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PERCEPTION OF THE EU IN CENTRAL ASIA: CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN

Abstract. The article addresses the issue of public perception of the European Union in Central Asia. It employs Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as two cases to explore perception and characteristics attached to the EU by public opinion in the region. Additionally paper examines the relationship between bilateral relations of the studied countries with the EU and its perception.

Authors conclude that public perceives EU as neutral actor, who has specific interests in the region related to its own security and prosperity, but also to the wellbeing of the region. However, public opinion does not recognize EU as influential actor in Central Asia.

Keywords: European Union, Central Asia, public perception, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan.

Аңдатпа. Мақала Еуропалық Одақтың Орталық Азиядағы қоғамдық бейнесін сараптауға арналған. Еуроодақтың қоғамдық бейнесін зерттеуінің эмпирикалық негізі ретінде Қазақстан және Тәжікстан мәліметтері қолданылды. Сонымен қатар, мақала аталмыш мемлекеттердің Еуропалық Одақпен қатынастары мен ЕО-ның аймақтағы бейнесі арасындағы өзара байланысын талдайды.

Авторлардың пайымдауынша, қарастырылып отырған мемлекеттердің халқы Еуропалық Одақты өзінің қауіпсіздігі мен әл-ауқатын көздеп отырған, алайда аймақтың дамуын қамтамасыз етуге талпынатын бейтарап актор ретінде қабылдайды. Сонымен қатар, халық Еуроодақты Орталық Азиядағы маңызды актор ретінде қарастырмайды.

Тірек сөздер: Еуропалық Одақ, Орталық Азия, қабылдау, Қазақстан, Тәжікстан.

Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена анализу восприятия Европейского Союза в Центральной Азии. Эмпирическим материалом исследования общественного восприятия ЕС в регионе были использованы данные Казахстана и Таджикистана. Кроме того, в статье анализируется взаимосвязь между отношениями Евросоюза с рассматриваемыми государствами и восприятием ЕС в регионе.

Авторы заключают, что население рассматриваемых стран воспринимает ЕС в качестве нейтрального актора, который заинтересован в собственном благополучии и безопасности, но при этом стремится обеспечить развитие региона. В то же время, население региона не рассматривает Евросоюз в качестве весомого игрока в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: Европейский Союз, Центральная Азия, восприятие, Казахстан, Таджикистан.

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Introduction

The topic of external perception of the EU has recently become a focus of scholarly enquiry. This includes questions such as how the EU partners assess its role and place in world politics? To what extent does the external perception of the Union differs from self-representation of Brussels? Holland and Chaban (2005) conducted the pioneering research on the image of EU outside Europe, particularly focusing on Asia Pacific. This followed by various research projects focusing on EU perception in China (Jing 2006, Peruzzi et al. 2007, Kenneth 2010, Zhimin 2012), Russia (Kaveshnikov 2007, Utkin and Baranovsky 2012), India (Jain and Pandey 2010, Jain 2012), Turkey (Eralp and Torun, 2012), Brazil (Gomes Sariava, 2012), Japan (Oshiba 2012) and South Korea (Park and Yoon 2010).

Recently Holland and Chaban edited the collective works on EU perception in Asia Pacific (Holland and Chaban 2008, Holland 2009) and Lucarelli and Fioramonti edited a collaborative edition on external perception of the European Union by various international actors (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010). Stumbaum recently presented a working paper on EU perception in Asia (Stumbaum 2012), published based on findings of research project on Asian Perceptions of the EU, and Chaban and Elgström (2014) published an article on EU's perception in media of emerging powers. However, the issue of EU perception in Central Asia has attracted limited interest of researchers. Peyrouse recently edited EUCAM working paper on Central Asian views on the European Union (Peyrouse 2014), in which he attempted to outline general EU perceptions of Central Asian elites. This paper aims to cover all five countries and explore specifics of EU perception in countries of the region, and to some extent it fulfills the purpose. However, the elaborations of the authors are

based on interviews, mainly with those who interact with the EU in one or other form and it does not include general public survey. Moreover, the paper does not outline research methodology and the number and qualifications of the interviewed persons. Thus, it is hard to say whether the information provided in a paper reflects the variety of opinions and perceptions of the EU in Central Asia.

In order to support and complement this pioneering research on EU views in Central Asian region, this paper aims to explore EU image in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as presented in mass media publications and as perceived by general public. Additionally, authors were inclined to clarify what might explain differences in EU perception in two studied countries if they exist.

The existing literature (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010:8) suggests that image of particular actor might be affected by various factors, including historical memory of conflict, intensity of transnational communication and dynamics of bilateral interstate relations between parties. EU and Central Asian republics do not have direct borders, and so far there is no record of conflict between them. Thus, authors of the paper focused on a question of to what extent does relations of the country with the EU affect its perception in the country? In order to explore the questioned relation authors first analyze bilateral relations between the EU and studied countries, and then unfold the perception of EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The authors conclude that both local mass media and general public perceive the European Union in a positive way, though public is aware of EU's interests in Central Asia. Moreover, the research findings suggest the positive causal relationship between bilateral relations of EU with studied countries and its public perception there.

Data and Methodology

Measurement of variables

The suggested question of the paper implies the measurement of both variables – bilateral relations and perception of the EU in particular country.

Authors measure EU relations with the country as a combination of economic and political relations. They examine the scope and intensity of bilateral trade, volume of EU investments in the country, volume of EU aid provided to the country and the intensity of political relations through evaluation of meetings of high rank between EU officials and studied country's officials in order to explain the state and features of bilateral relations. Authors also pay attention to the problematic issues in bilateral interaction, specifically focusing on presence of partner's criticism in either party's rhetoric.

The perception of the European Union in studied countries is measured as a combination of published opinion and public opinion. Authors analyze mass media publications and results of survey in order to define specific attributes and attitudes attached to the European Union.

Data on public perception

Authors of the paper developed the datasets on mass media publications (published opinion) and public opinion separately.

The dataset on published opinion covered publications in newspapers of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan both in local and Russian languages in 2012 and 2013. For both countries authors analyze national newspapers, at least one of which represents official political position of the government and at least one of which represents opposition. In case of Kazakhstan, "YegemenKazakhstan", "ZhasAlash", "Kazakhstanskaya Pravda" and "Vremya" were used as sources. Two of these newspapers – "Yegemen Kazakhstan" and "Kazakhstanskaya Pravda" – are daily official newspapers having circulation of 100, 000 issues. The other two – "ZhasAlash" and "Vremya" – are considered as opposition newspapers. The first one is published twice a week and have a circulation of 140, 000 issues a week, and the second one is published three times a week and has a weekly circulation

of 130, 000 copies. The "Yegemen Kazakhstan" and "ZhasAlash" are published in Kazakh, and "Kazakhstanskaya Pravda" and "Vremya" are published in Russian. In case of Tajikistan, "Jumhuriyat" (published in Tajik and Russian) is used as an official publication as it is the main official newspaper in the country and must-read for major part of officials. "Asia Plus" (published in Russian) is chosen as independent media outlet.

These particular newspapers were chosen for several reasons. First, they are well established and have a wide national circulation. Second, three of these newspapers represent the official pro-government position and the other three publish alternative views. Thus, analysis of the publications in these newspapers provides the opportunity to cover various opinions.

The dataset on public opinion was developed on the basis of online survey results, which was conducted by authors in May and June 2014 using the Survey Monkey platform. The survey consisted of 10 multiple choice questions with option for provision of additional comments/notes. It was designed to cover broad audience, and was open to citizens of all five Central Asian republics.

The authors were able to get answers from hundred respondents (53% - Tajikistan, 26% - Kazakhstan, 18% - Uzbekistan, 4% - Kyrgyzstan). 57 % of survey participants indicated their sex as females, and 43% as males.

Main category of participants is representatives of international organizations (mostly 23%). Next biggest category is the private sector representatives (22%), and students and academia share equals amount of 15% each. Some private entrepreneurs (9%) and NGO workers (8) also participated in the survey. Other insignificant categories are budget sphere workers (5%) and government workers (2%). There were also some journalists and bankers, who indicated their occupation in the comments.

Hypotheses and Methodology

The authors of the paper focused on relationship between the bilateral relations of the EU with studied country and public perception of

the Union in the same countries. They suggested that there should be positive relationship between these two variables, and assumed that intensive bilateral relations characterized by positive interaction experience will lead to positive perception of the European Union in studied countries. On the contrary, the presence of negative experience or criticism in bilateral relations is supposed to negatively affect public's perception of the EU. Thus, authors developed two countervailing hypotheses:

H1: The more intensive relations between EU and studied country are the better public perception of the EU is in the studied country.

H2: If EU criticizes the government of the studied country then EU perception is worse.

In order to test the hypotheses and find an answer to the research question of the paper authors apply multi-stage approach and rely on several methods. In order to assess the relations between the EU and studied country authors first analyze trade, investment and aid flows, as well as political cooperation between the parties. This is done through analysis of documents and statistics. On the second stage authors rely on quantitative content analysis in assessing the visibility of EU in local press, and apply discourse analysis to the selected publications in order to explore specific features of EU image in the mass media outlets. The paper traces the publications devoted to the EU and classifies them in different domains, depending on type, general message and topic of publication.

The publications in all national newspapers are categorized in two main groups: news reports and periodical articles. These publications are divided into three categories of negative, neutral and positive, based on the nature of their message and their connotation. While there is no pure negative, neutral or positive categories, we grouped the news reports/periodical articles into three mentioned categories based on the nature of general message. Moreover, based on the nature of activities, authors have also classified three separate types: EU economics, EU politics and EU-bilateral/Central Asia cooperation.

Authors then analyze online survey results applying quantitative statistical approach. This step defines major characteristics attached to the

EU by general public in studied countries. It also gives a notion on public attitudes to the Union and its activities in the region.

On the fourth stage results of content analysis of chosen national newspapers' sources are examined in relationship to the results of online public opinion survey. This is done to examine correlation or deviation between published opinion and public opinion. Based on the results of content analysis of mass media publications and statistical analysis of survey outcomes authors describe the public perception of the European Union in two studied countries.

Last, but not least, authors test proposed hypotheses correlating the analysis of bilateral relations with the description of public perception derived from analysis of mass media publications and survey results.

Bilateral EU-Kazakhstan and EU-Tajikistan Relations

EU-Kazakhstan Relations

The European Union began to develop bilateral relations with Central Asian republics in early 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This section explores bilateral relations between EU and studied countries to identify their state and features and to measure the independent variable of the research paper.

Diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and the European Communities were established in 1993. In 1995, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the European Union was signed. This agreement entered into force in 1999 and set up the political dialogue between parties (Delegation of EU to Kazakhstan 2014a).

The European Union member countries are significant trade partners of Kazakhstan. EU accounts for about 49% of Kazakhstani foreign trade turnover, holding the first place and outpacing Russia and China (Delegation of EU to Kazakhstan 2014b). It should be noted that the trade turnover between EU and Kazakhstan was steadily increasing, showing dynamic growth since 2000. For instance, Kazakhstan's export to EU accounted for 3,8 billion Euro in 2000, and this number increased up to 24,4 billion Euro in 2012 (European Commission 2006:37, European Commission 2014a).

Since 2000 Kazakhstan has not only increased its export to EU, but also improved its rank among trade partners of the European Union. In 2000 Kazakhstan hold 38th place in the list of main EU importers, while in 2004 it was ranked 32nd in the same list. In 2012 Kazakhstan was ranked 20th in the list of EU importers. The picture looks similar in exports area, where Kazakhstan also improved its position for 8 points from 48th in 2000 to 40th in 2004, and holds 38th position in 2012 (European Commission 2006:36-37, European Commission 2011a: 31-32).

Foreign direct investments represent the second most important area of EU-Kazakhstan economic cooperation. Since mid-2000s EU member states investments into Kazakhstan's economy recorded rapid growth. Overall, European Union has invested 80,7 billion US dollars in Kazakhstan during 20 years. It accounts for 47% of total investments in Kazakh economy (National Bank of Kazakhstan 2013:67-68).

The third important area of EU-Kazakhstan interaction is the development aid. Kazakhstan has been receiving EU aid under TACIS program and DCI. The last 5-year budget cycle of 2007-2013 allocated 431,8 million Euro to bilateral cooperation projects in five Central Asian republics. Kazakhstan received 74 million Euro or 17% of this aid, reserving third largest aid receiver among countries of the region (European Commission 2011b:6).

Obviously, strong economic ties between the European Union and Kazakhstan contributed into development of enhanced political cooperation. The conventional wisdom on EU-Kazakhstan relations suggests that 2007 should be regarded as a milestone in bilateral cooperation. On the 22nd of June 2007, the European Union declared "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership". Although the Strategy had regional focus, Kazakhstan was targeted the most important country of Central Asia. However, it should be noted that since early days of independence Kazakh officials emphasized developing closer relations with European countries as main priorities of the state.

This interest led to intensive visits' exchange between EU and Kazakhstan officials. Since 1993 Kazakh high officials, including President NursultanNazarbayev, 14 times visited EU institutions, while EU officials paid 15 visits to Astana until 2013. The last, most important visit was the official visit of President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso to Kazakhstan on 2-3 June 2013.

Moreover, Kazakhstan regularly participates in EU – Central Asia multilateral meetings and furthers political cooperation with the EU under bilateral Cooperation Council, Cooperation Committee and Parliamentary Cooperation Committee.

Although Kazakhstan has developed sound political relations with the European Union since early 1990s and continues to emphasize their importance for country's development, issues of human rights and rule of law remains to be controversial in bilateral interaction. Recently, both EU spokespersons and EU institutions began to criticize Kazakhstan's government for negative record of human rights related development in country (Ashton 2011, Ashton 2012, EP Resolution 2012, EP Resolution 2013).

Nevertheless, the quick overview of bilateral EU-Kazakhstan relations reveals their positive connotation and intensive dynamics. Kazakhstan is not only receiver of EU aid, but also has been able to develop stable economic and political relations with the EU, becoming the most important partner of Brussels in the region.

EU-Tajikistan Relations

Relations between Tajikistan and the European Union were established Tajikistan became independent country in early 1990s. The first important project in bilateral cooperation was TACIS programme, which opened its office in Dushanbe in 1992 (Delegation of EU to Tajikistan 2014a).

First documents on cooperation - Bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the Government of Tajikistan and the EU was signed in 2004 and came into force in 2010. Several additional documents were signed between the parties as well, including the Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters

between the European community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the Republic of Tajikistan.

Republic of Tajikistan opened its Permanent Mission to the EC in Brussels in 2001 and in 2004 the Delegation of the European Commission of the European Communities was established in Dushanbe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan 2014).

EU-Tajikistan relations strengthened from 2007 when the EU's Central Asia Strategy for a new Partnership adopted by the European Council was endorsed. All priority areas of the strategy were important for Tajikistan: human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratization; youth and education; economic development, trade and investment; energy and transport; environmental sustainability and water; combating common threats and challenges. The role of EU institutions, responsible for its external actions is inestimable in this process and economic development of Tajikistan in general.

"The European Union encouraged and supported Tajikistan's accession to the WTO, as WTO accession is seen as an opportunity to open Tajikistan's way to integrating into the world economy by accepting and applying international trade rules and norms, which are likely to result in more intensive trade and investment relations" (Delegation of EU to Tajikistan 2014b). Tajikistan submitted its documents for WTO membership in 2001 and has been accepted in 2013 obtaining the status of full member.

After becoming an independent country, Tajikistan was able to maintain economic partnership and facilitate trade with near 80 countries of the world, including nearly all EU countries.

Though Tajikistan is located in isolated region and has no direct routes to the EU, it is still considered as one of the most significant trade partners of the country. According to Mr. Sharifzoda, Tajik Minister of Economic Development and Trade "European Union represents the fourth most important economic partner of Tajikistan after CIS, China and Turkey. Despite distance and structural obstacles, EU countries represent a real potential market for

Tajik high-value added products including food and textile" (Rahimzoda 2012).

In 2011 volume of bilateral trade between Tajikistan and EU member states reached more than 300 million US dollars (export 65.9 million USD and import 234.5 million USD). The volume of trade with the EU makes up to 19.3% of the total foreign trade turnover of the Republic of Tajikistan (Embassy of Tajikistan to the Belgium et al 2014). The main EU imports were aluminum, agricultural products, textiles and clothing. The main EU exports were machinery, transport equipment, agricultural products and chemical products (European Commission 2014b).

While the cooperation of EU and Tajikistan in economic sector is in developing process, cooperation in other domains – education (TEMPUS, Erasmus Mundus programs), health, security (BOMCA/CADAP), energy and transport (TRACECA, INOGATE) and other related areas are more intensive (EU Delegation to Tajikistan 2014c). The cooperation in the spheres mentioned above is mainly related to development programs funded by the EU within its aid programs designed for Central Asia.

According to EU, "the total value of EC assistance disbursed to Tajikistan since 1992, adding up all the instruments, is over €500 million» (EU Delegation to Tajikistan 2014d). Recently, EU confirmed its intention to continue support of development programs in Tajikistan. The EU will provide 251 Million Euros for Tajikistan for the period of 2014-2020 as development aid (European Commission 2014c).

During the period mentioned above there were no serious political or economic clashes, misunderstandings or conflicts in relations of two partners. Due to the policy of Tajikistan oriented to close cooperation with all interested parties and its strategic location in the region (shared borders with China and Afghanistan), further huge economic potential (Hydro Power Plants construction and production of clean energy, enormous amount of minerals, etc.), it could be predicted that the cooperation with EU will develop further.

Generally, Tajikistan – EU relations were developing in a cooperative framework without

expressing criticism by either side. Tajikistan enjoys the eased access to the EU market under PCA and receives major share of EU aid allocated to Central Asia.

Public Perception of the European Union

Content Analysis of National Newspapers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

The content analysis of mass media sources of «Yegemen Kazakhstan», «Kazakhstanskaya Pravda», «ZhasAlash» and «Vremya» reveals that the most publications are basically short news with neutral coverage of EU-Kazakhstan/Central Asia cooperation.

Bajority of publications devoted to EU are published either in official newspapers or Russian-language «Vremya». Interestingly to note, that in 2012 «Vremya» alone published 19 news reports and periodical articles somehow related to the EU, while in 2013 it downscaled its interest. Conversely, official newspapers tend to indicate their growing interest in EU increasing number of publications from fourteen in 2012 to twenty-two in 2013.

A brief overview of the summarized results of content analysis of Kazakhstan's newspapers reveals the domination of EU agenda in official newspapers. Most publications appeared in these newspapers are neutral news reporting meetings between EU and Kazakhstan officials at home or abroad. Such news covers both bilateral EU-Kazakhstan meetings as well as multilateral talks between the European Union institutions and delegations of all Central Asian republics.

The short news and periodical articles published in Kazakhstan's newspapers cover the issues of Eurozone crisis, discussions of the future of EMU and domestic politics of individual member states. Most of these publications present either neutral or negative message. The negative publications mainly report the problems within Eurozone and its consequences for social and economic situation in member states, with focus on Greece and Spain.

Generally, Kazakhstan's mass media tends to publish neutral or positive short news and periodical articles about the European Union. Moreover, they portray EU-Kazakhstan and EU-Central Asia relations in a positive connotation,

while negative short news and periodical articles are devoted to the EU's domestic development and policy issues.

In case of Tajikistan two main mass media outlets were analysed: «Jumhuriyat» in Tajik language and «Asia Plus» published in Russian. Both newspapers are being published twice a week and are indisputable leaders in their segments.

«Asia Plus» pays attention to major developments in all sectors of the government and society proving its reputation of independent and «positive opposition» media. The analysis of «Asia Plus» content reveals that the publications regarding the EU in this newspaper could be grouped as follows:

- Brief news related to start/financing/implementation process of development/aid programs funded by EU/EU member country;
- Analysis related to the situation in the EU and its influence to Tajikistan in line with regional processes: security situation in CA, use of hydro power potential of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the position of neighbouring countries, etc.;
- Reprinting of the analytical materials related to the EU from Russian and international media sources, which are mainly in line with general position of the newspaper (two-three opinions from different groups, etc.).

It should be noted that there are no any single publication in this newspaper, which could be considered as negative. All publications might be divided into two categories: positive and neutral. Positive publications are related to the first category of news (information on development programmes, etc.), while neutral information is related to reprinted articles and analytical materials from the Internet about the global developments and the role of the EU in these processes. The only article which might had some negative reflection is related to EU's position on the last presidential elections in Tajikistan. This publication notes that there were some shortcomings in the process.

«Jumhuriyat» as official publishing body of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan fully reflects official position and policy of the

Government. Review of the newspaper publications related to the European Union indicates that all publications related to the EU fully reflect the official position of the newspaper and publishes mainly positive information about Tajik Government's policy. Hence, all the publications related to the EU are in line with official policy of the Government. In 2013 «Jumhuriyat» published 36 publications directly related to the EU and more than 80% of them are short news. News is mainly related to the meetings of Tajik officials with their colleagues from respective EU institutions or countries. Much less attention is paid to coverage of the issues related to aid provided by the European Union. The outlet published few analytical articles devoted to the visits of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan to the EU and his meetings with heads of EU institutions.

It also should be noted that there are significant amount of news, articles and interviews related to cooperation with EU member countries, introducing their programmes, cooperation with companies and organizations in various domains – economic, social and cultural. Somehow the EU is mentioned in those news articles and thus they are also included into the table.

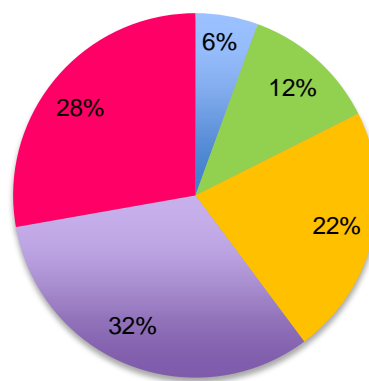
Considering the above mentioned information and referring to the tables developed after reviewing the newspaper publications it might be concluded that two main information sources in Tajikistan bring mostly positive or neutral information about the EU to the audience which leads to formation of the positive image of EU and its member countries as well.

4.2 Public Opinion Survey Results

Analysis of public opinion survey results reveals that in general the audience approached has good level of information about the EU, its institutions and spheres of action.

Figure 1. General awareness of EU

- I'm not aware about the EU at all
- I'm aware about the EU location and its member
- I'm aware about the location, structure and EU institutions in general
- I'm aware about the location, structure, institutions and EU spheres of action in general
- I know everything about the EU, its institutions, policies and its spheres of action



However, the next question about the level of information of respondents about the EU in Central Asia shows that 17% of respondents are not aware at all about the EU actions in CA. It might be explained by the factor that they receive the information about the EU from global or regional media (53 % of participants responded that they receive the information related to EU through global media).

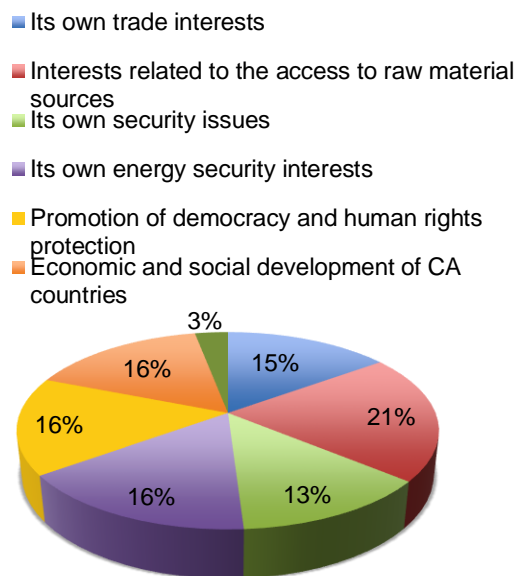
25% of respondents answered that they have heard something about big projects funded by the EU in CA and other 25% know the names of some concrete programs (Erasmus Mundus, BOMCA, etc.). 31% have the information about main directions of the EU strategy in CA and 12% know everything about the EU in CA.

Answers to the next question indicate that only 12% of respondents aren't aware about the EU relations with their native country compared to the 17% who don't know anything about the EU actions in CA region. 28% have general information about the diplomatic relations established between their home countries and the EU. 39% know about the general directions of cooperation between two parties and 28% have comprehensive understanding about the nature of collaboration of their countries with EU.

The next question was related to the EU influence on CA region. Thus, 8% of respondents think that the EU has no influence on CA. 39% believe that the EU has some limited influence to the region. 35% consider the influence of EU to CA as medium and 17% as sufficient. Only two percent of respondents consider the EU's influence as strong enough and remaining five percent are not sure about their position.

Another question showed the perception of respondents about the motives of EU in Central Asian countries. Generally, public perceives EU as self-interest driven actor in the region. 65% of the respondents believe that EU's activities in Central Asia are governed by its own interest. Among those interests, access to raw materials and energy security of EU reserve the highest positions. This result demonstrates self-perception of Central Asia as a supplier of raw materials and energy resources to the global market. In addition to pre-defined answers, the survey enabled participants to comment, and 3% of respondents proposed personal interpretation of EU interests in Central Asia. This interpretation included expansion of the EU's political and geopolitical interests, USA and other countries' interests. Interestingly to note, quite large proportion of respondents (32%) believed that EU policy in the region is driven by development agenda, including improvement of human rights and democracy promotion.

Figure 2. Perception of EU interests in Central Asia



In order to grasp public perception on foreign policy priorities of their countries, survey asked to choose an actor(s), cooperation with which better reflects national interests of respondent's country. Not surprisingly, Russia was listed as the main partner by majority of respondents (54%). It was interesting to note that China was placed as second important. 46% of respondents selected China, though there is general perception of China having negative image in some CA countries, both for historical memory reasons and for recent gradual economic and social expansion. Next most popular option is CA countries (40%) and CIS countries (38%), EU comes next with comparatively high results (37%) and the US is the last choice with 24%. There were additional opinions shown in the comments, which included Japan, Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey.

Generally, survey results indicate that citizens of Central Asia are quite well aware about EU policy in the region, its programs and relations with their countries. Although majority of respondents believe, that the EU has own

interests in the region and has quite significant impact on Central Asia, they do not perceive it as a threat. Still, Central Asia's population recorded pragmatism, as they listed Russia and China as first preferable partners for their countries, and the EU was mentioned in the very end of the list.

EU's image in studied countries

The analysis of mass media publications and survey results reveals that published opinion and public opinion largely overlap. Mass media in both countries tend to publish neutral or positive news and periodical articles about the European Union and its interaction with respective countries. The publications devoted to EU – Central Asian cooperation, both on bilateral and multilateral grounds emphasize the positive dynamic of this interaction. Most of these publications in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan describe the EU as significant trade partner, who steadily invests into economies of respective states and provides considerable development aid. Moreover, the EU is excluded from power competition rhetoric, and rather portrayed as neutral actor pursuing bilaterally beneficial relations and respecting sovereignty of the states.

The results of survey indicate that general public is aware of the European Union and its activities in Central Asia, including its interaction with respective countries. Public perceives EU as actor with double mission. On the one hand, its activities in the region are determined by its own economic interests and security concerns. On the other hand, considerable proportion of general public believes into modernizing and assisting mission of the EU. One third of respondents indicated that EU was dedicated to democracy promotion in the region, and generally was interested in economic and social development of Central Asian states. Additionally, public perceives the Union as important partner of their states. Although EU does not enjoy the highest positions among preferred partners, still it comes ahead of the United States. Moreover, EU is not perceived as threat or possible enemy, despite realization of EU's interests in the region.

The other characteristic attached to the European Union in public consciousness is its limited ability to affect Central Asian affairs.

Despite being portrayed as important trade partner, CA public does not assess trade relations as a source of EU's power and influence. This puzzle might be explained by dominant discourse of power (mainly military) politics of Central Asian affairs. It seems that population views hard power instruments as more decisive in exerting influence, and does not regard economic instruments as possible coercion tool. Moreover, absence of 'soft' coercion experience in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's relations with outer world further diminishes possibility of viewing bilateral economic ties as a source of influence or threat.

In order to understand relation between mass media publications and public perception of the EU in studied countries authors asked survey respondents to indicate the source, which they rely on in obtaining information about the EU. Surprisingly, international media (all types) play the leading role (53%) as a source of information. National and regional (CA) media have nearly equal positions with 36% and 35% respectively. 34% of respondents indicated that they receive information through official publications, bulletins and scientific journals, 20% - from colleagues and friends. 10% receive the information through national bloggers. Additional comments section of the question reveals that the Internet is significant source of information about the EU and its activities in the region.

This result leads authors to conclude that publications in national mass media outlets might affect opinion and perception of only one thirds of population in studied countries. However, overlap between published opinion and public opinion in their assessment of EU's role in the region suggest that there is a connection between publications in national mass media and public opinion in studied countries. As testing relationship between mass media publications and public opinion falls beyond the scope of this article, authors do not develop issue further.

It should be noted that generally description of public perception of the EU proves to be true for both studied countries. The only difference mentioned by authors is the larger emphasize of EU aid and assistance by Tajik mass media, but

that is explained by specificity of bilateral interaction of particular state with the Union.

Hypotheses Testing

The authors correlated results of content analysis and public survey with the analysis of bilateral relations of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan with the European Union in order to test hypotheses proposed by research paper. Initially, two countervailing hypotheses regarding causal relationship between quality of bilateral interaction and public image of the EU in respective countries were proposed.

The first hypothesis suggests that more intensive relations between EU and studied country lead to the better public image of the EU in the studied country. The analysis of both mass media publications and survey results demonstrates that the EU has positive image in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Public opinion in studied countries perceive EU as neutral self-interested actor, who still aims to contribute into social and economic development of the region. On the other hand, analysis of bilateral relations of the respective republics with the EU indicates positive dynamics; for both countries EU is important trading partner and both governments are interested in developing cooperation with the Union. Thus, the hypothesis regarding positive causal relationship between intensity of bilateral EU relations and public perception of the Union in particular countries seems to be sufficiently plausible.

The countervailing hypothesis of the paper suggests that EU's criticism of the government will deteriorate and worsen its image in respective countries, leading to negative trends in public perception of the Union. The analysis of bilateral relations of EU with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan demonstrates that lately EU began to criticize Kazakh authorities for deterioration of human rights and political freedoms record. The EU also expressed concerns over the electoral procedures in Tajikistan. However, both Kazakh and Tajik mass media lacks negative articles on the EU, although they mention European Parliament's resolutions on Kazakhstan in neutral news. Additionally, public perception of EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan records to be positive.

The countries' population does not regard this critic as intervention into domestic politics, and generally does not attach negative characteristics to the EU. Thus, the hypothesis on causal relationship between EU criticism of government and its image in the respective country seems to be less plausible.

Conclusion. This paper aimed to explore public perception of the European Union in Central Asia utilizing Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as two cases. The EU perception and image in respective republics was assessed on the basis of content analysis of publications in major national mass media outlets and analysis of online survey results. The second aim of the paper was to assess the relationship between public perception of the EU and bilateral relations of the EU with respective countries.

The paper first analyzed bilateral relations between the EU and respective republics in order to measure independent variable. The authors concluded that EU relations with both Central Asian republics have recorded positive dynamics. Though recently EU began to express concerns over democratic development and human rights issues in both republics.

The paper then proceeded to analysis of data on publications in national mass media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan and survey of public opinion. This analysis revealed that both mass media publications and general public hold positive view of the European Union; additionally mass media publications tends to reinforce this positive image through publication of neutral or positive short news and periodical articles about the EU.

Initially authors suggested two hypotheses, which were tested throughout research project. The extensive analysis of authors reveals that relations of the country with the EU greatly affect the Union's image in particular country. The more positive dynamic of bilateral interaction is the better image European Union has in a country. On the other hand the hypothesis on negative causal relationship between EU critics of respective governments and the public perception of EU in studied countries was falsified. Authors do not record worsening of EU

image and public attitudes towards the actor despite EU's recent criticism.

The authors recognize that this work has limitations and the research needs further elaboration. Specifically, it would be useful to extend the review period up to a decade.

Also it is important to include other national newspapers and probably increase sample. This might further confirm the proposed hypotheses and make the results more robust.

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