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**The costs and benefits of the EU-Central Asian political
cooperation**

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Introduction

Cooperation between states and other international actors may be welcomed and appreciated on a rational ground that it represents a better alternative to more violent form of international interaction, conflict. Yet, one shall not be misguided by seemingly benign effects of international cooperation. Instead, it might be useful to weigh possible costs and benefits of cooperation, and take them into consideration, when reviewing or re-structuring cooperation strategies and mechanisms.

This essay seeks to evaluate the costs and benefits of the European Union-Central Asian relations in the light of the EU's recently adopted strategy for a new partnership with Central Asia (2007). The essay assumes that the European Union represents a unique international actor, which seeks to establish itself as a normative power and a global agent of democracy promotion. As such, the EU sets certain normative goals in its policy documents, allocates significant funds to their implementation, and cooperates with other countries to ensure smooth implementation of its democracy promotion agenda in these countries. The EU's policy towards Central Asia follows this order, and is often regarded as granted. However, the implementation of this strategy might bring both benefits and costs to the EU and its partners, Central Asian governments.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the costs and benefits of the European Union's relations with Central Asian republics, and outline potential scenarios for the EU-Central Asian relations in the mid-term perspective. For this purpose, the essay draws on specific examples of the EU-Central Asia cooperation, and highlights their advantages and disadvantages for the EU, for Central Asian countries, and for both. The research locates itself on the cross-road of normative theory, rational choice theory, and democracy and development studies. The main method used in this essay is data analysis. At that, the data sources include the EU's policy documents, and normative and legal acts; publications by individual researchers, international organisations and think tanks; current news, interviews and speeches of relevant European and Central Asian political and public figures.

The essay is structured in the following way. The main body consists of two parts, each devoted to a specific topic. In the first part, I discuss the costs of the EU-Central Asian relations for the directly involved stakeholders, the EU and the five Central Asian states. Afterwards, I proceed to an analysis of advantages that such relations bring to the

stakeholders. At that, I focus on potential mutual benefits and the benefits for the EU as a single entity (i.e. I do not focus on how the relations benefits the EU's individual member states), and for Central Asian states. The concluding part of the essay represents an intellectual exercise to suggest possible scenarios for further development of relations between the EU and Central Asia on the basis of the costs and benefits of their relations discussed in the two previous parts.

At the outset some limitations should be set. The essay does not claim to contain an exhaustive list of the costs and benefits of the EU-Central Asian relations, or the only possible scenarios of future interaction between the EU and Central Asia. Instead, it aims to leave the debate open, and welcomes further discussions and contributions. Although being an empirical study, the essay does not base itself on a single country case study. It rather draws on empirical evidence from specific examples of interaction between the EU and individual countries of Central Asia, namely Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and to lesser extent Turkmenistan, as the latter is more inward-oriented closed regime. When drawing possible scenarios for the EU-Central Asian relations, I use only two dependent variables: foreign policy choices of the EU as an international actor and exporter of democracy in Central Asia, and policy choices of Central Asian governments with regard to acceptance, disregard, or denial of the EU's agenda in the region. It should be noted that a larger scale research could look deeper, and add other variables, such as the impact of regional and world powers; the European energy demand and the Central Asian energy supply; global and local economic conditions; changing discourses, perceptions, expectations and narratives in European and Central Asian societies, and many more.

Part I. The costs of the EU-Central Asian relations

EU commercial cooperation affects trade within the EU

<http://www.publicserviceeurope.com/article/2547/germany-dismisses-eu-partners-in-favour-of-kazakhstan>

This part aims highlighting the obvious and latent costs of the European Union's relations with Central Asia. The part starts with an outline of the EU's costs of its involvement in Central Asia, and, afterwards, it proceeds to analyse how the EU's policy in the region might affect the people of Central Asia. The part finishes a discussion of mutual costs.

The EU funds, allocated to humanitarian aid, development assistance, democracy promotion and other related expenses in Central Asia, probably make the most obvious cost of the EU's involvement in the region.

The EU pays a considerable price to promote itself as a global actor. In December 2010, the EU approved its budget for 2011, which amounted to 141,9 billion Euro. Approximately 6% of this sum is allocated to the promotion of the EU as a global power, i.e. maintenance of the new diplomatic service (European External Action Service with its large network of EU Delegations), overseas peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid, development assistance etc. To compare, such large sector as citizenship, freedom, security and justice receives only 1% of the EU budget (General Report on the EU's activities).

The expenses of the EU, in its pursuit of a global actor's status, include funding for assistance to Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The EU has started providing development assistance to the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia soon after the emergence of these countries as sovereign states. From 1991 to 2007, the EU assistance has been provided under the framework of the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS). For that period, the EU provided largely technical assistance with limited conditionality, and preferred bilateral cooperation through Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with local governments. In 2007, due to the general re-structuring and unification of the EU development assistance instruments, the TACIS programmes were replaced with the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI).

Currently, the EU seeks to apply both bilateral and multilateral approach to its relations with Central Asia. The EU earmarked assistance budget for Central Asia under the DCI for 2007-2013 that amounts to 719 million Euro (Regional Strategy Paper). The budget for 2011-2013 amounts to 321 billion Euro. One third of the sum is designated for regional programmes. At that, the most of funds are directed to business, energy, transport, education and security-related (border management and combating drug trafficking) programmes. Two-third of the sum will be used to fund bilateral programmes in each Central Asian country.

In the light of such considerable expenditures, the implementation of the EU policy in Central Asia deserves certain attention. Experts in the EU-Central Asian relations tend to evaluate the implementation of the EU policy in the region through the lens of the recently adopted partnership strategy for Central Asia. The EU's Central Asia Strategy outlines seven priority

areas: human rights, rule of law, good governance and democratisation; youth and education; economic development, trade and investment; energy and transport links; environmental sustainability and water; common threats and challenges; and, intercultural dialogue (The EU and Central Asia: strategy for a new partnership 2007). While the most of these areas have technical nature and might enjoy similar interest from the part of the EU and Central Asian governments, the first priority area, democratization, might have normative nature and be more controversial than others.

According to its own understanding, the EU is driven by the universal motive to foster liberal democracy in the world (Kotzian et al 2011). This motive is reflected in its core policy documents. Thus, the Treaty on the EU sets forth the core European values: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights [...] (TEU, Art.2). The European Security Strategy (2003) mentions promotion of these values in third countries as a tool of creating “a better world”. Similar language can be found in the EU’s Central Asia strategy. After four years of the EU-Central Asian cooperation under the framework of this strategy, the implementation record in these seven areas is uneven and weak, especially in the democratization area (Hoffman 2010; Axyonova 2011).

There might be several explanations of why the EU’s democracy promotion in Central Asia has not been very successful. One possible explanation regards the local conditions as a bad soil for the democracy seeds. Central Asian countries are often considered as stable authoritarian environments (Hoffman 2010), patrimonial regimes (Collins 2009), or imitation democracies (Furman 2008). The existing local practices of elite formation, public sector corruption, clan politics and (self)censorship (Kenny & Gross 2008) undoubtedly make external democracy promotion difficult.

However, Central Asian authoritarian environment could not be solely responsible for imperfect democracy promotion. Some experts indicate half-hearted EU efforts and lack of strategic thinking as a possible explanation for this implementation gap. Thus, Schmitz explains how the EU conditionality, applied to Uzbekistan in the aftermath of the Andijan massacre of 2005, has turned against the EU. The EU imposed sanctions on Uzbekistan as a reaction to the Uzbek Government’s failure to allow an independent investigation of the Andijan uprising, which resulted in the massacre of hundreds civilians by security forces. The sanctions were rather “symbolic in nature”: the arms embargo in the light of the virtual absence of arms trade between Uzbekistan and the EU, or the suspension of the Partnership

and Cooperation Agreement that did not anyhow impede the implementation of approved projects. The only visible sanction was the visa ban, which, however, was suspended in 2007 and abandoned in 2008 (ibid). As Hoffman noted the sanctions were far from asserting any pressure on the Uzbek Government; instead, they had turned into “an instrument for the Uzbek regime to play hardball with the Europeans” (2009).

Other experts note that though the EU declares itself a democracy promoter, it does not set democracy promotion as the top priority in certain regions (Hoffman, Crawford, Tocci). As Tocci’s cumulative research of eight case studies demonstrates, the EU represents a multi-faceted actor that might have different, not necessarily normative goals, apply different instruments, and its activities in particular states might result both in normative and non-normative impact (Tocci 2008a and 2008b). Hoffman (2010) explains that the EU, with its prioritisation of self-interest objectives and flawed conditionality, provides loopholes for the Central Asian governments to limit their concessions and feign reforms.

The gap between the normative objectives stated in the EU’s Central Asia strategy and the implementation in all five Central Asian countries might result in a potential cost for the people of Central Asia: incomplete half-hearted reforming undermines the very idea of democratic reforms and democracy in general. The close interaction of the EU with the local authoritarian regimes contains a negative message to the public: the EU turns blind eye to what the regimes do to their people, i.e. limit their freedom of speech (Kenny & Gross 2008), abuse human rights, cooperate with criminal underworld (Kupatadze 2008), rip off the national wealth. On hand, to a certain extent, this gives even more freedom to the regimes to continue the power abuse. On another hand, this results in the public disillusionment in external powers and their benign democracy promotion agendas in the region.

Beside the above-discussed costs, the EU-Central Asian relations might result in a shared, yet sometimes overlooked, cost: relations with Russia. Due to geopolitical and cultural reasons, Russian political elites might not necessarily welcome the increasing presence of Western powers promoting normative agendas in the region.

Russia considers Central Asia to be its natural geopolitical *backyard*, which is often referred to as “*Near Abroad*”. The term clearly has a proprietorial implication, and it also reflects the general view that Russia has vital interests there and enjoys special privileges (Menon in Sharshenova 2009).

Russia's special relations with Central Asia are rooted in its long history of closest engagement with the region. In XVII-XIX centuries, Central Asia had been attracting Russian merchants and explorers both as a vast market, resource-abundant land, and potential target for imperial conquest. From the second half of XIX century until the Great October Revolution in 1917, Central Asia had been a Russian colony. With the advent of the Soviet power, the colony was transformed into five Soviet republics under the Moscow control (Gatagova & Filippova in Sharshenova 2009). The Soviet rule has generated similar political systems and shared values. Moreover, the Soviet social engineering has resulted in forging a shared identity in the post-Soviet countries¹ (Glenn in Sharshenova 2009). Social continuities of these processes have not vanished after Soviet republics gained independence: "Deeply embedded in the Russian psyche is the notion that Central Asian states are simply '*nashi*', the Russian word for 'ours'" (Brannon 2004, p.426-427).

Despite this, the Russian-Central Asian relations in the immediate post-Soviet period have been rather complicated. In 1990-s, Central Asian ruling elites encountered virtual absence of any Russian support. In the light of critical situation in Russia, it showed little willingness to provide any technical assistance, investment or political support. At that time, Central Asian elites were motivated to cooperate with the outer world and agree on West-inspired reforms due to "a fear of exclusion from the Western sphere of influence" (Matveeva 1999, p.23).

Now, the current Russian leadership, in the face of former (and potentially next) President Vladimir Putin, makes it clear that the Western sphere of influence is not the only one possible in the world, and authoritarianism can be easily coloured in democratic shades if it is named a "sovereign democracy". It is an attractive message for Central Asian dictators, who struggle to reconcile the authoritarian reality in their countries with their own democratic declarations and Western demands (Furman 2008). Beside this, the growing Russian economic, military and political strength triggers increasing Russian influence and its financial support to Central Asia. Consequences of such influence are multi-fold, and one of them is decreasing the leverage the EU might have on Central Asian countries. A recent Russian initiative of establishing the Eurasian Union, another integration bloc on the CIS territory, speaks for the more proactive Russian position in the region. While an initiator of the idea, Putin, emphasized that the new Union would expand its cooperation with the EU and

¹ This is less applicable to the younger generations of Central Asians, who have not directly experienced the Soviet reality.

China, it is clear that the Union is “rather about Russia solidifying and institutionalizing its resurgence in its former Soviet periphery” (Eurasianet 2011).

For the EU, the relations with Russia, which is a strategic partner, “has elements of both cooperation and competition, with the latter prevailing when it comes to the common neighbourhood” (Grevi & Khandikar 2011). Nevertheless, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of Russia and the EU for each other. The EU is Russia’s largest trading partner: 80% of Russia’s oil exports, 55% of its gas exports and 50% of its coal exports go to the EU. The EU depends on Russian energy exports: about 40 percent of the EU’s natural gas and 32 percent of oil imports come from Russia (ibid).

The EU seeks building its partnerships with third countries on the principles of democracy and human rights. On the contrary, Russia interprets the very concept of democracy to fit it into its factual authoritarian reality, stresses the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs, and aims at reasserting its role as a global power (Grevi & Khandikar 2011). Russia also tends to use energy as a foreign policy tool, which motivates the EU seek for alternative sources of energy supplies. Currently, the EU focuses on the development of the Southern Corridor to bring gas from the Caspian Basin and Central Asia to Europe.

The EU’s Central Asia strategy with its stress on political issues, as well its increasing economic and energy-related cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, might be an unpleasant move for Russia, which might see the growing EU-Central Asian cooperation as a threat to its energy/foreign policy and its political influence in Central Asia.

Part II. The benefits of the EU-Central Asian relations

Given that the relations between the EU and Central Asia are steadily evolving, it is clear that the benefits of these relations outweigh their costs. It is possible to mark out mutual benefits and specific benefits for the EU and Central Asian governments and people.

Taking into account the existing multiple security challenges in the region, both local governments and the EU acknowledge the importance of cooperation to tackle such transnational security threats as drug-trafficking, human trafficking, organised crime and terrorism. The EU assists with security provision in the region both directly (e.g. border control) and indirectly (e.g. rule of law initiative).

In the implementation of security-related objectives, two programmes are probably the most visible and exemplary: Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP). Both programmes have been operating before the EU's Central Asia strategy, and both have been equally appreciated by the EU and local governments.

BOMCA's achievements can hardly be overestimated: supplying modern equipment to border posts, advocating revisions of obsolete border policy laws, training officials, and engaging with the region's neighbour states. Besides, BOMCA might serve as a model for border control assistance as it is well-coordinated, quite comprehensive and relatively inexpensive (Emerson & Boonstra 2010).

CADAP aims to assist local governments with their fight against drug trafficking and powerful drug barons. Drug (mostly opiates) trafficking routes start in Afghanistan, and after crossing Central Asia, they reach their primary consumption markets, Russia and Europe. According to approximate estimates, the drug trade volumes amount to several billion Euro. CADAP works to provide airports and border posts with the necessary equipment, and cooperates with local law enforcement and security agencies to provide relevant training and legal assistance (Emerson & Boonstra 2010). Under conditions of massive corruption and powerful drug trade networks, the very existence, continuous operation of this programme and its acceptance by local governments is a success.

Beside security, energy and trade represent the areas, which are prioritized by both parties. In this regard, the energy and trade relations of Kazakhstan with the EU are of particular interest. In the light of the European quest for diversification of energy supply sources, Kazakhstani abundant oil and gas fields are of great interest for the EU. The Kazakh gas has been a strategic commodity for the EU before the gas crisis of 2006: the Europe's main gas supplier, Russian Gazprom, heavily relied on purchasing the Kazakh gas and reselling it to Europe (Matveyeva 2006, pp.72-75). Currently, the EU is conducting wide-ranging energy dialogues with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and considers the gas supplies of these countries for the Southern Corridor with a trans-Caspian link (Emerson & Boonstra 2010). At the present, the EU seeks further consolidating its trade with Kazakhstan, the most developed of the five CA countries: "Kazakhstan is the EU's biggest trading partner in Central Asia, with bilateral trade worth over €15 billion. About 85% of Kazakhstan's exports to the EU consist of oil and gas" (Dave 2007). Such cooperation proves to be mutually beneficial as the EU diversifies its energy supply sources and Kazakhstan has an opportunity to sell its resources.

Central Asian governments in their turn might benefit their relation with the EU in several ways. Firstly, Central Asian countries receive substantial assistance in numerous areas (border management, drugs control, education, poverty alleviation etc.), investment and grants. This financial inflow supports local economies.

Central Asian countries have been using the new strategic competition between Russia and the US “to reap distributive gains from both external powers” (Bohr 2004, p.485-486). With the advent of the US military and support troops in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Russia has made an effort to revive, restructure existing (e.g. Collective Security Treaty Organisation), or even create new local cooperation organisations. Thus, in April 2003, under the Russian leadership, Central Asian Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CACRDF) were established. This resulted in the Russian military presence in the region: Russia established a permanent military air base at Kant, Kyrgyzstan. The increased activities of the EU, a relatively new strategic actor in the region, provide more freedom of manoeuvre for Central Asian ruling elites, and consequently, more opportunities to bargain with new and old power in the region.

On another hand, there are immediate interests of Central Asian people. Here it should be noted that the interests of ruling elites do not always coincide with the interests of the people. The EU’s democracy promotion, if successful, might be beneficial for the people of Central Asia. A study based on the Life in Transition Survey conducted in 2006 demonstrates that the majority of citizens in four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) prefer democracy “as an ideal form of government” (Nikolayenko 2010, p.191). At that, free and fair elections and freedom of expression are the most supported attributes of democracy (see Appendix I). If the EU continues its support for democracy and invests more effort to convince local governments of the necessity to promote reforming, there are real chances to alleviate authoritarian regimes. The changing situation in Kyrgyzstan is an example that democratic governance is possible in the authoritarian environment.

Beside the above-mentioned benefits, the EU’s involvement in the Central Asian affairs contains a normative boost: it serves the ideas of normative power Europe and the EU as a global power. In addition, the increased and diversified cooperation between Europe and Central Asia helps building a bridge between these two cultures and changing perceptions of each other. For more than 70 years, Central Asian countries could hardly pursue any kind of foreign policy under the Soviet rule. As a result, the five post-Soviet Central Asian states have little record of interaction with the “outer” world. The EU also has not been much aware of

these countries, their traditions, and political culture. To a certain extent, the last twenty years have represented a period of mutual learning and understanding. With more definite strategy and more joint implementation programmes, the mutual perceptions of the EU and Central Asian states are likely to have shifted from unknown international actors to reliable partners and agents of change.

Conclusion: Scenarios for the EU-CA relations

Given the increasing real or perceived importance of the Central Asian region for global power, it is likely that the EU will continue its cooperation with Central Asian governments and seek to broaden its involvement in the region. Therefore, it would be rational to analyse how the EU-Central Asian relations will continue evolving. Here, it is assumed that the evolution of the EU-Central Asian relations directly depends on the options that the EU or Central Asian governments might choose. Though it is rather difficult to provide an exhaustive list of options for both sides, it is possible to outline few of them.

Central Asian governments might have three options. The first one is that they seek maintaining the status quo, i.e. playing a bargaining game with global powers, which express their interests in the region. This would imply continuing the so-called “multi-vector” foreign policy and seeking to please external donors with democracy and development rhetoric. In this case, the situation for the ordinary Central Asians is not likely to change: democracy and human rights will rather remain on the papers of state and donors’ agendas than in reality. With the change of the current political elites and individual leaders, the next Central Asian governments might decide to adhere themselves to democratic path, fully accept the EU’s assistance and conditionality, abandon old authoritarian practices and apply transparent governance. This option might be the most favourable for the peoples of Central Asia. At the same time, it might be the most difficult to achieve due to the all-penetrating corruption, clan politics and kinship-based elite formation (Kupatadze 2008, Cummings 2005). The last option for Central Asian governments is to acknowledge the authoritarian nature of their rule, declare it fully legitimate (or name sovereign following Putin’s example), offer the EU to remove conditionality and cooperate on the basis of mutual security, energy and economic interests without any normative agendas.

On the other side, the EU might also have three options to choose. The first option is also a status quo scenario: the EU continues incorporating democratization into its policy, investing

money in democracy promotion programmes, but prioritizing other interests in the course of its policy implementation. Such incomplete reforming might raise criticisms of the EU's inconsistency from the part of experts, but Central Asian governments would still be cooperative if their abuse of power is disregarded. The second option would require much courage from the part of the EU: it would be necessary to re-set implementation priorities and push harder on the local governments. One may argue that pushing local governments might simply result in losing any dialogue with them, and further lead to losing the region from the EU's foreign policy field. However, this unfortunate event is not likely to happen, if the EU would assist the change of local governments and ruling elites. This could be done in the long-term way by assisting democratic powers come into power through education and support of civil society. There are also short-term ways to replace local authoritarian-minded elites, but these ways are hardly legal. The last option for the EU would be adopting the local rules of the game, give up conditionality and democracy-related projects, and act like other regional power, China and Russia, on the basis of self-interest. However, this option might undermine the carefully built normative framework of the EU, affect its spirit and destroy its image of a global democracy promoter.

Appendix I. Table: Preference for Democracy and Support for Democratic Procedures 2006, cited as in Nikolayenko 2010, p.196

Table 1
Preference for Democracy and Support for Democratic Procedures

	Country			
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyz R.	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Democracy preferable	50.3	59.4	61.6	68.4
Autocracy preferable	21.9	19.6	15.5	11.9
Doesn't matter	27.8	21.0	22.9	19.7
Total	100% (1000)	100% (1000)	100% (1000)	100% (1000)
Support for democratic procedures				
Free and fair elections	92.7	92.8	91.8	85.3
Freedom of speech	87.8	85.7	89.0	80.4
Independent press	76.0	75.9	68.7	71.2
Strong political opposition	65.2	64.3	54.7	51.3
Protection of citizens' rights	91.1	85.0	77.8	75.7
Minority rights	86.5	77.3	75.5	75.9

Note: The combined percentages of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses are reported in the table to summarize the extent of support for democratic procedures.

Source: Life in Transition Survey.

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