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## **THE EUROPEAN UNION'S APPROACH TO CENTRAL ASIA AS A BALANCING POWER IN THE REGION**

### *Abstract*

Cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Central Asian countries has become an area of strategic importance in recent years. Due to its geographical location, Central Asia attracts attention with its energy resources, trade routes and cultural richness. This region offers significant opportunities both to increase the EU's energy security and to strengthen economic integration. While the infrastructure of the study is handled with the comments of experts in the region, the aim of the study is to analyze the EU's approach to Central Asian countries. According to the results of the study, while the EU continues its cooperation activities with Central Asian countries in every field with various projects and programs, it carries out a policy of balancing the activities of other actors such as China and Russia in the region.

**Keywords:** European Union, Central Asia, cooperation, energy, integration.

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## **ЕУРОПАЛЫҚ ОДАҚТЫҢ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯҒА АЙМАҚТАҒЫ ТЕҢДЕСТІРУ КҮШІ РЕТІНДЕГІ ТӘСІЛДЕРІ**

### *Аңдатпа*

Еуропалық Одақ (ЕО) пен Орталық Азия елдері арасындағы ынтымақтастық соңғы жылдары стратегиялық маңызды салаға айналды. Орталық Азия өзінің географиялық орналасуына байланысты энергетикалық ресурстарымен, сауда жолдарымен және мәдени байлығымен назар аударады. Бұл аймақ ЕО-ның энергетикалық қауіпсіздігін арттыру, экономикалық интеграцияны нығайту үшін де маңызды мүмкіндіктер ұсынады. Зерттеудің инфрақұрылымы аймақтағы сарапшылардың пікірлерімен зерттелген және зерттеудің мақсаты ЕО-ның Орталық Азия елдеріне көзқарасын талдау болып табылады. Зерттеу нәтижелеріне сәйкес, Еуроодақ Орталық Азия елдерімен әр салада әртүрлі жобалар мен бағдарламалармен ынтымақтастық қызметін жалғастыра отырып, аймақтағы Қытай мен Ресей сияқты басқа субъектілердің әрекетін теңестіру саясатын жүргізеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** Еуропалық Одақ, Орталық Азия, ынтымақтастық, энергетика, интеграция.

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## **ПОДХОД ЕВРОПЕЙСКОГО СОЮЗА К ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ КАК БАЛАНСИРУЮЩЕЙ СИЛЫ В РЕГИОНЕ**

### *Аннотация*

Сотрудничество между Европейским Союзом (ЕС) и странами Центральной Азии в последние годы стало сферой стратегического значения. Благодаря своему географическому положению Центральная Азия привлекает внимание своими энергетическими ресурсами, торговыми путями и культурным богатством. Этот регион предлагает значительные

возможности как для повышения энергетической безопасности ЕС, так и для укрепления экономической интеграции. Хотя инфраструктура исследования учитывает комментарии экспертов региона, цель исследования – проанализировать подход ЕС к странам Центральной Азии. Согласно результатам исследования, хотя ЕС продолжает сотрудничество со странами Центральной Азии во всех сферах с помощью различных проектов и программ, он проводит политику балансирования деятельности других игроков, таких как Китай и Россия, в регионе.

**Ключевые слова:** Европейский Союз, Центральная Азия, сотрудничество, энергетика, интеграция.

The EU's interest and activities in Central Asia are viewed from a broad perspective, taking into account the region's geopolitical significance as well as its economic opportunities. These relations have great potential not only in trade and energy, but also in terms of security and cultural interaction. In recent years, visits by Western politicians to the Central Asian countries are seen as steps taken to deepen relations with these countries and enhance cooperation.

Central Asia stands out with its rich natural resources, particularly energy reserves. The EU is developing various projects aimed at ensuring energy security and creating alternative energy routes in the region, such as the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP). In this context, oil and natural gas pipelines, renewable energy investments, and environmentally friendly projects are at the forefront. The implementation of these projects aims to both increase Europe's energy diversity and contribute to the economic development of Central Asian countries.

At the same time, the EU's interest in Central Asia is not limited to the energy sector. Partnerships are also being developed in various areas such as education, cultural exchange, trade, and security cooperation, which in turn strengthens the region's role in international relations. Europe's desire to bring its democratic values and human rights standards to the region could lead to a deeper long-term relationship with Central Asian countries. The EU's strategic interest in Central Asia is shaped not only by the region's geopolitical and economic dynamics but also by global energy security and sustainable development goals. In this context, Central Asia's position in the international arena is increasingly gaining importance.

The visit of European Commission Vice-President Josep Borrell to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from August 1-3, 2024, should be seen as a reflection of the EU's strategic orientation in its Central Asia policies (Esas.europa.eu, 31.07.2024). Under Borrell's leadership, this visit concretely demonstrates the efforts of European diplomacy to strengthen relations with Western partners in the region. Borrell's meetings with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in Kazakhstan and senior officials in Kyrgyzstan have been described as "an important opportunity to reaffirm the EU's determination to further develop its relations with both countries and with the Central Asia region as a whole in a challenging geopolitical context" [1]. These discussions hold significant importance in terms of enhancing regional cooperation and deepening strategic partnerships.

The primary objective of the visit was to address important issues on the bilateral agenda and to assess the potential for developing joint projects between the EU and Central Asian countries. The officially stated priorities include hopes for strengthening partnerships in strategic areas such as economic cooperation, energy security, and environmental sustainability. In this context, Borrell's meetings provide not only an opportunity to deepen diplomatic relations but also a critical chance to establish mutually beneficial collaborations.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with their rich natural resources and strategic locations, are key players in the European Union's energy corridors and trade routes. Therefore, it can be said that Borrell's visit reinforced Europe's determination to ensure energy security and seek alternative sources. Additionally, such diplomatic engagements align with broader goals, including supporting political stability in the region and promoting democratic values.

Experts highlight the importance of the promising opportunities that exist between the two sides in areas such as economy, energy, tourism, and education. In this context, it is emphasized that

increasing cooperation between the two regions holds critical potential for ensuring mutual economic benefits and deepening strategic relations [1].

In recent years, there has been notable progress in the relationship between the European Union and Central Asia. In January 2024, based on the recommendations in a report prepared by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, a decision was adopted aimed at reviewing the EU's approach to the region [2]. This decision marks an important step in the process of shaping a new EU strategy for Central Asia and includes goals aimed at strengthening regional cooperation.

The European Union's cooperation with Central Asian states is significantly shaped by the *Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* (EPCA). This agreement provides a critical framework for the EU to define its strategic objectives in the region and develop collaborations accordingly. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country to have signed the EPCA, which envisions comprehensive cooperation across 29 areas with the EU. Preparations for similar agreements are ongoing with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Additionally, Turkmenistan is the only Central Asian country without any *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* with the EU [3].

In 2019, the European Union updated its Central Asia strategy, presenting a perspective focused on resilience, prosperity, and regional cooperation, addressing issues such as human rights, border security, and the environment [4]. Within this framework, significant progress is being made through the EU's *Global Gateway* project to develop the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (Middle Corridor) between the EU and Central Asia. The European Parliament emphasizes the role of parliamentary diplomacy, drawing attention to the importance of human rights, good governance, and social development. Furthermore, the Parliament strongly supports democracy and the rule of law through concrete initiatives such as efforts to promote democratization in Central Asia. Given the current situation in Afghanistan, Central Asia has become critical for regional security and stability.

In this context, the updated documents are considered an important step toward building a stronger relationship with countries in the region, not only by defining specific goals but also by transparently outlining the methods and processes to achieve these goals. Transparency contributes to the establishment of mutual trust and the deepening of cooperation, while also enabling Central Asian countries to take a more active role in their relationships with the European Union.

The changing global context highlights the necessity for the EU to deepen its relations with Central Asian countries. On one hand, Russia's focus on its invasion of Ukraine has diverted its attention, while on the other hand, China's expansion of its commercial and economic ties in the region, particularly through infrastructure projects, is encouraging the EU to expand its own sphere of influence. Furthermore, the European Parliament emphasizes the need for the European Union to intensify its engagement with this region. This situation could contribute to the reshaping of international relations, both economically and politically.

This development can also be seen in the high-level meetings held between the leaders of Central Asian countries and the President of the European Council in 2022 and 2023. As a result of these meetings, a joint roadmap was created to deepen the ties between the European Union and Central Asia. The roadmap broadly aims to strengthen strategic cooperation, enhance economic and political relations, and increase the capacity to jointly respond to regional issues. These developments highlight both the growing interest of the European Union in Central Asia and the importance of a shared vision in ensuring regional stability.

According to experts following these developments, one of the EU's most effective tools is its development aid funds. According to data from the European Parliament, the EU provided €1.1 billion in grant funding, technical assistance, and direct budget support to the region under its Development Cooperation Instrument between 2014 and 2020. This represents a 62% increase compared to the previous program [1].

In addition, Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Murat Nurtleu, stated in a press conference that the partnership between Kazakhstan and the EU has intensified in various areas. According to him, in the first five months of 2024, bilateral trade between Kazakhstan and the

European Union reached \$20 billion, accounting for 37% of the country's total foreign trade volume. In 2023, this figure exceeded \$41 billion [5].

According to regional experts, the EU's efforts to deepen its relations with Central Asian countries are viewed as a "functional and instrumental" approach aimed at balancing the influence of Russia and China in the region. This perspective highlights the prominence of strategic calculations and power dynamics in the foreign policies of Central Asian countries. Therefore, the EU's role in the region is a complex issue that must be considered not only in terms of economic and political cooperation but also within the framework of geopolitical dynamics [6].

In summary, the EU aims to strengthen its geopolitical presence in Central Asia by approaching the region as an independent actor and strategic player. As part of this strategy, the EU continues to prioritize progress on key issues such as democratic reforms, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable development. In this context, the EU is expected to increasingly support projects, such as the alternative Middle Corridor, which bypass Russia, positioning itself as a balancing force against China's growing economic and energy influence in the region.

The EU's initiatives aim not only to further its economic and strategic interests but also to support the internal dynamics of Central Asia. The effective use of EU aid and budgetary support, aligned with sustainable development goals, will contribute to the economic growth and social reforms of the region's countries. However, it is clear that the EU's approach to Central Asia should not be limited to strategic and economic objectives alone; the cultural and social dimensions of the region must also be taken into account. The sharing of common values and the promotion of cooperation will help build stronger and more sustainable long-term relations between the EU and Central Asian countries.

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