

ASSESSING EUROPEAN UNION'S ACTORNESS IN THE EXTENDED NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE CASE OF CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

The interest of the European Union towards Central Asia grew after 2002. Fuelled by factors such as the region's geostrategic location, energy resources and potential in fostering stability, the EU's political involvement towards it intensified in the past two decades. The paper assesses EU's actoriness in the region of Central Asia, by applying the opportunity, presence, capability framework elaborated by J. Vogler and C. Bretherthon (2006). The paper argues that EU's actoriness in Central Asia is limited, but it witnessed a positive development since 2002, the EU being one of the most important actors in the region.

Keywords: Central Asia, European Union, actoriness, Russia, China

Introduction

After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the European Union, at that time, the European Community, commenced its interactions with the states which were part of the former Soviet space¹. There can be identified three paths on which these states were engaged by the EU. The Baltic States enjoy the closest relation with the EU, as they became members of the Union in 2004. Another group of former Soviet states engaged by the EU is the group later included in the Eastern Partnership: Ukraine, Belarus, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Finally, the third group comprises the states of Central Asia (CA): Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Despite being the most remote former Soviet republics relative to the EU, the Central Asian states received a growing interest and political engagement from Brussels, reflected through an increase of interactions and political documents issued towards them, among which the EU Strategy for Central Asia, adopted in 2007, and renewed in 2019, expresses a significant political will.

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¹ The first programme dedicated to the states of the former Soviet Union was TACIS, launched in 1991, before the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

EU's interest for Central Asia is given by the special importance held by the region in terms of world politics, and for the EU specifically. Concerning its importance in world politics, the void of power appeared after the fall of the Soviet Union and the will of the five Central Asian republics to integrate in the global system, generated a context which attracted the interest of the great powers for influence in the region (Kavalski, 2010, p. 9), thus creating a situation labelled by some authors as a "new great game" (Efegil, 2010, p. 84). The EU, after 2001, and during the mid-2000s, developing objectives at global scale, manifested an increasing interest for Central Asia, even though it doesn't lie on the near Eastern border of the EU. Firstly, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the military involvement of the US in Central Asia, the EU recognized the importance of the stability of the region for both the stability of Europe, and the stabilization of Afghanistan. Bordering Tajikistan, the weakest of the five CA republics (Kangas, 2018, p. 37), the destabilizing factors from Afghanistan can easily spread in the region, towards Europe. Secondly, the region has an increased potential in fostering connectivity between Europe, through the South Caucasus, and East/South-East Asia. Increasing connectivity at the level of Central Asia has, at its turn, the potential of fostering the inter-regional trade and commerce, which could benefit the EU. Thirdly, Central Asia has high deposits of natural resources, found especially in the states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Accessing these resources would highly benefit the EU, by breaking the dependency on Russia. These factors are interconnected and they amount for EU's interest in Central Asia.

Moreover, the region can be regarded as connected to a certain extent to the EU, through the states of the Eastern Partnership. Relevant in this regard are projects such as the Baku initiative, or the Trans-Caspian pipeline, which aim to help the EU to capitalize on Central Asia's energy potential (Efegil, 2010, pp. 78, 79). Also, after the enlargements of 2004/2007 and the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy, a perception of Central Asia as a "more proximate neighbour" (Ibidem, p. 79) emerged. Due to these growing interdependencies and security links, Central Asia – as well as other regions – came to be included in what was termed the EU's "extended neighbourhood", suggesting a reconceptualization of EU's neighbourhood, by expanding its geographic scope (Grevi and Keohane, 2014, pp. 18-20).

In this context, the paper aims to assess EU's actorness in Central Asia. The relevance of this topic is given by the importance of the region for the EU, in the light of the factors exposed above, and also due to the interdependency potential between the EaP states and Central Asia. Its relevance amounts also by approaching a highly debated topic in the sphere of International Relations, EU's actorness, applied to a region which is less enquired than others.

The theoretical perspective used in this analysis is based on the social-constructivist paradigm, and it is represented by John Vogler and Charlotte Bretherton's contribution to actorness theorization. More precisely, the paper uses



the *opportunity, presence, capability* framework proposed by the two authors for analysing actorness, presented in more details in the following section.

The research questions that guide this analysis are:

1. How can the EU's actorness in Central Asia be evaluated from the perspective of Vogler and Bretherton?
2. How did the EU's actorness in Central Asia evolve during 2002-2019?
3. What are the main factors influencing EU's actorness in Central Asia?

The analysed time frame spans between 2002, which marks a shift in the EU engagement in Central Asia, and 2019, representing the adoption of the new CA Strategy, which starts a new stage of the EU's involvement. The paper employs a qualitative methodological approach, using the case study as a research method, and uses political documents, reports, declarations, as well as second literature represented by the contributions of other scholars on EU's role².

1. Theoretical framework

The nature of the European Union can be regarded as hybrid, being described as more than an international organization, but less than a state, characteristic which made the EU to be referred to as an “unidentified political object” (Rhinar and Sjöstedt, 2019, p. 4), thus emphasizing its unique character. This feature highlights the difficulties of establishing the actor capability of the EU, a topic which stemmed fruitful debates in the academic sphere of International Relations.

The conventional literature on International Relations approaches the concept of *actor* in the perspective of the units of a system. The actors are the most relevant units for the study of international relations. The Realist perspective stresses the importance of the state in the international arena, other actors, such as international organizations or corporations, being subordinated to the actions of states. Moreover, states are differentiated by their power, the most important in the international system being the most powerful states. On the other side, the Neoliberal perspective challenges the state-centric position, pointing towards the importance of the non-state units, such as international organizations (Vogler and Bretherton, 2006, pp. 14, 15).

The concept of *actorness* was introduced by Cosgrove and Twitchett in 1970, in an approach towards the roles of UN and the European Economic Community. The concept of actorness describes more than the status of a unit, encompassing a more complex behaviour dimension, stressing the autonomy of the entity from the environment in which it operates. Autonomy, at its turn, can be perceived as the capability of “formulating purposes and making decisions” (Ibidem, p. 15). Many studies on actorness focused on the autonomy of the unit, and therefore stressed the internal dimension. Acknowledging the social sciences debate between the primacy of agency or structure in determining the action, Vogler and Bretherton (2006)

² The paper doesn't aim to bring an exhaustive approach on the topic, since it would exceed its limits, but it rather aims to present the most relevant empirical aspects for assessing EU's actorness in Central Asia.



propose an approach focused on the relation between the two dimensions, being theoretically grounded in social constructivism. Constructivism enquires the ways in which the behaviour of the agent is influenced – not determined – by the structure. At its turn, the agent can influence the nature of the structure (Ibidem, pp. 19, 20). Therefore, the relation between structure and agency can be considered as dialectical. Based on these theoretical grounds, Vogler and Bretherton propose a perspective of EU actorness based on three concepts: *opportunity*, *presence* and *capability*.

Opportunity refers to the political context in which EU's actions take place. This external environment can be described both by material factors, such as events, and by non-material factors, such as ideas and perceptions, which are connected, restraining or allowing action (not determining it). Even though it refers to the structure, opportunity must not be considered independent from the agent, as the process is dynamic, and it can be influenced by the actions or inactions of the EU (Ibidem, pp. 23, 24). In this paper, the focus of the analysis lies on the context offered by the Central Asia region, in the timeframe comprised between 2002 and 2019.

Presence points towards the ability of the EU to exert influence outside its borders. The influence is described as the ability to “shape perceptions, expectations and behaviour of others” (Ibidem, p. 26). Presence is not achieved through a voluntary, intended action, rather it is a result of EU's internal characteristics. It can be also regarded as the reputation with which the EU is perceived by external actors. Presence relies on two factors. The first element encompasses the identity and character of the EU. The identity refers to the shared meanings and understanding behind EU's actions. The character emphasizes the material existence of the EU: the member states and the EU institutions in which they interact. The second element points towards the unintended effects generated on the outside by the EU's internal processes (Ibidem, pp. 25, 26). An example in this regard can be considered EU's internal success, which makes it to be regarded as a community of “security and prosperity” (Vogler and Bretherton, 2013, p. 377). One of the most important sources of presence of the EU lies in the Union's single market, as well as in the economic power of its consumers, which represent strong attractive factors (Ibidem).

Finally, the third element of actorness, capability, highlights the internal aspects which favour or hinder EU's ability to act, and therefore, to “exploit” a potential favourable context (opportunity) and favourable perception towards the EU (presence). Capability designates EU's ability to formulate policies and to use the adequate policy instruments. There are four capability requirements which need to be fulfilled: the commitment of the member states towards a set of shared values; the legitimization of the processes and priorities of external policy, in the domestic environment; the ability to establish priorities and generate policies, which comprises two elements: a) consistency (the congruence of the external policies of EU and those of individual member states), and b) coherence (between different policy sectors of the Union); and the capacity to use policy instruments (Vogler and Bretherton, 2006, p. 28).



Bretherton and Vogler's contribution to actorness was chosen for this analysis due to its comprehensive nature. The opportunity, presence, capability framework encompasses elements concerning both the actor and the structure, as well as the relation between them, therefore facilitating an inclusive analysis (Ibidem, pp. 19-22). Bretherton and Vogler applied the above presented requirements on the EU at global level, and their latest article (2013) suggests that the EU's ability to exert influence globally has diminished after the mid-2000s (Vogler and Bretherton, 2013, pp. 386, 387). This paper aims at conducting a similar analysis, but focused on the region of Central Asia, by applying the above presented requirements for EU's actorness, during the 2002-2019 period.

2. EU's involvement in Central Asia

The first EU action whose scope included also the states of Central Asia, is the Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of the Independent States (TACIS) programme, which was initiated in 1991. Central Asia was not a priority in this programme, but it received funding for a series of projects (Voloshin, 2014, p. 25). The first specific actions initiated by the EU towards Central Asia date as early as 1993/1994. In 1993, the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) was launched by the EU, at a conference which gathered the Central Asian and South Caucasian states' Transport Ministers in Brussels (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 19). One year later, in 1994, the EU opened its first delegation in Central Asia, in Kazakhstan, which had offices also in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Further EU initiatives followed in the framework of the TACIS programme (on a multilateral basis), and through Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the states of Central Asia (on a bilateral basis) (Efegil, 2010, p. 72).

Nonetheless, it was after the 9/11 terrorist attacks that EU augmented its involvement towards Central Asia, marking an important change in its approach towards the region. Among the factors that prompted the shift were the concerns over regional stability and terrorism proliferation, the interest for the local energy resources, but also a perception of proximity after the 2004-2007 EU enlargement (Ibidem, p. 79). The growing interest of Brussels for the region and the higher importance it attached to Central Asia were reflected in a series of subsequent actions undertaken by the EU, such as the appointment of a Special Representative for Central Asia and the adoption of several political documents. The following part analyses EU's actorness in Central Asia, by applying each of the actorness requirements, since 2002.

2.1. Opportunity

Beginning with 2002, the political context at the level of Central Asia has been marked by a growing involvement in the region of multiple international actors, both proximate and Western powers. To the already strong Russian influence in the region added the post-9/11 US military involvement, as well as a growing Chinese presence.



Concerning the influence of the powers neighbouring Central Asia, the interferences of Russia and China are the most significant. Russia's dominance in the region can be considered as initiating since the end of the 19th century (Golden, 2011, p. 125), until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in 1991. Based on the infrastructural, energetic, social, cultural and military ties that developed in this period, Russia inherited a strong influence over the Central Asian states. Its main interests in the region revolved around the access to the region's energy resources, especially oil and gas, and in maintaining regional security (Laurelle, 2010, p. 161). Russia is also interested in keeping its political influence over Central Asia, by limiting any outside influence, especially from the West (Lo, 2015, p. 11). If in the early 2000s, Russia maintained a strong position both in the energy and security fields at the level of Central Asia, after the 2008/2009 economic crisis, after a series of energy disputes with Turkmenistan, Russia's position on the CA energy market declined in favour of China, the latter actively engaging in energy trade relations with Central Asian states (Kaczmarek, 2015, pp. 88-101).

After 2008, China developed significant energy infrastructure projects (such as the Central-Asia-China pipeline) and, capitalizing on Russia's post-crisis economic weakness, it gained better energy contracts with the states in the region (Ibidem, pp. 89-92). Faced with the growing Chinese economic power, Russia lost its prime position in this field, but retained it in the sphere of military/hard security, the relation of the two developing into a "division of labour" (Ibidem, p. 86) at the level of Central Asia, each of them having a dominant position in a different field of activity. At the same time, both Russia and China promote economic projects in the region: the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The two states also exert influence upon the region, in the security field, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), led by China, where their cooperation intensified as a response to the prolonged US military presence in the region, and through the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Clarke, 2010, pp. 129, 130).

Besides the notable influence of Russia and China in the region, a number of other states, including Turkey, Iran, India, Japan or South Korea (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 25) manifested interest towards Central Asia and intervened to a lesser degree in the region. Of these, Turkey and Iran stand out with more regional influence. Turkey unsuccessfully tried to promote the idea of a common identity with Central Asia after 1991. Even though its political influence is limited, due to divergent foreign and domestic interests and policies, it is still present in the region, especially in the business, education and culture sectors (Sasley, 2010, pp. 191-213). Iran employed a policy of "prudent pragmatism" (Pahlavi and Hojati, 2010, p. 235) in Central Asia, by engaging in the development of the regional interconnectivity, with the aim of escaping the American containment, but at the same time accommodating Russia's interests. Its involvement in CA focused on bilateral trade, while its political influence remained limited (Ibidem, pp. 222, 237).



Turning towards the major Western actors involved in Central Asia, the US military presence in the region was one of the most influential. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US agreed with all the states of Central Asia for different forms of cooperation or access to military bases. Two of the most important agreements were concluded with Uzbekistan, for access at the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base, and with Kyrgyzstan, for the Manas air base, as part of the US operations in the “war on terror” (Cooley, 2012, pp. 31, 32).

Besides the military involvement, the US engaged also in promoting democratic and human rights values, as it is depicted by its Silk Road Strategy Acts of 1999 and 2006 (Fumagalli, 2010, p. 181). Nonetheless, the issue of human rights was often subordinated in US’ approach towards Central Asia, as it could hamper local regimes’ willingness for security and military cooperation (Cooley, 2012, pp. 49, 50). Uzbekistan received a special attention from the part of the US, benefitting of aid packages and also of a Strategic Partnership, signed in 2002 (Clarke, 2010, p. 129). The most prominent US involvement in Central Asia took place until 2005, being characterized mainly by its focus on the security dimension (Fumagalli, 2010, p. 177). In 2005, the US was evicted by Uzbekistan from the K2 air base, marking the beginning of a period of decline for the US engagement with Central Asia, which continued with the 2009 withdrawal request from Kyrgyzstan’s Manas airbase³. Later, the Obama administration decreased the US engagement in Central Asia, as a side-effect of the partial withdrawal from Afghanistan (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 87). Another important US initiative for the region is the C5+1 dialogue platform, which acts as a framework for addressing challenges faced by the Central Asian states and the US. The first meeting took place in 2015, in Samarkand⁴.

Since 2002, the EU steadily increased the level of importance attached to Central Asia, reflected also through a gradual political approach. A prime step was to adopt the “Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia” (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 22), in 2002 and to create the position of Special Representative for Central Asia in 2005 (Voloshin, 2014, p. 53). These actions were subsequently followed by the adoption, in 2007, of the Central Asia “Strategy for a New Partnership” (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 22). The Strategy went through two major reviews in 2012 and 2015, which highlighted EU’s growing interest for Central Asia, for which amounted EU’s intent to diversify its energy resources, in the light of the difficult energy relations with Russia, and the need for stability in Central Asia (Ibidem, pp. 23-33). Finally, in 2019, the EU renewed its Strategy for Central Asia. Through its political endeavour towards the region, but also on the background of the US military withdrawal, the EU became the most

³ Eurasianet (2009), *Kyrgyzstan: The United States Receives Formal Air Base Eviction Notice*, 20 February (retrieved February 10, 2020, from <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-the-united-states-receives-formal-air-base-eviction-notice>).

⁴ U.S. Department of State (2017), *C5+1 Fact Sheet*, 22 September, Washington (retrieved February 10, 2020, from <https://www.state.gov/c51-fact-sheet/>).



engaged Western actor in Central Asia (Ibidem, pp. 9, 66) and became regarded as a “counterpoise” (Efegil, 2010, p. 72) to the influence of other actors in the region.

Unlike the approach of the Central Asian neighbour states towards the region, and to a large extent also that of the US, which can be defined generally in hard security terms, EU's approach to the region is based on norms and values (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 24). Though, the influence exerted by EU in this respect confronts a series of limits in the regional ideational context. Efegil argues that the EU's and Central Asian states leaders' understandings of security diverge, often in an incompatible manner. For the Central Asian states, who gained their independent statehood only in 1991, after a long experience of totalitarianism, the notion of security is defined by the survival of the regime. Therefore, the liberal democracy values promoted by the EU can be regarded, locally, as security challenges. On the other hand, the EU regards the “decorative democracy” in the region as a source of insecurity (Efegil, 2010, p. 81). Moreover, the Central Asian states inherited, based on their historical past, legal cultures which have at their centre the primacy of a strong individual, the leader, and a well-defined hierarchy built on clan relations. In such a context, the local meaning of the “rule of law” came to suggest the preservation of this order (Kangas, 2018, p. 29). Therefore, confronted with the Western criticism for their authoritarian regimes, the CA states tend to balance the EU (but also US/NATO) influences with Russia/China and the CSTO/SCO (Efegil, 2010, p. 81). Such an approach from the part of the Central Asian states can be regarded as a “multi-vector” tendency in their relations with the great powers. Being interested in preserving their independence, without falling under the dependency of a great power, they tend to engage in balancing actions (Cornell and Starr, 2019, pp. 25, 26).

At the same time, there can be identified perspectives on regionalization at the CA level. Such tendencies are depicted by the various summits held by the leaders of the Central Asian states, and by their declared commitment towards regionalization (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 11; RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, 2018). Even though a high level of regional cohesion is distant, these evolutions can be regarded in line with neo-liberal values of interdependency promoted also by the EU, through its multilateral approach to the region (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 49).

Overall, the political context of Central Asia bears a heavy influence from Russia and China, which capitalize on their proximity to the region. Russia exerts more influence in the political and military fields, while China, after the 2008 economic crisis, has taken the lead in the economic and energy fields. In this context, EU's interest towards Central Asia went through a gradual positive evolution, intensifying its regional initiatives since 2002. Nonetheless, the influence of Russia and China in the region, as well as the ideational context and perspectives upon security, can have a limiting effect on EU's influence.



2.2. Presence

EU's influence, on which its presence relies at the level of Central Asia, stems from several factors. Among these are the perceptions of success towards it, and economic factors, the size of its market luring third parties which seek privileged access to it (Vogler and Bretherton, 2013, p. 377).

One of the special programmes of the EU for Central Asia, which enjoyed success at the level of the region, is the Border Management Programme for Central Asia (BOMCA). Launched in 2003, BOMCA is fully-funded by the EU and seeks to enhance regional security, by combatting illegal trafficking and easing trade. BOMCA is designed on a multi-year phase structure and, during the period 2003-2014, the programme was allocated with over €33.6 million (Voloshin, 2014, p. 56). The last phase of the programme, the 9th, started in 2015 and was extended until the end of April 2020, with a total budget of around €6.5 million⁵. Since 2003, through BOMCA, the EU offered assistance for border management, such as guards training, gear and infrastructure at the border crossings, mainly along the Tajik-Afghan and the Kyrgyz-Kazakh borders. While other programmes which promote democracy and human rights are perceived reluctantly by most of the CA states, BOMCA was well received due to its anti-trafficking, border capacity building and overall security agenda (Gavrilis, 2009, pp. 1-4). Alongside BOMCA, which was motivated also by the need to cut the supply of drugs from Afghanistan, works also the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP), which focuses on the demand side of the drug policy. During its 6th phase, started in 2015, CADAP was implemented by institutions from a group of EU states⁶.

On the other side, regarding the normative influence of the EU towards the Central Asian states, Georgy Voloshin argues that Brussels' efficiency has been limited, failing to promote its influence in issues such as democracy and human rights (Voloshin, 2014, p. 72). Of the five CA states, Kyrgyzstan is the one which seems the most influenced by EU's normative agenda (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 45). This position is also reflected by the freedom scores provided by Freedom House⁷, as Table 1 shows.

Kyrgyzstan also departs from the other Central Asian states on the 2019 aggregate score, having 38 points, in contrast with Turkmenistan which has 2 points, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which have 9 points each, and Kazakhstan 22 points⁸. Also, as Bretherton and Vogler point, due to their remoteness from the EU, there is no prospect of accession for the Central Asian states, fact which limits EU's ability to exert normative influence upon them (Vogler and Bretherton, 2013, p. 377).

⁵ BOMCA (2020), *Overview* (retrieved February 4, 2020, from <https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/programme/overview/>).

⁶ CADAP (2020), *About us* (retrieved February 4, 2020, from <http://cadap-eu.org/en/about/>)

⁷ 1 means most free, and 7 least free.

⁸ Freedom House. (2019), *Freedom in the World Countries* (retrieved February 4, 2020, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/countries-world-freedom-2019>)



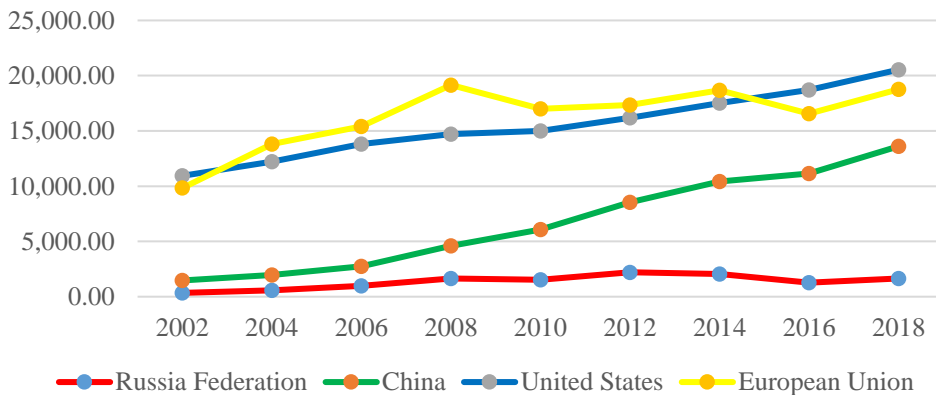
Regarding the economic influence, the EU ranks well among the main actors involved in Central Asia. Concerning the overall economic performance, measured in the size of the GDP, of the major actors involved in Central Asia, the EU held the prime position up until 2015, when it was surpassed by the US⁹, as Figure 1 shows.

Table 1. Comparison of freedom in the world scores of the Central Asian republics

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Kazakhstan	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	6.0
Kyrgyzstan	5.5	5.5	4.5	4.5	5.5	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
Tajikistan	6.0	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	6.0	6.5	6.5
Turkmenistan	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0
Uzbekistan	6.5	6.5	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0

Source: Freedom House (2019)

Figure 1. Graph presenting the GDP evolution of Russia, China, the US and the EU in the 2002-2018 timeframe, in trillion US\$



Source: The World Bank (2020)

Though, in 2017 the EU remained the main overall trade partner and investor of Central Asia, amounting for 30% of the region's total trade, and investing 63 billion euro (Russel, 2019, p. 3). Among the EU member states (EUMS), Germany held the largest share of trade with Central Asia (Auswärtiges Amt, 2010, p. 5). EU's position is challenged in the last years by China, which increased its trade with the region in the light of its BRI project (Bhutia, 2019). Nonetheless, as these numbers

⁹ The World Bank. (2020), *DataBank World Development Indicators* (retrieved February 1, 2020, from <https://databank.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD/1ff4a498/Popular-Indicators>).

show, despite losing the prime position on the global scale of economic size, the EU holds one of the most important places in trade with Central Asia, which offers it influence in economic terms. Moreover, the economic ties established by the EU with the states of Central Asia are more important as they offer them a means to diminish their dependence on Russia (Voloshin, 2014, p. 30).

Another relevant aspect regarding EU's presence concerns the ways in which it is perceived in Central Asia. Although surveys are difficult to conduct in the region, studies suggest that Russia is perceived as the most influential actor in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, followed by China in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and Iran in Tajikistan, EU being on the third place. In contrast, in Kazakhstan, local elites identify more with Europe than with Russia. Also, the EU enjoys less visibility than individual member states, such as Germany, France or Italy (Peyrouse, 2014, pp. 5, 6).

2.3. Capability

Bretherton and Vogler consider the signing of the EU treaties, by the EU member states, as a commitment towards the EU values. Among them there are sustainable development, democratic governance or the rule of law (Vogler and Bretherton, 2006, p. 28). At present, although there can be observed deviances in the cases of Poland and Hungary, it can still be argued that the EU states are committed towards the external diffusion of the values expressed in the treaties. Nonetheless, concerning the observance and diffusion of such values at the level of Central Asia, there were some discrepancies between the EU and some of the member states during the studied period. EU's first interactions with the states of Central Asia were focused on providing aid with the aim of improving the living conditions and facilitating trade in the region. The signing of the PCA's brought for the first time the normative dimension in EU's approach to Central Asia, which was later consolidated through the 2007 strategy (Voloshin, 2014, p. 21).

Overlooking the issue of EU's efficiency in projecting its normative influence towards the states of Central Asia, some differences can be noticed in the cohesiveness of the observance and support of these values by the member states. Telling for this example is the follow-up of the 2005 Andijan events, in which the Uzbek security forces violently suppressed a large manifestation, determining the loss of lives of hundreds (Ibidem, p. 23). In this context, the EU imposed sanctions on Uzbekistan for its grave violations of human rights and democracy. Though, Germany adopted a "softer line" (Efezil, 2010, p. 79) towards Uzbekistan, due to its interest in keeping its access to the Termez military base (Voloshin, 2014, p. 49; Youngs, 2008 apud. Efezil, 2010, p. 79).

Regarding the internal legitimization of the EU foreign policy towards Central Asia, the 2002 Strategy Paper, a document organizing the EU assistance programs towards the region, was adopted by the European Commission, therefore it can be argued it lacked the full legitimacy of the EU member states. In contrast, the 2007 Strategy of the EU for Central Asia was adopted by the European Council, becoming



an “EU-wide document” (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 30) that gained the legitimacy of the states’ governments. In this regard can be perceived also the endorsement of the EU Council upon the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia. Being developed at the EU level, between the European Commission and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU strategy for Central Asia comes out as a “joint communication” which expresses the main lines of the further EU engagement with the region (European Commission, 2019a). Further on, the Joint Communication is approved by the EU Council, formed by the EU Foreign Affairs Ministers, therefore gaining legitimacy from the EU member states (European Commission, 2019b).

Regarding the actual commitment to the EU involvement in Central Asia, some differences can be observed between the EUMS which have been active even from 1991 in engaging with the region, such as Germany (Auswärtiges Amt, 2010, p. 3), which was also the heart of the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia, or France, and other states which are less involved towards the region.

Concerning EU’s ability to identify priorities and formulate policies towards attaining them, the adoption of the two strategies is telling in this regard. At first, European Commission’s 2002 Strategy Paper identified three objectives subsumed to the TACIS programme: security promotion and preventing conflicts; the elimination of political and social tension sources; and the improvement of the “climate for trade and investment” (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 29). The 2007 Strategy has a broader character and highlights seven fields of action for the EU involvement towards Central Asia:

- 1) “Human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratization”, aimed at supporting the protection of human rights, and the cooperation upon these issues, by funding more the Rule of Law Initiative and supporting the training of experts etc.;
- 2) “Youth and Education”, aimed at offering support in the fields of primary, secondary, vocation and higher education;
- 3) Sustaining “economic development, trade and investment”, aimed at facilitating the WTO accession for the CA states, but also focus on supporting the INOGATE and TRACECA initiatives¹⁰;
- 4) “Strengthening energy and transport links”, aimed at supporting energy security and highlighting the importance of oil, gas, electricity and water management areas of action;
- 5) “Environmental sustainability and water”, aimed at tackling the major regional environmental issues, among which the use and management of water resources;
- 6) “Combating common threats and challenges”, which addresses issues such as fostering the fight against drug trade, organized crime, but also the issues related to the border with Afghanistan and the instability of the Fergana Valley;

¹⁰ Besides TRACECA, EU launched also the Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE) initiative, in 1996. INOGATE ended in 2016 (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 20)

- 7) “Building bridges: inter-cultural dialogue”, concerned with the freedom of religion and fostering dialogue of the civil society (Council of the European Union, 2007, pp. 7-17).

In contrast to the 2007 strategy, the new 2019 Strategy is more focused, presenting three sets of priorities, under the headings: “partnering for resilience”, “partnering for prosperity”, and “working better together” (European Commission, 2019c, p. 2). Each of them has several subfields. Under the “Partnering for resilience” heading there are “the promotion of democracy, human rights and rule of law” (Ibidem, p. 3) (focused on fighting corruption and stressing good governance), “strengthening cooperation on border management, migration and mobility and addressing common security concerns” (Ibidem, p. 5) (concerned with border security and the importance of countering radicalization, extremism), “enhancing environmental, climate and water resilience” (Ibidem, p. 6) (targeting the reduction of the impacts upon the environment through changes in the linear production type of economy). The second heading, “partnering for prosperity” is composed of four subfields, focused on economic reform, fostering trade inside the region and with other regions, supporting connectivity, and investing in youth and education (Ibidem, pp. 8-14). Finally, the last heading, “working better together”, targets the enhancement of the “architecture of partnership” (Ibidem, p. 14) by involving parliaments and civil societies and promoting the development of the region (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 38; European Commission, 2019c, pp. 14-16).

Another relevant difference between the two EU strategies for CA, reflected also by the broader 2016 EUGS relative to the 2003 EU Security Strategy, is the emergence of the concept of resilience, which became an important dimension of EU’s foreign policy approach (Pascariu and Rouet, 2019, p. 12). Relevant to our discussion are the political and societal sides of resilience, which some authors argue that EU should pursue, as less intrusive ways of promoting normative influence towards authoritarian states (Van Gils, 2019, pp. 455-460).

There can be observed a congruence between the objectives stated by the EU through its strategic documents, and the political priorities expressed by the member states active at the level of Central Asia. In this regard, the examples offered by Germany, France or Italy are relevant. Germany is one of the most engaged EUMS in Central Asia, having embassies in all of the five CA states. Through its policy at the level of the region, among Germany’s priorities for Central Asia there are the development of the educational system, enhancing the legal reform and the awareness for human rights, supporting sustainable economic development and fostering trade and investment, and also the extension of energy and transport links, as well as the environment and water, but also tackling common threats and promoting intercultural dialogue (Auswärtiges Amt, 2010, p. 5), thus matching the goals expressed also by the EU. France at its turn expresses support for human rights,



democracy promotion and fighting against poverty, as well as strengthening border security and fighting drug trafficking¹¹, a similar position being adopted also by Italy.

Nonetheless, there can be observed also some divergences of the EUMS from the EU position. Examples in this case are the different approaches of EU and Germany towards the Andijan events, and the different levels of commitment that the EUMS show towards Central Asia, some being more engaged than others in the EU initiatives towards the region (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p. 34).

Concerning the coherence of different policy sectors promoted by the EU at the level of Central Asia, there can be observed a lack of consistency in addressing the issue of human rights and pursuing the energy and trade objectives. Despite the authoritarian nature of the Central Asian states regimes, the EU intensified after 2007/2008 the political cooperation with them. In 2008, bilateral Priority Papers were signed, in order to bring more details on the projects to be undertaken through the Strategy, and meetings between officials took place. Moreover, EU concluded a Memorandum of Understanding on energy with Turkmenistan. These interactions can be regarded as a “softening” of EU’s discourse towards the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia, in the light of gaining more economic benefits in the region (Efegil, 2010, p. 83).

In order to reach its objectives at the level of Central Asia, EU put in place a variety of instruments, ranging from aid instruments to trade and economic ones, both regional and bilateral ones. The first regional instrument employed by EU was the TACIS programme, which was designed to help the states of the post-soviet space, including the Central Asian republics, with economic and technical aid, in order for them to cope with the challenges appeared after gaining their independence. TACIS functioned for over 15 years, up until 2007, and since the 1993 and 1996 regulations, it introduced weak and strong conditionality provisions. Therefore, the aid was conditioned by improvements in democracy and human rights, EU engaging in the diffusion of these norms. Nonetheless, the provisions were often neglected, the EU Council never actually taking the necessary measures against the Central Asian regimes violations (Voloshin, 2014, pp. 25-27). TACIS was succeeded by the Development Co-operation Instrument (DCI), through which, during the 2007-2013 period, were implemented projects on good governance, worth of 25% of the funds (approximately €187.5 million). EU also funded projects in the region through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the Non-state Actors and Local Authorities in Development programme. Also, through the 2007 Strategy were introduced the Rule of Law Initiative, Civil Society seminars and the organisation of regular Bilateral Human Rights Dialogues. Even though these instruments provide aid upon conditionality, based on the compliance of the Central Asian states with the normative dimension, the conditionality lacks clear definitions and a coherent methodology to be implemented, which makes unclear the conditions

¹¹ France Diplomatie (n.d.), *Central Asia* (retrieved February 09, 2020, from <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/central-asia/>).



in which the EU would limit the assistance, fact which also led towards it not being applied (Ibidem, pp. 45-47).

Regarding the bilateral instruments, the PCAs are relevant, as the first bilateral frameworks of interaction with the CA states. The first PCAs were set up in the 1990s, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, while the EU-Tajikistan PCA is in force since 2010. The PCA with Turkmenistan was not ratified by the EU Parliament. The PCAs are to be updated to Enhanced Partnership Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs), some of which are still under negotiation (Russel, 2019, p. 2). At the moment, Kazakhstan enjoys an EPCA, which entered into force on March 1st, 2020¹². One of the most relevant instruments, which seeks to promote EU's normative power, is the GSP+ programme, through which the beneficiary states have "duty-free access for various exports to EU markets" (Russel, 2019, p. 6), conditioned by their commitment to 27 international conventions regarding good governance and human rights, as well as environment protection.

Conclusions

This paper aimed at enquiring EU's actorness at the regional level of Central Asia, by applying the social-constructivist approach provided by Bretherton and Vogler, through their actorness requirements of opportunity, presence and capability. By summarizing the above presented data, several observations can be drawn, thus bringing answers to the research questions.

EU's actorness in Central Asia can be regarded as limited, due to several constraints which act upon it. On the one side, Brussels exerts a fairly important amount of influence in the region mainly through its economic capabilities. Being one of the most important trade partners of the overall Central Asian region, and also overpassing Russia and China in the size of the economy, in terms of GDP, the EU's economic potential can be regarded as attractive for the interests of the Central Asian states. Also, its involvement in the regional security field, through the BOMCA programme, which was well received by the CA states, represents another strong feature of EU's presence in the region. Concerning capability, the EU enjoys several strong points as well. In this regard it is important to highlight the relevance of a cohesive set of values which it seeks to promote to the region, the legitimization of its approach by the EUMS, a congruence between its objectives and those of the EUMS, and the high array of instruments which it uses to interact with the region.

On the other side, EU faces several important limitations towards its actorness in Central Asia. Firstly, the regional political and ideational context doesn't favour EU's presence. Being under the heavy political and energy influence of Russia and China, the CA states often get attracted in the actions of their neighbours, than towards EU's influence. Moreover, due to their understanding of security as regime

¹² *EEAS (2020), Entry into Force of the EU-Kazakhstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement - 1 March 2020* (retrieved from https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/75089/node/75089_en).



survival, the states of Central Asia often engage in balancing policies among the main international actors involved in the region. Secondly, based on the non-favourable ideational context described above, EU's normative influence in the region is limited, its diffusion of democracy and human rights values being hardly received in the Central Asian states, save for Kyrgyzstan. Also, despite enjoying a wide range of instruments to act in the region, the EU's approach lacked strong conditionality. Thirdly, another limit is also constituted by a lack of cohesion in the EUMS commitment towards EU's programmes for Central Asia.

Even though EU's actorness in Central Asia faces the above limitations, its strong points show a gradual positive evolution of EU's actorness in the timeframe of the analysis. It can be argued that since 2002, EU augmented its presence in the region, in terms of capabilities, by formulating its objectives in the Strategy for Central Asia, through the multitude of instruments it developed over time, and by opening new delegations in the region. Also, the withdrawal of the US military presence from Central Asia allowed for the EU to become the most important Western influence in the region.

Despite bringing answers to the research questions, the paper is liable to some methodological limitations. The paper used only Western-language sources, without enquiring local Central Asian perspectives. Though, even if this aspect can have a limiting effect on the analysis, the paper focused on the EU and its actorness in the region, aiming to present only the EU side, towards which it offered a perspective. Despite the limitations towards its regional actorness, the EU is one of the three most important actors involved in the region, alongside Russia and China.

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