

The strategic partnership between the EU and central Asian countries

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Abstract

This article examined the relationships between the EU and Central Asia at the level of the partnership, their background, which were laid in the early 1990s and the dynamics at the beginning of the 21st century. The economic interests of the EU in Central Asia based on the possibility of access to necessary energy resources of Central Asia and the development of trade-economic relations. Central Asia takes a significant place in world geopolitics now. Increased interest in the early 21st century was a result of many factors such as: the need for energy resources of Central Asia, the region's proximity to Afghanistan and based on the possibility of creating a security belt, combatting new threats such as trafficking in drugs and arms, migration flows and organized crime. In this context, this article was an attempt to study the development of an EU strategy for Central Asia until the contemporary stage.

Keywords: the European Union, Central Asia, strategic partnership, cooperation, energy.

1. Introduction

Relations between the European Union and countries of Central Asia have evolved also before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Central Asia, located at the crossroads of two continents, is a historic bridge between Europe and Asia. In the context of increasing interdependence of the economies of the world system, the European Union has been actively implementing the regional policy outside Europe as well, including in Central Asia.

In general, the dynamics of development of relations between countries of Central Asia and the European Union can be divided into two stages:

1. Period of formation of the concept of relationships between the EU and countries of Central Asia, as well, identification of the main areas of cooperation (the 1990s);
2. Period of establishment of the strategic partnership relations between the EU and Central Asia from 2001, which is manifested in the activation of the European Union in the Central Asian region.

2. Materials and methods

The content of this article have been used methods of analysis and synthesis, logic, and systematic methods. Historical and comparative methods are particularly important also. Considering that Central Asia's future is determined by the trends of world development, the study applied the methods of the specific field of expertise – international legal forecasting. For example, in the analysis of the present stage of evolution of the strategy of the European Union, expert estimates of domestic and foreign researchers brought benefits. Particular attention in this research will be paid to descriptive and prescriptive (normative) expectations.

2.1 The formation of partnership relations between the EU and Central Asia

During the 1990s the development of relations between the EU and Central Asia was based on interest of both parties in

mutual cooperation. Relations between the EU and Central Asian states in the early 1990s developed under the influence of a new geopolitical situation created by collapse of bipolar system of international relations. The location of Central Asia on such geopolitically important area, as the Heartland macro-region, provided more opportunities for cooperation with other leading economic centers. Among the latter the European Union occupies a special place because of its structural features. The mutual interest of the parties primarily promoted the development of relations between the EU and post-Soviet states.

The EU policy towards Central Asia in the 1990s was influenced by the new geopolitical situation created by collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and later of the Soviet Union in 1991. The EU has become the closest to unstable eastern space and major economic and geopolitical power center.

After the collapse of Soviet Union the foreign policy of new independent states was aimed at the establishment of equal and mutually beneficial relations with all countries of the world. For its part, countries of the European Union were also interested in cooperation with Central Asian states, primarily on the basis of economic considerations. The economic interests of the EU in Central Asia based on the possibility of access to necessary energy resources of Central Asia and the development of trade-economic relations. For such kind of cooperation it was necessary to prepare a political and legal basis.

The process of building diplomatic relations between the EU and Central Asian states had already begun in 1991. Political and legal framework for relations between the European Union and the countries of Central Asia was founded on December 31, 1991, when the European Union in a joint statement recognized the newly independent countries that emerged on the territory of former USSR.

Initially, the legal basis of the EU policy have been: "Agreements on trade, commercial and economic cooperation"

with the Soviet Union in 1989, the conclusion of European Council on the relations with the independent states of the former Soviet Union dated March 16, 1992, as well as the regulations of the TACIS program. On December 16, 1992 European Community adopted the Declaration of the Heads of State and Governments of the member countries of the EU on readiness to contribute to the process of democratization in the former Soviet Union. Thus, the interest of the EU to the new independent states took on a political aspect.

In the early 1990s the political weight of the EU in the world began to increase, after the entry into force of Maastricht Treaty. This contributed to the establishing by the EU of new partnership-level relations with Central Asian states. According to official documents of the EU partner level of relationship was established with any third countries on the basis of the Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation. During the period of 1994-1996 Agreements on Partnership and Cooperation were signed with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, an agreement with Turkmenistan was initialed in 1998.

The EU has established Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with each country, which encompassed political dialogue, trade, economic relations, and cooperation in a variety of sectors, including energy, the environment, transport, security and education. With Tajikistan agreement was concluded in 2004. These documents laid the foundation for mutual cooperation in various fields between the EU and Central Asian countries. By signing such an agreement, Central Asian states agreed to adopt the necessary conditions of partnership, based on shared principles and objectives such as the rule of law, development of political freedoms, and establishment of a market economy. In turn, also for the European Union the Central Asian region was of particular importance on the basis of economic interests. This was noted in the "Strategy of the European Communities in relation to the states of Central Asia", which was introduced to the EU Council in the summer of 1995 by the European Commission. Report by the European Community identified the EU strategy for Central Asia, but the specific EU strategy was formed only in the early 21st century. Since in the implementation of the strategy of the 1990s and in the whole process of signing of the PCA with the states of Central Asia, relations between the EU and Central Asian states were at premature stage because of a variety of reasons. The region of Central Asia remained restless: the civil war still was going on in Tajikistan. For example, in Kazakhstan the ratification process dragged on for five years. The point was not only in external causes, when the circle of the EU countries, through which it would take agreement to pass, increased from 12 to 15 countries in 1995 with the entry of new members. First of all, this was due to internal reasons. As a result of the dissolution of the Parliament by the President of Kazakhstan in 1995, the European Parliament refused to approve the PCA until recovery of parliamentary democracy in the country. However, after the December 1995 parliamentary elections and the restoration of parliamentary system in the country in a number of the EU countries resumed the work on ratification of the PCA.

President Nazarbayev's Eurasianism played an important role for the strengthening of mutual cooperation. This idea serves as the main tool of convergence of Europe and Asia. It promotes dialogue between Kazakhstan and both Asia and Europe, paving the 'way to Europe'. Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE, chairmanship in the OIC, realization of the program

'Path to Europe' are prime examples of Eurasianist strategy of our country. (Sadykova, 2013) ^[12].

In the 1990s it was a period of not only the formation of the conceptual framework of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, but also to identify the main areas of cooperation between the parties. This process began with the support of Central Asian states by the European Union.

In the context of economic and political reforms in Central Asian states it is important that since 1991 the EU has moved on to direct contacts with the republics regarding technical, financial and humanitarian cooperation. The projects of inter-regional and regional levels were specific practical steps of the EU in Central Asia. Technical cooperation between EU and Central Asia was launched in the framework of TACIS program (a program of technical assistance to CIS countries, effective from 1991), TEMPUS (the program of assistance from the EU in the field of education, in force since 1994), INTAS (International Association to support scientists of the CIS countries), COPERNICUS, Europartenariat etc.

In 1995 it was established as the EU's mechanism for oil and gas transportation to Europe. After the conference in Baku and in Astana in 2004, the program evolved into a wider partnership within the framework of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan.

Thus the 1990s was a period of formation of the concept of the relationships of the EU with the countries of Central Asia and identification of the main areas of cooperation (1990s). With regard to Central Asia the European Union has selected policy of nomination of a series of initiatives, capaciously combining both economic and political motives. Economic initiatives were implemented within the framework of regional projects, based primarily on the desire to access to energy resources and at the level of bilateral economic and trade relations. The political aspect manifested in the formation of the political and legal basis of relations between the EU and Central Asia, in developing a strategy for Central Asia. It should be noted that during the formation of the EU strategy towards Central Asian countries, not only the internal development of states in the region, but also the geopolitical situation was considered. Such players as the US, Russia, and China were involved in a geopolitical game in Central Asia.

2.2 The adoption of the new partnership strategy of the EU

The geopolitical situation has changed dramatically since the terrorist events of September 11, 2001 in the United States. The problem of providing security from external threats has become a major issue on the agenda of the international community. The world's leading venues, including the EU is aware of the fragility of the international security system. These events served as a kind of catalyst to review policy in relation to the Central Asian states as countries in close proximity to Afghanistan, the source of the terrorist threat. Central Asia has moved from the periphery to the center of world politics. The EU assistance to the Central Asian countries was necessary also for the resolution of other issues such as drug trafficking and border security. Europeans have recognized that only a peaceful, economically prosperous and democratic Central Asia can become their trusted partner. (Dadabaeva, 2011) ^[2].

It appears that it was then that in the EU they have begun to realize the importance of closer cooperation with the Central Asian states on regional security and countering transnational threats. Also, it should be noted that in the beginning of the 21st century the European Union has proposed a strategy for

Central Asia and its supplementary documents such as the “Regional Strategy for assistance to Central Asia for the period of 2007-2013” and “Program of the main areas for the period 2001-2012”. The adoption of such an important document was not only the interest of the European Union in ensuring security in Central Asia. Energy factor played a significant role as well. As noted in one of the Western Research: “The European Union wants to establish a commercial energy relationship with Central Asia. The principle underpinning the EU’s energy outreach towards Central Asia is based on self-interest and focused on gas. The objective is to diversify supplies in order to reduce the dependence of the EU member states on gas supplies from Russia”. (Denison, 2009) ^[3].

“Strategy for a new partnership between the EU and Central Asia”, adopted in 2007, outlined the position and interests of the EU in the region at present and marked the transition to a qualitatively new level of partnership. According to the strategy, to address issues of particular importance the EU will undertake the following:

- develop ongoing regional political dialogue at the level of Foreign Ministers;
- start an “European Education Initiative” and support the development of “e-Silk Road” in Central Asia;
- start an “EU initiative on the rule of law”;
- adjust with each Central Asian state a permanent “human rights dialogue” aimed at obtaining specific results;
- conduct a regular “energy dialogue” with the countries of Central Asia. (The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, 2009) ^[10].

The strategy covers the period until 2013 and concerns inter-state and regional level cooperation. In general, the document outlined the following areas of cooperation:

1. Security cooperation, which includes the fight against drug trafficking and arms trafficking, peaceful settlement of border issues.
2. Economic reforms that made it possible to use the funds of the European Investment Bank and the Investment Fund for projects in Central Asia.
3. The development of energy cooperation, access to energy resources of Central Asia and the search for new ways to deliver energy resources to the EU.
4. The environmental sphere of cooperation, in particular the protection of the environment and paying considerable attention to issues related to the Caspian and Aral seas.
5. The development of the most sensitive issues in the relationship between Western Europe and Central Asia, such as respect for human rights, building a legal and democratic state.
6. Reforming standards of three-tier education system and including Central Asian countries into the Bologna system.
7. To implement the strategy based on the budget of the European Union it has planned to double the financial support of the Central Asian countries, which amounted to 750 million Euros.
8. Thus, the “Strategy for a new partnership between the EU and Central Asia” has demonstrated the EU’s intention to strengthen its positions in the Central Asian region, which has been updated with practical actions as well.

3. Results & Discussion

The development of the current geopolitical processes in Central Asia is indicating the growing importance of the region

in world politics. Central Asia has become a space of “competition and competitive cooperation of the world’s leading powers” of modernity.

At the present stage, the multilateral policies of the EU, expressed in an effort to interact with different centers of power and different regions in the world, still remain. The European Union for a long time has not treated its interests in Central Asia as strategic (Dadabaeva, 2011) ^[2]. Increased interest in the early 21st century was a result of many factors such as, the need for energy resources of Central Asia, the region’s proximity to Afghanistan and based on the possibility of creating a security belt, combatting other new threats such as trafficking in drugs and arms, migration flows (Mendikulova, 2011) ^[6] and organized crime.

Western researchers also pay attention to these aspects. According to them: “The introduction of the Strategy and its first year of implementation had important positive aspects. The adoption of the EU Strategy in 2007 was a significant and bold statement of intent by the EU; signalling that the Union planned to upgrade its influence in a part of the former Soviet union that up until then had commanded little serious attention within Brussels. The EU has made a firm commitment to launch a diverse series of initiatives - rule of law, education, water issues - that are designed to help to meet some of the major challenges facing Central Asia and, at the same time, strengthen the bonds between the Union and countries of the region”. (Melvin and Boonsta, 2008) ^[7].

It appears that the main objective of the foreign policy of the European Union (EU) in Central Asia (CA) has been and remains the gradual involvement of the region in the sphere of influence through the promotion of European standards in the field of public, social and economic governance. The main instruments of this policy is the financial, technical, political and diplomatic assistance to the implementation of these basic elements of European values such as democracy, human rights, liberal principles in economic and state building. All these, according to the Brussels should be the provision of strong and long-term geo-economic/geopolitical position of the European Union in the strategically important region of Central Asia, located at the crossroads of Russia, China and the Islamic world. (Paramonov and Stokov, 2011) ^[8].

Kazakh researchers note that Europe develops its own strategic line in CA with some fear of relative risks in the countries of Central Asia and at the same time with caution on the major actors – the US, Russia and China. Despite the shortage of energy resources, decision on their ways of transportation is delayed by the EU (“Nabucco” project).

Thus, the “real politics” in the region is such that in the context development of regionally significant connections between the EU and Central Asia, pragmatic interests are predominantly prevailing. The EU policy towards Central Asia I would define as a liberal pragmatism and the one of Central Asian countries towards the EU as “collateral” pragmatism, accompanying the establishment of their interests. (Gubaidullina, 2011) ^[4].

Russian researcher Pryakhin while analyzing policy of Western Europe towards Central Asia notes that it is characterized by realism and pragmatism. In the capitals of Western European countries there is an understanding that Russia, China and the United States are the “key players” in the region, and certainly and especially, the Central Asian states themselves. It is they who are the guarantors of the political and military stability in the region. (Pryakhin, 2011) ^[11].

The main implication for the EU Strategy is that what was desirable in 2007 is still desirable. Goals of strengthening human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratization may be harder to achieve in straitened circumstances, but success is connected to the economic goals of promoting economic development, trade and investment and alleviating poverty. Finally, the Strategy's goal of strengthening energy and transport links may be easier in a period of low energy prices as long as the EU can turn the economic downturn into an opportunity rather than a threat. (Pomfret, 2009) ^[9].

The EU Strategy for a New Partnership takes security and stability as the main EU interests in the region and makes a distinction between regional initiatives and bilateral ties. At the same time as the important questions remain on security issues. Policy is focused on securing access to the region's energy supplies and to ensuring that the states of Central Asia assist western countries involved in the conflict in Afghanistan rather than promoting genuine long-term stability built on the emergence of civil society, rule of law and forms of democratic politics. This suspicion is reinforced by public statements by EU officials that appear to employ narrow notions of security and stability as the basis for Brussels policy in the region and the definitions of threats prompted by regimes of the region. (Kimmage, 2007) ^[5].

4. Conclusions

Thus, the cooperation between the EU and the countries of Central Asia is expanding and it's safe to say that it has reached a new level of strategic partnership. The adoption of relevant conceptual documents concerning the countries of Central Asia and the implementation of various regional programs make it possible to speak about the prospects of mutual cooperation.

The European presence in the energy industry of the countries of Central Asia seems significant, although it is mainly concentrated in the oil and gas industry. In addition to the oil and gas industry the cooperation in the nuclear sector of Kazakhstan's fuel and energy sector is promising, while other sectors are unlikely to pose any significant interest to the EU, because of the insignificance of their potential for Europe. But how fast will develop European cooperation with Kazakhstan in the energy sector in the future – it is difficult to say for sure due to the complex sum of contradictory factors. The main factors that determine the fragility of the Euro-Kazakhstan energy cooperation are strongly shaken hopes of foreign investors in the "big oil" from the Caspian shelf (on which the European business is mainly betting in the Republic of Kazakhstan), the negative impact and unpredictability of the global crisis, upcoming fierce competition for Kazakh uranium from Russia and China, as well as the so-called Fukushima syndrome.

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