

# UACES 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference

Krakow, 4-6 September 2017

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# **The European Union and Central Asia: One step forward, two steps back?**

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**Paper prepared for the UACES 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**  
**Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland**  
**4-6 September 2017**

## **Abstract**

Many analyses evaluated European Union's Central Asia Strategy with a focus on its achievements, successes, and failures. This article has a different goal - to provide an analytical framework to examine the role of member states (with focus on the Visegrad group countries) in the context of values vs. interests' debate. A more nuanced understanding of how the member states cooperate with European institutions in persuading their aims in the Central Asian region can provide a new perspective on these relations. We believe that member states will play a significant role in formulating the new strategy for the region that is expected in 2019.

It is ten years now since the European Union presented the Strategy towards the Central Asian region in 2007. Although the region is not the geopolitical priority of the European Union and its member states, the EU numerous time highlighted the importance of the "neighbours of our neighbours" particularly in the context of security threats, energy issues, border management, and economic cooperation. Since then, the Strategy was several times revisited and collaboration enhanced in some areas, although the EU is often criticized for ineffectiveness and slow progress. Over past ten years, conditions (and representatives) in the region has changed. Also, the EU is different. The European Union also developed high-policy dialogue, created new mechanisms for cooperation and received the attention of Central Asian leaders. Despite all of this the EU's involvement is still limited.

The EU is also the only player (and after the election of President Trump in the USA it is even more visible) that put the topics of democracy, human rights, and freedoms on a table during discussions with Central Asian partners. Despite critiques for small progress and preference towards the economic interests, the views from the region stressed that just fact that "someone is watching" makes a situation better. On the other hand, previous research indicates that EU institutions have just declaratory support from (some of) member states regarding normative

dimension in Central Asia. Although some of the member states are involved in projects and initiatives coming from Brussels, many other are purposely let controversial topics on the EU, and they are highlighting their economic interests.

**Key words:** European Union, Central Asia, member states, values, interests

## **1. Introduction**

Evaluation of the Central Asian Strategy together with analyzing of the „great game“ belongs among the most popular research topics in the area of Central Asian Studies. One of the most discussed aspects of the relations between the EU and the region lies in the issue of „values vs. interests.“ In other words, if the EU should more push ideas of human rights, good governance, and democratization or to focus on „pragmatic“ aspects of collaboration such as security situation, energy, economy and trade. As Manners (2002, p. 242) stated peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights are core values of the European Union. However, as some of the analysis indicated (Plenta 2016, p. 80), at least some of the member states put the responsibility for values promotion on the level of European Union. We can see the division of roles in which the European Union open these issues, and member states focus on developing of economic and trade links. The example of such countries is Visegrad group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia). Current governments in Poland and Hungary are facing to severe critique from the European Union institutions as well as non-governmental organizations for violations of the principle of the rule of law and democratic standards. Some other would add that situation is not so different in the case of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The ambition of the article is twofold. Firstly, to analyze the role of members state during the preparation of the new Central Asian Strategy, that is expected in 2019, in the context of „interest vs. values“ issue. Secondly, the article compares ideas and behavior of Visegrad countries with the group of member states that push normative ideas more visible in their foreign policy (notably Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland). According to Voloshin (2014, p. 6) EU member states are increasingly aware of the Union’s normative power being both real and efficient. For instance, in March 2013, the foreign ministers of Germany, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands sent an open letter to Barroso, asking him to place greater emphasis on promoting a culture of respect for the rule of law on a Union-wide scale. Such comparison between two groups of member states can bring a fresh view on European Union policy-making and decision-making process as well as how these countries (call them pragmatics) handle with states that more focus on values in their foreign policy (call them normatives). Moreover, research on the involvement of the new member states of the European Union (EU) in the EU’s external policies remains very scarce, in particular when it concerns regions beyond the Eastern neighbourhood (Bossyut 2017, p. 1).

Some of the authors do not consider the European Union for the unitary actor, as the EU represents the case of the multi-level system of governance (Ademmer – Delcour – Wolczuk 2016, p. 8). On the other hand, Norling and Cornell (2016, p. 19) recognize the EU as a unitary actor. Member states and EU institutions tend to have different priorities and, more importantly, among member states, two camps exist within the EU: those that prioritize (economic) development and those that emphasize human rights and democracy. On the level of the EU institutions, it is usually European Parliament that highlights and advocates focus on human rights, freedom of speech, rights of oppositions while EEAS and European Council and European Commission are considered for more pragmatical players. Therefore the EU's strategy is inevitably a compromise between the political and developmental approaches, and the EU has strived to emphasize both, even if doing so is not always possible. (Norling – Cornell 2016, p. 19) Paradoxically, in the framework of the relations with Central Asian countries, it is the EEAS that is opening topics connect with the European values.

In my article (Plenta 2016, p. 81) I argued that European Union member states known as Visegrad group – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – employ a “two-level game” in relations with Central Asian countries. The primary point of this game lays in the difference between a “national” approach and a “European” approach to the region. The member states voluntary transfer problematic issues such as democracy promotion and human rights dialogue to the EU institutions because of preferences for their economic and trade interests. On the level of EU institutions, these countries support the values agenda of the European Union. However, on the level of bilateral relations, the countries focus mainly on economic topics and mutual trade. Such division of roles allows them to promote economic cooperation without opening sensitive issues. The states focus on their economic interests, and the EU has concentrated more on technical assistance, human rights dialogue and the promotion of European democratic values. In the case of Central Asia, promoting European values has become the responsibility of the EU institutions, while member states are involved on a voluntary basis. However, such a division of roles has never been made by the official decision but rather by states' rational behavior. Member states will attempt to project certain national preferences regarding foreign policy onto the EU level because – if successful – it can allow them to pursue and even expand those foreign policy objectives beyond those attainable with domestic capabilities (Bossyut 2017, p. 1-2).

Since the development of the EU 's foreign policy, it has always been the target of harsh critiques. Due to its geostrategic value, Central Asia could represent the perfect theatre where the EU is involved, to affirm the “one single voice” of the EU. (Mori 2016, p. 20) However,

as this article shows, there is the division between „pragmatics“ and „normatives“ countries. This situation is not a big surprise, the more interesting aspects are to analyze preparation of the new strategy in this context. The experience from previous revisions shows that member states more or less follow ideas of the EU institutions and supported these changes. Therefore the article looks to answer the question why in practice the EU is not speaking „one voice“ in Central Asian region as some of the member states are avoiding involvement into „sensitive issues“ especially in the area of the rule of law, democracy promotion, and human right dialogue.

The study will provide analyses of member states attitudes towards „interest vs. values“ issue utilizing a combination of primary and secondary sources as well as interviews conducted within the EU institutions and member states permanent representation in Brussels. European Union policy toward Central Asia, together with foreign policies of member states, has created two interconnected policies toward the region that are meeting in the “two-level game.” Although “European' foreign policy and foreign policies of EU members” states are closely linked, member states would prefer the division of roles – if it is in their national interests. European Union institutions along with member states need to balance their “values” such as human rights and democracy promotion and their “interests” like developing economic and trade ties. The Central Asian region provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate this game due to “partnerships” in the form of the Strategy as well as due to partnership and cooperation agreements. (Plenta 2016, p. 94) The article further develops concept of the two-level games between European Union institutions and member states. Whether in multilateral negotiations or bilateral meetings, government leaders regularly engage in “two-level games” played simultaneously at the domestic and the international level. (Conceicao-Heldt – Mello 2017, p. 1) While there are similarities to a liberal perspective, two-level games emphasize that executives hold some degree of autonomy in their decision-making that cannot be purely derived from their constituencies. Unlike realism, however, the approach recognizes the importance of domestic veto players and institutional constraints. (Conceicao-Heldt – Mello 2017, p. 2)

### **1.1. Council of the European Union Conclusions and road to 2019**

Conclusions of Foreign Affairs Council regarding EU Strategy for Central Asia from 2015 and 2017 serve as background for the articles. In the opinion of the author, it can be used as a good indication for discussion about the new strategy. The 2007 European Union Strategy for Central Asia was reviewed for the fourth time in 2015. Over these eight years, the EU has

successfully established several institutionalized mechanisms for strengthening relations and working with Central Asian governments, including an increased presence on the ground. Despite this, the EU's engagement in Central Asia is one of limited to no impact. The region has become more unstable; forecast gas deliveries from the region to Europe have so far not materialise (Boonstra – Tsertsvadze 2016, p. 4).

The conclusions from 2015 highlighted both economic dimension as well as the promotion of the human rights. For instance „The Council calls for strengthening trade and energy links between the EU and Central Asian countries and reinforcing cooperation on security and stability, including sustainable management of natural resources. It emphasises the fundamental importance of democratisation, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and socio-economic development, all of which are essential elements of the Strategy“ (Council of the European Union 2015, p. 2). Among the other priorities belong promotes the well-being of all layers of society, including through the empowerment of women and prioritizing of the Rule of Law cooperation. Further, the EU's priorities will include notably promoting respect for freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, furthering the rights of women, children and persons belonging to minorities and supporting efforts to eradicate torture. A more inclusive work with civil society should also help make EU support to human rights and democratization more effective and result-oriented (Council of the European Union 2015, p. 5).

The Council of the European Union in 2017 confirm balanced focus on values agenda. More specifically, the EU is willing to help to undertake reforms to strengthen democracy, fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and to modernize and diversify the economy (Council of the European Union 2017, p. 2). Given the serious challenges to human rights, including gender issues, in the region, the Council reaffirms the crucial importance of continuing a meaningful dialogue with the Central Asian countries on good governance, the rule of law and human rights. The Council also stresses the importance of an independent media environment free from internal and external pressures. (Council of the European Union 2017, p. 4) On the another hand, the Council highlighted also the importance of the strategic projects. In the energy, infrastructure and transport sectors, the Council emphasizes that cooperation between the EU and Central Asia should prioritize the integration of the Central Asian countries with each other and into international markets and transport corridors. The EU will continue to seek to extend the Southern Gas Corridor to Central Asia and to further promote the EU's multilateral and bilateral energy cooperation. (Council of the European Union 2017, p. 4)

For the future of relations between the European Union and Central Asian countries will have a decision about the new strategy for the region. The Council invites the High Representative and the Commission to come forward with a proposal for a new Strategy by the end of 2019 in accordance with the EU Global Strategy. The new Strategy should take stock of the achievements of EU action in support of Central Asia since 2007. It should be broadly discussed with the Member States and lay the foundation for a renewed and enhanced partnership with the region and guide the upcoming EU assistance to Central Asia. The EU intends to involve the Central Asian partners in the preparation of the new strategy. (Council of the European Union 2017, p. 6)

## **2. Interests vs. values and pragmatic vs normative countries**

According to Tocci (2007, pp. 2–3 in Averre 2009, p. 1692), we can understand the concept of normativeness or normative power in two sense. Firstly, normative can be taken in a neutral sense to mean what is considered normal in the international environment. In this interpretation, all major international actors have a normative element in their foreign policy in that they shape the norm. This feature is especially evident in regions where they have an active presence; in this case, norms are in danger of becoming confused with the exercise of power. Alternatively, the normative can be associated with a moral imperative, or a ‘good’ or ‘ethical’ foreign policy; in this case, the problem lies in a subjective interpretation of what is ‘good’ and in claiming universality for one’s own model of political organisation. Manners (in Voloshin 2014, p. 3) argues that the EU should be understood not as a civilian power based upon intergovernmental cooperation but as ‘a normative power of an ideational nature characterised by common principles’ For Manners, ‘the EU is not what it does or what it says, but what it is’. On the other hand, Adrian Hyde-Price believes that the EU does not differ from other international players because it likewise pursues narrow interests ahead of moral or normative considerations. (Voloshin 2014, p. 4) In the context of the article such discussion raised the additional question: Can be the EU „normative power“ without „normative“ behavior of its member states? It is in the contest over legitimacy that the significance of the rise of normative powers also emerges in relation towards Central Asia. According to Kavalski (2013, p. 248), the proposition of a rise of normative powers suggests that actors such as the EU and China proffer themselves as exemplars of distinct patterns of international interactions. The models they project are framed by their idiosyncratic strategic cultures which inform not only the cognitive frameworks of their international interactions but also the



way(s) in which they practice policy-making. „In Gordon Crawford’s view, the EU always likes to present itself as a normative power, but behaves consistently in the same way that a nation-state does, sacrificing norms to interests whenever it deems it necessary. For Katharina Hoffmann, economic considerations still are and will remain the driving force behind the EU’s foreign policy; it thus looks impractical from the Union’s vantage point to refuse to cooperate with repressive regimes, be it in Central Asia or elsewhere.“ (Voloshin, 2014, p. 49)

The image of the European Union is created on the base of its soft power not only economic dimension but also in pushing „western liberal values“ (both with negative or positive connotations). However, as Kavalski (2013, p. 248) further stressed just because any international behavior can be labeled as normative should not lead one to assume that, in fact, all actors are normative powers (even if some of their actions have normative side effects). Value based policy is grounded not only in attitudes of politicians and bureaucracy but, more importantly in official documents as well. Official documents and speeches more often than not recite like mantras the core values underpinning the EU, which frequently include peace, democracy, human rights, freedom, and justice. The existence of the EU’s normative power has been accepted for years if not decades by European media, in both positive (it contributes to regional and international peace) and negative (it leaves Europe disarmed in the face of Russia, China and the United States) terms. Moreover, the realness of its rules and norms is now recognized outside of Europe, too. (Voloshin 2014, p. 5-6) According to Norling and Cornell (2016, p. 4), EU democracy assistance can be seen as one part of a heightened global focus on democracy-building among international organizations, regional organizations and other new actors beyond Western nation states. While, in the past, democracy promotion tended to be the exclusive domain of high-income Western countries, the actors involved today are more varied, the kinds of activities more diverse, and the number of countries targeted for democracy assistance is steadily increasing.

By adopting the strategy for Central Asia, the EU set out on a course to build a superstructure of interests on the normative foundation of democracy and human rights, the two universal values it has always championed in its foreign policy. (Voloshin 2014, p. 44) The problem with the normative dimension of the EU relations is that it did not really work except Central European and Baltic states. Even in neighboring regions such as Western Balkans, Caucasus or Ukraine, the local politician and societies just slowly accepted these ideas. Additionally, more attention is pay to the setback of democratic values inside the European Union in these days. Democratization in the post-Soviet space has been much slower and uneven than what

was predicted, and it has differed considerably from processes that occurred in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. (Norling – Cornell, 2016, p. 8)

As Kavalski highlighted (2013, p. 251) the complexity of global life confronts the EU with the reality where other countries do not perceive it like a magnet. This is a qualitatively new condition for Brussels and its normative power - a situation which appears to baffle the EU and one which it still has not addressed convincingly. The EU is offering (not only) to Central Asia countries through trade and assistance programs to encourage the maximum possible convergence with European norms and values, notably good political and economic governance and the rule of law (Averre, 2009, p. 1690). The EU's self-positioning as Normative Power Europe (NPE) makes it different from the traditional nation-state in that it seeks first and foremost to project values outside of its borders, shunning hard power on all occasions and, instead, utilising attraction, persuasion and the silent force of the negotiating table to defend its strategic and vital interests. (Voloshin 2014, p. 69) However, even on EU level, it seems that values are inferior to developing good (economic) relations. As Catherine Putz wrote in 2016 when Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited Brussels resident of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker seemed to praise Kazakhstan, saying reforms were "promising." Juncker called Nazarbayev his "dear friend" and said he was "sensitive to these [reform] issues."

Nargis Kassenova (2008, 128) pointed out that there are two key questions for the EU in the region. The first deals with the problem how to balance the goals of the promotion of democracy and human rights with the realistic interests of securing access to the region's energy reserves. The second question addresses the logistics of engaging and not "losing" the region, while also not becoming too soft on local authoritarian regimes. The EU is not offering from logical reasons vision of EU membership or even close association as in the case of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The political elite of Central Asian countries does not have the sincere interest in human right and democracy dialogue. Additionally, like in much post-communist/post-soviet space, civil society is weak, under-financed and with limited influence on public opinion. As Gast (2014) pointed while the EU distributes "carrots" to promote reforms, it does not apply effective "sticks" regarding pressure and sanction mechanisms to chastise its partner countries in case of noncompliance. At most, the EU can suspend partnership and cooperation agreements or withhold financial assistance, but it cannot force the Central Asian states to raise their human rights standards. What most of the region's leading elites are interested in economic growth, stability, and the preservation of their power. On the other hand, Hoffmann (2010, p. 96) highlighted that in an attempt to

strengthen the value-based components of the strategy, the EU has introduced notions of conditionality. Enhanced cooperation on security and economic matters is made dependent on the region's performance about democratic and governance reform. The EU's leverage on these issues is, however, rather weak. The EU's attempts to increase the costs of non-compliance with the norms of democratization and governance were essential steps since in the past the regimes had hardly demonstrated an interest even in the more technocratic aspects of the good governance agenda, as was pointed out above.

To paraphrase Voloshin (2014, p. 43-44) the European Union Central Asia Strategy represents a concerted attempt to recalibrate the EU's ties with Central Asia on a modified basis where realism (interests) and idealism (values) no longer contradict each other. If such goals were fulfilled is often dispute. For instance, Bigo and Hale (2013) claimed that the EU plays mostly a role of lenient fund and prestige provider. The lack of clear objectives in the 2007 Strategy feeds into this. The strategy pursues values (governance, human rights and the rule of law) and interests (security and stability) in tandem on paper, but policy practice has treated them as competing, rather than complementary. Interests often prevail despite the fact that the EU's values agenda accounts for much of its 'soft power.' Similarly, according to Norling and Cornell (2016, p. 11), the „EU's strategy evolved from one with a more cautious ambition of state building to one that places greater emphasis on democratization. The nuances are subtle, however, and the EU, at least up until 2012, tended to embed democratization into its broader efforts to promote stability, security and poverty reduction. In general, these two strategies and the 2012 progress report capture many of the paradoxes of the EU's development aid to Central Asia. Despite often being presented as an overarching aim, insufficient resources are earmarked for democratization work, as we will discuss later in this paper. The EU's developmental focus is rather aimed at various aspects of state-building, such as border management, social and economic development, water management and other related areas of activity. Conceivably, the EU's cautiousness on democratization is owed in part to the multiple pressures exerted by EU member states and various EU agencies and also reflects the priorities of Central Asian governments themselves, which are generally hostile to external interference in their political processes.“

The EU's approach to its Eastern neighborhood constitutes an extension of the internal 'European project,' based above all on norms and values which place good governance, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as well as an attractive economic model for modernization, at the forefront of its policy concerns. The ENP, and to an extent the Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia, derived from the accession logic - be more like us -

and are articulated according to a normative agenda set by Brussels. (Averre 2009, p. 1693-1694) The primary institutions involved in EU democracy assistance and good governance programs are the European Commission, the European Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS). These processes are mostly conducted from Brussels, even if EU delegations in Central Asia assist with local expertise. (Norling – Cornell 2016, p. 19)

The region is not a priority for the EU, and earlier development aid has been heavily affected by recipients' unwillingness to engage in democratic reform and tackle endemic corruption. (Boonstra – Tsertsvadze 2016 p. 9) For obvious reasons countries to countries of the Eastern Partnership EU pays high attention, especially when these countries have increasingly become an object of contention and rivalry between Brussels and Moscow (Ademmer – Delcour – Wolczuk 2016, p. 2). This changed rather abruptly with the Rose and Orange Revolutions and the subsequent intensification of EU engagement with the region, which led to the launch of the EaP initiative – an apparent attempt at bringing the participating countries closer to the EU's normative and regulatory framework. (Delcour – Kostanyan – Vandecasteele – Elsuwege 2015, p. 13) Maybe also because of this, the EU's action in this region differs considerably from its earlier experiences in other portions of the world such as Western Balkans, Eastern Europe or South Caucasus. (Voloshin 2014, p. 70) We can also say that with Russian integration project (with focus on an economic area and with mixed results) the Eurasian Economic Union, also playground has changed. Conservative „Russian“ ideas that in many cases directly opposed to „European values“ spread in the countries spread in the countries of the EAEU. These processes are based upon deep economic integration and entail legally binding commitments for the participating countries, thus bearing potentially strong effects regarding the domestic change. (Delcour – Kostanyan – Vandecasteele – Elsuwege 2015, p. 5) Recent developments in and analyses of the region show that post-Soviet countries are not merely passive recipients of EU's and Russia's policies, but actively respond to and complexly shape external influences). (Ademmer – Delcour – Wolczuk 2016, p. 4) Russian-inspired initiatives to limit the space for civil society, to criminalize LGBT communities and to curtail political pluralism has further taken root in all Central Asian countries. (Boonstra – Tsertsvadze 2016, p. 5)

Most attention so far has been devoted to human rights and the rule of law. The EU chooses to prioritize these over democratization and good governance since the latter are not welcomed by Central Asian leaders. These leaders are not comfortable discussing human rights either, but they understand that they are a core component of the EU's normative approach and UN and OSCE frameworks. As for the rule of law, it is a less sensitive issue in Central Asia than

democracy. (Boonstra 2011, p. 11) „Experiences in this human right dialogues, in particular, on the one hand, Central Asian governments are willing to make only limited concessions and, on the contrary, the EU is not ready to apply its conditionalities. The EU and the Central Asian states agreed to upgrade the dialogue from an ad hoc to a regular event at a ministerial conference in April 2008. The dialogue includes meetings at different political levels as well as civil society and media seminars.“ (Hoffmann 2010, p. 98-99) The EU’s ability to open up the political space in these countries thus faces substantive constraints. Whether normative ties with Europe will prove to be thicker than oil, or whether the Central Asian states will gradually adopt the EU’s values-based agenda over and above economic engagement, remain unanswered questions. (Averre 2009, p. 1695) Despite all these issues Boonstra and Tsertsvadze (2016, p. 6) highlighted that human rights should remain a primary focus for the EU in Central Asia. The Human Rights Dialogues created by the EU have modest added value mainly as a complementary tool of ‘persuasion’ (in addition to the UN mechanisms) and with respect to improving the situation of particular (prosecuted) human rights activists. On the one side, the EU is criticised for not pushing human rights issue, on the other hand, there are also opinions that opening such issues is a disadvantage against the influence of China and Russia that are more focus on „practical“ aspects of cooperation. Moreover, the EU achieved just minor successes in this area. For instance Voloshin (2014, p.70) in his book came to conclusion that the EU’s normative power in Central Asia has proved so far ineffective since the application of its rules and norms has been scarce and episodic, if not absent altogether: the EU has failed to promote normative power in such sectors as democracy, human rights, energy, and security, with only a few limited successes in the fields of technical assistance and trade and economic cooperation. Rule application discrepancies among Central Asian states are particularly illuminating. However, as academicians from Central Asia stressed any changes needs to be approved by the elites of the regime. Hoffmann (2010, p. 89) provides the explanation why the EU has trouble to persuade these changes-norm diffusion as an indirect process of democracy promotion has a high potential to foster political change. The spread of ideas on democracy and good governance is expected to challenge the legitimacy of non-democratic regimes and to open a window of opportunity for democratic reform. Opening these topics can represent a risk for the stability of regimes. Additionally, the Strategy for a New Partnership, however, was meant to be a comprehensive policy tool incorporating and integrating both value-based ambitions and interest-driven stakes in the region. The promotion of values and the safeguarding of interests require different mechanisms of negotiation and implementation. (Hoffmann 2010, p. 93)

Voloshin (2014, p. 72-73) identified three main reasons for the ineffectiveness of the Strategy. First one is a character of regimes, failure to foster democratic changes in Central Asia has much to do with the prevailing political conditions in the region. As Bigo and Hale (2013) mentioned, local leaders have consolidated power in neo-patrimonial systems, misusing public resources for private purposes and bestowing favors on subordinates in return for loyalty. These systems – which vary from regime to regime as the five countries take increasingly divergent development paths – nevertheless share some recognizable features. Elites deploy formal and informal mechanisms of control and shape bureaucracy in view to perform in their interests and to reduce opportunities (and incentives) to challenge their rule. In the process, they curtail citizens' rights, notably freedom of association, assembly and expression. The second reasons are the dominant regional context in which Russia's and China's hard power diplomacy fits perfectly into the region's interstate relationships. Lastly, the effectiveness of the EU policies in Central Asia is undermined by extra-regional factors as well. Economic troubles in the Eurozone and, more broadly, the economic and financial crisis within the EU have impacted on the attractiveness of the European model. Not all are convinced the concepts behind western strategies toward Central Asia are right or useful. Such example can be according to Putz (2015) Cooperation Council between the EU and Uzbekistan at its twelfth meeting. The press release touted progress made between Uzbekistan and the International Labor Organization (ILO) in the area of child labor. The ILO says fewer children were forced to labor in Uzbekistan's cotton fields in 2014, the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights noted that "In 2014 we observed an increased forced labor burden on adults, apparently to compensate for reduced numbers of children forced to pick cotton."

Beijing is also fast at implementing its own projects. While the EU's decades-old plans to bring Central Asian gas to Europe remain unfulfilled, the Chinese pipeline connecting Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Xinjiang was built over the period of two years. The TRACECA project, which was introduced in the early 1990s and consumed substantial amounts of EU funding, has been nearly forgotten. On the other hand, China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) unveiled in 2013 has announced its support by a USD 40 billion fund and had all the chances to roll out relatively quickly. The effectiveness of Beijing's focused, pragmatic and well-financed policy in Central Asia provides food for thought and poses a challenge to both Russia and the EU. (Kassenova n.d., p. 1-2) Boonstra and Tsetsvadze (2016) stressed that the EU should not and cannot compete with Russia and China in the region. The EU would do best to focus on a few key areas where it can achieve concrete results. Besides broader economic and some security cooperation, the EU should focus on education in

supporting the region's development while further emphasizing human rights and strengthening political and financial assistance to civil society. Although the EU has little influence in Central Asia, adherence to democratic principles should be the centrepiece of engagement. These countries will only become more reliable partners when they develop and respect the rule of law and democratic governance. In the opinion of Bigo and Hale (2013) the EU should also fully implement in Central Asia its Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, notably by "making trade work in a way that helps human rights." By promoting democracy and human rights, including socio-economic rights by its actions as well as words, the EU will remain an important part of its 'soft power' and establish an enabling environment for citizens to seek legitimate rulers and claim rights, which will be crucial for equitable development and an open society.

## **2.1 Instead of conclusion: Role of member states**

Member states have often played the role of lead countries in EU programmes. For example, the EU Rule of Law Initiative has been led by Germany and France, supported by the cooperation programmes provided for by the Commission and a number of member states. (Norling – Cornell, 2016, p. 19) However, as the EU's legal competence in the area of foreign policy is still low, member states continue to conduct foreign policy issues in parallel to, separately from, or even in opposition to the EU. (Bossyut 2017, p. 5). It is a fact that many countries have just limited involvement into EU initiatives in central Asia and focus mainly on the development of economic relations. As one of the reason is mention capacity of (small) embassies. However, according to Boonstra and Tsertsvadze (2016, p. 11), several member states have been involved in regional initiatives in recent years, and this should be encouraged. Member states should increasingly lead and coordinate national or regional projects on behalf of the EU (just as the EU represents member states with few embassies in Central Asian republics). As Boonstra (2011, p. 5) further stressed one of the main issues facing the EU and its member states is the conflicting interest between promoting democratic and human rights and pursuing energy interests. This is especially true of relations with the most authoritarian states in the region, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the former of which sits on large reserves of natural gas and the latter of which is by far the most populous country in the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are also lukewarm at best towards European values which they feel often interfere with national development, state building, and domestic traditions.

Bossyut (2017, p. 2) identifies four conditions under which member states are likely to attempt to project national foreign policy preferences onto the EU level. These include the perceived salience of a policy goal, the extent to which member states can carve out a niche, member states' perceived capabilities and the level of Europeanization of the national foreign policies. The most important condition is the importance of policy goal that needs to be worth of action. In other words, if an issue is not considered a policy priority, they will not invest significant effort in trying to influence the EU on that matter. (Bossyut 2017, p. 6) Member states should increasingly lead and coordinate national or regional projects on behalf of the EU (just as the EU represents member states with few embassies in Central Asian republics). Germany initiated the EU Strategy in 2007, some member states have stepped up in recent years (Finland and Latvia come to mind), but now other states also need to take on aspects of EU development assistance and interest in the region. Europe as a whole through EU member states and partners (Switzerland, Norway, etc.) need to be visible in Central Asia, not just EU institutions that of course represent Europe to a large degree. (Boonstra – Tsertsvadze 2016, p. 11) Another key problem concerns visibility. Several member states, such as the UK, Germany and the Netherlands, have been demonstrating greater effectiveness than the EU in terms of making their human rights agendas known and available to the target audience. As a result of this, member states have turned out to be more easily recognised for their work by ordinary Central Asians than the EU as a whole. (Voloshin 2014, p. 48).

The previous pages provide a brief and incomplete overview of interests vs. values issues and role of member states in the relations between the European Union and Central Asia. The future research is going to focus on three interrelated area:

- a) role of member states in preparation of new Central Asian Strategy with the focus on „interests vs. values“ issues;
- b) role of Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) in preparation of the New strategy;
- c) Comparison of Visegrad countries preferences with states traditionally focusing on „values.“



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