

The European Union Strategy on Central Asia: out of game?

László Vasa¹

Abstract: *The Council of the European Union adopted in June 2019 its new EU Strategy on Central Asia. Besides the Eastern Partnership, the Central-Asian region is one of the most relevant areas for the EU, so determining and shaping its development priorities were of paramount importance. In this study, based on the developments and feedbacks in recent months, I would like to demonstrate how the weak EU image due to this document will be strengthened and why it is not suitable for reaching the goals which are probably even not existing. My hypotheses are: 1) in fact, the EU does not have any clear and real strategy focusing on Central Asia, 2) the EU is losing out on the game of big and middle powers interested in the region, 3) the EU cannot exploit the economic potentials of the region.*

Keywords: *Central Asia, strategy, foreign policy, soft power*

Introduction

In Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, on 7 July 2019, the European Union introduced its new Strategy on Central Asia² ratified the previous month, on 17 June, by the European Council, Brussels. Indeed, this new strategy is the updated version of the 2007 strategy. This previous version has been highly criticized on the one hand due to the lack of clear goals, on the other hand due to the seemingly important but in fact marginal topics from the perspectives of Central Asian countries. While this recent strategy is meant to be a more updated and tailor-made version to the current conditions, the consonance of focus, goal and content is still missing from it. The EU has been criticized for its weak foreign policy, hesitation and prioritizing marginal issues not only from outside but by member states, too (Molnár, 2018). This opinion seems to be strengthened by the ratifying commission as well, since opposed to the year-long consultation they failed to create a strategy that focuses on EU interests as well as on the interests and historical characteristics of the target countries in question.

The concept of Central Asia has several international explanations including the historical Soviet definition, the UNESCO explanation, and the modern geopolitical one. The name “Central Asia” as a distinct geographical termination first appeared in the book of Prussian Alexander von Humboldt, who is considered to be one of the founders of the science of geography (Humboldt, 1843). According to him, the term Central Asia refers to the Asian regions without sea exit. Following this line of thought, UNESCO defines the Central Asian region to cover Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia, and Afghanistan (Dani et al. 1992). According to the Soviet definition, which was used in the 20th century, Central Asia also included some Chinese territories such as Inner-Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang province, but it excluded Kazakhstan³. However, in this current study the most wide-

¹ László Vasa is research professor at Széchenyi István University and senior researcher and chief advisor of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hungary. E-mail: laszlo.vasa@ifat.hu.

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf> (accessed 02 March 2020)

³ Great Soviet Encyclopedia electronic version <https://slovar.cc/enc/bse/2057489.html> (accessed 27 February 2020)

spread geopolitical definition of Central Asia is going to be used, which includes five states such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan⁴. All of these countries are post-Soviet countries and their current borders were formed in the past 100 years during the Soviet regime (Bendarzsevskij, 2019; Ko & Min, 2019). Following the downfall of the Soviet Union, geopolitical reasons brought the Central Asian region into view again and the great powers started to show extensive interest into it. Besides Russia, the USA, China, Turkey, and India, who primarily intended to gain control over the region's military strategy, trade routes, and energy resources, the EU also attempted to show economic interest in the area. However, maintaining the region's stability is equally important for the competing great powers (Szálkai, 2014). In the present study, it is going to be analysed what role the European Union can play in the active competition between middle and great powers, and what possibilities EU member states have to build individual foreign policy and foreign economic relations with Central Asian countries.

Hypothesis 1) is that the European Union does not have a clear, real strategy towards the Central Asian region 2) EU will lose in the game of great and middle powers for influence and control over the Central Asian region 3) EU cannot exploit the Central Asian region's economic potential.

The EU and Central Asian relations

The EU has stepped into the next level of building Central Asian partnership and cooperative agreements. It signed a new EPCA (Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement) with Kazakhstan in December 2015⁵. EPCA with Kyrgyzstan⁶ was signed in July 2019 while negotiations with Uzbekistan started in November 2018⁷. The two latter countries have Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with EU since 1999. Tajikistan, whose PCA is in effect since 2010⁸, also expressed its interest for signing EPCA⁹. Temporary trade and trade related agreements in 2010 laid down relations between the EU and Turkmenistan until 2019 PCA agreements were signed. Delay on behalf of the EU was due to concerns regarding human rights.

Kazakhstan is an important resource country for the EU's oil import (8%), and Turkmenistan plays a significant role in natural gas transport. In relation to the neighbouring Afghanistan and its security challenges the EU provides assistance to the Central Asian partners in border control security and their fight against drug smuggling (Chukayeva et al. 2016). There have been regular dialogues between EU and Central Asian countries regarding political and security issues. There is diplomatic presence of EU in all Central Asian countries, the latest being opened in July 2019 in the capital city of Turkmenistan, Ashgabat.

⁴ Based on EU terminology <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/178/central-asia> (accessed 03 March 2020)

⁵ Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/HU/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016D0123&from=EN> (accessed 06 March 2020)

⁶ EU-Kyrgyz Republic - Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/ePCA_factsheet.pdf (accessed 03 March 2020)

⁷ EU - Uzbekistan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, European Commission, https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2019/october/tradoc_158407.pdf (accessed 18 February 2020)

⁸ EU-Tajikistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/dcas/documents/eu-texts?tabCode=tajikistan> (accessed 03 March 2020)

⁹ Caspian Policy Center, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/eu-and-central-asian-opportunities-european-council-president-highlights-positive-relations-during-central-asia-tour/> (accessed 01 March 2020)

The Central Asian countries can apply for financial support from the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI)¹⁰, 1,028 million EUR for the period 2014-2020 (750 million EUR between 2007 and 2013) which includes financial support based on bilateral agreements, as well as on regional programs (360 million EUR). Support goes to education, regional security, sustainable handling of natural resources and socio-economic development. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are no longer entitled to the bilateral parts of DCI because they have reached the status of a middle income country; however, regional programs are still available for them. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) operates in all countries except Turkmenistan where the number of civil organizations is very low, poorly organized and strictly controlled.

The EU Strategy on Central Asia

The EU Strategy on Central Asia was released and accepted in the document *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* in May-June 2019¹¹. The document is based on the hypothesis that there is a “*longstanding relationship based upon strong mutual interests*” between EU and the five states of Central Asia. EU seems to be enthusiastic due to the recent developments and reforms since the launch of the previous, 2007 Central Asia Strategy¹² especially in relation to Uzbekistan “*Some of today’s developments in Central Asia have further opened up new opportunities for taking the EU-Central Asia partnership forward. Reform processes in the region have triggered calls for political recognition and support for modernization from the EU.*” The region’s countries count on the EU as a reliable partner regarding reforms and economic transformation (Li et al., 2019), integration into world economy, quality investments and modern technology as well as the proponent of regional cooperation.

The EU Strategy on Central Asia is built on three interrelated and supportive priorities such as:

Partnership for resistance and flexibility

The EU is a partner of Central Asian countries in forecasting and handling challenges regarding the countries’ socio-economic goals and security as well as in strengthening their skills in implementing reforms and modernization. The EU supports democracy, the application of human rights and the rule of law, while it also enhances cooperation to face the region’s environmental challenges and migration. These include:

- developing democracy, human rights and rule of law
- tighter cooperation in borderline adjustments, migration, mobility and handling mutual security issues
- enhancing resistance for environmental protection, climate changes and water management

Partnership for welfare

The EU supports exploiting the region’s growth potential by fostering the

¹⁰ https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/multisite/devco/node/934_pt (accessed 06 March 2020)

¹¹ European Commission, The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed 05 March 2020)

¹² The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, 10113/07 of 31 May 2007

development of the competitive private sector and by assisting the establishment of an open investment milieu. The EU collaborates in strengthening knowledge and skills, research and development and innovation especially focusing on the young population. The EU attempts to help facing the challenges of interregional trade and investment, supports the joining of Central Asian countries to World Trade Organization (WTO) and enhances sustainable relations including:

- stable partnership in economic reforms
- enhancement of interregional and mutual trade and investment
- fostering sustainable infrastructural relations

Partnership for mutual understanding

The EU cooperates with Central Asian countries to strengthen partnership and political dialogue to strengthen the civil society. The EU continues to be the main regional development and aiding partner. It fosters diplomacy emphasizing the benefits of the partnership for all residents. In details:

- strengthening the structure of partnership and involving the civil society and parliaments into the process
- partnership for the bigger effect for instance the 2030 UN Sustainability Goals

The geopolitical context of the EU Strategy on Central Asia

To understand how much room the EU has to manoeuvre in the Central Asia region we need to revise who the local players and organizations are.

Throughout history, the Central Asian region has always been an important playroom for close or distant powers due to the area's geographical location. As it lies between the East and the West alongside an unavoidable logistic route, its geopolitical status has always been unquestionable. This position has just become even stronger after some natural resources for modern technology were found there in the last century¹³. Moreover, we must not forget that the neighbouring powers always looked at the region as a target for their territorial expansion. Persia, Russia, China, and even Turkey considered it to be their zone of influence. The region covers important sections of the Silk Road and it became a target of the Russian cultural and military expansion in the 1800s, that continued until the Soviet Era (Gyene, 2018, Shvedovsky et al., 2016). In modern times it has been rediscovered by the USA for resources and business potential in Afghanistan and by China for possible economic expansion and logistics.

China

From China's perspective, the Central Asian region, especially Kazakhstan's role, is essential in the Belt and Road (BRI) Strategy¹⁴ for enabling a terrestrial corridor and energy supply route for gas transport. This motivates China's railway investment in Kazakhstan and financing the construction of the gas pipe between Turkmenistan and China. However, China's influence in the region is still limited compared to the Russian influence. China signed a comprehensive strategic agreement with Kazakhstan in 2013 that is one of the strongest bilateral relationship in Chinese diplomacy. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are less significant strategic

¹³ Energy Resources - Enormous Development Potential, <https://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/Energy-Resources-Enormous-Development-Potential.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2020)

¹⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/03/11/belt-and-road-initiative-in-central-asia-and-the-caucasus> (accessed 07 March 2020)

partners regardless of the fact that China financed the construction of a gas line from Turkmenistan to increase its safe energy supply¹⁵.

On a multilateral level one of China's most important international institute is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)¹⁶. Its predecessor was the "Shanghai Five" from 1996 including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The 2001 expansion of SCO added Uzbekistan, but still missed Turkmenistan. In the beginning, analysts considered the Central Asian focusing period's early phase as an agreement between Russia and China on how to divide up the region among themselves. While in political and military context the region was still under Russian influence, China got economic influence in the area. However, due to economic and demographic challenges of Russia, the agreement seemed to favour China more on the long run¹⁷. As the organization accepted India and Pakistan too in 2017, SCO has become an organization covering the Eurasian continent's majority¹⁸. Therefore, it is becoming a less important organization for China's interest in strengthening China's position in the region.

Another Chinese geopolitical initiative on Central Asia is the One Belt One Road/OBOR or Belt and Road/BRI, which was initiated by President Xi Jinping in September 2013. Its main aim was to re-establish Eurasia's relational network, to harmonize national politics, build a new physical infrastructure, and grant free flow of trade, financial integration and to strengthen the relationship of the human sphere. The backbone of the new relationship is the economic corridors which gives the Central Asian region paramount importance. The NEW Eurasian Bridge Economic Corridor ensures link between China and its most important market, the EU¹⁹. The countries of the region are important supporters of the One Belt One Road initiative as they trust in the expansion of interregional trade and the growing benefits of Chinese infrastructural investment. The fact that all Central Asian countries except Tajikistan were present at the 2019 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing²⁰.

EAEU

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) initiated by Kazakh President Nazarbayev in 1994 was a new phenomenon among the international integrational organizations. Although it started to operate as a tax union in 2011, it stepped further and became an economic union in 2015. Besides the classic geopolitical considerations the union is based on long-term economic and geopolitical plans. Therefore, it resulted in the tightening of economic relations among the founding states (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Armenia) as well as in modernizing their national economies to form an economic environment that makes them suitable for the challenges of globalization. From an economic point of view the integration aimed to establish a

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/ (accessed 10 March 2020)

¹⁶ The Shanghai cooperation organisation, <http://eng.sectsc.org/> (accessed 04 March 2020)

¹⁷ <http://www.geopolitika.hu/hu/2019/01/22/az-uj-nagy-jatszma-kozep-azsiaban/> (accessed 06 March 2020)

¹⁸ India-Pakistan Tensions Test the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Mettle, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/india-pakistan-tensions-test-the-shanghai-cooperation-organizations-mettle/> (accessed 03 March 2020)

¹⁹ European Commission, Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf (accessed 11 February 2020)

²⁰ Az „új nagy játszma” Közép-Ázsiában [The “new big game” in Central Asia], <http://www.geopolitika.hu/hu/2019/01/22/az-uj-nagy-jatszma-kozep-azsiaban/> (accessed 14 March 2020)

unified product, service, capital, labour flow. The EAEU further strengthened its integrational structure by establishing the EAEU Court, Eurasian Development Bank, and the Eurasian Stabilization and Development Fund.

Russia

After the change of regime Russia did not encourage forming tighter relationships with the Post-Soviet region's states for a long time. In the 1990s its economy was weak and vulnerable; however, its neighbours' economy was even worse so it could rely on its economic, political and military power to influence the region's development. Russia's position started to weaken in the 2000s when the Western powers and international organizations became more active and gained more influence in the traditionally Russia influenced region. As a result, the Baltic States became EU and NATO members in 2004, while the first gas pipelines away from Russia were built by Western corporations. In addition, China also started to build its influence in the region.

Moscow's decision to strengthen a regional economic integration was a sensible reaction to these processes. Although its primary interest was not economic (its trade with EAEU members is only 6 %), but geopolitical, to gain as much influence in the region as possible. In other words, by initiating the economic union Russia intended to strengthen its geopolitical position. According to Moscow's logic, the building of an Eurasian regional integration does not oppose the processes of globalization, noting the fact that tariffs were significantly raised for not EAEU members to support regional protectionism. On the contrary, according to Russian thinking, the creation of regional economic organizations contributed to global trade and international labour. This is in tune with another Russian foreign affair goal, considering the union to be a bridge between Europe and Asia. It is especially due to the transportation projects including the high-speed railway lines by which Russia believes to be an essential member of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative (Vasa-Ilyash, 2019).

It is also important to note that by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly formed CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) that consisted of 9+1 states included 4+1 Central Asian members. Turkmenistan was in a special position. It signed the constitution of CIS, but did not sign the membership chart, so it officially counted only as associated member. The role of the CIS however had a more coordinating role, a cooperative platform. By creating the EAEU and by Georgia's and Ukraine's quitting the importance of CIS further decreased.

United States of America

For the USA the Central Asian region became important during the Afghanistan operations, when the USA established military bases in the region, for example in Kyrgyzstan until 2014. From an economic perspective it is the Central Asian mineral resources that make the region attractive for the USA. Nevertheless, following a slight increase after the fall of the Soviet regime, there was a decrease in US investment, probably due to the Russian pressure. According to intelligence news, Turkmenistan is the USA's most important strategic partner which is a remarkable fact in the light of Ashgabat's political course (autocracy) and excellent Chinese relations.

Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State's 2020 February visit to Kazakhstan²¹ and his meeting with five Central Asian Foreign Affairs ministers in Nur Sultan shows the USA's intention to play an important role in the region excluding military presence. However, the USA's strategic partnership can only work if the Russian and Chinese influence would decrease in the region.

Turkey

Turkey, as an influential middle power in the region, considered to be a *silent power*²², must also be mentioned to influence the region's relations. The common Turkic ancestry, the shared history and language recently empowered Ankara to gain influence and build its position in Central Asia's economy, politics, and education. The Turkic Council, an international organization for Turkic language countries except Turkmenistan and Tajikistan (including Hungary with an observant status) is a significant influencer in the region²³. Previously Turkey unsuccessfully cooperated with the Western countries in its Central Asia programs, so today Russian-Turkish cooperation has become more significant²⁴.

Discussion: the critical analysis of the EU strategy

The introduction of the EU Strategy on Central Asia and the region's geopolitical analysis entails a critical analysis which aims to prove the hypotheses stated in the introduction.

If we compare the goals of middle and great powers in regard to the geopolitical relations with the EU's regional strategy, we can see a huge difference (see Sebe, 2018). It seems that all the players except the EU has definite and conscious intentions to win in the game.

By investigating the three main program basics we can see the common EU terminology such as:

- developing democracy, human rights and rule of law
- tighter cooperation in borderline adjustments, migration, mobility, and handling mutual security issues
- enhancing resistance for environmental protection, climate changes, and water management
- stable partnership in economic reforms
- enhancement of interregional and mutual trade and investment
- fostering sustainable infrastructural relations
- strengthening the structure of partnership and involving the civil society and parliaments into the process
- partnership for the bigger effect for instance the 2030 UN Sustainability Goals

These were sensible and useful in the course of EU's expansion but might not work in case of the Central Asian conditions. This reflects the lack of historical

²¹ A New Era of Strategic Partnership: The US Engages to Find Opportunities in Central Asia, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/a-new-era-of-strategic-partnership-the-us-engages-to-find-opportunities-in-central-asia/> (accessed 07 March 2020)

²² <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/power-quiet-turkeys-central-asia-strategy-24069> (accessed 21 February 2020)

²³ Turkic Council, <https://www.turkkon.org/en-US/HomePage> (accessed 05 March 2020)

²⁴ The Power of the Quiet? Turkey's Central Asia Strategy, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/power-quiet-turkeys-central-asia-strategy-24069> (accessed 03 March 2020)

knowledge, the fetishizing of democracy in the region, and shows that EU has not learnt from Afghanistan and Iraq's examples. Considering the region's conditions, claiming for democracy in a traditionally clan based states ruins EU's possibilities instead of fostering them. Moreover, they are especially the bigger powers who can make agreements while they are enhancing democracy and human rights in front of the public²⁵. It is also clear that decision makers in the region tend to cooperate with partners who do not look for democratic infrastructure and foundations (like China).

Focusing on border control, migration and security challenges is praiseworthy; however, it is still doubtful how much financial and technical tools EU can provide for this.

Focusing on environmental problems is also very welcomed as it is one of the EU's main priorities and an existing problem in the Central Asian region (Khan et al. 2020); however, there are no concrete programs and it is not clear how these macro intentions will suit the region's environmental strategies (Akbulaev & Salihova, 2020). There is of course a wish to take these subsidies but the real question is how they will be used.

The economic reforms and trade development seem to be empty promises until the real needs of the countries cannot be seen. For instance, Kazakhstan cannot be compared to Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan cannot be compared to Uzbekistan. There are huge differences in the countries' economic structures, economic politics, and even in economic philosophies. Areas that can be beneficial for EU companies should be determined first, ones that open up investment options, intensify trade and decrease risk. Why is the Asthana International Financial Centre (AIFC), which aims to become the region's financial centre with a significant international support mentioned in the EU Strategy?²⁶ China has invested 22.5 billion EUR in the Central Asian Belt and Road since its launch as opposed to the 1 billion European support. Regarding foreign trade, China has become the biggest partner in four countries out of five.

We only know some general facts about the sustainable infrastructural relations instead of real plans. How can EU improve the corridors for its own sake by not favouring its competitors? The road from EU to the region goes across Russia, Turkey, and the Caucasian mountains. In addition, if EU would like to build the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP) as a possible infrastructural project, it has to take into consideration the blocking power of Iran and Russia, and the fact that a more efficient pipeline is under construction by the agreement of Germany and Russia opposing the consent of EU. Infrastructure linking the region's countries is also a great possibility for EU construction companies; however, if development aid or loan is not linked to this, the EU cannot become a real player. Tenders are won mainly by Turkish and Russian companies.

Strengthening the civil sphere is also risky as these countries lack the law of order were the civil organizations can prevail without seemingly interfering with politics. Partnership in reaching the 2030 UN development goals is much appreciated;

²⁵ The region's largest mosque was built by the French Bouygues ordered by Turkmenbashi in 2004 for 1 billion EUR <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3946035.stm> (accessed 11 March 2020)

²⁶ AIFC was founded within the 'Kazakhstan 2050' program initiated by President Nazarbayev for the 2017 EXPO in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) with the aim of transforming the Eurasian Economic Union to be the financial centre of Central Asia, the Caucasus, West-China and Mongolia by integrating innovative financial technologies. <https://aifc.kz/>

however, it shows few concrete measures and also requires well working development programs.

Although the document is comprehensive, it is little ambitious. Therefore, it does not bring a new era for the relationship of EU and Central Asia especially in the view of external players in the region. It does not propose new tools that can moderately or significantly change the relationship of EU and Central Asia, for instance there is no strategic partnership, visa facilitation, trade liberalization, or key infrastructural projects.

Even if strategies in general have overall objectives, this document lacks the concrete operative steps and the evaluation of set goals, the parameters of success or failure are also missing.

It is not clear what financial resources will be adjusted to the tasks defined in the 2019 strategy. As the EU 2021-2027 financial framework is still under discussion, sources for financing planning for the Central Asian policy should have been indicated.

The document shows that the potentials in the EU-Central Asian relation is not fully exploited. However, the EU member states have embassies, consulates, and cultural centres, and development aid programs that could support the EU strategy's goals and adjusted tools.

Evaluating deep interviews conducted in the region²⁷, the Central Asian elite shares the same opinion about the EU. They feel the EU is practically invisible in Central Asia, unknown to the society, described as complicated by bureaucratic measures. What is more, its attempts overrun its real power potential and production skills. The main explanation for this might be the lack of a comprehensive Eurasian dimension and approach in the EU.

Based on the previous overview and analysis, testing my hypotheses shows the following result:

1) the European Union does not have a clear, real strategy towards the Central Asian region – proved. While this recent strategy is meant to be a more updated and tailor-made version to the current conditions, the consonance of focus, goal and content is still missing from it. The EU has been criticized for its weak foreign policy, hesitation, and prioritizing marginal issues not only from outside but by member states, too. The implementation of the strategy proved the limited capacity of the EU to address local needs and challenges, while also facing its own internal crises and difficult foreign policy decision making structure.

2) The EU will lose; in the game of great and middle powers for influence and control over the Central Asian region – proved. If we compare the goals of middle and great powers in regard of the geopolitical relations with the EU's regional strategy we can see a huge difference. It seems that all the players except the EU has definite and conscious intentions to win in the game.

3) The EU cannot exploit the Central Asian region's economic potential – proved. Considering the region's conditions, claiming for democracy in a traditionally clan based states ruins EU's possibilities instead of fostering them. Moreover, they are especially the bigger powers who can make agreements while they are enhancing democracy and human rights in front of the public

²⁷ Structured interviews were conducted in September 2019 with the involvement of 18 people including university professors, PhD students, government representatives, researchers and businesspeople.

Conclusions

It is a positive development that EU intensified its diplomatic presence in the region, but these should be utilized in all the five states with proper personnel and local representatives. A more dynamic consultation mechanism could be introduced in the EU delegations, for example by hiring highly qualified and independent Central-Asia experts. EU needs different approaches in several areas for instance putting more emphasis on aiding policy and economic diplomacy instead of classic diplomacy. It should focus more on development support and areas in which EU is the most admired such as culture, education and regional cooperation.

The countries of the Visegrad group should support and encourage EU's soft power and influence by contributing to building relations, economic reforms, and offering expertise in some useful areas like educational and research cooperation, water management, agricultural or security reforms. Activities should be more proactive through their own embassies and programs to enhance the EU's ambition; otherwise, its strategical goals will not realize either in short or in middle term. The V4 model could be successfully applied in the regional cooperation. The new EU Strategy on Central Asia cannot go beyond Central Asia's resistance. It is clear that EU's soft approach to influence the region's economic and political processes is limited. Nevertheless, there can be areas where success is likely to come by cooperating with other great powers. However, it is not realistic to expect more than that. The new strategy cannot remain only a letter of intent and the criticism of the previous one, but it has to be implemented through concrete, straightforward measures within the region's complicated geopolitical conditions.

It is important to note that this strategy is the consequence of the lack of a common EU foreign policy. There are soft, iterate approaches based on liberal foundations, but these will not be enough in key regions. Consequently, member states will build pragmatic foreign policy and economic relations in the region according to their own interest, resulting in becoming each other's competitors. EU is still keeping its status and presence as a soft power, admitting its limited capacity to mobilise the member states to support an agenda more focused on hard power issues.

References:

- Akbulaev, N., Salihova, S. 'Relationship between tourism sector and export: VAR analysis using Kazakhstan as case study' *Journal of International Studies*, 13(1), 184-195. 2020 doi:10.14254/2071-8330.2020/13-1/12
- Bendarzszevszkij A., Eszterhai, V. 'Az „új nagy játszma” Közép-Ázsiában' [The "new big game" in Central Asia]. *PAGEO Geopolitikai Kutatóintézet* 2019. <http://www.geopolitika.hu/hu/2019/01/22/az-uj-nagy-jatszma-kozep-azsiaban/> (accessed 03 March 2020)
- Chukayeva, S., Akzharov, B. 'Kazakhstan: Sustainable Development in Transition and Connection to the EU's Assistance' *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 16 (2) June 2016
- Dani, A. H., Masson, V. M., Harmatta J., Puri, B. N., Etemadi, G. F., Litvinskij, B. A. 'History of civilizations of Central Asia.' UNESCO, Paris, 1992
- Gyene P. 'Kína gazdasági felemelkedése és az „új selyemút” percepciói Közép-Ázsiában.' [The economic rise of China and perceptions of the New Silk Road]. *Külügyi Szemle* 2018/3

- Humboldt A. 'Asie Centrale: Recherches sur les Chaines de Montagnes et la Climatologie Comparee'. [Central Asia: Research of the Mountain Chains and Comparative Climatology]. Paris: Gide, 1843
- Khan, M. A., Popp, J., Talib, M. N. A., Lakner, Z., Oláh, J. 'Asymmetric Impact of Institutional Quality on Tourism Inflows Among Selected Asian Pacific Countries'. *Sustainability*, 12(3), 1223, pp. 1-16. 2020 <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12031223> 2020 (accessed 05 March 2020)
- Ko, H., Min, K. 'Determinants of social expenditures in post-socialist countries' *Economics and Sociology*, 12(2), 253-264. 2018 doi:10.14254/2071-789X.2019/12-2/15
- Li, C., Pervaiz, K., Asif Khan, M., Ur Rehman, F., Oláh, J. 'On the Asymmetries of Sovereign Credit Rating Announcements and Financial Market Development in the European Region. *Sustainability*, 11 (23), 6636, pp. 1-14., 2019 <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11236636> <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/23/6636/htm> (accessed 02 March 2020)
- Molnár A. 'Az Európai Unió külkapcsolati rendszere és eszközei'. [The structure and tools of EU's foreign policy]. Dialóg Campus Publishing House, Budapest 2018
- Sebe, M. 'Why the Black Sea matters for the European Union? Brief remarks and possible developments' *Institute of European Democrats* June 2018 https://www.iendonline.eu/download/2018/WorkingPaper_Black-Sea_June-2018.pdf (accessed 03 March 2020)
- Shvedovsky, V., Standrik, A., Bilan, Y. 'Economic and Social Institutions: Modelling the Evolution Paths for the Archaic Society' *Economics and Sociology* 9 (2), 137-147. 2016 <https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789X.2016/9-2/9> (accessed 03 March 2020)
- Szálkai K. 'Az EU szerepvállalása Közép-Ázsiában'. [EU's role in Central Asia]. *Nemzet és Biztonság* 2014/5. pp. 51–62.
- Vasa L., Ilyash, Gy. 'Az Eurázsiai Gazdasági Unió helyzete és kilátásai' [The Eurasian Economic Union's position and prospects]. *Külügyi Szemle*, 2019/4.