

## Article

# Implementation of the New EU Strategy in CA on the Example of Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** The new EU Strategy for Central Asia, adopted in 2019, seeks to foster greater collaboration and support for sustainable development within the region. Uzbekistan, as a pivotal partner of the European Union in Central Asia, assumes a critical role in the successful implementation of this strategic vision. This paper delves into the process of executing the EU's new strategy in Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on key areas such as economic growth, rule of law enforcement, human rights promotion, regional security enhancement, and specific initiatives and projects initiated by the EU as part of this strategy, as well as their impact on Uzbekistan's development and transformation. Furthermore, the article evaluates Uzbekistan's progress in fulfilling its obligations under the country's own strategy, examining the political, economic, and societal reforms undertaken by the government, assessing their alignment with the objectives of the EU strategy. Delving into the implementation of the latest European Union (EU) strategy in Uzbekistan offers a profound understanding of EU engagement in the region, shedding light on its role in fostering sustainable development and promoting reform efforts in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** EU foreign policy strategy, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, cooperation, European integration, soft power, Eastern Partnership, transregionalism, resources, security

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Central Asia has emerged as a region of increasing interest for international actors, including the European Union (EU). Due to geopolitical changes, economic challenges and social transformations in the region, the EU has actively developed and implemented new strategies for engagement with the countries in Central Asia. Uzbekistan, with its significant resources and strategic location, is at the center of these efforts. The implementation of these strategies requires a multi-faceted approach that includes economic cooperation, cultural exchange, security cooperation and sustainable development. The main objectives of this strategy include deepening political dialogue, expanding trade relations, supporting economic modernization reform, and improving social well-being in the region.

In 2019, the European Union (EU) adopted a new regional strategy to strengthen cooperation with the countries of Central Asia. The strategy focuses on promoting stability, economic growth, and integration between the two regions in areas such as trade, security, and human rights [1].

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Uzbekistan is a prominent and developed country in the region, playing a significant role as a natural center and driving force for integration in Central Asia. The country actively engages with the European Union (EU) in various areas, including trade, energy, transport, education, and cultural exchange. Through its leadership in implementing the Central Asian strategy, Uzbekistan has the potential to strengthen cooperation and promote regional development. However, the implementation of this strategy faces several potential challenges that must be addressed [2]. The European Union, compared to major global powers such as China, Russia and the United States, has a relatively small presence in the global arena. While some countries such as Turkey, Japan and South Korea, as well as several Arab states exert a more significant influence, due to various reasons, the importance of Central Asia for the security and stability of the EU should not be overlooked.

It is essential to analyze the European perspective and interests when considering cooperation with Central Asian countries to understand their significance. Unlike other major players, the EU has maintained a unique approach to Central Asia by promoting high-level political dialogue, advocating for democratic reforms, human rights and the rule of law in Uzbekistan and other countries of the region.

However, with each initiative, the modernization of processes and the implementation of this strategy are taken into account. Through the analysis of shortcomings in past policies and strategies, as well as how the European Union addressed these issues, we can discern them in the new 2019 EU strategy. This strategy outlines further steps aimed at strengthening the EU's presence and influence in the region. The first strategy, titled "The EU and Central Asia: Towards a New Partnership," was adopted in 2007 following the enlargement of the European Union eastward and accession of countries from the former Soviet bloc and neighboring states of the EU [3]. The European Union's objectives in this part of the world, as laid out in its strategy, encompass:

- Safeguarding peace and tranquility among the nations of Central Asia.
- Contributing to the alleviation of destitution and enhancement of living conditions in line with the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.
- Promoting regional collaboration within Central Asia, as well as fostering partnerships between the states of the region and the European Union.
- Collaborative efforts will be concentrated on domains such as energy, transportation, educational initiatives, and environmental conservation [4].

The initial strategy for engaging with the five Central Asian countries has focused on identifying priority areas of cooperation, including security, justice administration, respect for human rights and good governance. Particular attention has been paid to implementing initiatives related to education, investment and trade. Other areas under consideration include energy, transportation and environmental protection, with a focus on promoting stable intercultural exchange. One of the main challenges in implementing policies in the region, especially within the European Union's approach towards Central Asia, is addressing democratic deficiencies in all countries in the area, such as a lack of progress on democratic reforms, economic development problems, restrictions on freedom of expression and belief as well as violations of opposition and basic human rights.

The European Union has faced pressure from human rights organizations, which has made it difficult for the EU to engage in meaningful dialogue with Central Asian countries, without compromising its interests or those of its Western partners. This has led to an impasse in addressing these issues [5]. The impact of liberal trends on the implementation of new initiatives in the context of EU policymaking has emerged as a significant obstacle to fostering dialogue with Central Asian countries. This impact stems from the idea that assistance, financing and investment depend on specific democratic reforms and external policy objectives. In 2016, the European Union adopted a new "Global Strategy," necessi-

tating adjustments to its foreign policy initiatives in order to meet the requirements outlined in this document. The EU aimed to strengthen its global position and improve mechanisms for cooperation with major players in international relations, while Central Asia remained an important component of this strategy despite not having the same level of priority as the Middle East or North Africa.

In its new 2019 strategic direction, the European Union has prioritized creating a market-oriented economy, solving environmental issues, and most importantly, transforming human rights dynamics. Specific focus on gender equality and women's rights has emerged as a crucial indicator of the EU's commitment to respecting human rights. This approach has proven instrumental in promoting meaningful dialogue between the EU and Central Asian countries.

## 2. The Analysis of Literary Works and Methods of Their Interpretation

The EU Strategy for Central Asia, adopted in 2019, aims to promote economic growth, security and stability in the region. Uzbekistan has been identified as a key partner in implementing this strategy. In July 2019 at a regional meeting in Bishkek the European Union presented its new approach towards cooperation with Central Asian countries. On May 15th, 2018, the strategy "The European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for Strengthening Partnership" was adopted with the goal of enhancing cooperation between EU and Central Asian States [6].

In order to analyze the relationships between Central Asian countries and the European Union (EU), we conducted a thorough review of relevant literature from academic databases such as JSTOR and ScienceDirect. We used search queries that included terms such as "new EU strategy for Central Asia," "Uzbekistan," "leading EU partners," and "role of Uzbekistan." The study clearly acknowledged Uzbekistan's significant contribution to the implementation of the new EU strategy due to its strategic position, growing economy, and reforms implemented under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoev. Uzbekistan's strategic location, strong economic growth, and ongoing transformation has positioned it as an essential partner for the EU. Based on our analysis of available data and academic literature, we identified several crucial areas for collaboration including trade, economic development, education, health care, energy, infrastructure, cultural exchange and security [7].

With regard to security, the EU supports initiatives aimed at countering terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking in the region, and Uzbekistan plays a crucial role in maintaining stability along its borders. And countering drug trafficking from Afghanistan one of the main points noted by European countries was Uzbekistan's initiative in resolving the Afghan crisis, for which Uzbekistan held large-format meetings with the participation of all parties involved in solving the Afghan crisis and further assistance from the Government of Uzbekistan in resolving the humanitarian crisis [8] and evacuating EU citizens from Afghanistan during the Taliban's rise to power in the country [9].

The European Union (EU) is committed to upholding principles such as the rule of law and respect for human rights. Uzbekistan is actively promoting these values, particularly in relation to the empowerment of women and their participation in political life. These efforts have garnered positive results and the support of European countries [10].

Furthermore, the European Union (EU) promotes regional cooperation among countries in Central Asia through initiatives that aim to build trust and collaboration. Uzbekistan, in particular, actively promotes deeper economic and political integration with the EU. The analysis identifies several approaches for implementing the new EU strategy in Central Asia: 1. The EU facilitates regional initiatives such as the EU-Central Asia Security

Dialogue to strengthen cooperation and address common challenges. 2. The European Union provides financial support for development and reform initiatives in Central Asian countries. 3. The EU maintains a diplomatic presence in the region to monitor developments and facilitate dialogue.

In November 2021, the European Commission made a positive preliminary decision on Uzbekistan's application for preferential treatment under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP+). Upon approval of this decision, Uzbek producers and exporters will benefit from unilateral tariff reductions on their exports to the European market. According to experts, this will allow them to increase exports of over 6,200 different products. Under the GSP scheme, the initial volume of textile exports is projected to be \$300 million, and it is expected to grow to \$1.2 billion by 2025, due to the preferential trade arrangements offered under GSP [11].

The research suggests that Uzbekistan is a crucial partner for the European Union in implementing the New EU Strategy for Central Asia. Due to its strategic position, economic growth, and reforms initiated under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's leadership, the country has become a valuable ally for the EU, promoting economic development, enhancing security, and fostering stability in the region.

### 3. Results

Transregionalism is an important aspect of the EU's approach towards Central Asia, and it is closely connected to the EU's engagement in trade and investment with other countries. This concept differs from interregional cooperation, which refers to formalized interactions with regional integration organizations such as ASEAN, Mercosur and the Andean Community. Transregional cooperation involves interaction between integration organizations and groups of countries working together on various issues, as well as interaction with individual countries that have the potential to become significant regional actors. It also encompasses relations between countries and groups from different regions [12].

Drawing a line between interregional and transregional cooperation, some scholars propose considering the latter as a special combination of the former. Furthermore, they identify other forms of hybrid cooperation, such as engagement between a regional integration body and a group of countries in a dispersed and unstructured area, which closely resembles the situation in Central Asia [13]. The competition between regional players in Central Asia is closely connected to the course and structure of integration processes, as well as the role played by the European Union in promoting the development of the region through regional integration organizations and interregional cooperation. The European Union views Uzbekistan as a significant player and potential "catalyst" for integration in Central Asia, recognizing Uzbekistan's ability to act as a bridge between itself and the region based on its Eurasian background and its readiness to adopt European standards and values [14]. The recent change in power in Uzbekistan and the reassessment of past regional policies has led to renewed interest from the European Union. This development has resulted in increased bilateral engagement and negotiations in recent months. These new exchanges have allowed Uzbekistan to resume cooperation with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which was suspended for some time [15].

The European Union is currently implementing a range of projects and initiatives in Uzbekistan as part of its recently adopted strategy. One such initiative, the Border Management and Development Support Program (BOMCA), provides technical assistance to the country in the area of border management and the fight against illicit drug trafficking. This program also addresses migration-related issues and promotes transparency and accountability in government institutions. Another significant initiative

is the Justice Reform Assistance Program, which supports reforms in Uzbekistan's criminal justice system. This program aims to ensure access to justice and promote human rights. Furthermore, the Agriculture and Water Resources Management Support Program seeks to enhance the sustainability of agriculture production and optimize water resource management in Uzbekistan.

Through these initiatives, the European Union is striving to strengthen its political engagement with Uzbekistan by promoting democratic reforms, protecting human rights and upholding the principles of the rule of law in the country. The Trade Facilitation Programme for Central Asia (CAFA) aims to enhance the export potential of Uzbek businesses and streamline trade processes, while also focusing on promoting economic diversification in Uzbekistan, including the development of non-primary sectors like textiles and food production. Implementation of this new EU strategy has led to several positive outcomes, such as improved border management, reduced drug trafficking, strengthened rule of law, protection of human rights, enhanced agricultural sustainability, efficient water resource management, promotion of economic growth, and diversification, as well as regional cooperation.

The implementation of the European Union's strategy in Uzbekistan requires a multi-faceted approach and a coordinated effort from all relevant parties. Dialogue, investment, and support for transformation have been identified as essential components that will contribute to the sustainable development of EU-Central Asian relations.

#### 4. Discussion

Uzbekistan, with a history of statehood dating back three decades, has placed particular emphasis on promoting parliamentarism within its borders and collaborating with international partners in this field. To strengthen bilateral ties in parliamentary cooperation, the two countries established the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee between Uzbekistan and the European Union in 1999. In April 2021, the European Parliament initiated the creation of a group aimed at fostering friendship with Uzbekistan, significantly contributing to strengthening bilateral parliamentary relations between the two nations. During the period between 2019 and 2020 foreign ministries from several European countries held more than two dozen meetings exclusively on political matters. Following its engagement with Uzbekistan in 2022, the EU reaffirmed its dedication to enhancing interregional collaboration within the framework of EU-Central Asia relations [16].

It is noteworthy that the European Union provides specific developmental assistance to Uzbekistan, a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which includes advisory services and expert knowledge on matters related to WTO requirements. The EU supports Uzbekistan's development of legislation that complies with international standards, as well as financing projects aimed at revitalizing the economy and harmonizing with WTO regulations [17]. In his address to the Oliy Majlis, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoev stated that the country would continue its cooperation with the World Trade Organization and aim to conclude a new partnership agreement with the European Union. From 2014 to 2020, Uzbekistan received a total of 168 million euros to support various national initiatives under the framework of the EU [18]. A further amount of 83 million euros has been projected for the period from 2021 to 2024, together with a grant of 40 million euros in 2019, in order to strengthen state budgetary expenditures [19].

According to data provided by the State Investment Committee of Uzbekistan, the country has successfully implemented 25 projects with the support of the European Union worth over \$100 million. The trade volume between Uzbekistan and the EU has increased significantly in recent years, exceeding a 50% growth from 2018 to 2021. Both parties are committed to continuing this positive trend and aiming to achieve a future trade volume



of \$10 billion as outlined in Uzbekistan's strategic development plan for 2022-27. During the challenging period of COVID-19, the European Union provided assistance worth 36 million euros to Uzbekistan to mitigate the effects of the global health crisis [20].

As part of the Covax initiative, the European Union generously provided more than one million doses of vaccines and advanced air purification equipment. This action demonstrates the EU's commitment to global public health and emphasizes its dedication to promoting bilateral cooperation. The collaborative efforts have strengthened bilateral relations between the EU and Uzbekistan based on shared values such as friendship and mutual assistance. One significant milestone in this partnership was the granting of unilateral trade benefits to Uzbekistan under the Generalized System of Preferences Plus in April 2021.

This development marks a significant step forward in the relationship between the two countries, further enhancing their trade and economic cooperation. Under this agreement, Uzbek producers now have the opportunity to export more than 6,200 different products to EU markets without any tariffs. This represents a doubling of the number of products eligible for duty-free exports compared to previous agreements [21]. Since 2021, the Jean Monnet Centre for Excellence in European Studies has been active in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, with the aim of promoting educational and academic activities in the fields of international relations, regional cooperation, EU studies, and Central Asian studies. The center also aims to strengthen the relationship between the EU and Uzbekistan [22]. The European Union (EU) plays a significant role in promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights, peace and stability in Uzbekistan. Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent developments in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan remains committed to its reform efforts. Uzbekistan welcomes tourism and business opportunities and is working to establish a democratic society, while actively combating corruption and protecting private property. In support of these efforts, the EU has launched a multi-year cooperation program with Uzbekistan spanning from 2021 to 2027. The program aims to strengthen public administration, promote digital transformation, foster inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and support agricultural development through innovative solutions. These initiatives are aimed at creating employment opportunities and improving the overall welfare of citizens, ultimately contributing to the well-being and prosperity of the country [23].

In addition, the European Union pledged more than seven million euros to support civil society and human rights in Uzbekistan [24]. The allocation of this funding will contribute to strengthening civil society organizations, promoting public engagement, and protecting human rights. In his address on the occasion of Uzbekistan's 30th anniversary of independence, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, emphasized the significant role that Uzbekistan plays in promoting stability and cooperation within the region. He highlighted the importance of cooperative efforts in addressing global and regional challenges, particularly in light of recent events in Afghanistan [25].

The European Union (EU), the largest economic and political union in the world, relies on non-coercive instruments in its international relations. Its strategy is informed by its increasing role in global affairs and its potential for future superpower status. However, due to inherent military vulnerabilities, its aspirations for leadership may depend on the support of the United States (US) and NATO. Cultural differences in strategic approaches between Western European countries and the US hinder the EU's ability to lead under the protection of the US. Despite these challenges, the EU's commitment to peaceful conflict resolution, limited use of force, multilateral diplomacy, respect for international law, and promotion of economic cooperation is commendable. Its collaboration with Central Asian countries in energy and hydrocarbons is also noteworthy.

Oil and its derivatives will continue to play a significant role in the global economy in the medium term. Access to reliable energy sources is essential for energy security and economic development around the world. Industrialized countries are major consumers

of oil but most oil production is still concentrated in developing and emerging economies for export. The European Union is concerned about Central Asia becoming a region prone to conflict and a haven for terrorists and their financial networks, as well as being a transit route for illegal drug and weapons trafficking from Afghanistan, and a channel for human trafficking. There are also concerns about nuclear safety and environmental management in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan plays a crucial role in maintaining the security of Central Asia due to its unique demographic and social characteristics, but its stagnant political and economic systems could pose a threat to regional stability. Experts warn that repressive government policies towards political dissidents and widespread poverty could lead to significant social unrest. In light of these challenges, the EU aims to support civil society and establish the foundation for future economic and social change in Uzbekistan.

## 5. Conclusion

Uzbekistan plays a critical role as an intermediary between the European Union (EU) and Central Asia, promoting dialogue and cooperation. The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) between Uzbekistan and the EU provides a comprehensive framework for strengthening ties in various fields.

The EU is Uzbekistan's main trade partner, and bilateral trade has seen significant growth in recent years. The European Union's strategy towards Central Asia emphasizes the importance of promoting sustainable economic development, fostering regional collaboration, and ensuring regional stability.

Uzbekistan represents a promising partner for cooperation in key areas, such as water management and transition to a more environmentally friendly economic model.

The European Union (EU) provides financial and technical assistance to Uzbekistan and other countries in the region to implement projects aimed at achieving sustainable development. Uzbekistan plays a crucial role in maintaining regional stability, especially in the fight against terrorism and extremism, and actively cooperates with the EU on initiatives related to border security and drug trafficking control. The EU fully supports Uzbekistan's efforts to promote democratic reforms, establish the rule of law and human rights, and extends its support to human rights initiatives within the country. The establishment of dialogue on human rights between the two parties demonstrates their commitment to strengthening cooperation in this field.

Uzbekistan actively participates in regional organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It acts as a bridge between these organizations and the European Union (EU), promoting greater mutual understanding and playing a crucial role in enhancing cooperation in the region. Through collaborative efforts, Uzbekistan promotes cross-border water management, infrastructure development and energy cooperation, which are important areas for regional development. With its strategic location and economic potential, Uzbekistan serves as a key partner for the EU in Central Asia, contributing to its position as a leader in promoting sustainable development and maintaining stability in the region while fostering prosperity for all.

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