic well-being and stability, while Brussels' real initiatives remain on the periphery of public consciousness (Arynov, 2022). After 2022, researchers document a qualitative shift in the regional context caused by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the strengthening presence of China. These developments increased the strategic importance of Central Asia and opened a “window of opportunity” for the EU to expand its influence (Matveeva, 2023). The EU Strategy for Central Asia, adopted back in 2019, was initially focused on “principled pragmatism,” sustainable development and digitalization (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2019). However, it was after 2022 that issues of energy diversification, development of transport corridors (in particular, the Middle Corridor) and access to critical mineral resources came to the fore in the Brussels discourse (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024). Thus, contemporary literature demonstrates the duality of EU soft power in Central Asia. On the one hand, the Union is perceived as a donor and cultural integrator, offering educational and social opportunities. On the other hand, normative rhetoric and limited practical resources cause skepticism among regional elites. Developments after 2022 have indeed opened up new opportunities to strengthen the EU's position, but the limits to its soft power remain significant and depend on whether Brussels can formulate a more coherent, pragmatic and resource-backed strategy.

### Evolution of EU strategy in Central Asia (2019–2025)

An analysis of official EU documents, starting from the 2019 Strategy and up to the Samarkand Summit in 2025 (Council of the European Union, 2025), allows us to trace the transformation of the Union's foreign policy priorities in relation to Central Asia. In recent years, the geopolitical importance of the Central Asian region has increased. This is due to the crisis arising from the war in Ukraine, which has led to a huge shortage of energy supplies in EU countries. From Brussels' point of view, Central Asia has the potential to become an alternative gas market for EU countries and provide an effective counterbalance to Russia. At the same time, for consumer countries from the EU and energy-producing countries in Central Asia, the search for alternative transport corridors for the transit of energy resources has become urgent. And in this context, EU policy in Central Asia has become more guided by geopolitical considerations related to efforts to reduce transport and logistics dependence on Russia. This factor is especially important for Kazakhstan, which exports most of its hydrocarbons from the Caspian region to the countries of the European Union through Russia, against which the United States and the Union countries have increased sanctions pressure.

The development of transport and logistics connectivity with China through Central Asia, bypassing Russia, is crucial for understanding the European Union's growing interest in the region, as it touches upon fundamental issues of economic security and geopolitical autonomy. After 2022,

the traditional overland China–Europe routes via Russia became politically and sanction-wise vulnerable, which prompted the search for alternative corridors. The “Middle Corridor” through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Turkey is viewed in Brussels as a strategic infrastructure axis capable of diversifying supply chains, reducing transit risks, and decreasing dependence on Russian logistics infrastructure. In this context, Central Asia is transforming from a peripheral space into a critical transit hub for Eurasian trade.

At the same time, the development of these routes fits into the broader competition among global infrastructure strategies, including China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the EU’s Global Gateway program. For the EU, investments in transport, digital, and energy infrastructure in Central Asia serve not only economic but also political objectives: strengthening the sovereignty of regional states, expanding Europe’s regulatory and technological presence, and constraining the dominance of China and Russia. Thus, the logistics factor becomes an important element of the new geopolitical configuration of Eurasia, in which Central Asia is gaining increasing strategic significance for European foreign policy.

However, there are concerns in the EU that Central Asian states may support Russia's attempts to circumvent international sanctions. As is known, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Kremlin can influence its integration partners in order to circumvent EU economic restrictions. It is worth paying special attention to fluctuations in the policies of Central Asian states under the influence of external vectors. All these factors increase the EU's interest in expanding economic relations and intensifying political ties with Central Asian countries in order to control the possible circumvention of sanctions against Russia.

Therefore, for the EU, strengthening diplomacy in the Central Asian region is, firstly, an opportunity to exercise control over fuel and energy resources and their transportation routes, and secondly, an opportunity to control the balance of the region, preventing the dominance of any individual country. In general, EU strategic documents related to relations with the countries of Central Asia reflect the strategic importance of the Central Asian region and show a trend towards deepening cooperation. At the same time, it should be noted that the European Union began work to establish partnership bilateral relations with the Central Asian states from the moment they declared independence. We can agree with the point of view that at the early stage of relations with the countries of the region, the EU solved the problem of creating an image of a global player and a reliable partner. It can also be noted that the effectiveness of the European Union’s policy in the region and the success of interaction with Central Asian countries is influenced by such a significant factor as the policy in this region of the EU’s largest geopolitical rivals – the USA, China and Russia. At the same time, EU policies may diverge from or support US strategy in the region, but ultimately contrast with and stand in opposition to the policies of China and Russia.

The EU strategy model in the region, relying on soft power resources and a special strategic culture, seemed to be an alternative to the predominantly military-political cooperation of the United States with the Central Asian republics, its primary efforts to break Russia’s monopoly on energy exports from the region and actions to contain China.

The EU supported the 5+1 Central Asia format, which was initiated by Japan in 2004. This formula was subsequently adopted and promoted by the United States, among others, to intensify cooperation with countries in the region. The beginning of such interactions, in our opinion, emphasizes the key role of Central Asia in shaping the geopolitical landscape, in conditions when each of the global and regional actors is promoting its interests in this region.

### **The influence of China and Russia on EU policy in the region**

Central Asia occupies a key position in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. In May 2023, in Xi'an, Xi Jinping met with Central Asian leaders at the first Central Asia-China Summit, where a significant investment package of approximately \$3.7 billion was discussed to implement key infrastructure projects supporting the BRI initiative. In the same year, in September, the next 10th China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum was held in Xiamen.

China's significant economic presence in the region poses a serious problem for Brussels. Beijing's economic influence, based on large-scale investments, is influencing economic dynamics in the region and poses a significant obstacle to the EU's pursuit of economic engagement and influence in Central Asia. China, despite its powerful economic diplomacy, does not have widespread society-level support in the Central Asian states. Clearly, China's soft power activities in Central Asia are focused on the political elite and have virtually no impact on the general public. In general, in the

Central Asian countries, the attitude towards China is ambiguous: if Beijing's external actions are regarded as an attempt to maintain international balance, then economic and cultural cooperation with it is mainly considered a resource for Beijing to achieve its geopolitical ambitions.

In turn, Russia views Central Asia as a zone of its traditional influence, as part of its military-political, historical, and cultural area of interest. Following the same formula as the United States, in the 5+1 format, Russia held its first Central Asia-Russia summit on October 14, 2022, with the aim of intensifying cooperation. According to B. Lo, Moscow is seeking to prevent the participation of external forces in regional affairs, or at least control them, giving preference to China and other non-Western countries over European ones. And, at the same time, the Russian Federation would like China to limit its participation in security projects in Central Asia and support Russia's role as a regional leader. It is worth noting that Russia, whose attitude changed with the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict against the backdrop of EU sanctions and a decrease in "soft power" in front of China and other players in the region, is trying to neutralize their influence through restricting the access to resources, which, in turn, provide it with certain advantages. To a greater extent, Russia is also well positioned to pursue objectives of cultural diplomacy, thanks to the spread of the Russian language and Russian media in the region.

Consequently, the current phase of EU policy in Central Asia reflects a geopolitical shift caused by tensions in Brussels, first of all, in relations with Moscow, and secondly, the growing influence of Beijing. Faced with growing geopolitical tensions in their relations with the Russian Federation and China, the EU countries are demonstrating a more active position towards the Central Asian countries. At the same time, the EU takes into account the diversity of internal conditions and characteristics of each Central Asian state. It can be stated that, by building its own system of influence in the region, the European Union thereby contributed to the strengthening of the competitive struggle of external actors in Central Asia. The growth of the "soft power" influence of the European Union does not exclude the intensification of the struggle of external players in Central Asia, directing them to use "hard power" instruments. The activation of competitors forces the European side to look for new areas and models of cooperation, expand its formats, and modernize its foreign policy strategy. It is worth noting that the EU's interaction with the Central Asian states in the field of "soft" power has always been a priority and was considered a kind of advantage in the EU's image, strengthening its role as a flagship of multilateral cooperation, as well as strengthening its influence in competition with other global actors.

In particular, the European Union has developed a more positive image among the countries in the region. In the updated 2019 European Union (EU) Strategy for Central Asia highlights the promotion of democracy in the post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as one of its key priorities. (Mukasheva et al., 2024.). Here, in addition to the indicated "normative" factor, an important positive fact is that the EU did not have a military presence in the region (unlike the United States), did not pursue a highly intensive trade and investment policy in the region, which was perceived as expansion (unlike the PRC), and had no history of imperial or colonial presence (unlike the Russian Federation). Broad economic involvement of the EU in Central Asia could help stabilize the political situation in this region. This stabilizing potential arises from the fact that, unlike other subjects of international relations, Europe is distinguished by its commitment to a normative approach, relying on clearly developed international legal standards.

By way of example, the EU supports the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and applies it to energy dialogue and ongoing projects. A clear benefit is that regulatory energy policies can promote standards of corporate governance, transparency of use and revenue sharing in producing countries. The initiative encourages Central Asian countries to comply with recognized international standards in the energy sector, which helps, in part, to strengthen their independence from China and Russia. It is not without interest that the competition in Central Asia between extra-regional players also concerns the vector and format of integration processes in Central Asia. Let us remember that in Central Asia there were attempts to institutionalize the regional integration process already in the first decade of independence. In 1994, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan established the Central Asian Union, within which the Treaty on the Creation of a Common Economic Space was signed on April 30, 1994. However, the situation has changed significantly in the first decades of the 21st century. After the reorganized Central Asian Cooperation Organization (OCAC), consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Russia, joined the Eurasian

Economic Community in order to deepen regional cooperation (primarily in the energy sector), a shortage of joint integration projects arose in Central Asia.

However, in recent years, the states of the Central Asian region, in their country strategies, have emphasized the importance of economic cooperation as the basis for more effective economic development. It is noteworthy that extra-regional forces, for various reasons, support the integration initiatives of countries. In particular, the EU repeatedly speaks out in support of integration interaction between the countries of the region. The European Union is interested in promoting the formation of Central Asia as an international region in the form of a regional integration association and establishing interregional cooperation with it in the future in various fields. In this context, we can talk about risks from other world centers of influence for the Central Asian integration project. Central Asia has a fairly acute geopolitical vulnerability, and, in connection with this, the states of Central Asia do not want to allow themselves to be dominated by any one of the global players. Representing a geopolitical whole, the countries of the region themselves are gradually turning towards integration interaction. The annual summit of heads of state and government of Central Asia has become an informal institution promoting integration processes in the region. The first such summit took place in the capital of Kazakhstan in March 2018.

**Table 1. Comparative Indicators of Soft Power: EU, China, and Russia in Central Asia**

Direction / Indicator	European Union (EU)	China	Russia
<b>Education and Academic Mobility</b>	Erasmus+, Horizon Europe: thousands of students and academics from the region receive scholarships and participate in exchange programs; support for universities and research projects	Confucius Institutes, scholarships for studying in China (training personnel for BRI)	Scholarships in Russian universities, joint universities (e.g., branches of MSU and KFU), programs for teaching staff
<b>Investment and Economic Influence</b>	Projects via EU Central Asia Investment Facility (infrastructure, green energy, small and medium enterprises)	Belt and Road Initiative (infrastructure, transport, energy), billions of dollars in investments	Economic presence through Gazprom, Lukoil, trade agreements; support for EAEU integration structures
<b>Cultural Initiatives</b>	EU InfoPoints cultural centers, joint exhibitions and festivals, grants for artists	Confucius cultural centers, promotion of Chinese language and traditions	Russian cultural centers, festivals, promotion of the Russian language
<b>Media and Communications</b>	Radio Europe / Euronews, media grants, social media	CGTN (China Global Television Network), cooperation with local media	RT, Russia Today, support for Russian-language media
<b>Diplomatic and Political Influence</b>	Promotion of democracy, rule of law, participation in regional forums	Focus on economic cooperation, infrastructure projects, “non-interference” in politics	Preservation of historical and cultural ties, support for allied political forces, participation in CSTO and EAEU
<b>Assessment of Visible Influence / Quantitative Indicators</b>	Thousands of students in the EU, hundreds of projects in science and education, grants worth millions of euros	Hundreds of educational grants, dozens of infrastructure projects worth billions of dollars	Thousands of students in Russia, large energy and resource projects, integration agreements

Source: author’s own compilation

The table above juxtaposes the principal means whereby the European Union, China and Russia have sought to influence the regional development and integration of Central Asia by means of several different instruments and avenues of “soft power”. Based on this comparison, it can be pointed out that, in the context of the transformation of the geopolitical situation in the world, the EU’s

goals of creating new trade routes through Central Asia bypassing Russia and creating a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region led to a reformatting of the EU strategy and a turn to more active "soft diplomacy" in Central Asia.

### **Institutionalization of partnership and the influence of EU soft power in Central Asia**

The EU is consistently intensifying its policy in Central Asia, taking into account the geostrategic importance of the region. It appears that Central Asia is one of the regions of interest to the EU from the point of view of energy security, conflict resolution and the defense of a multilateral international order based on common rules.

Adapting EU policies to new geopolitical realities, and, as stated in the European Council Opinion, "recognizing the strategic role of Central Asia in global efforts to develop Euro-Asian connections", and taking into account the region's place in the global energy security framework, in June 2019 the EU adopted a new Strategy for Central Asia, which sets out strategic interests in the region and emphasizes the region developing as a more resilient and closely interconnected region. In this regard, along with traditional topics, much attention was paid to issues of regional cooperation.

Negotiations of the Next Generation Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCA) with Central Asian countries have also provided a powerful tool for forging a more modern and diversified partnership that goes beyond the "trade and aid" agenda. Such agreements are a guideline for countries in the region in cooperation with the EU and an indicator of the effectiveness of the EU strategy in Central Asia. By signing such agreements, which pay special attention to common values, democracy and the rule of law, human rights, and sustainable development, the Central Asian republics declare their readiness to accept EU norms and implement them at the national level, thereby recognizing the normative strength of the European Union (Report on the EU strategy on Central Asia, 2023).

Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian state to sign the EPCA on December 21, 2015, which came into force on March 1, 2020. This was also the first ever instance of an agreement of this level with a post-Soviet country was concluded in 2015 for the first time.

It is no coincidence that the first Summit in the "Central Asia – European Union" format took place on October 27, 2022 in Astana. The second summit took place in Cholpon-Ata on June 2, 2023. The CA 5+1 summits represent a further institutionalization of EU-Central Asia relations and complement the work of existing regional dialogues and platforms. Of course, the establishment of such an informal consultative forum is in the interests of the European Union. This not only complements its multilateral cooperation with the countries of the region (the European Union is an active supporter of the principle of multilateralism in world politics), but also helps to strengthen trust and mutual understanding between the Central Asian republics regarding the discussion of regional challenges and threats, the search for answers to them, including with the participation and support of the EU. For example, a pressing issue is the shortage of water resources. This problem has repeatedly become a source of territorial disputes and conflicts in the region. In addition, environmental protection, border control, countering terrorist activities, transnational organized crime and drug trafficking, among others, are also pressing issues for the region. Another of these additional platforms was the Germany-Central Asia Summit, held on September 29, 2023 in Berlin. It serves as further evidence of the European Union's concerted efforts (which have also found a place among the diplomatic priorities of key individual member states) to forge closer ties with the Central Asian republics and strengthen the EU's presence and influence in the region. It marks a significant shift in diplomatic relations between the West and the Central Asian region, catalyzed by the situation in Ukraine.

The 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia also contains recommendations for the preparation of the EU assistance program for the period 2021-2027. The assistance provided by the European Commission, combined with the assistance provided by EU member states individually, makes the European Union the number one provider of development assistance in the region. The European Commission's assistance to Central Asia reached 1.1 billion euros for the period 2014-2020. To better tailor development programs to the characteristics of each country, such as existing levels of development and needs assessments, the European Union takes a differentiated approach to its assistance, paying particular attention to the poorest and most vulnerable countries.

The EU's approach can be observed by examining a number of its particular projects and initiatives in the region. In 2021, the 10th phase of the BOMCA (Border Management in Central Asia) project began, the main goal of which is "to enhance security, stability and sustainable growth in the

region, as well as support cross-border cooperation and improve the living conditions of people living in the border areas of Central Asia” and the 7th phase of the EU CADAP (EU Counter-Drug Action Program in Central Asia). As part of CADAP, it turns out that “the EU seeks to strengthen the role of civil society in the region.” Since 2019, the annual EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum has been held, providing a platform for civil society representatives from the two regions to contribute to the development of the EU-Central Asia partnership. This is a tool for promoting human rights issues. The Forum, as well as the European Endowment for Democracy, are sources of funding for local human rights organizations.

Multi-year regional indicative programs also complement the EU Strategy towards the Central Asian countries. Firstly, there is the TEAM EUROPE initiative on water, energy and climate change. Given Central Asia's vulnerability to natural disasters and the impacts of climate change, this regional program supports countries' capacity to prepare for and respond to these risks. The goal of the project is to promote sustainable management of water and energy resources, solving environmental problems and combating climate change in five Central Asian countries.

Another example is the DARIA programme, which stands for Dialogue and Action for Resourceful Youth in Central Asia, with a budget of €10 million, it will support the inclusive development of labor market skills for young women and men in five Central Asian countries. The project began in June 2022 and is expected to last five years. The programme aims to contribute to improving the quality and inclusiveness of education, training and employment systems in Central Asia, as well as to promote the creation of mechanisms for participatory and inclusive dialogue and cooperation at the national and regional level.

### Erasmus+ and Horizon Programmes

One of the European Union's key instruments of soft power in Central Asia is strengthening educational and academic cooperation through the **Erasmus+** and **Horizon** programs. These programs not only promote individual student and staff mobility but also support the alignment of the region's education systems with EU standards and their internationalization.

For the 2021–2027 period, the Erasmus+ program has a **total budget of approximately €28.4 billion**. The program targets **millions of participants** across education, training, youth, and sport sectors. In the context of Central Asia, the impact of Erasmus+ can be measured particularly through student and staff mobility.

Between 2015 and 2023:

- **Kyrgyzstan** sent 1,093 students and 469 staff members to participate in mobility programs to Europe.
- **Uzbekistan** recorded over 3,000 participants from 2015–2024, with students sent to Europe under the Erasmus Mundus and International Credit Mobility (ICM) programs.
- **Kazakhstan** plans to send approximately 1,200 students to Europe between 2021–2027 through short-term mobility and ICM programs. Additionally, 260 scholarships were awarded under Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degrees between 2014-2024.

Table 2 (below) provides a clear overview of Central Asian countries' participation in the Erasmus+ program:

Country	Period	Number of Participants (Students + Staff)	Program Type	Official Source
Kyrgyzstan	2015-2023	1,093 (outgoing) + 469 (incoming)	ICM	Erasmus+ National Office Kyrgyzstan
Uzbekistan	2015-2024	3,000+	ICM, Erasmus Mundus	Erasmus+ Uzbekistan / EU Delegation
Kazakhstan	2021-2027	≈1,200 (outgoing)	Short-term mobility, ICM	EU Delegation Kazakhstan
Kazakhstan	2014-2024	260 scholarships	Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees	European Commission

Note: The table has been prepared based on the sources cited by the authors.

### Horizon Europe Programme

Horizon Europe is the European Union’s flagship funding programme for research and innovation. The total budget allocated for the 2021–2027 period amounts to approximately EUR 93.5 billion. The programme provides a broad framework that facilitates the participation of researchers from within and outside the European Union in joint research and innovation projects.

The table below, based on data from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG R&I) and SECCA, quantitatively illustrates the level of participation of Central Asian countries in the Horizon Europe programme. The data indicate that regional participation remains relatively limited in terms of both the number of participating organizations and the number of projects. However, this quantitative limitation has not prevented Horizon Europe from being framed in regional media discourse around themes such as “access to international scientific networks,” “integration into global knowledge production,” and “institutional rapprochement with Europe.” At the discursive level, the program is thus presented as an important component of the EU’s science diplomacy and soft power narrative in Central Asia.

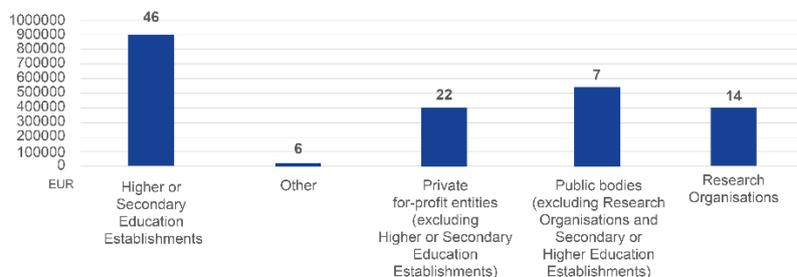
**Table 3. Central Asia’s Participation in Horizon Europe (2021–2025)**

Indicator	Value
Total Horizon Europe budget (2021–2027)	~€93.5 billion
Total number of projects involving Central Asia under Horizon 2020 + Horizon Europe	42
Number of unique participating organizations from Central Asia	62
Total project funding allocated to Central Asia (2020 + 2021–2025):	€2.28 million
Project proposal success rate (Central Asia):	11.9%

Note: The table is based on the sources cited by the authors.

The chart below presents the number of projects and the amount of funding received in Central Asia between 2014 and 2024, supported by the Horizon Europe and Horizon 2020 programmes.

**Number of Horizon Europe and Horizon 2020 funded projects in Central Asia and the amount of funding received (2014-2024)**



**Explanation: Source – SECCA, 2025**

SECCA Program - “EU Support for Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia”, worth 6.8 million euros, launched in 2022. Goal: to promote a more sustainable energy mix in the Central Asian region in line with EU best practices. The program meets the EU’s goal of supporting Central Asian countries in their current energy transition environment. Rational use of natural resources is a key factor in the development and political stability of the region.

In 2025, a summit of the European Union and Central Asian countries was held in Samarkand. Expanding economic cooperation between the EU and Central Asia became the central theme of the summit. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced in Samarkand the launch of a new €12 billion investment package under the EU’s Global Gateway initiative, aimed at strengthening transport links and deepening cooperation in the areas of critical raw materials, digital communications, water and energy. Some projects have already been approved by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and put into operation.

The regional programs under consideration are aimed at supporting a broad process of dialogue and cooperation between the five Central Asian countries.

It is worth noting that high-level contacts between the EU and Central Asia take place with regular frequency, in particular meetings between the heads of state of Central Asia and the President of the European Council. The post of EU Special Representative for Central Asia has been established. There are representative offices of the European Union in the Central Asian countries.

It must be assumed that the EU is actively using a multilateral approach, international cooperation mechanisms, such as summits, dialogues and consultations with Central Asian states in the 5+1 format, in order to influence states and develop cooperation.

In turn, in an increasingly complex geopolitical context, Central Asian countries are seeking to diversify their EPSA options and see a stronger EU presence as a balancer in the regional equation and a committed partner for reform and modernization.

### Limitations

In evaluating the prospects for the European Union's strategy in Central Asia, we should pay attention to the following points:

- The developing EU strategy creates risks of increasing geopolitical tension in the region. Escalating tensions between the EU and Russia and the EU and China in the region could create a difficult environment affecting economic and political stability, which creates risks for trade and transport projects;

- Europe's normative influence is far from unlimited, as exemplified, for instance, by the moral and normative crisis which arose over the reaction to the Charlie Hebdo cartoons by Muslims inside and outside Europe in 2015;

- A review of the EU-Central Asia strategy is necessary in order to update it in the light of geopolitical events that have occurred in recent years subsequent to its official promulgation;

- The EU has turned its foreign policy objectives into a universal and desirable model for all partners. The EU's attempts to adapt the "soft power" tools common to all countries to the actual practice of regional interactions in Central Asia are insufficient.

There is a risk that other external players, primarily China, will benefit from the European Union's efforts to promote integration processes in Central Asia. To summarize, it should be recognized that "soft" power, which is an attribute of a modern state, can become an effective additional resource for the foreign policy of the EU countries and Central Asia.

### Conclusion

Analysis of EU strategic documents (2019–2025) and media discourse of leading Central Asian publications confirmed the hypothesis about three variables of European policy in the region. After 2022, economic and sanctions-regulatory dimensions became decisive: attention was focused on the development of transport infrastructure, energy diversification, access to critical resources and control over circumvention of sanctions. These directions form the pragmatic and at the same time controlling nature of EU policy, while soft power retains a secondary role.

Cultural and educational initiatives, including Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, reinforce positive perceptions of the EU and promote human capital development, but their impact is limited by superficial knowledge among the general public and weak conversion into political loyalty, exacerbated by competition from Russia and China and the region's social conservatism.

It can also be stated that in the context of a dynamic world system of international relations developing towards multipolarity, it is necessary to strengthen the involvement of leading European states in mutually beneficial relations with the states of Central Asia. EU countries are important as partners in realizing the goals of the states of the region to modernize industry, diversify the economy and increase international competitiveness. In our opinion, even in the absence of a large scale and outstanding results of cooperation, the EU's economic diplomacy in Central Asia can be called competitive and has great potential. In addition, establishing productive cooperation with EU countries helps strengthen the positions of the countries of the region in the international community.

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## ЕУРОПАЛЫҚ ОДАҚТЫҢ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ «ЖҰМСАҚ КҮШІ»: МҮМКІНДІКТЕРІ МЕН ШЕКТЕУЛЕРІ (2019-2025 Ж.Ж.)

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